Inventor's Absolution

by TheFaerieChild

Summary

Winona Parker is a brilliant inventor but unintentional troublemaker of Vault 101 when her gadgetry goes haywire. Her tale is entwined with that of her childhood nemesis, Butch DeLoria, when their many year war begins with a game of Hunt the Mutant at Wally Mack's 9th birthday party. (Multiple OCs inside, lots of Vault 101 life and 'behind the scenes', twists on main settlements (Megaton, Tenpenny Tower, and Rivet City) and main quests from F3!)

Notes

Hello, all! Welcome to my Fallout 3 fanfic, "Inventor's Absolution"! You can also find this fic under TheKonfessionist on FF.Net (which is MY account, not someone else's!) as well, where the story originally began under another name. This is the new and approved revision of the fanfic. If you see it under any other website aside from FF and AO3, and under any other name but TheKonfessionist and TheFaeriechild, that person is NOT me, and that person DOES NOT have permission to repost my work!

Keep in mind that tags will be added and the rating of the story will be subject to change as it progresses, so it won't always remain as "GA" or tagless. Otherwise, new chapters to this
fic will be posted every Friday for your viewing pleasure! Please don’t hesitate to review or write to me, I love reading them whether it's compliments or criticism!

So without further ado, here is the story of Winona Parker, the Lone Wanderer, and her long and tumultuous 'friendship' with her bully, Butch DeLoria! I hope you enjoy!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out~
"Well, I think it's a good idea! You'll see when we get it put together, Wally." Butch grinned impishly from ear to ear and lazily propped his feet up onto his classroom desk, crossing them at the ankle. Wally sat at the desk in front of him, sitting backwards in his chair with his arms folded on the top of the seat back, and Paul stood near the two with his hands tucked into his jumpsuit pockets. He was kicking at the floor with downcast eyes and a doubtful expression.

Mr. Brotch just finished up with their History lesson, and with all the students gone to get their meals (teacher included), the classroom was open as it was during every lunch. It'd be empty for another few minutes before Brotch returned to eat his meal at his desk, so they had to plan quickly during the private time for Wally's 9th birthday party—which was to be in three days. The boys deemed it necessary that it had to be a party that their peers would talk about for years to come; they'd play rounds of Hunt the Mutant, his dad would get Andy to do magic tricks for them, and Old Lady Palmer was going to make her trophy-worthy chocolate iced cake as his birthday dessert.

Pranking the taciturn Winona Parker would just be the cherry on top of the proverbial sundae.

"Uh—this prank seems cool and all, but it's kinda… mean, Butch." Paul finally spoke up, rubbing his arm awkwardly.

"It's s'pposed to be mean, stupid! 'Ya pull pranks on people you don't like, so it has t'be mean! And humiliating!" Butch exclaimed in annoyance as he tucked his legs back under his desk to sit upright. "And this is the most humiliating prank I've ever created!"

"I don't know if it's a good idea…" Paul muttered again in protest under his breath. Butch groaned in frustration at things not going his way, having believed that his friends were going to be completely on board with his plan. "I'm serious, guys! Winona's really smart—"

"That's 'cause her dad's a doctor, of course she's smart." Wally spat.

"—so won't she get suspicious of Wally inviting her? Since you guys pick on her all the time, and all…"

"I'm not inviting her—"
"Yes you are!" Butch cracked as he shoved back his chair and got to his feet, his splayed out hands slapping down onto his desk top as he loomed over Wally, who remained seated. "What? Are 'ya scared, Mack? You wussin' out on us? You big chicken!"

Wally's neck flushed bright red under his jumpsuit collar at the accusation, spreading up into his cheeks as he pushed out his own chair to stand upright—slamming a fist down onto Butch's desk between the other boy's hands and leaned into Butch's face, glaring intensely in challenge like he was daring Butch to say it again.

"I'm not scared!" He snarled, pulling back away to plop down into his seat, immediately seeming to cool off though his brow crinkled in agitation. "I'll invite her."

Butch grinned with glee. Ever since they were kids, he knew how to push most of Wally's hot buttons with relative ease; accusing him of being scared was one of them, and it'd peeve Wally enough that he'd do just about anything to prove that he wasn't a scaredy-cat. It was a card Butch always laid out on the table when Wally would refuse to do a prank, if only to goad him into cooperating.

Works every time! He thought to himself victoriously.

"I still don't know, guys…” Paul mumbled.

"Why not? The freak was just asking for it, for being so weird!" Butch exclaimed as he turned back to Paul, remaining standing. "You're either with us, or against us, Hannon!"

"O- Okay, okay!" Paul waved his hands in front of him in a gesture of surrender. "I- I'm with you."

"Good!" Butch kicked his chair in under his desk and they walked out the door, side by side, finally going to lunch. "Grab any garbage you can get till Wally's birthday and bag it up and stash it. We'll put everything together the morning of the party and hook it up in the auditorium when the lights are out for Hunt the Mutant."

"It's still dumb," Wally repeated, yet again, and Butch turned on his heel to wallop him—but stopped when he noticed Wally's slightly giddy smile. "But if we pull it off—she won't even see it coming."

As the boys walked on, out of sight from the classroom in confident march without a glance back, conversing about this idea or that for Wally's birthday… they hadn't noticed the two little figures that were crouched behind the water fountain suspiciously. When they disappeared around the bend of the corridor, the eavesdroppers both stepped out from their hiding spot, and glanced to one another in worry.

"Okay, it looks like they're gone…” Amata spoke as she frowned, pointing down the hall where the troublemakers had gone. "I really can't believe those jerks. This is going way too far!"

"I'm surprised that you're surprised…” Winona responded quietly, almost too quietly to be heard, while looking back at her. "This is Butch we're talking about. For whatever reason, he likes to bug people."

"Bug people? Winnie, this is more than just bugging, now! This prank he has in mind is downright dirty. Literally." She sighed and crossed her arms uneasily, still watching down the hall where the trio had walked away.

The girls were coming back from Winona's apartment when they happened to hear Butch boasting
about a new idea he had cooked up from inside the classroom. This was something the whole class was use to—*Butch's schemes*—but when Amata heard 'prank' and Winona's name, they took shelter around the corner and listened intently to their plans as Butch (loudly) gave it blow-by-blow to his companions. Winona forgetting her lunch pass, which was unusual for her, proved to be a Godsend rather than a mistake. Otherwise they never would have heard Butch's plan!

"...So what are you gunna do about it?" Amata asked after some moments of quiet.

"I don't have any other choice if I want to get Butch before he gets me," Winona spoke, and there was a smile on her face that suggested a cunning solution was coming to formation in her mind. "So I have a plan."

"I like the sound of that!" Amata laughed, reflecting Winona's own smile in giddiness. "Waddya need?"

"Well, for starters, I need some sturdy material for the base of my invention. I think I could sneak into the lower levels and get some of that plastic piping from Stanley's workshop—I've seen him working with them before."

"Yeah, but what can I do to help you?"

"I need elastics—rubber bands or hair ties would work—a paper clip, glue, and some sort of fastener or clip..." Winona murmured in thought.

"My dad has a huge stash of work supplies! He has these binder clips, too. Could that work as a fastener thing?"

"Wouldn't hurt to try. Then I'll get the base for my invention." She spoke as she fixed her inky black hair in its ponytail, and the two girls walked on towards the cafeteria, arm-in-arm.

"What if your dad finds out?" Amata asked as they walked, her hair spilling from behind her ear as she turned her chin down to look at Winona, who was shorter than her. "He gets suspicious when he sees you collecting up supplies."

"I'll just tell him that I'm doing a—...fun experiment."

It was the morning after the boys began their planning for pranking Winona at Wally's birthday party, and so it was time to officially put *Phase 2* into action. *Phase 1* was collecting up as much garbage and compost as they could—which was made easier when at the end of the night the trash bags in the cafeteria were nearly full and ready to be swindled. It was only emptied at night by waste management to be taken to the incinerator or turned to mulch, so it was surely filled with things like curdling yogurt cups and sticky pastry wrappers from breakfast, unfinished split-pea soup with soggy crackers from lunch, and mushy spaghetti noodles saturated in bright tomato sauce from dinner.

Once the garbage was collected, they stuffed it into a heating vent in Butch's apartment to help the rotting process go faster as well as create a more 'fragrant' musk.

Meanwhile, *Phase 2* of the prank was Wally inviting Winona to his birthday party. Butch and Paul hung back at Wally's desk while he initiated the step, standing just outside of the classroom and talking quietly to Winona with Amata at her side. Wally made a big show out of it—arms folded over his chest, an exaggerated eye roll every once in a while that made Amata's face flush in annoyance as he recounted how his mother was forcing him to invite her. Winona looked to Amata...
once Wally finished explaining, looked back to him with a finger over her shoulder to gesture back to her best friend, and said something Butch and Paul couldn't hear from where they sat and observed.

"Are you kidding me? I have to invite your weird friend, too?" The two heard Wally exclaim very clearly, and Winona bobbed her head once in the affirmative. He groaned obnoxiously in annoyance as Amata bristled, still putting on his big performance. "Whatever, fine. But you better bring me something cool!"

Wally ambled back over to his waiting companions while Winona and Amata remained just outside the classroom, chatting quietly to one another. Winona shook her head once every little bit while Amata nodded hers—but Butch thought nothing of it as he turned to Wally once he claimed back his seat.

"We've got a plus one," Wally spoke. "Winona the Weirdo wouldn't come unless I invited Miss 101, too."

"Why didn't ya say no?" Butch moaned—in annoyance or despair, he couldn't tell which. "Now the Overseer's gonna be there since his princess is!"

"If I said no, Winona wouldn't have come at all." Wally replied coolly. "Necessary sacrifice."

"So—... the prank's off?" Paul asked a little hopefully.

"No way! I spent too long plannin' this! We'll just figure out a way around it, no problem!"

"I doubt the Overseer'll be there at all." Wally piped up confidently. "Only time he comes to any birthday party is when you turn 10."

Butch knew that well—he didn't have a big party or anything for his 10th birthday. His mother let him go and do as he pleased that day (she was too hungover to stop him, or to keep him in the apartment, anyways), so he, Wally and Paul hung out on the upper level of the atrium and shared comic books. Paul gave him Grognak the Barbarian: Issue #11, which featured Shebaba; a shaman from the Emerald Swamps that was helping Grognak on his quest for the Sword of Valor. Wally gave him a switchblade that he found on the lower levels, and the three spent a good few minutes trying to figure out how to unstick the spring so it sprung open. The Overseer found them moments after the gift exchange; he gave Butch his Pip-Boy, spewed some other nonsense about responsibility while giving him dirty looks, and then promptly left... but not before mentioning that the birthday boy was expected in his office the next morning at 9-sharp.

Needless to say, Butch was 20 minutes late because his mother vomited on the couch right as he had a foot out the door. He knew he wouldn't be able to sit still through the meeting knowing she would most likely fall back asleep in her own throw up.

"The Overseer better not be there, that's the last thing we need." Butch replied after some thought just as Amata and Winona went by them. Amata had her nose in the air like she always did, as if she were above inhaling the same air as the three of them. Winona trailed at her side and stared at them—creepily unblinking—but then looked away just as Butch balanced a one-line insult on the tip of his tongue to sling her way.

*God, she's so weird!* He shivered.

Mr. Brotch walked into the classroom and to the front, where from the corner of the classroom he wheeled the projector to the middle of the room. Everyone began cooing in relief at the sight of it,
as it symbolized that they'd be spending a portion of the morning's lesson watching a video and taking notes instead of listening to the strict teacher drone on through a lesson.

"Students, please get to your seats. Today we're going to be going over an educational film on the formation of the thirteen American Commonwealths in 1969, so please get out your books for note-taking in the meantime." He spoke as he walked around his desk and sat down, beginning to go over the short list of attendance. Amata Almodovar, Butch DeLoria, Freddie Gomez, Paul Hannon —

"Dorothy Horowitz—?" Edwin Brotch glanced up, finding the assigned seat empty. He cocked an eyebrow. "Must still be out sick…"

Just as he was about to mark the name as 'absent' on his list, little Dorothy Horowitz—with frizzy pecan-colored pigtails tied by curled ribbons, upturned piggy nose, and small beady blue eyes—sprinted in through the classroom doorway. She was a full year younger than the rest of the class, and so was given special attention by Mr. Brotch to ensure she was learning at her grade level.

"Here~!" She squealed, her heels digging into the floor so she skid to a stop. "Present, Mr. Brotch!"

Her presence in the classroom made Butch shrink down in his seat as best he could. Butch considered pig-featured Dorothy Horowitz to be a complete royal nuisance, as every time she came near him it made him want to scream. Dorothy, for whatever reason, had a crush on him since they were toddlers, and every day it seemed that crush grew worse and worse; she'd always give him unexpected kisses on the cheek or tip of his nose or his forehead, or some of her sweets at lunch, or stop by his room to give him weird little presents after class—it never ended! He tried to make it very clear that he did not like her, but she continued to desperately attempt to get his attention... one time she even purposely tripped herself in front of him in the lunch line to see if he'd help her up. Needless to say, he, Wally and Paul laughed instead when her soup bowl flipped up into the air and landed on one of Andy's three sensors like a bowler hat.

"Ah, good… glad to see you're feeling better, Ms. Horowitz. Though late as usual." Mr. Brotch responded and immediately marked her as tardy. "Please, take your seat and take out your notebook."

As Dorothy whirled round on her heel to march towards her seat, she spotted Butch hunkered down at his desk—and rather than following instruction by her teacher, she darted towards her crush.

"Buuuuutch!" Her arms were thrown about his neck in a tight and affectionate embrace, nearly strangling the breath out of him.

"Dorothy, get the heck offa me!" He demanded sourly as he tried to pry her off of him. "Did 'ya miss me, Butchie?" Dorothy asked in a happy giggle, planting a wet kiss on his cheek dangerously close to his mouth. "'Cause I missed you!"

"Ew!" He shrieked, finally shoving her off just as she was about to plant another kiss on his face. Butch hurriedly wiped his cheek dry in disgust with the rolled up sleeve of his jumpsuit, against the inner crook of his elbow, as his face burned hotly in anger and embarrassment. "Stop kissin' me! I'm not your boyfriend!"

"You aren't yeeet!" She sang happily with Wally and Paul snorting in mocking laughter behind their hands at their desks with Wally mimicking how he shrilly yelled 'Ew!' repeatedly.
"Ms. Horowitz…" Mr. Brotch sighed, though it was obvious that he was more than just slightly amused by how Butch squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "Would you please take your seat?"

She smiled sweetly and nodded. "Yes, Mr. Brotch!" Then looked back to Butch, giggling again. "I'll be back for you, later!" She pecked him on the tip of his nose before skipping off to her desk, and he shrieked in disgust again, causing the entire class to burst into boisterous laughter.

This wasn't the first time Dorothy put on a show with him as an unwilling actor, so it wasn't the first time he was laughed at because of her, either—but oh, boy, did it make his blood boil! It made him even angrier, still, when his eyes darted from face to face in the classroom. Paul and Wally were no longer sniggering behind their hands but laughing boldly, Christine and Susie whispered quietly to each other with condescending smiles at him, Freddie remained bewildered but smiled a little anyways at the hilarity of it all, and Amata was hunched over in knee-slapping laughter.

Winona watched him from over her shoulder, at her desk right in front of his, being the only one who wasn't laughing or even smiling in mocking at him. She didn't flinch, or turn her eyes away, or even blink like she normally did when he grimaced back at her upon noticing her gaze. Winona stared at him in a way that made him feel vulnerable, like she was observing him without his consent, and looking through him in a way that was different from the adults. She looked through him in a way that didn't make him feel invisible but rather sole focus.

Mr. Brotch scolded the class to quiet down before drawling on the remainder of the class list somewhere on the edge of Butch's thoughts. The classroom went dark as Paul was instructed to cut the lights and the projector was turned on with the first video tape. When Butch came back down from his high—a fumble of emotions between residual fury, embarrassment and an uneasy calmness—he saw Winona's studying gaze still upon him.

'She's so friggin' weird!" Butch shuddered again, hearing smooching noises coming from back-left field behind him. He looked back to see Dorothy staring back at him from where she sat in front of Paul in the opposite row of desks; giving him batting, flirtatious eyelashes and blowing him giggling kisses. He grimaced and slumped down in his chair grumpily, turning back slightly to whisper to Wally, who sat right behind him.

"Hey, Wally."

"What's up?" He whispered back. Mr. Brotch was at his desk, too busy with grading their lengthy math tests from the previous school day to notice them.

"Dorothy isn't invited to your party… right?"

"Are you almost done, Winona?" Amata complained from where she had wilted herself onto Winona's bed, hanging over both sides and watching with an upside-down gaze. A Grognak comic book, draped open-faced, was left half read on her belly. She dropped the comic book out of boredom at her side and continued to watch the little inventor with much more fascination. Winona sat on the rug with her supplies scattered in a half circle in front of her, the items constantly changing in her two hands as she worked and pieced things together.

"These things take time, Amata." Winona replied with a distracted tone as she checked her invention over.
"But it looks done, already!" Amata whined.

"The glued pieces could snap off because they're not dried, yet," She explained as she held up the invention in upturned palms gingerly, ensuring she didn't accidentally break it. "But yeah, I think it's done."

The project resembled a makeshift handgun; the base was made from an elbow of plastic piping, the sight lining down the barrel was a reinforced paper clip bent upwards to act as a sight, and a binder clip was glued where the hammer of the weapon would be on an actual gun.

"I can't get over how cool that looks!" Amata laughed and slipped down from the bed to crawl over to her friend on her hands and knees. "What was it that Wally said? That you're not even gonna see it coming? Well just wait until they don't see this!"

"We can test it out when the glue's dry—"

"I don't wanna wait, let's test it out now!" She argued, turning over to Winona's bedside table to grab the box of assorted rubber bands she had snagged from her father's office. "Please?"


"Elastic!" Amata parroted with a giggle as she plucked a single band from the box, slapped it into Winona's hand, and watched as she threaded it over the sight and back to the binder clip.

The rubber band slipped out from the paper clip, snapping sharply against her knuckles, and the girls weren't feeling as confident as they were before about their plan. Determined otherwise, the inventor tried threading it through again, successful and satisfied when nothing broke off. Scanning her room for a target to use for practice, she aimed down the sight upon seeing a box of bolts sitting on her work desk, and had to use both of her thumbs on the binder clip to release the shot.

Unfortunately, the toy apparently needed much more tweaking than a better sight and hammer, as instead of hitting the box of bolts it went much more left than she aimed and rebounded off an empty soda bottle. It rocked on the desk edge, swiveling over before plummeting to the floor and shattering into big pieces. They winced in unison at the noise and looked to each other with identical sheepish smiles.

Their confidence in their plan working at all had now completely vanished.

"I swear I can fix that," Winona commented, much more boldly than she felt.

The bedroom door slid open for her father to hurriedly rush in, worried eyes darting around nervously. This was a normal scene for Winona as more often than not her inventions would get away from her, and he'd always quickly rush in to survey the damage and either calm down annoyed vault residents, or scold her for not being more careful (if he happened to be home in either situation).

It was usually both.

"I heard something break—is everything alright in here?" He asked, seeing the jagged remnants of the soda bottle at his feet. His eyes then laid upon Winona's hands at the evidence of the poor bottle's demise. He sighed lightly, and pointed at the toy with suspicious eyes. "Is that a new—... project, sweetheart?"

"...Maybe?" She replied with a bashful, but tell-all, smile.
"Winona, as your father I know that you never make an invention without an idea or reason in mind," He explained as he watched her observantly. "Which is why I'm uncomfortable with your new project looking like a weapon."

"I—…” She stammered, looking to her friend for an answer, but found Amata to be idly playing with the box of rubber bands as if they were more interesting. "…Uh…"

"Nona, what are you doing?" He sternly demanded, his arms crossing over his chest.

To call her Nona was reserved for times when she needed her father's affection the most, such as when Butch first began to bully her (the first encounter resulting in a nosebleed because she wouldn't give him her student lunch pass, and he elbowed her in the face to get her to hand it over); or when she was in serious trouble. In times where she was being reprimanded, the ushering of that name absolutely sparked the fear of God inside her, while using her full name (Winona Hope Parker) had absolutely no mentionable affect in comparison. She tried to think of a plausible answer to give him, knowing that whether she lied or told the truth, she'd be in big trouble.

So much for telling him it's just a fun little experiment…

"It's for—… Hunt the Mutant?" She spoke with an innocent smile up at him.

"Oh no, you don—Hunt the Mutant?" He asked, the concern draining from his face as he gaped down at her dubiously.

"Wally invited us to his birthday party tomorrow—he says we're going to play it in the auditorium."

"…Wally? As in Wally Mack?"

She nodded. "Mhmm."

"…As in, if memory serves me right, friends with Butch DeLoria, Wally Mack?"

Winona nodded once again.

"…Then I'm going to assume that Butch will also be there?"

For a third time she nodded, but with a nervous smile forming on her thin mouth.

"…You're going to shoot him with your new toy, aren't you?" He asked after a short calculative pause, and the good doctor sighed lightheartedly when her only reply was a wordless grin. He massaged his temples wearily. "Nona, you can't make inventions like this with the intention to hurt someone. I know Butch has given you a lot of grief, but you can seriously hurt him with that. Remember what happened when your last project malfunctioned?"

The project he spoke of was her Super Pencil. It was supposed to be an invention that carried everything anyone would need for a classroom all in the usefulness of one device, rather than a pencil bag full of them; it held a pen (in red and black ink), correcting tape, a lead pencil, an eraser, and as a last-minute decision, a pair of mini sewing scissors Mrs. Palmer let her have just for the invention. Winona made the mistake of deciding to test it out in a formal environment rather than in private (despite the device being a bit bulky to carry, but she planned on compacting it soon). It was in the middle of a science exam on the solar system when the device went AWOL and broke completely apart in her hand. Winona had splotches of black and red ink all over her jumpsuit, test, and hands, the eraser bounced out and went flying in some unknown direction, and the spring that was loaded and attached to the scissors released, flew at Mr. Brotch, and tacked him by the
shoulder of his jumpsuit to the wall behind his desk.

It all happened so quickly no one (not even she) realized she was the unintentional culprit until Mr. Brotch got himself free. Winona was mortified at how close she came to seriously injuring her teacher—and she was severely punished once getting to the Overseer's office. Her father was already there by the time she arrived, which made the whole issue even worse in knowing that his work was interrupted; he'd become a certain kind of stern when he was called from work.

"That was an accident! And it wasn't a weapon, it wasn't meant to hurt anyone…" She argued. "I apologized to Mr. Brotch for that! And served detention for three months with classroom chores!"

"Be that as it may, your smarts shouldn't be squandered on building a weapon like this." He knelt down in front of her and Amata shifted away from the both of them awkwardly. "Despite the Super Pencil incident, sweetheart, I know Butch teases you, but two wrongs don't make a right. Why don't you be the bigger person and walk away instead of going to this party?"

"Because being the bigger person doesn't work," She grumbled under her breath, as she didn't dare to defy him so openly. "Because bullies don't stop picking on you just because you keep walking away, and I'm tired of him picking on me—I want to show him that he can't bully me anymore because I won't let him."

"What brought all of this up? What has that boy done now?" Her father frowned protectively, and when she didn't answer him, he looked to Amata, who winced when seeing that she was being turned to for the truth. "Amata?"

"We- Well—… Uh—…” Amata shook her head at herself, deciding that telling the truth was the right thing to do. "We overheard Butch and his friends talking about inviting Winnie to Wally's birthday party to play a prank on her… they're going to dump trash on her when we're playing Hunt the Mutant in the auditorium, because it'll be dark, so she won't be able to see it coming and stop them!"

When she concluded, he looked back to his daughter. "Amata, could you please step outside for a minute? I would like to speak to Winona. Alone."

"Yes, sir." She replied respectfully as she got up from the floor and made her way to the door, looking back over her shoulder to Winona with an apologetic look as it slid shut behind her.

Winona watched her father get up from kneeling on the floor, sat on the edge of her bed, and patted his knee for her to come to him. Biting her lip nervously, the inventor rose up and crawled onto his lap before his arms encased her in a gentle squeeze. Her head laid against his chest with an ear of his heart, which was her usual seat during their talks, because she enjoyed listening to the rhythm of his heart and how his accent rumbled as he spoke.

"I want to tell you something that my father told me, when I was young." He looked down at her, tucking her hair behind her ear lovingly. "Because when I was young—just around your age, actually—... there was a lot of fighting going on, and he taught me a lesson that I never forgot. So I want you to listen carefully to me honey, okay? Because I don't want you to forget this, either."

"Okay, dad." Winona nodded in understanding. "I'm listening."

He rolled his head over so it rested on top hers, and as he rubbed her back in circles with a gentle palm, he began to speak.

"He taught me about war… and how it never changes."
"War?" She questioned in slight confusion, but he continued on, looking down at her with a soft smile.

"He taught me that people have always hurt each other, even from the very beginning of time… weapons changed, people changed, and as these things changed wars broke out all over the world for many different reasons. Not just here—they also happened in very faraway places, too, where you can't travel to anymore. As a matter of fact you're learning about a very important war right now in Mr. Brotch's class, aren't you? The Great War?"

Winona nodded and put the gun down in her lap to wrap her arms around his waist. When she turned her face up to look at him, he lightly kissed her forehead and her anxiety was almost immediately forgotten.

"Well, as you get older, in class you'll learn about many other wars as well… and you'll learn that wars are started with the same reasons as another. Because of injustice, or differences in religion and God. Some fights began just because people were angry, scared, pressured, or even misinformed on political details… you learn that no matter the war, nothing about it ever really changes. Someone's angry, or defensive, or hurt, and someone has to lose. It looks better in your cartoons. But do you know what else learning about wars can teach us?"

"What, dad?"

"That in many situations, war was the answer when it didn't have to be. That's partly why they're put into textbooks—in hopes that history won't repeat itself. It's to give us hope that our future generations will learn from the mistakes of the people before them and realize that violence doesn't always have to be the way we handle things. Look at what's happened to us—to lots of people over 200 years—because of war. It came to a point where the aftermath can never be reversed, or forgiven. It's why we're here in Vault 101."

"But if that's true, how come nothing's changed?" Winona gazed back at him curiously. "Why did people keep fighting?"

"The Great War was supposed to be the end of the world and the end of mankind, but we've proven ourselves to be strong, haven't we? With us, we also prove that on a new day, with different tools and different names and in a different place, another fight will always be out there." He gestured to the toy gun on her lap. "This fight you have with Butch is proving that to be true—it may not be war, and I am sure you're wondering what this talk has to do with him in the first place, but when you're old enough you'll understand. When you're old enough you'll understand this conversation better, and why violence doesn't have to be the answer… do you want it to be this way, honey?"

After the toy came back into her possession, she frowned in thought as she began analyzing it with a completely different perspective. Winona watched her father as he moved her back onto the bed, and walked to the door with his words replaying in her young mind.

"He taught me about war… and how it never changes."

"War was the answer when it didn't have to be."

"Do you want it to be this way, honey?"

"…Daddy?" She called after him, and he stopped at the door with his hand on the OPEN button. She smiled upon spotting Amata scrambling away quickly to sit at the dining table and pretend that she wasn't trying to eavesdrop.
"Yes, sweetheart?"

"If I still decide to do this…?"

"I would prefer you being civil with him… I think it will be easier for you as well, in the long run. Bullies might not leave you alone at first when you try to walk away, but I've seen many times in my life that they get bored when they're ignored."

"But if I decide to get back at him, will you be mad at me?"

"No. But I expect you to hold yourself responsible for the consequences, whatever they could be." He turned and strolled out past Amata at the table, who watched after him before she quickly scrambled up, ran back into the bedroom, and shut the door.

"What happened? Did you get in trouble? Are you still going to Wally's party with me? Did he yell at you? Did you get grounded? What happened? What happened? What happened?" Amata began shooting off questions before the door even completely slid shut, and Winona looked down at the toy weapon in her hands.

"He—… I'm not sure. He told me a story, I guess."

"He—… what?" She sputtered in disbelief, eyes wide as her eyebrows practically skyrocketed off her face. "When I'm in trouble, I get scolded, I don't get told a story!"

The inventor smiled a bit as she picked up the box of rubber bands from the floor, along with the other things she used to put the gun together, and carried everything to her work desk where she set it down.

"…So? What'd telling you a story do?"

"It gave me options." Winona turned back to face her friend. "So I have a new idea—and all I'll need is a little paint."
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Butch lazily rocked back on his heels as he stood with Wally and Paul, watching on while the other party-goers sat at the tables set up for the festivities. They chatted about this and that through bites of Old Lady Palmer's chocolate iced cake—leaving not even a single crumb as they licked icing off of fingers, mouths, plates, utensils—anywhere a morsel could be. Wally always had large birthday parties since about half of the vault residents were his family alone, so it always meant lots of food, games, gifts, and people.

Besides the given of Butch and Paul showing up as his best friends, and Susie as his baby sister, invited as well were Freddie Gomez (which Mr. Gomez vehemently denied his going but his wife thought it'd be good for anxious Freddie), and Christine Kendall (being his cousin, and all). Wally ensured Dorothy's invite was 'lost' on its way to her; not only because she was extremely annoying but she'd cling to Butch like a chewed up wad of gum on the bottom of his boot and most likely ruin their prank. Winona and Amata hadn't arrived yet, which made Butch antsy.

"What's takin' them so long?" He griped. The cake had already been gobbled down, all of Wally's presents were opened, and now all that was left was Andy performing magic tricks and Hunt the Mutant. With the party already being half over, it looked less and less likely that the two were going to come.

"Maybe they changed their minds..." Paul spoke at his left, looking to where all the other guests were gathered. "Since you guys pick on them and all."

The children were almost matched in number by the adults with six children to Wally's grandpa Stanley, his aunts Beatrice and Mary, his mom, and his big brother Stevie. Stevie didn't count as a big adult yet, but he was a pre-teen and so big enough not to be called a child anymore. Missing from the party was Wally's uncle John, who was a security officer, Wally's other cousin, Steve, and then Wally's father, Allen. Because his father was unable to come—some big thing at work—Stevie took his place at their mother's side, helping to watch the kids and clean up any big messes. Of course, he grumbled through the whole party as he shoved used plates and napkins into a garbage bag, saying he could have been doing something more fun than babysitting at a kid's party.

"Would suck if they didn't show up," Wally commented with some trace of disappointment in his voice, flexing his fingers on the neck of his new wooden bat. His mother said it was the same bat his father used when he was a part of the vault's baseball team as a kid. "Was kind of getting excited for the prank." Then took a practice swing with a balanced stance.

"We still got time!" Butch cawed, looking to the atrium door that led to the upper levels. They had to come—they spent three days collecting up garbage for this! It was just his luck that one thing or another would go wrong when he cooked up his best prank yet. He was getting too impatient, shifting his weight between his legs and looking to the atrium door every couple of minutes. C'mon, c'mon—!

"You know the Overseer's Brat." Wally chimed in as he shouldered the bat and looked to Butch, having noticed his displeasure. "She's on time for everything. If they were coming, they would have been the first ones here like the Goody-Goodies they are." He then snorted. "Probably would've showed up before my mom even decorated!"
As the boys spoke, the atrium door opened and in came Amata on the heels of Winona, who was holding a present box. Some adults glanced over, suspicion written on their faces upon seeing the presence of the two girls, and just as Wally's mother was walking over to greet them—Wally intercepted them first after putting his hat down with some of his other gifts; some books (comic and otherwise), a patchwork quilt made by his two aunts and mother, some handmade coupons from Stevie to have his desserts for a week, and a slightly dented Pip lunchbox from his grandfather.

"Wooow, the vault losers have finally graced us with their presence! Geeze, took you long enough to get here." Wally greeted the girls sourly.

"Yeah, Happy Birthday, you bird-faced big beaked jerk." Amata shot back with her hands firmly rolled against her hips. "We were trying to finish your present, but if you're gonna be a jerk we'll gladly take it back!"

"Watch it, Miss 101." Wally warned darkly at her insult, but his attention was called away when Winona offered him a small wrapped box. Whoever had wrapped it did so with much care—the edges met nicely, and the big red ribbon on top was hand tied. He took it from her and shook it curiously but the rattling inside caused the mute girl to tense up in place.

"B- Be careful," She murmured with a slightly outstretched hand. "It's—... delicate."

"Yeah, sure... thanks." He tacked on his gratitude just so his mother wouldn't take him by the ear later since she was now within hearing distance. Wally swept his arm behind him towards the table, where two pieces of cake had been saved for them (by his aunt Beatrice, as she predicted that they were just running late). "Go get your cake, we're gonna play Hunt the Mutant soon."

"Happy Birthday, Wally. I hope you like your present." Winona quietly said, much more genuinely than Amata did if she was actually heard by him, with a shy nod of her head. Wally parted away from them back to his own friends as the girls made their way to the party table, turning the box over in his hands a few times to inspect every angle of it.

"Well? What'd they get 'ya?" Butch probed.

"Dunno," Wally shrugged as he began pulling apart the wrapping paper and ribbon in tatters, letting it drop on the floor. Stevie looked over in annoyance, tightly gripping the garbage bag he held. "Probably something dumb."

As he flipped off the lid, the boys peered inside of the box with their heads collected together, circling over the present curiously. Staring back up at them was a toy handgun with a clothespin hammer and a bolt screwed in above the mouth of the barrel; the whole thing was painted in a dull gray-silver coat while the grip was painted a deep brown, like revolvers were in the old Western films Paul's dad kept. When Wally took the toy out it revealed a small tin underneath. Paul took that out and opened it, showing multiple rubber bands spray painted neon yellow and orange.

"What is it?" Paul asked in awe, watching Wally set down the box to turn the handgun over in his hands a few times, just as he'd done with the box it came in.

"Looks like a crummy fake gun!" Butch snorted, looking to the two girls where they sat wedged in between Beatrice and Stanley, eating cake. "What a sad excuse for a birthday present!"

"I think it's a rubber band launcher," He clarified as he took a rubber band from the tin Paul had in his possession. Pinching it between the teeth of the clothespin to keep it in place, he strung it over the bolt so the band was pulled tight. "It looks like it can actually shoot!"
"What the—? I thought it was just some stupid make-believe toy, but it actually works? Butch scowled within himself out of jealousy. Where'd she even get it? And where can I get one?

"If the stupid thing actually does shoot, we got two practice dummies t'use it on." Butch huffed, and as he glared at Winona and Amata's backs, he didn't notice the peculiar look that came to Wally's face; he looked like he were mischievously contemplating something.

At the front of Wally's conscious thought, he heard Butch's accusations from three days ago of him 'wussin' out' and calling him a chicken. The memory traveled down his arm and made his thumb twitch dangerously close to the clothespin hammer, which he realized actually acted as the gun's trigger. With a nasty grin, he aimed the toy directly in Butch's face, and laughed in satisfaction when the older boy flinched back with obvious fear in his eyes.

"Don't point that thing at me, man!" He exclaimed, stepping back away. "You could put someone's eye out with it!"

Wally laughed as Butch's fear shrank away to uneasiness. Taking much more serious aim down the length of the toy, Butch turned to run away—to have Wally's thumb clamp down on the clothespin with ease so it projectiled from the barrel in a flash of bright yellow. Butch squealed as the rubber band pelted the nape of his neck over the rolled collar of his jumpsuit, and he had a hand slapped against the welt that immediately reddened, glaring back at his assailant.

"Wally, you radroach!" He spat angrily, but all the birthday boy did was laugh again. Over at the table, some adults glanced up to see what the commotion was all about with Wally's laughter and Butch's shriek. It seemed that only Amata and Winona caught the events that played out, with the Overseer's daughter laughing and explaining to Susie Mack what happened while Winona looked on, wide-eyed and unblinking back at Butch. He shot back at her a very heated glare, and to his surprise, she smiled. The little freak actually smiled and then turned away to Wally's sister, as well.

Why does she keep smilin' at me?!

"You sound like a girl when you scream like that!" Wally barked in laughter still, tucking his new gun into his jumpsuit pocket along with the tin of rubber bands after Paul had given it back to him.

"Shut up before I make you swallow your teeth!" He seethed as he threateningly shook a fist at him. "Go tell your grandpa that you wanna play Hunt the Mutant, now. I'm gettin' tired of waiting around to see the Weirdo run back to her doctor daddy cryin' like a big baby."

The boys went over a quick review of the plan; Paul was to excuse himself from the party (faking a stomachache) and go up to the second floor of the atrium where the garbage bags were stored in hiding. When the lights flicked out for Hunt the Mutant, he'd drag them over to the edge of the upper platform at their marked position and unfurl the wire he was given. From there, Butch would set up the tripwire, tug on it for Paul, and he'd attach the bag to the other end to hang over the railing—during the game, Wally and Butch would try to find Winona (and Amata now, too, since she wanted to come to the party so badly) and guide her over to the tripwire to trigger the bags to be dropped. It'd be difficult to do in the dark, they knew that much, which is why they had Stevie make three pairs of night vision goggles for them. The eldest Mack boy complained that he had better things to do with his precious time—but when Wally threatened to tell their mother about his skin mags stash that he inherited from their father, he had no choice but to comply.

When each boy knew what he had to do, they walked back to the table where Paul weakly told Gloria Mack that he wasn't feeling so well and was going back to his room. Wally's mother laughed, commenting that he probably ate more cake than anyone else there, and sent him away with her well wishes. As Paul hobbled out of the atrium on his own, Wally went to his grandfather
and told him that they were ready to play Hunt the Mutant; saying that he was too excited to wait until after Andy's magic show to play it. Stanley nodded, happy to oblige one of his grandchildren, and called for the other kids to gather their attention to him.

"Is everyone ready to play Hunt the Mutant?" He asked them, being met back by some excited cheering and impatient nods. "Alright, then let's quickly go over the rules…"

Hunt the Mutant was, essentially, like a more complicated game of Hide and Seek—but instead of the person being 'It' chasing after one of many victims, the person who was picked to be the Mutant was chased around by the Mutant Hunters, which were the other players. The game would be played in the dark, so the Mutant was required to make noise once every few minutes to help the Hunters find it. If a Hunter catches another Hunter thinking it's a Mutant, the mistaken Hunter is then turned into a Mutant as well. The game would then continue on until the Mutant, or Mutants, were all extinguished, or until there were no Hunters left.

"Everyone get how the game works?" Most of them nodded, though Freddie looked on in slight puzzlement and quietly went over the rules of the game to himself before nodding in half-understanding. "Alright, then the final rules are no hiding, you have to really look for the Mutant—no roughhousing, and no leaving the atrium! Old Stanley'll know!"

The adults got up from the table and migrated to the stairwell to wait just outside the atrium until the game end, gossiping and sipping coffee. Wally and Butch exchanged the same worried look to each other and hoped none of the adults would go to the upper atrium walkway where Paul would be.

The players gathered in a half-circle around Stanley and watched as he used a tall drinking glass to mix up the paper scraps of their names, to draw out who would be the Mutant. Butch glanced around at everyone; Freddie looked nervous and still partially unsure of how to play the game. Susie bounced in place in excitement, as well as Christine. Amata smiled wide but remained patient with her arms crossed loosely over her stomach, Wally grinned excitedly (though it was more because of their prank than the game itself)... and then, there was Winona. She stood at Amata's side, watching Stanley almost lethargically, as practically everyone else seemed eager (or anxious, in Freddie's case) for the game. She stood as straight as a board with her arms at her sides, and only moved to tie her hair back out of her eyes with a hair ribbon she produced from her jumpsuit pocket.

What a weirdo... she never talks, she never acts happy or sad 'er nothin'. She's just—creepy! Butch thought as he stared at her.

Butch tried to recall the last time he had seen Winona upset—like crying hysterically or throwing a fit upset. That hadn't been since they were both about 5 years old (he actually just turned 6, he vaguely recalled), and he elbowed her in the face to try and get her lunch pass, and caused her nose to bleed. He bullied her at the time for it, sure, but it was really because he'd been too scared to go back home and encounter his mother, whom was undoubtedly drunk at 12:30 in the afternoon. He couldn't tell Mr. Brotch, either, as the teacher would have to notify her directly—and it'd be obvious that she was drinking. Butch didn't want people to know how embarrassing his mother was like that; slurring over her words and barely able to walk if she was awake at all, or half-dressed, or sprawled out on the floor like a starfish, or any other mortifying situation.

So Butch panicked until he saw the smallest child in their class carrying a lunch pass they couldn't defend... and it just so happened that the smallest kid was Winona.

"Butch!"
"What?" He whipped around to look up at Stanley. His peers were staring at him and giggling (with Winona being an exception, as per usual, and was only staring creepily at him).

"Uh, you're our mutant..." Stanley explained, holding up the unfolded scrap of paper to show that it was, indeed, Butch's name messily scribbled on it.

"Look at the bright side, Butch!" Wally slapped him on the back playfully. "You'll do the part justice, since you already look like a mutant, and all!"

"Still look better than your ugly chicken mug!" Butch snapped back and smacked Wally's hand off his shoulder.

"You two better watch it!" Stanley warned though he chuckled and shook his head. "Now, if everyone could scatter I'll get the lights turned off!"

All the kids scurried on away gladly, ushering little comments in giddiness that the game was finally starting as Butch turned to change position. They were all scattered about the atrium now, and Butch found his hand patting at his goggles over his jumpsuit pocket.

Soon enough the lights flicked out all at once with Stanley calling out. "Hunters! Find that mutant!"

The moment the game started, Butch could hear hesitant footsteps lingering all around him in the pitch blackness of the auditorium. He shut off his Pip-Boy and dug into his jumpsuit pocket for his pair of night vision goggles they got from Stevie. He pulled them onto his head, settling the lenses over his eyes, and turned them on to look around the room. The darkness of the big open room lit up bleakly with a film of sickly green like everything around him was void of any other color.

Butch watched his peers around him, stumbling with their arms straight out in front of their bodies, looking like a small horde of blind zombies. At the far side of the atrium, Wally struggled with trying to turn on his goggles, and shook them vigorously in annoyance.

Butch turned his attention away from Wally, scanning the upper platform to make sure Paul was up there doing his part of the prank. The dark-skinned boy certainly was with his goggles on; unfurling the spool of wire down to the bottom floor and Butch walked over as quietly and as quickly as he could manage while taking some pins out of his pocket. He looked around for Winona and Amata as he pushed the pins into the floor, wedging them between two metal plates on the ground, and took hold of the wire that dangled near him. Butch spotted them easily—their eyes like bright green marbles reflecting back at him eerily in the vision of his night goggles. He made a small noise, as was a rule of the game; a gargling chitter from deep in his throat as he envisioned a mutant would sound, and immediately several pairs of eyes were looking in his general direction; Susie turned the opposite way in small scuffling steps to ensure she didn't slam into anyone, Freddie with his arms straight in front of him instinctively but he veered too much to the right, Christine couldn't find which direction Butch's call came from, her head twisting around this way and that like it was settled on ball bearings—

But Winona and Amata were slowly, but surely, coming closer to him while clinging to one another so they wouldn't lose each other.

With wire in hand, he coiled it tightly around each pin so the wire was drawn tight between them and lightly thrrrrrrrn~ it with his pointer finger to test its resistance. Pulling on the wire three times to get Paul's attention, he looked up to watch as he pieced the remaining parts of the trap together; clipping two bags to the loose end of the wire and then strung it carefully over the upper bar of the railing so it had some height above the bottom floor. The bags swayed lazily from side to side in slow circles before resting and he could see rancid liquids that pooled at the bag bottoms under all
the sweated garbage.

Looking back to see the progress Winona and Amata had made since then, they were much closer than before and still heading diagonally in his direction. Butch stepped back out of the way of the trap and waited, watching on excitedly while his prey came closer and closer to their awaited demise. He looked up to the second floor platform to see Paul fidgeting nervously, watching them creep closer as well. Glancing to Wally, however, showed that he still wasn't able to get his goggles working and was shaking them much more vigorously than before; smacking his hand against the side of it where the main mechanism was positioned.

It didn't matter that Wally was phased out from the plan, everything was working out perfectly—

**What the—?! No, no, NO!** Butch shrieked inwardly as his night vision goggles suddenly sputtered and then cut to black, casting him in complete darkness again. Yanking them off his head, he repeatedly clicked his thumb against the button that powered them and put his eyes back to the lenses to check, but they weren't turning back **on!** So he started smashing his fist desperately against the side of them like Wally was doing, but they still refused to come back to life. This was an important part of their plan! With his goggles out, and Wally's as well—they had no **chance** of getting the prank to work! Right when it was the most important time for his plan to come together in a nice clean bow, they broke!

*Stevie musta cheaped out on us!* Butch recalled how much Wally's big brother reminded them that they could break or malfunction somehow, since he wasn't given a lot of time to make **three pairs** for the boys in just two days. The success of their mission was quickly declining and he found himself floundering, trying to find a way where he could still manage to bring it all together like originally intended.

"Don't forget to make noise, Mutant!" Stanley called, from somewhere far away in the room.

Butch grumbled at the reminder and begrudgingly complied with a half-hearted chitter just like the one he made earlier; a small noise of a throaty gargling.

Butch's Mutant call was caught short when he felt several hands on his chest, suddenly shoving him back, hard, without any warning. As he stumbled around to try and catch his balance, his foot caught on something tight and he went sprawling onto the floor. A sharp and thin **snap** came just before a mass fell from above, submerging his body in the sour, sticky, and **putrid**, glory that was three days' worth of garbage putrefied in a hot air vent. He flailed in it, trying to get back up and climb out of the mountain of trash he was currently trapped underneath. That's when he heard girlish giggling; and he didn't have to question what had happened any further as complete rage and disbelief took him over.

*I can't believe it!* He seethed, releasing his rising anger in yells out into the darkness. Stanley called back worriedly, asking if everything was okay and if someone was injured. Clawing off the trash that clung to him, he threw everything in any direction he could; something goopy and thick that smelled curred and like sour fruit rolled down his shoulder. Must have been a yogurt cup Wally salvaged at breakfast just that morning—peach, **Winona's favorite.**

Groans of disgust and cries of confusion erupted all throughout the auditorium as the smell of the decayed garbage heap began to reach all corners of the large, open room. Wally was the only one laughing, having figured their prank worked despite his failed participation. The lights turned back on and, surely, before him stood his attackers. Amata grinned triumphantly while Winona gaped down at him with her hands held innocently behind her back.

*They got me! They got me in my own trap!*
Butch was worried that the prank was going to go haywire when his goggles suddenly said *goodnight Gracie*, but he hadn't expected that he'd be the victim of his own creation! That was just insulting!

"We know what you were going to do, Butch… we've known for days." Winona spoke softly to him.

But how had she known? Butch's mind fumbled looking for an answer, but with the horrid aroma of trash and compost permeating the air and forcing its way up his nostrils, he wasn't able to think clearly. All he knew was that he was *furious*, and he was in no position to get up and punch her lights out with how woozy and disoriented he felt from the smell. It was worse than he thought it would be!

"Stop picking on me, Butch," Winona spoke again, louder than he ever heard her speak before, with her voice suddenly carrying a hardness that surprised him. It sounded unexpectedly... *threatening*. The kind of threatening that had merit to it. "Because I'm *not* going to take it from you anymore—I'm *not* letting you bully me *any* longer. This is a game I can play, too."

*If only we actually got her with it! Her and Amata, too!* His mind spiked with resentment as he glared up at her. The adults came running in with hands clapped over noses and Paul was nowhere in sight on the upper platform. He must have bolted.

"Bu-Butch?" Stanley exclaimed as he pulled a filthy rag from his back jumpsuit pocket, covering his nose and mouth with it. His wrinkled face twisted up in utter disgust. "How did this happen?"

"Man, now you *smell* like a mutant, too!" Wally laughed along with the other kids at his joke all behind hands covering noses, though Christine began to cry at how bad the stench was.

"Shuddup, Wally!" He barked with bared teeth as he got himself up from the floor, slipping back onto his rump with something slick having caught under his boot heel. His comical flailing threw the other kids into another bout of hysterical laughter.

Butch quickly pulled himself up to steady footing, embarrassingly red in the face, as he slapped at all the trash that stuck to him. The laughter continued on as someone began helping him by picking out a snack cake wrapper that was in his hair. Watching the hands, with smooth tan skin and a meticulous movement to them, he looked to their owner to see Winona concentrating on her work of pulling more garbage out of his hair.

"If you mix in a little Abraxo Cleaner with your detergent when you wash your jumpsuit, the stains and smell would come right out after a handful of hand washes." She muttered under her breath, though loudly enough where only he could hear. Amata watched on in confusion as to why her friend was helping him clean up!

What the *heck* was he supposed to say to that? If the roles were reversed, which they *should* have been, he would have been pointing and laughing at her with no remorse as she ran back to her daddy's office crying hysterically! But oh, no—Winona, with Amata, had not only caught him in his own *prank*, but she was now currently relishing in the victory of it! While at the same *time* making herself seem so innocent like the little goody-two-shoes she was by helping him clean up!

Butch growled as she finally got the tacky substance out of his hair and he roughly shoved her back so she went flailing into Amata, both girls surprised. "Don't touch me, freak!"
"Butch!" Stanley exclaimed in a warning tone. "That's no way to treat a lady!"

You think that's a lady? He bit his tongue so he wouldn't verbally lash out at the old man (since the guy was Wally's grandfather and all), and shoved past the surrounding kids who were in his way to get to the stairs. They gladly let him leave, making a wide berth for him to storm through. Couldn't they see what she was doing?! She wasn't innocent, or a little angel, like everyone thought! She was a conniving little weasel, and it looked like he was the only one aware of it!

Was he the only one with half a brain in the entire vault?

"Whatever! I'm gonna go take a shower 'er somethin'!"

As he smacked his hand to the door console, he heard complete silence behind him where, no doubt, some adults glared at his back while his peers shifted nervously at the tense air. Once he stepped through the doorframe, officially leaving, he heard old Stanley speak.

"We- Well, now… before we continue on with the birthday party, how about we clean up this mess first? And then we'll play a couple more rounds of Hunt the Mutant!"

I'll make her pay! Butch seethed as he glared back over his shoulder and clenched his hands tightly at his sides when he saw that Winona was, again, watching him. He glared back into her eyes, and it only enraged him further to see that she had gone back to being so emotionless when he was just so darn livid! The metal door slid back down behind him, severing their stares from one another, and he did a shameful walk back to his apartment—trembling as he made a mental oath to himself.

The vault's resident weirdo wants me to stop? Well, now, that's just too damn bad! Now I won't stop until I absolutely DESTROY you! Until you regret doing this. She. Will. Pay.

"...It looks like we've only made it worse, Winnie." Amata responded glumly as everyone watched Butch walk out of the atrium with an awkward and glare-ridden silence that followed after him.

Winona's face was soft now—thoughtful, now—and she looked up at Amata. "Amata, I'm scared. What if he tries to beat me up?"

"Butch DeLoria is not going to beat you up. I'll be with you all the time! Or we can just tell your dad. Maybe even my dad."

"You know we can't do that. The last time you told your dad about all this, Wally nearly put a cherry bomb in your desk." She shook her head in the negative.

"Yeah, well, Wally's an asshole." She huffed her response. "But we can always get back at them if they mess with us. Anything they can do, we can do, and foolproof!"

"Amata, where did you hear that word?" The little inventor stared at her with rounded eyes of shock.

"...My dad." She admitted sheepishly as old Stanley awkwardly called for assistance in cleaning up the garbage mess left behind by Butch's prank, so the party could continue.

Winona thought momentarily of this, looking to see Wally idly picking over his toys rather than help to clean up since it's his birthday and all. Stevie, who was already on clean up crew, was forced to help his grandfather, reluctantly, pick up the garbage.

"...He is an asshole." Winona replied in finality, but her voice had dropped to an even quieter
volume so none of the lingering adults would hear her.

Amata laughed and threw her arms around her best friend. "So don't worry about Butch and his goons! As long as we stick together, you've got nothing to worry about."

Winona felt better about the situation than she had in the last three days. Despite her fear and anxiety over an inevitable comeuppance delivered by the hot-headed Butch DeLoria, there was a calm assuredness that struck her; she knew that she was ready for whatever he'd bring her way. She felt stronger now, nearly unbreakable, and it made Winona Parker realize that she wasn't a victim anymore not because she finally stood up to Butch, but because she wasn't thinking or feeling like one any longer.

He no longer had power over her and it felt... **liberating.**

*I've proven to him and myself that I can beat him. I can make him sorry for everything he's done... and that makes him a little less scary.*

Butch didn't return back to Wally's party that night, especially since by the time he finished cleaning himself up, the party had long been over by an hour or two. Despite such thorough washing, he found himself at the end of two showers and a good three hair scrubblings with a simmering agitation and red skin from how hard he scrubbed himself. He continuously thought about the events of the party like a never ending movie in his head; over and over was that one **specific** event where it all went wrong, and he tried to figure out how Winona could have **possibly** known about the prank.

She was smart, sure, but he didn't leave a trail and he knew Wally and Paul wouldn't talk—even though Paul had been reluctant to participate the whole time. Paul was stupid and overly sympathetic, but he wasn't a snitch. He was a loyal buddy.

So Butch laid in bed, damp hair curled against his forehead, with his arms folded tightly over his chest as he stared up at the dark bedroom ceiling. There was the hum of the lights just outside his room, a familiar buzz that sometimes helped to lull him to sleep, but tonight it only heightened his irritation instead. He couldn't sleep, his brain was too distracted by his thoughts of enacting vengeance to shut down.

Winona's voice came to him through his thoughts.

"*We know what you were going to do, Butch...*"

**God! She's so—!* ** Butch gave out an obnoxious groan of frustration as he pulled his pillow out from under his head and smothered it against his face. He didn't quite know how to describe someone like her! Someone so **infuriating!** Someone who just by looking at her made him want to punch her in the gut! How could everyone think that she was such an angel? She was a crafty little punk that managed to outfox the fox!

"*We've known for days.*" Winona's voice called again, echoing mockingly inside his skull.

Butch pulled the pillow off his face and threw it to the floor, opening his eyes to glare at the ceiling.

"*Stop picking on me, Butch.*"

Go to sleep, DeLoria! Just go to **sleep!**
"Because I'm not going to take it from you anymore."

Go. To. SLEEP!

"I'm not letting you bully me any longer."

Butch snapped up in his bed, rubbing his sore eyes and groaning throatily to himself.

"This is a game I can play, too."

I'm gonna show that weirdo not to mess with me! I'll show her that she's gonna be sorry! I just need to plan for better pranks! Yeah, the garbage prank had a few kinks in it... the goggles were junk, the position was bad—I have to make sure she can't get the jump on me next time! She thinks I won't just get her again? She's gotta 'nother thing comin'!

"Stanley?"

His mother's slightly slurring voice pierced through his thoughts from the other side of his bedroom door. He sat up and turned over in his bed.

Old man Stanley's here? Butch crept out from under his covers and flicked on the two-way intercom between the rooms that was beside the door. After a static click, through the intercom he clearly heard what was his mother and... old Stanley?

"Sorry to bother you, Ellen." Stanley supplied. "I know it's well after curfew—but I only just got off my shift."

"S'no problem."

"Are you alright?" He asked in concern.

"Oh, yeah, m'fine! Just had a long day. Sure you know how those days are. When 'ya can't wait t'come home and have a stiff drink."

"Don't I know it," He chuckled goodheartedly. "Well, alright—I can see you're exhausted, so I'll make this quick... Butch had a little accident at Wally's birthday party today. From my understanding, it was some prank gone wrong during Hunt the Mutant and he got caught in it."

Little accident? I had to shower two friggin' times and wash my hair three times, you old fart! Butch grumbled quietly to himself as he turned back to his bed and collected his thrown pillow from the floor, tossing it back onto his mattress and plopped down to try and go back to sleep.

"Ah, my poor boy," His mother cooed lovingly. "Smelled like burnin' traash, but I love 'im anyways!"

"...Anyway..." Stanley went on uncertainly. "James' kid won the prize for the game and wanted me to give it to Butch for her. It's a sticky roll from Lucy Palmer. I meant to come by to give it to him earlier, but I got called into work right after the party."

The young boy slowly rolled over onto his side, looking up towards his door again. Why on Earth would Winona want to give him her prize?

"Oh, zat's nice of her... so nice... she's a good kid."
"Yeah, the kids sort of laughed at him and made a mean joke or two," Stanley continued on to explain. "She said she felt sorry for him."

She's giving her prize t'me? What the heck kinda joke is she playin' at?! Butch's mind screamed as he glowered down at his pillow. None of it made sense at all! Winona's behavior completely frustrated him with how baffling she was at times. She seemed to do things with no plausible reasoning, and it made his head hurt trying to figure out what kind of game she was currently playing at with him. Was she just trying to further her stance as an innocent party in all of this? Because there was absolutely no way that she was doing it to be nice. She didn't have any reason to.

"I'll put it in the fridge for him t'morrow…" She discreetly slurred again. "Thanks fur comin' by. Have a good night, Stanley."

Butch heard Stanley's retreating footsteps from outside the shutters of his window, walking down the hall in metallic footsteps that echoed further away until they were completely gone. He heard their small fridge open and shut and then the pop of a bottle being opened as his mother continued winding down for the evening. Lucky for her, Stanley probably caught her right at the beginning of her self-degradation, and so hadn't caught on that she was a somber drunk. If only she were more boisterous, and silly in her drunken states rather than melancholy and quiet—more people would know the type of mother she was behind closed doors. She was the type of drunk mother that made him worry constantly on high-alert for her well being; that made him sneak food from the cafeteria at 3 in the morning because she was too drunk to stand and then would throw it up anyways. She was the kind of mother that didn't care that he was a bully, that he terrorized other children, and had—more than once—blown off a summons down to Mr. Brotch's classroom to talk about his behavior.

They were lucky on that last one, in that Brotch the Crotch didn't decide to make a home visit instead.

Meanwhile, Butch had already figured out what he was going to do about this—about the unsure gesture of Winona's offered sweet roll, and the way she tried to help him after she successfully turned him into an ass in front of everyone and seemed like the hero—after how she pitied him like she was so high and mighty and better than he was! Butch knew what he was going to do about her. Winona was not a friend of his, nor would she ever be a friend to him. He didn't like her, and he didn't care how nice she tried being to him. It was all fake, and she somehow had everyone eating out of the palm of her hand!

But not him. Not Butch DeLoria—he was too smart for that.

After shutting off the intercom, he finally settled back down on his bed and forced himself to drift off to sleep. Butch also decided on another thing—he decided that he didn't care that she didn't like his bullying, and that she threatened to 'stand up' against him, now. He'd just have to throw it back in her face and return with a vengeance. He was never going to allow her to win over him ever again.

Her threats were soft… but this war he'd start against her wasn't going to be.
Winona meandered down the empty hallway sleepily with the heel of her palm rubbing into one of her exhausted eyes. She spent all of last night—right after school and well into 2 in the morning—working on a new little project of hers. Even though she didn't have a name for it yet, Amata (playfully and unofficially) referred to it as the Winona4000. Either way, the new invention was meant to clean up after the messes she made while working, and often enough they consisted of a horrendous amount of clutter and scrap left around her room—as she worked she paid very little attention to tidying up as she went. If she spilled oil on the floor, the Winona4000 would mop it up—clothes lying around? It'd pick them up and deposit them into the dirty laundry chute. Her bed needed to be made, her workbench tidied up, her things needed to be organized? Her new invention would do it all. Maybe even bring her meals when she got too wrapped up in her work to eat... would it be considered cheating if it also did her homework for her, too?

Her father playfully commented on how it'd make Andy jealous; and that if the invention came to successful fruition, he doubted he'd ever see her come out of her room again!

Unfortunately for her now, though, her new invention wasn't proving to be much of a success. The little inventor found that it was riddled with bugs since she was still learning wiring and such, and once she fixed one issue, another two or more problems would come in its place. It made it impossible to get it to properly function for more than a few moments where it'd either crash into something or go berserk until the battery fried itself out, causing it to shut down. The first time it did that, it had crashed into the wall where it fell to the floor in a disgruntled heap, and needless to say, it woke up quite a few very agitated vault residents. Her father had to swing in to rescue her from the growing mob and managed to calm them all down enough so they could turn back to bed.

That was one of the more recent bugs she was having with the dang thing—she'd need to either find, or make, a more stable and powerful battery for it. She wouldn't be able to program it, either, until she had regular access to a terminal and not just the one in the library; there she was quietly monitored and very rarely allowed to go by her father, as he couldn't afford the fine if she accidentally fried one of their computers with her work.

But these were all problems for solve on another day, as her father hurriedly put her to bed at 2:15 AM and she immediately went to sleep the moment her head hit the pillow. The alarm programmed into her intercom by her door woke her up at exactly 8:30, and the calling of her unfinished work encouraged her to climb out of bed rather than go back to sleep for another few hours. She took a shower, got dressed, hastily groomed herself—and as she took a seat down at her workbench, still just as alert as when she woke up, she saw a note from her father lying on top of her tools for easy finding.

*come to the cafeteria when you're awake birthday girl*  
*birthday breakfast with Jonas*  
*~love, daddy*

So with note tucked into her pocket, off she went—navigating her way down the halls, sleepily, to
her destination. She hoped that she'd get some new tools, or better supplies—maybe even that terminal she wanted!

It was all very unlikely, but a 10 year old could dream about having her own soldering iron.

Coming up to the cafeteria doors, Winona didn't realize that the lights weren't on inside, leaving the room in complete darkness. She didn't realize how silent it was on the other side of the door when, normally, the jukebox drawled on calming tunes hand-picked by the Overseer. Winona didn't notice any of these things until her hand came up to the button, the door slid open, and her exhausted haze was immediately assaulted by the bright cafeteria lights suddenly turning on with a surge of white light, making stars in her eyes. She cried out in surprise and rubbed at them as enthusiastic voices carried around her in a disorienting wave. Her father immediately came to her side with his hand on her shoulder, chuckling.

When she could open her eyes again without dots of stars flashing in her vision, she saw balloons scattered around the floor and hanging lazily from the ceiling. Multiple guests were donning polka-dotted party hats and blew noisemakers, and there was a handmade streamer with glittering bubble letters that spelled out 'Happy Birthday!' above the silent jukebox.

"Stanley, you turned on the lights too fast!" Officer Gomez called out. The sight of him in his security uniform with a party hat that looked to be too small for his head made her laugh. "You blinded the poor kid!"

Despite the scolding, another round of "Happy Birthday!"s flooded back to her. Her father and Amata blew noisemakers happily, Mrs. Palmer whispered something to Officer Gomez to where he nodded with a soft smile, and Andy hovered behind the bar with Stanley, who waved happily at her.

"Happy Birthday, honey." James pecked her lightly on the top of the head and brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "It's so hard to believe that you're already ten… time's gone by so quickly. If only your mother—…" His words trailed off with a melancholy key, and Winona gazed up at him questioningly. A small smile occupied his lips. "If your mother were here, she would be so proud of the daughter she has."

Winona muttered words of love to him as they hugged tightly, with his hand cradling the back of her head, thumb stroking over her tight black curls. Upon parting, the room had grown still and eerily quiet, and when she looked up the Overseer had entered the room from the opposite door of the cafeteria. He strolled over in a composed gait, jumpsuit crisp and his hair properly parted and combed, and cut between Officer Gomez and Mrs. Palmer to get to them. Winona watched the Overseer as he and her father exchanged a slightly tense greeting and she felt her empty tummy do a flip-flop.

This man was her Overseer, and her best friend's father but his presence made her feel uneasy. She didn't know if this uneasiness she felt around him stemmed from her personal feelings, or because the two—her father and Amata's—seemed to barely tolerate the other's presence when around each other. Exchanges always felt—... hostile.

Her father's arm tightened around her shoulders. "Honey, say hello to the Overseer."

"Good morning, Overseer…" Winona mumbled sheepishly. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course, Miss Parker. As Overseer, it's my duty to the vault and its residents to attend every 10th birthday party—to ensure the child is properly prepared, and given all the tools he or she needs in order to succeed in this delicate food chain that is our beloved home."
Amata stood behind him, annoyance and mild embarrassment reddening her cheeks as she watched her father rattle on about vault responsibilities and what it meant to contribute to society. When his speech was over, he presented to Winona the infamous Pip-Boy 3000 that every child got on their 10th birthday, as a more concrete reminder of their newfound place amongst the adults. She knew some of the basic chores expected of her from what her father had told her; keep your classroom clean, wash dishes at the cafeteria, sweep up the hairdresser’s floor of hair clippings. It was mostly simple and tedious volunteer work but it excited her, nonetheless. Winona waited for a very long time to get her own Pip-Boy and to become a part of the higher order known as Adulthood.

The only part about it she didn't like was that the time she spent working was time away from inventing.

After instructing the 10 year old to be at his office the next morning at 9 AM-sharp for her first work assignment, the Overseer turned on his heel and took a seat at one of the cafeteria booths. The only end to the conversation was an unnerving chuckle from him, and Winona looked up to her father, who gazed after the Overseer with a hard, and mildly unsettling, stare.

"Dad—?"

"Here—how about we put on your new Pip-Boy? See if it fits..." He responded, tearing his gaze away to help her put it on. When the screen lit up, so did the eyes of the little inventor like a million igniting sparks as she marveled at it. "There. Now everyone in the vault will know that you're a grown up."

"I have one like you, now!" She smiled and pointed at his own Pip-Boy. His was an older model with a larger, squarer screen so it was bulkier and heavier. "I'm really an adult now, aren't I?"

"Yes but that doesn't mean that you're an exception to the rules," He chuckled with a raised brow. "Now, you remember the basics—don't you, sweetheart?"

Winona huffed a bit under her breath and put her hands on her hips, making herself seem so official and serious. She was an adult now! An adult with some rules, but… an adult, otherwise! Of course she knew the rules!

"No taking it apart. No opening it up to see what's inside. No tinkering with it, no playing with it after lights out—and I'm not allowed to modify it in any way."

Her father laughed at the disappointed tone of voice she utilized. "Good girl. Now, I want you to go and enjoy your party—today will be the only day that you turn 10, and we have the cafeteria until 10:30 so make the best of this day."

"Thanks, daddy." She said as she hugged him once again as Amata trotted over. He detached from her to walk towards the bar so the girls could talk, and the first thing she did was show off her Pip-Boy. "Look at what I got!"

"I know, I saw it this morning when Stanley gave it to my dad. We sure surprised you, didn't we? Your dad was worried you’d find out, so we had to be super sneaky about the whole thing!" Amata giggled before looking back over her shoulder to her father—the Overseer—to make sure he wasn't listening, and then leaned in towards her to whisper. "Did you get your new invention to work? Maybe you can bring it to my apartment to clean my room sometime!"

The moment Amata finished speaking, the cafeteria door slid open and Dorothy Horowitz walked in with a thin gift box tucked under her arm. She strut towards the two girls hurriedly, seeming
distracted.

"Don't ask," Amata spoke under her breath still, now for Dorothy's sake as she came their way and Winona gaped impassively at the pig-tailed girl, confused by her presence. "Your dad said we had to invite her. And Butch and his friends, too."

"...Why?" Winona shot back with a curious glance, but the only response she was given was an unsure shrug as Dorothy stopped to talk to Mrs. Palmer briefly, seeming more bored than distracted in that instance.

Butch made it very clear to Winona that he wasn't taking her peace offering of Mrs. Palmer's sticky roll—which she was given after winning another 2 rounds of Hunt the Mutant at Wally's party two months prior. The very next day, Butch, walking alone, shoved her against a wall and pulled on her hair, goading her mercilessly to try and make her cry. She stomped on his foot to run away back to her apartment, him hollering 'cry baby!' down the hall after her as he hopped around on his one good foot. The war was on from that day when he refused her peace offering, and the battle had been fought almost daily since, and it especially didn't help that he sat behind her in class.

The two were constantly butting heads; he tried pulling pranks on her with Wally and Paul on his heels, and the ones that succeeded were met with retribution from her side of the battlefield with the help of Amata, and a harmless (but devastating) invention or two. Her father wasn't happy with her, but Winona had tried to be patient and understanding with the DeLoria boy! What was the good in patience if it got pencils threaded through her curls during math tests? What was the good in being understanding if it'd only get her cornered in the hallways during lunch, and taunted about being a 'Goody-Goody'? It caused her to fight with herself, constantly swaying between wanting to walk away and feeling like she had to stoop down to his level to survive just a day in school. She even started wearing her hair tied up in a tight bun in fear that he'd cut it off or stick gum in it after Amata made a joke about such things happening. It just seemed like something he'd likely do.

Either way, the end of their constant warring seemed nowhere in sight. Any peaceful solution was completely out of the question—and she didn't know if it angered or saddened her more. She didn't want to be friends with Butch DeLoria, persay, but she certainly didn't want them to actively be enemies. Winona didn't like the jabbing and pranking and insults any more than he enjoyed finding chocolate pudding in the rump of his jumpsuit, or his intercom ringing his alarm at all hours of the night (Winona felt bad about it a couple days later when she saw how exhausted Butch was, and so fixed it immediately after class one day while he was out with Paul and Wally).

Winona wondered how her mother would feel about all this, and if she'd disapprove of the things she was doing or be proud that her daughter wasn't buckling under a bully's tyranny. Her father didn't seem to have the answer to that, in lieu of his own feelings about it.

"Hey, Dorothy." Winona shyly greeted as Dorothy finally made her way over to them once Mrs. Palmer took a seat at the same booth as the Overseer. "Thanks for com—"

"Just so 'ya know," Dorothy cut in, staring at Winona with darkening eyes. "I'm only here 'cause Butch is here. Butchie doesn't like you, so I don't like you." She shoved the box into Winona's possession and looked around. "There's your gift—hope 'ya like it, Happy Birthday, yadda yadda. Now where's my Butchie?"

"You got some really low standards there, Dorothy." Amata replied in an annoyed voice and an exaggerated eye roll as she pointed to a booth in the far corner where Butch sat across from Wally; they were talking about something Winona couldn't make out over the chatter of the birthday guests.
Why did dad invite him? He doesn't like Butch. She thought in surprise, her eyes widening a little upon seeing the young DeLoria's head bobbing behind the diner booth as he cruelly laughed at something Wally said—who was visually twitching in irritation for being laughed at.

"Gee, next time I'll draw 'ya a map so you can show me where I asked for your opinion!" Dorothy snapped and then briskly strode past them, shoving Winona out of her way and into Amata as she went past. "Butchieee!"

The screeching of his name made Butch jump in his seat as if the vault's blaring alarm had suddenly gone off, and looking back over the booth divider with wide eyes in horror, he comically ducked down out of sight. It was Wally's turn to laugh now.

"Geeze, Dorothy's such a ditz!" Amata grumbled with a disgruntled shake of her head as she helped Winona to her feet, both girls straightening out their vault suits with Dorothy's present still in Winona's arms. "I honestly don't know what she sees in Butch—he looks like a frog! Acts like one, too!"

"...Ribbit." The inventor muttered under her breath, and her best friend giggled quietly behind a cupped hand. "Dorothy isn't that bad, though—sometimes."

Amata raised an eyebrow over an incredulous look and folded her arms over her chest, glancing over to watch the 'love birds' as Dorothy held Butch's arm firmly against her side. She nuzzled herself into his shoulder as he grumpily pouted, unable to pull his limb out of her taloned grip. He blew a wisp of his black hair out of his face with a huff of annoyance.

"I dunno why Butch just lets it happen—he's always making sure people know that he doesn't like something, and it's obvious he doesn't like her."

"Who knows why Butch's the way he is." Winona replied with a shake of her head, looking down to the box in her possession. "Looks like Dorothy got me something big, though..."

"Oh, no you don't!" She exclaimed as she hooked a thumb towards herself. "Best friend's present, first!" Then ran over to her father, who was sitting silently with Mrs. Palmer still, and handed something to his daughter with a stern look. Amata ran back with the gift tucked behind her back and out of sight.

"What's that?" Winona asked, pointing at the thing she was hiding.

"You're gonna have to guess before I give it to you! And think carefully, because this is going to be a test of our friendship!" She teased with a beaming smile.

"Is it that new multi-head screwdriver I asked Vault Santa for?" Amata shot her a pressed look but Winona grinned. "I'm kidding—I hope it has something to do with my favorite barbarian?"

"You mean our favorite barbarian?" Amata corrected with a mirrored grin as she removed the comic book from behind her back. The pristine and flimsy cover revealed it to, indeed, be a Grognak the Barbarian comic book with a clean sheen that reflected the diner lighting.

"Is that—? Issue 14?" She gaped in disbelief with wide eyes. "How'd you get this?"

"I got it from my dad. And look!" Amata thumbed the pages rapidly to leaf through them. "No missing pages, either! Can you believe it?"

"I'm surprised that your dad read comic books..."
"He was 10 once, too," She laughed as Winona took the comic book into her possession. "But enough about my dad. You've passed the friendship test! You now have permission to open Dorothy's present."

Winona smiled as she set the box on the floor, kneeling down with the comic book tucked under her arm so she could free up both hands to open Dorothy's present. Peeling away the tape on a few of the sides, she opened up the lid of the box and stared, dumbfounded, at the contents inside it. Amata loomed over her, hunched over with her hands on her knees, all the while blinking repeatedly in shock.

"...Is that—?" Amata began, unsure of how to finish.

"...I think it is..." Winona answered quietly, still gaping down at the present that laid inside its box. "Have you ever seen one before?"

"Only in old posters and pictures." She looked up to her friend. "Vault Policy wouldn't allow it."

"Who cares about Vault Policy, it's your birthday!" Amata grinned and then pointed down at the box. "Besides, I'm sure my dad would make an exception. It's just a dress!"

As Amata spoke, Winona pulled the dress forth from its box; the fabric was soft and a spectacular shade of blue, like the skies she'd seen in pre-war picture books and posters. Winona thumbed the white puritan collar of the dress adoringly, hand running down to the knee-length flared skirt—which was layered underneath with white frills to give it more body. It was a simple but beautiful dress, and the little inventor never thought she'd see anything like it in her life let alone get to wear one.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" She sang excitedly, helping Winona pack up the box. Thrusting it back into her arms, Amata helped her up off the floor and shoved her on towards the door. "You have to go put it on! Now!"

"Wha—? Says who?" Winona dug her heels into the floor with the refusal to leave. She looked back to her father at the bar for help, but found him deeply engrossed in conversation with old Stanley.

"The best friend!" Said best friend giggled as she opened the door and pushed her out into the hall. "And don't come back till you put it on!"

As the door closed between them, Winona looked down to the box in her arms along with her comic book and heaved a small sigh, hurrying off to her room to change. Lord knows her father would be upset if she was away from her surprise party for too long...

"This party's so freaking stupid!" Butch growled as he watched Winona cling to her father when she spotted the Overseer walking towards her. He grimaced at the look spreading in her father's face—eyebrows pulled together, a slight frown on his lips. The concern in his face was the type of concern only a father could conjure up for their child... for a daughter, especially. Christine's old man got the same look on his face when he and Wally would make fun of his spoiled cousin.

"Yeah, it's boring." Wally replied as he lazily drummed his fingernails on the tabletop. "There aren't any games or fun things to do. Complete Snore Fest. It's not fair I had to go, but Susie and Stevie didn't have to!"

"So what? And where the heck's Paul?"
"Dunno. Probably late like always." He continued to drum his fingernails on the table, and the boys went back to silence.

The hot-headed DeLoria could not believe that his mother forced him to go to Winona's dumb surprise party! Couldn't she see how much he loathed the vault's resident freak? A couple months ago when Stanley came to his apartment to give away her sweet roll prize, he refused the gesture by dumping it down the garbage chute. His mother was sober enough to be pretty upset by his reaction—so when Dr. Parker sent an invitation for her 10th birthday party, she said he'd be going whether he wanted to or not and that was the last she was going to hear about it. Butch didn't have a chance in challenging her when she was sober enough.

But he knew the party was a terrible excuse—his mom just wanted to drink in peace where he wouldn't be a witness to her self-degradation. The only good thing about this lame toddler's party was the cake, and everyone knew Old Lady Palmer made the best baked goods in the vault. He couldn't say no to that! He'd put up with the lame party and being around Winona the Weirdo for a slice or two.

"You ever find that switchblade I gave you?" Wally broke through Butch's thoughts so he could get rid of his own boredom.

"No." Butch grumped. "It musta fell outta my pocket or somethin'—and I can't go around asking people if they've seen it since its contraband."

"True… hey, what're we calling our gang, by the way? I was thinking The Mackers."

Butch laughed mockingly at the suggestion, causing his friend to twitch and bare his teeth in insult. Just as his laughter began to die down, and Wally looked as if he was about to lunge across the table to grab him by his collar, high-pitched squealing lashed at his ears like the sharp crack of a whip.

"Butchieee!"

It catapulted him out of his seat as he glanced back and saw Dorothy run towards him, and in a panic he did the first thing that came to mind—hide. So he flopped back on the diner booth, hoping that Dorothy hadn't really seen him.

"Hi Butch! I missed you, I haven't seen you in two. Whole. Days!" She exclaimed as she plopped down next to him, immediately trapping his arm in her clinging grasp, and snuggled up against his side with a dreamy smile on her face.

There's a reason why! His mind exclaimed bitterly as he tried tearing his arm out of her grip, but to no avail. She only tightened on his limb as if it belonged to her, and so he had no choice but to comply with what she wanted if he desired to get it back.

"So watcha guys talking 'bout?" Dorothy asked.

"About starting a super awesome gang. Only really cool people can join—and we'll do whatever we want without the adults telling us what to do. We'll rule this vault." Wally replied enthusiastically.

"We already do, anyway. We're just makin' it official." Butch replied, and she constricted around his arm again. "Jesus, Dorothy! You're cuttin' blood off!"

"Get used to it, lover boy!" She laughed in an annoying titter and clung even tighter, making him
hiss in pain. "You guys come up with a name yet? 'Ya gotta have a swanky name!"

"I was thinking The Mackers. Or Wally and the Willies—Butch and Paul are the Willies."

Dorothy snorted obnoxiously with a wide grin and cocked a thin eyebrow. "You're a willy alright, Wally."

Grumbling inwardly, Butch nestled his jaw in his upturned palm as his elbow settled on the table and listened to Dorothy trying to make small talk with Wally. To keep himself occupied from blowing a fuse and taking his anger out on his only present group member, his eyes wandered around the diner; Andy hovered in front of the birthday cake, talking with Stanley about something happening down on the reactor level as Winona's father sat down next to him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. The two smiled at each other before James contributed his questions about the malfunction in the water purifier just the day before. Butch's eyes soared over the room again, and was caught by the sight of the two best friends that were at the front of the room by the broken jukebox. Amata was holding something out to Winona, it looked like a thin book of some sort, and she looked down to it with bug-like eyes. He could only make out parts of their conversation.

Something drowned out by the small crowd of party-goers. "—our favorite barbarian?" Amata grinned.

Something, "Issue 14?" Winona asked in shock, then something else as she looked up at her friend.

Barbarian? Issue 14? Is that a comic book? Butch pieced together that it must have been some old comic book Amata found in a box of abandoned belongings, most likely Grognak the Barbarian since that was one of the few comics worth reading. The freak's a Grognak fan?

He watched as they opened up the box Winona was given as Dorothy's offered gift, and they both began squealing about something girls only found exciting. Amata was suddenly pulling Winona up and shoving her to the door and out into the hall, grinning to herself. She then shut the door, marched toward her Overseer father, and scolded him about acting all 'official' at a birthday party. Butch could see that if Amata ever became Overseer, it wouldn't make much of a difference from her father ruling over them. She was just as naggy.

"Hey Dorothy—" Butch began, looking down at Dorothy who was still holding his arm captive. "What was in the box you gave Nosebleed?"

"Her present, silly!" She swooned as she swiped her finger down the tip of his nose playfully, giggling a little. He flinched back with a grimace and brushed his nose clean of Horowitz germs.

"I know it's a present stupid, but what's in it?"

"It's some dress my mom made for me, but I grew out of it. She thought it'd fit Winona since she's so skinny." She cocked her head to the side with a shrug of her shoulders. "I told her that Weirdie Winnie makes you mad so she shouldn't get such a nice present, but I had to give it, anyways! Why're 'ya asking?"

"No reason…" He replied, glancing back to Wally to continue talking to him about a name for their up and coming gang. They talked about starting a little something for themselves for the last year now—they were tired of adults telling them what to do! Dictating everything, giving them punishments and detentions and figurative slaps across the face (though it was literal in Wally's case). They'd do what they want and take no trash from anyone. He didn't care if no one else liked what his gang did—they could take a long walk off a short pier!
A few name suggestions consisted of Vault Rebels, Vault Rats, Vault Snakes, Tunnel Rats, and any other suggestions that either had radroach in the name (with Butch immediately vetoing these in disgust), or a combination of Wally's name (such as The Mackers, Wally and the Big Cheese, or Wally and Co.).

"Look who decided to show up—and he's with the spazz." Wally cut in after The Radiated Radroaches had just been shot down by Butch vehemently.

Looking back over the booth divider, he saw who Wally was referring to—Paul had finally shown up to the party, but he wasn't alone. Walking back in with him was Winona, engrossed in light conversation with the Hannon boy where he said something that she smiled shyly at. He meekly waved to her when he noticed that Wally and Butch had their eyes focused upon him, like a nervous actor pinpointed by a sudden spotlight, and he quickly scurried over to sit next to Wally, opposite of Dorothy.

But Butch continued to stare in slight surprise at the young inventor. The dress Dorothy gave her was a vibrant but soft blue that seemed mismatched with her Vault-issued black boots, but she didn't seem to care about that any. As she walked over to Dr. Parker to present her new dress, not noticing how Butch's eyes followed her all the way past their table as she went to the bar counter where her dad sat, and she spoke up to get his attention. When he looked down at her, his eyes widened as a pleased smile lit up his face.

"Oh, sweetheart…" Her father exhaled as he placed his hand on her cheek, leaning over to kiss the top of her head "You look beautiful... you look just like your mother."

She turned a burning shade of red and gave him a small smile, her arms folding loosely behind her back in a bashful gesture.

"I suppose that since it's her birthday, she can wear that… but once this party's over she must wear her jumpsuit." He heard the Overseer grumble to Mrs. Palmer behind him.

"Oh, fiddlesticks! She looks lovely." She shot back gleefully. "And I think it's about time we stop wearing these silly jumpsuits!"

"Vault Policy clearly states, Lucy—"

"If Vault Policy told you to stick your head in the incinerator on the first Tuesday of every month, would you do it? I thought not, Overseer."

Butch continued to watch Winona, but it was because he couldn't wrap his brain around how the foreign sight was making his stomach feel, and why it made him feel like that. Despite her sheepish appearance as she took in the compliments, her eyes had a different look to them that he didn't really know how to describe; they burned fiercely and he'd never seen this in her before—he'd never seen any fire. Just weird wide-eyed smiles every once in a while or a pure emotionless demeanor 24/7 that convinced him she was actually a robot. It'd explain why she liked building stuff so much.

Forcing his eyes to stay away from Winona, he tried to continue focusing on naming their gang with Wally and Paul, but he found his eyes periodically looking back to the wayward girl that was his enemy. Finally her father told her to greet the other guests who came to the party, and she walked past his booth to speak with Old Lady Palmer first. Butch kept trying, but ultimately failing, to concentrate his attention away from her.

He didn't have to anymore when Amata suddenly cried out in horror.
"Andy, wait—!"

The clumsy robot brought out a large disk saw from one of his arms, excreting a loud mechanical grinding as he turned it on and neared the cake. Before Stanley and Dr. Parker had the chance to tell Andy to stop, the robot sent the disk saw through the dessert and caused it to splatter outward in sticky chunks. Butch couldn't contain his laughter as he watched a rather sizable gloop of mutilated cake mixed with white and blue icing land on Dorothy's head, smearing down her forehead. She screeched in surprise, jumping up from the table as she furiously tried to brush the cake out of her hair with her fingers and a napkin she grabbed from the bar counter—beginning to cry when the mess only got worse, streaking blue across her forehead, and she ran out of the diner in mortified embarrassment before Old Lady Palmer had the chance to even get up to help her.

"Oh no…" Amata exhaled as everyone watched Dorothy run out of the diner in tears, with Officer Gomez immediately getting up to follow after her and make sure she was okay.

Dorothy's gone, and the mute freak's birthday cake's destroyed. Butch thought as he grinned to himself, looking over to see Winona amble over to the bar counter cautiously as Andy still had his disk saw turned on. Now to wait and see the water works of her dumb party being ruined!

"I am just mortified, young miss!" Andy exclaimed in his gentlemanly drawl. "I didn't mean to ruin it! Oh, I am so dreadfully sorry! I'm sure Mrs. Palmer and I could whip up another beautiful cake for you in a jiff!"

The young DeLoria watched Winona closely, his grin deepening as he waited for her reply while she examined the remnants of the baked good—he expected her to cry, maybe throw a tantrum—and if he was lucky, even see her run out like Dorothy did! His hope was quickly dashed as she dipped her finger into the mutilated icing to suck off her fingertip, and then smiled warmly up at the handyman robot.

"It's okay, Andy." She murmured quietly. "It's just cake."

...That was it? 'It's just cake'? The birthday party was lame enough as it was! The balloons, the streamers, the party hats! It was fit for a five year old, not someone who was now going to be seen as a grown up in the vault! How was she not upset that the only upside to the stupid festivities was the cake, which was now demolished?

How did she just not care?!

This ain't over yet! Butch thought determinedly as he spotted a sweet roll in a plastic container in her other hand. An idea began to twist and churn in his brain, and before he had a true plan cooked up or even realized the repercussions (being in a room full of adults, and Winona's father, no less), he was already on his feet and coming towards her. He ignored the concerned look Dr. Parker had on his face upon seeing the trouble-making boy coming towards his daughter with a crooked grin on his lips.

"Nice party and all," Butch spat in a bitingly sarcastic tone at Winona, causing her to turn and face him with a blank expression, her smile immediately dropping. "But the stupid robot destroyed the cake, and I'm starving!"

"S—? Stupid robot?" Andy echoed in a callous tone. "Why I never!"

Winona stared up at him silently before looking down at her sweet roll in its container, seeming to understand what he was saying. With a slight shake of her head, she opened up the box and tore the pastry down the middle, offering him one of the halves. Butch gawked at her in surprise before
blinking down at the gesture, as he half expected her (and really wanted her) to refuse so he could have a bit of fun and give him a reason to torment her. Snorting at her meek gesture, he knew just how to continue making it entertaining.

"I don't want half of it, freak! I want the whole thing!" He barked, seizing for both halves that were in her petite hands. She quickly shoved the offered half back into the container and snapped it shut on his fingers.

"...No." She muttered, staring up at him with her eyes glinting with some warning behind them; turn back now, you don't have to start a fight today.

But this was where the fun was going to begin... he could feel it.

"What?" He spat with a scowl, advancing her as he saw her father push out his bar stool to get up, but he didn't walk over to them to stop the bully. He looked on, instead. "You sayin' no to me, trynna be a smart-mouth punk?"

"I am saying no to you." She nodded, speaking a little louder, and braver. "This is my present from Mrs. Palmer, and this is my birthday. I was nice enough to give you half of it even though you're rude to me all the time, but if you're just gonna be mean again, then you're not getting any of it and you'll have to leave with your friends."

At her words, Dr.Parker smiled and proudly put his hand on her shoulder in support. Winona didn't look up at him, but rather continued her little stare-down with Butch and he was now trembling with rage. He told himself he wasn't going to let this happen again where she looked like a complete hero and an angel and a Goody Two-Shoes; and what he hated the most about the whole thing was not only was he unable to make her upset, but her father looked so proud of her... when was the last time anyone looked at him like that? Even his own mom?

He never received approval from anyone, being the bastard child of a closeted drunk after his dad took a header down a flight of stairs. No matter how deep he walked into or hid in the vault, he was being looked down upon like an insignificant speck with legs—like a scuttling radroach that was smaller than the average. He received all of these dirty and harsh glares like they were boots threatening to squash him as he slunk around the halls of steel.

But why did Winona never look at him that way?

Down to his very rotten core, the thought ignited a white-hot fury inside of him. She was supposed to be his sworn enemy until the end of all days in the vault! He was supposed to be her sworn enemy! They were supposed to hate and irritate one another till another Great War reared its ugly head through the hallways every time they so much as looked at one another! Yet, she offered him half of her birthday present—she was willing to share it with him—even as he laughed in her face.

His rage rose to a boil within him as his face and neck grew increasingly hot. Growling at Winona, he pulled back a curled fist and threw it before the thought of punching her even had a chance to reach his brain. He was allowing his anger to work him, like a battery in a toy. He heard the crunch before he actually felt the pain, traveling from his knuckles and up his arm, when Winona's hands shot up to protect her head from the blow, and his curled fist collided with the screen of her new Pip-Boy instead of her face.

"OW!" He belted while retreating his hand to his body to survey and care for the damage that was dealt. Looking to her, he watched as she peeked out from behind her arms curiously to see what had happened, her eyes widening in alarm when she realized that he was hurt.
"Bu- Butch, are you okay?" She stammered under her usual mutter, but didn't move towards him or take down her arms from protecting her face—still afraid he'd try and hit her again. "The Pi- Pip-Boys can take a lo- lot of damage... you—... you should get some ice on that... you're not hurt, are you? I'm sorry—"

That was it. *That. Was. It.* He *really* had it with her this time! It was only months ago Butch swore to never let her win by sending him to Loserville ever again, and yet here he was—his reddening knuckles a literally sore reminder of Hunt the Mutant.

As Officer Gomez returned, the Overseer explained to him what had transpired while he was out, and Gomez frowned with a miniscule glare in his eyes upon the dark-haired boy. Shaking his head, he took Butch aggressively by the collar of his jumpsuit and forced him out of the diner to send him home; all the while scolding him for his actions and praising his 'saintly mother' for putting up with a problem child like him. Sneering back over his shoulder at Winona, he watched as her father spoke to her with concern while she watched him leave with a bothered look on her own face.

Butch knew that if he ever hit her again, he was *not* going to miss.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Apologies for the rather random chapter in the middle of the week. This was due to the fact that I had originally planned on posting this chapter on Friday, but due to it being in the same scene and setting as the prior chapter (just with a different character, James', POV) I decided to post it up! "Chapter 5: The Bad Feeling" will still be posted this upcoming Friday (November 3rd) so don't you worry!

Oh, and before I forget, be sure to pay attention to the dates posted at the top of each chapter in the future. This is important to the story, where you'll be able to keep track of how old Butch and Winona are, as the chapters follow a timeline.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out~

July 13, 2268 (cont'd)

"I'll send her down momentarily, Jonas." James said into the intercom next to the diner door, releasing the button as he looked to where his little girl (who wasn't so little anymore) sat with Amata at the back booth.

Butch's friends, Wally and Paul, left barely a moment after Gomez hauled the DeLoria boy out of the diner and things had been quiet and cheery since. Alphonse left shortly after, and Lucy was speaking with Stanley at the bar counter—no doubt about the water purifier, seeing as how quietly they were talking, and how Stanley fidgeted on his stool. The handyman fixed it without a problem but the topic still made him obviously uneasy; like the purifier downstairs could hear him somehow and would soon break again just to spite him.

James briskly walked towards his daughter to catch a bit of the conversation she was having with her best friend as they shared her sticky roll. A red baseball cap, her birthday gift from Stanley, was perched atop her head.

"I really can't believe Butch tried to hit you! I mean, I know that this is Butch we're talking about, but today's your birthday! And with all these people around! He's sure got some nerve."

"It's just how Butch is, I guess..." Winona shrugged, her mind obviously somewhere else as she idly bit into her half of the pastry and chewed slowly, too occupied to enjoy it.

"You're not still worried about hurting him, are you?" Amata asked accusingly with a raised brow.

"What if I broke his hand?"

"He deserved it and you know it. He's such an idiot..."

"Winona," James called as he came up behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Jonas just paged me—he'd like you to come down to the reactor level."
"The reactor level?" She repeated, blinking curiously as she straightened up in her seat curiously. "What for?"

"I suppose you'll have to ask him when you get there." He chuckled and nodded his head to the door. "Now get going. We wouldn't want to keep him waiting."

James watched as Winona nodded, climbing off of her booth without another question, leaving the remainder of her half of the sweet roll for Amata to polish off. Once she was out the door with the troubled look about the DeLoria boy still on her face, he watched through the window as Beatrice cheerily greeted her; a big, almost dazed grin was on her face as she spoke with the birthday girl, handing her a holotape to plant into her new Pip-Boy. No doubt another one of her—... artistic poems.

From the moment James met her, when she generously offered to help him raise Winona until she was out of diapers, he knew she was a strange one.

"My dad's gonna be super mad if he ever finds out about the present you're giving her, Mr. Parker." Amata pointed out through a mouthful of the chewed up pastry.

"I know—but what your father doesn't know won't hurt him, don't you think?" He gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't you worry about it. If he were to ever find out about it, I'll take full responsibility. You have nothing to worry about."

"Thanks," She breathed out a sigh of relief, still chewing until she was able to swallow and then continued. "You know she's probably just gonna take it apart anyways, right?"

He chuckled and nodded, looking back to the window to see that Winona had continued on her way to the reactor level. Beatrice came in just then, going to the bar to see if there was any cake left, but only saw the remnants of it being mopped away by Andy off the floor and counter.

"I know. It's just in her nature." James responded before making his way to the door. "Now, I have to go and give her her birthday present. Thank you for all your help, Amata—the party was wonderful."

"It was nothing! Bye, Mr. Parker!"

James strode out of the cafeteria, through the halls, and to the staircase that led down to the reactor level with hands tucked into the pockets of his jumpsuit. He thought about how far he had come with his daughter; about taking the trek from the Jefferson Memorial all the way to Vault 101, and how it was a terrifying experience even with Brotherhood of Steel soldier, Cross, accompanying them. The locals sometimes liked to take pot shots at anyone allied with the Brotherhood, and having a baby that screamed constantly was difficult to manage at night (or if they were trying to keep a low profile, otherwise). They could do nothing but walk, even through the night when they were supposed to rest, because his fear kept him from feeling exhausted, or starved, or needing to stop for a bathroom break. The fear of being unable to keep his child alive kept his aching legs from buckling at the knees and causing him to collapse into the dust, carrying his swaddled baby girl... that was until they arrived in Megaton, where Cross forced him to stop and rest. They were tacking in the sniper's nest at the front gate when they entered back then—and he wondered what else changed about the city in his time away.

He thought often of the above, with a certain surreal feeling that everything above ground stopped like Vault 101 was a massive time capsule; preserving everything he left behind above ground, where it'd lie in wait for his return to set things in motion again.
James vividly remembered the bar they rented an upstairs room at, when they came inside Megaton—it was an Irishman by the name of Colin Moriarty, who was an untrustworthy sort that seemed like a giant walking rat in a leather vest. As sleazy as Moriarty was, he was an undeniable fountain of valuable information when a proper toll was slid across the counter (James' was in the form of several bottles of scotch over a handful of dark days). He only wanted to get to the border and pass over into Virginia back then, and who could say where they would have been right now, if it wasn't for the barman having pity when James drunkenly recounted Catherine's death... and, in turn, told the grieving and widowed father about Vault 101 down the road.

"No one e'er goes in—an' the people that came out? Well... they ain't 'round anymar. The world ain't a place fer e'ryone, 'yeh know. Imagine gettin' in'ta a neighborhood like that, 'ey? Couldn't think o' anywhere safer out here for yer little anklebiter."

James had forgotten all about Virginia by the time the conversation concluded, and he pressed on the next morning, despite his hangover, with the decision of taking a chance on Vault 101. Alphonse was reluctant at first and absolutely refused to let either of them in—for good reason, of course—and he wouldn't listen until he heard Winona's excruciating cries and saw her on the door cameras. Coupled with James' promises of being an upstanding citizen, and practiced doctor, in Vault 101's society, Alphonse couldn't turn them away. The door was opened after a deal was struck and he was personally escorted up to the Overseer's office by Security for documentation.

Back then Alphonse was a somewhat admirable leader. He occasionally suffered from a case of 'power trip', but James believed that the man meant well.

Once things were settled, life in the vault went on swimmingly; he was liked by the residents and accepted as one of their own, he made friends and loyal confidantes, he did good work in the clinic that was positively recognized, and good food and clean water was stupidly accessible. There wasn't a single trouble to be worried over and Winona was happy, healthy, and safe. It was the paradise he and Catherine had always dreamed of... until the second year mark when he had to diagnose Alphonse's wife, Mrs. Nadia Almodovar, with Wilson's disease—and it was already too late for them to do anything for her. Even if it had been caught sooner, the vault didn't hold the proper tools or medicine necessary to treat the overwhelming build up of copper in her organs. They could only make her comfortable until she succumbed to her illness.

When she died, and the entirety of the vault sat in the atrium during her funeral, relaying old stories and fond memories, James went to Alphonse to offer his condolences—and saw in the man's eyes that he wasn't ever going to be the same.

He was broken.

Soon after the funeral, the accusations started. At first they were only frightened rumors ushered by vault gossips, until days later when the Overseer was directly spitting it like acid insults in his face. He was being framed by Alphonse, where it was claimed that James was the reason why Nadia died, and not because of some 'genetic defect'. In Alphonse's anguish he blamed James for bringing into the vault some 'foreign disease' that infected her, and refused to believe anything he said about the matter—either as a doctor or as a fellow mourning widower. It was heartbreaking to watch a dance he knew all too well—one that he couldn't cope with on good days and remedied with numbing amounts of scotch on bad days—and he was reliving the death of his beloved Catherine all over again. From that day onward Alphonse had gone from a well-to-do Overseer to a supreme dictator that suffocated the residents with his 'we are born in the vault and we die in the vault' propaganda; and the reason why James wasn't kicked back out was because he was a fantastic doctor (and the only doctor), and the Overseer didn't want to jeopardize the vault again by reopening the door.
Until that fight with Alphonse, he had been performing small scale experiments on the vault's water purifier for Purity—maddened by trying to figure out where it all went wrong, and the accusations caused his experiments to be permanently axed. Soon after that, Jonas was placed in the clinic after he passed his apprenticeship testing, and was sent as a 'watch dog' to keep the doctor in line. James was plagued with regret almost daily about leaving Project Purity to rot in what felt like a second failure to the cause, and it made him question if he made the right decision in leaving. Of course, he couldn't allow his daughter to grow up in such an unforgiving place like the wasteland, and despite Butch and his friends and the harsh Overseer, she was definitely much safer in the vault—safer than she would have been outside with the hostile creatures, the illnesses, and the slavers and raiders and mutants... yes, she was much safer in Vault 101.

As long as she's careful with her inventions, he thought with a little smile and a chuckle as he came into the generator room where Jonas and Winona stood together. They excitedly talked about her officially becoming a grown up with her showing off her Pip-Boy, and Jonas in turn was revealing some of its nifty features that he discovered with his over the years. He playfully pulled the bill of her hat down over her eyes when James entered the room, sending her into a giggling fit where she slapped Jonas' tickling hands away from her.

"I wanted to give you your surprise after you got all your other presents," James explained as she spun around to face him excitedly.

"Wasn't the party my surprise, though?" His child questioned when she managed to straighten out her hat, then gave Jonas a ribbing with her elbow in a sibling-esque gesture. He pulled her hat down over her eyes again in retaliation with a laugh.

"Let's just say this is part two of that surprise." He chuckled and walked to the door where the firing range had been set up just the night before. Winona obediently followed him, Jonas falling in step at her side with her eyes coming upon the rotating targets, standing at attention.

"I figured that if you were old enough to get a Pip-Boy and take on vault responsibilities, then you're certainly old enough for the present I got you—" James explained as he went to the overturned locker that acted as the range's barricade, and plucked up the BB gun that was placed there, turning and handing it to her. "Your very own BB gun. Of course, it's a little old, but nothing a bit of persistence and some spare parts couldn't fix."

"I—a gun, dad?" Winona asked uncertainly as she carefully took the BB gun from his possession, looking up to him. "But aren't guns dangerous? And what about the Overseer—won't he be mad if he finds out?"

James came down to one knee so he was eye-level with her. "You don't have to be afraid of guns, sweetheart. I know they're scary because of what they can do—they can be dangerous if they're not used properly, or if you're acting careless with them—so never misuse it and always treat it with respect, alright?"

She nodded and looked back down at the BB gun with the same uncertain look in her eyes. "Alright."

"Now, the rules for your new gun are the same as with any of your new projects. No taking it apart, as you can imagine it has a lot of small pieces in it. You are not allowed to modify it, no playing or tinkering with it after lights out, and most important of all—remember that having a gun is a big responsibility, and it's not a toy, so use it responsibly. You are not to aim it at another person, even jokingly, and if you ever want to shoot it you have to come here. Do you understand me?"
Winona nodded, clutching the weapon in her small hands. "Yes, daddy. I understand."

"Good," He kissed her forehead and straightened up. "Rules are meant to keep you safe—"

"—and they're meant to keep everyone else safe from my inventions," She finished for him, smiling cheekily and he clapped a hand down on her shoulder to lean in where he was eye-level with her.

"Happy birthday, pumpkin... I'm proud of you." James spoke as she lunged at him in a tight hug, which he gladly reciprocated with his hand brushing over her hat and hair. "I love you, my little darling."

"I love you, too, dad." She murmured against his shoulder where her face was buried and pulled back just enough to look up at him with a wide grin.

"We hope you like your present, sport—though let it be said that I did all the heavy lifting here," Jonas joked from behind them, then glanced to James. "We should give her some time to give her pea-shooter a try."

"Of course. Now go ahead, and make your old man proud." He nodded in agreement as he kissed her forehead and stepped back to stand with Jonas, while his daughter occupied herself with her new gun and the targets.

"So, Doc..." Jonas began quietly after Winona was too enthralled with trying to hit the targets (and failing) to notice them. "Everything been okay at the clinic when I'm off from my shift?"

"Of course," He answered, glancing to his assistant. "Why do you ask?"

"You've just seemed to be distracted lately, is all... and you're spending a lot of time in the office after hours, when it's closed." He explained with a vague sense of accusation in his voice, carefully watching the doctor who stared back at him. "Did you get clearance from Harland for all the overtime?"

*He's becoming suspicious... you've been careless with your private experiments, James.* He thought, while making sure not to break eye contact with Jonas.

The two were on friendly terms since Jonas was 17 and undergoing his apprenticeship to becoming a physician—close to a full year into the program and the only mentor he had before James were old holotapes and medical textbooks barely kept together in their age. The vault's previous physician died from terminal cancer around the time he took his G.O.A.T. exam, so Jonas was left on his own to learn. James only just arrived to the vault and so the young man was taken under his wing. Jonas graduated from the apprenticeship program early with his guidance, and a close friendship was solidified.

Jonas was James' assistant for close to 8 years, now, and James could trust him with just about anything: the secrets of his life before he came to 101 (though he kept Project Purity private), his personal turmoil with Catherine's ghost haunting him nightly… he even trusted Jonas to care for Winona if something were to ever happen to him, where he would become Winona's godfather.

"I've just been trying to keep myself busy with work when I can't sleep." James answered in a half-lie, finally looking away to watch Winona. Her hands were unsteady, causing her fired pellets to completely miss each target. "A lot has been on my mind lately."

"You're thinking about outside again, huh?" Jonas inquired, and the doctor nodded solemnly. "I know I keep saying this, even after how long you and the kid have been down here, but you'll get
used to it. We all have to... you need to forget about the world up there."

"How did your mother deal with it, Jonas? Having to go out into the wide-open wasteland, as dangerous as it is, to come back to this?"

"She didn't have a choice when the Overseer at the time called her back... then when she found out she was pregnant with me, she didn't have a choice but to stay. I can tell you she couldn't deal with being stuck down here again, that's for sure—she talked about the sky all the time, and how there were no walls or ceilings keeping her caged." He laughed a little mirthlessly. "The wasteland turned her into a poet, for sure... I miss her. A lot. Wonder what she's been up to since her great escape three years ago."

"Do you think she's ever tried to come back?" James beamed when Winona finally hit a target so it swiveled repeatedly around the pole that anchored it. "That's good, honey! Line up the sights on the gun and focus on your aim. Steady your arms, try not to lock your elbows."

"I don't know. If she's tried, it's not like the Overseer'd let her back in or even tell me or gran—but I don't think she would... she use to talk about how if she ever was able to leave again, she'd look for my dad and they'd get married like he promised her they would. I wish I knew then that she was seriously thinking about escaping to look for him."

"So you think she left to complete unfinished business."

He laughed at the good doctor's wording, bobbing his head a little. "If you can call trying to get married 'unfinished business', than yeah... you have something unfinished up there, too?"

"You could say that." His hands tucked themselves into the pockets of his jumpsuit, looking on to his child again. She was taking his advice and her aim was getting better—but not perfect, as she was still mostly missing the targets. "Yes, you could definitely say that... but I came here because it's what was best for Winona. To keep her safe."

"So don't be so hard on yourself," He replied as he clapped a reassuring hand onto James' shoulder. "And besides, she's growing up to be a smart young lady. You did good, Doc."

But will that be enough to continue living her life down here?... She's inquisitive. Will she ever wonder if the outside was really that dangerous, or could offer her so much more than this life down here? Will she wonder enough to go digging for answers, and when she finds the truth, will she want to leave? Will she be angry with me?

The two adults were pulled out of their conversation by the sound of familiar chittering. Turning their attention to the source, Winona was brightly observing a radroach that weaved around the weighted bases of the shooting targets. It's long antennas twitched at the air as it came to a stop in the center of the range, too small to climb over the barrier to bother them, and not quite having grown into it's aggression, yet.

"I've never seen a radroach so close before... it doesn't look as big as the others. It must be a baby!" They heard her mutter under her breath. She crouched low in front of the overturned locker, the hem of her dress gathered under her knees by an arm tucked under her.

The sight of his daughter pouring her attention onto the troublesome bug caused a fireworks display of warmth to light in his chest. Whenever she was deep into her work or concentrating on new ideas, he marveled at how alike she was to her mother with the passionate glimmer in her eyes. Catherine would have loved that about her... she would have loved everything about their daughter—down to every last freckle and stray hair. James could clearly envision Catherine's excitement at
Winona's curiosity, determination, and observant nature, and she would have further encouraged their daughter's passion to become an inventor.

Their family was everything Catherine hoped for while she was still alive.

He personally couldn't describe how delighted he was when Winona brought to him the first blueprints she ever drew; it was going to be a pet she wanted, after seeing a little girl the same age as she playing with one in an old projector slide she found. She named it Gizmo, and of course, Gizmo was not only going to be her loyal friend but her own personal pudding dispenser. She was four at the time and now was quickly growing up and working on a current project of a little robot that would keep her room clean so she'd have more time to work.

James knew she'd bring Gizmo to life eventually, but until then all it was a little trial and error, and a lot of determination and patience.

"Can you take care of it with your gun, sport?" Jonas asked with a smile. "It'd be one less radroach for the vault to have to worry about."

She frowned slightly, looking back to the two adults with her hair in her face. She tucked it back behind her ear. "But I don't wanna kill it... it's only a baby."

"That's alright, pumpkin." James spoke to get her attention and smiled warmly at her. "I'm sure it won't make much of a difference whether or not that one radroach sticks around."

"Alright," She smiled back at him, hopping off the locker to walk to his side. "I don't think I'm very good with the gun, daddy. I kept missing the targets."

"There's no shame in that. Everyone has to start somewhere, don't they?" Winona nodded in agreement. "Perhaps you'll want to practice with it more, and your old man will give you a few pointers. For now how about we go back upstairs and have celebratory pudding cups for your birthday, hmn?"

"...Pudding?" Jonas questioned with a cocked eyebrow. "What happened to the birthday cake?"

"Andy happened," James and Winona replied in unison, causing the clinic assistant to laugh and shake his head.

"I'm sorry I asked," He replied, gesturing towards the door. "But pudding sounds good to me. C'mon, I'll race you to the diner, kiddo."

Winona grinned, quickly rushing to the door but stopped short when she realized the BB gun was still in her hands. Turning back, she gave it to her father for safe keeping and then quickly ran out after Jonas towards the stairs, her voice echoing out in the generator room as they raced up the stairwell, a hand clapped down onto her head to hold her cap.

"No fair, Jonas! Your legs are longer than mine!" She cried, causing James to laugh as he set her BB gun against the wall of the firing range. He stopped to idly watch the baby radroach scuttle about the floor before disappearing between two boxes—he'd have to cover that hole so it wouldn't crawl back in. A bigger one could have squeezed through and attacked her.

...She will always need you, James... always.

With that thought in mind, he walked back out and closed the door, following the two back up to the main floor. It wasn't a bitter thought at all, he loved being there for his daughter when she needed him, but it also made him wonder;
Will I ever be able to leave?
Vault 101's junior league baseball team was meeting up over a short practice on their usual Saturday morning, warming up with a few laps around the atrium, some stretching exercises, and then finishing with perfecting swings and pitches. It was their last day of practice before the school year was finished and Officer Gomez (who was Coach Gomez on his days off) had aligned it with the year-end exams schedule, so the kids would have a full week to study before the testing took place without fitness program distractions.

It was a nice gesture on his part for the players—for Freddie, Wally, Butch, Paul, and Winona, who was the only girl player on the team.

That being said, Dorothy, of course, tried to make the team as well; but she failed miserably at try outs, proving that she had no coordination for sports and so was assigned to the fitness program in the gym led by Mrs. Pepper Gomez. The program seemed more like stretching, non-strenuous exercises, and a lot of overzealous and sugary sweet congratulations that were delivered far too often. There weren't very many ways to meet fitness hours in the vault when you were a child, so it was either sports or fancy pilates, and baseball definitely seemed more like her speed (although it took whatever little free time she had from inventing).

Winona sometimes wished she picked the frilly step-dancing instead of baseball, and realized too late that she'd rather be bored there with Amata than harassed here by the Tunnel Snakes of Butch, Wally, and Paul. Ever since they formed their little 'gang' several months back, they'd been as merciless and annoying as ever.

But it didn't really matter that she was in baseball now, because she was here for Freddie Gomez—whom she befriended in the most recent half year, and it was a friendship that started, of all things, as a request from her father as Freddie's doctor.

Last year he was diagnosed with Vault Depressive Syndrome and he battled the constant anxiety, crippling low self-esteem, and lack of energy daily. The Vault-Tec: Health and Medical Handbook dictated that chlorpromazine was the only needed treatment but it couldn't treat Freddie's lethargy or self-confidence, and Winona's father believed the medication would only be a temporary fix; if Mr. And Mrs. Gomez wanted Freddie to get better they needed to offer him more understanding and positive reinforcement, and as an added support beam he requested that Winona befriend the boy. He thought it would steer him away from attention seeking behavior and bullying his classmates, which was behavior that his VDS aggravated.

Of course Winona was unsure at first but agreed, and soon enough Freddie—unexpectedly—became such a good friend of hers and Amata that the close knit duo was now the best friend trio. The three were rarely seen in public with someone missing from their little company and it suited the three just fine. They had lunches together, hung out in Freddie's room to read comic books and share snack cakes, and would play games about the vault halls to stave off the weekend boredom after chores were completed.

Unfortunately, the fun times came to a rather sudden end recently. Freddie made it clear he no longer wanted to hang out with the girls and became distant, and his behavior was also becoming verbally aggressive if contact was made between the three—like in the halls or during class if Mr. Brotch wasn't within hearing distance. He'd tease Amata about being a daddy's girl or a brat who thought she was better than their peers, and he actively ignored Winona like she was invisible.
Though Amata had written him off as a jerk, since 'all boys in this vault are creeps!' as she called it, Winona had more worrying thoughts; she thought his VDS was getting worse and she was confused and scared, feeling like she was being forced to choose between him and Amata with the rift that came between them. She didn't know how to help him—but what she did know was that she didn't want to give up.

Freddie didn't deserve it, even if he was being a jerk... and his father didn't want to do that to him, either.

"Hey, Whammy, could 'ya come here a second?" Coach Gomez called from the far corner of the atrium, away from where the players practiced their pitching and catching.

Winona tossed her ball back to Wally (who was purposely whipping it at her when it was his turn) before jogging over to the coach. Her playful and occasionally used nickname, Whammy, came from a mock game where she accidentally hit a 'home run' through the Overseer's window that overlooked the atrium. Coach Gomez, who was standing umpire, had hollered "Whammy! Right outta the ball park!" before escorting her up to the Overseer for reprimand… as was his duty as a security officer, of course.

She was given a subtle high-five from Jonas when she was escorted to the clinic afterwards and into the care of her father. He wasn't nearly as amused as his assistant was.

"Yeah, Coach Gomez?" She asked as she came towards him, fixing her cap on her head.

"It's not really my place to pry or anything—but have things between you and Freddie been alright?" His voice dropped to an almost cautious whisper. "I never see you or Amata come over anymore."

"It's been okay," Winona replied. "Freddie and I haven't been talking much lately... Amata hasn't talked to him, either."

"Did you kids get into some fight? Or a falling out?" He inquired with a worried furrow of his brows.

"I don't really know what's going on."

"I don't really know what's going on." She looked back to Freddie, who was pitching back and forth to Paul. "He's just been—... different, lately."

"Good gravy," Coach Gomez sighed with exasperation as he looked on to his son. "Your dad seems like the only one around here with half a clue as to what's going on with my boy..."

"I've tried talking to Freddie. Really, I've tried!" Winona explained.

"I know I said I shouldn't be getting involved but I'm worried about him. You've been real good to him, Winona, real good to Freddie—could you please just do me the favor of trying to talk to him again? I can pair you two up to practice swings. Try and get through to him or something. You're a smart kid and I don't want Freddie getting twisted up with Butch and his pals. They'll be a bad influence on him and you and Amata are the only friends he has that are good for him to be around."

"Butch?" Winona frowned suspiciously with her brow crinkling. "What makes you think Freddie's talking to them?"

"He's been talking about those boys an awful lot lately... more than I'm comfortable with. I'm worried those three might be trying to wrangle him up into all that 'Tunnel Snake' gang malarkey. Paul could be a good kid but he's too deep into Butch's nonsense to snap out of it—and the Macks
come from a long line of angry men. Bullying has to be in their genetics at this point, and lucky for
the vault Stevie isn't like that. Poor Stanley. Having one of his daughters married to a man like
Allen Mack… b- but don't let anyone know I said that about them. I've said more than I should
have, already."

Winona watched Freddie again as Paul spoke quietly to him and he just bobbed his head idly along,
as if he wasn't listening at all. Butch and Wally seemed to be watching him as well from where
they sat at the time out bench with devilish grins on their faces. They laughed every little bit,
obviously at Freddie's expense with however they were talking about him, before making full body
gestures of mocking—which looked a lot like an exaggerated display of how Freddie would
timidly run during their laps.

"I'd kick Butch off the team for all the trouble he causes but he'd have no other way to meet his
fitness hours. The Overseer would just send him circling back, anyhow." Coach Gomez explained.
"Just try talking to him one more time, that's all I ask. Please?"

"I'll try to talk to him." He smiled in relief at her response. "But I can't make any promises."

"Thanks, kiddo." The coach turned his attention back to his team. "Alright, kids! I have to run
upstairs real quick, I forgot our base plates in the gym. While I'm gone I expect everyone to
continue practicing! Hannon! You're with Mack. Freddie you're with Whammy, and DeLoria
you're still benched!"

The last mentioned boy scoffed with an obnoxious eye roll. Butch playfully tripped Paul on their
warm up run around the atrium earlier, and so Coach Gomez stuck him on the bench as
punishment… not like he particularly cared, however—that much was obvious when he laid
himself down the length of the bench and pulled the bill of his cap down over his eyes. Sticky gum
popped between his chewing teeth in sharp, pink bubbles as he relaxed and watched the others
practice without him.

Freddie sheepishly stood alone until Winona came to his side, and when Coach Gomez was
satisfied that everyone was going to practice and not mess around, he left the room swiftly. The
two stared at each other, shy from the awkwardness, with Freddie shifting his weight uneasily
between his feet and Winona cupped her baseball mitt in one palm, looking down at it instead of
him.

"Ready to practice?" Winona finally asked. "We can practice hitting. I could give you some tips."

"Uh—… yeah, sure. Whatever." He shrugged, his unsure words coming out without any bite to
them. "Whatever works? I don't care."

"Sure…" She replied despondently with a shake of her head and looked up into his face. "Listen,
Freddie… are we not friends anymore? You and I? And Amata?"

"Huh?" The question immediately grabbed his attention and his eyes went wide, eyebrows striking
upward.

"Well, we don't talk anymore. You make fun of Amata and ignore me. If we're not friends I need to
know why. I need to know if we did something to make you treat us like this."

"N- No, I—… Winona, I—…" Freddie stammered out with his voice quieting to his usual
gentleness that she hadn't heard for weeks now. "It's not that, you are my friend…"

"Then why do you pick on Amata like Butch and his friends do? Why do you avoid me?" Winona
argued stubbornly. "Friends don't do that to friends."

"I— I— ... I—..." He was shifting nervously now, his breathing seeming labored and he was chewing on the inside of his cheek. The tick was one of the telltale signs of his anxiety building and Winona knew it well.

"Freddie, are you okay?" Winona asked worriedly and set a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Freddie—"

"Winona, I'm sorry." He whispered in a pained voice and a sorrowful expression, his eyes big and glimmering and apologetic. All the questions she had for him almost completely vanished—almost—and she gave him a reassuring smile.

"Apology accepted. At least you've come around to your senses, Fre—"

Freddie moved too quickly for Winona to try and stop him. There wasn't enough time for her brain to register what he had done, or for her body to physically react and stop him; he snatched the baseball cap that sat low on her head and from under it came spilling out tendrils of hair that came loose from her ponytail, showing noticeable silvery streaks that cut through the stark blackness of her tight curls of hair.

Around the time Winona turned 12, she began noticing some stray strands of her hair growing out white from the roots at her scalp. They were only showing up as a few here and there, seeming like fine cracks in the jet black of her tresses that she could easily pluck out, but within the last four months the issue was getting worse. The white hairs were growing in small groupings now, causing several thin streaks of silver to run through, and there was enough that she couldn't pluck them out anymore; if she tried she'd be half bald with naked patches all over her head within another four months. Now her hair was always in some updo, like a bun or ponytail, so she could manipulate the discolorations into hiding amongst the rest of her hair.

Winona confided in both Amata and Freddie weeks ago that it made her feel vulnerable. Her dad seemed scared of what other people would think of her and so she tried hard to hide her—... anomaly, from absolutely everyone. This went without needing to be said that she was trying her damnedest to hide it from the Tunnel Snakes especially; they already had so much ammunition against her and she wasn't going to give them another bullet to add to their arsenal. Now wasn't the time for her to show weakness to them.

But her vulnerability was being used against her not by them, but by someone she considered to be a close friend.

The inventor finally snapped into action and clapped her hands over the white roots that clustered along her right temple and the near middle of her forehead edge, watching as Freddie retreated towards the other boys at the time out bench. Her stunted reaction already came too late. The three bullies wore similar expressions of complete shock—Paul himself looking almost mortified as he got up from the bench and took a generous step around it so he wasn't as close to her. They were just as stunned as she at the discoloration that had spilled out from under her hat and the silence was penetrable.

"Wha- What the hell's wrong with your hair?" Butch was the first to speak as Wally's shock dissolved into cruel laughter.

"She's turning into a granny! Hey, Granny Parker, you need some senior ration tickets? I could get some from my grampa for you, I hear they play BINGO in the cafeteria on Thursdays! Don't forget your dentures, either!"
"Is it contagious?" Paul muttered with the same mortified look still in his face, actively keeping his distance still.

"Probably is," Butch guffawed as he stood up from the bench and twisted his cap around on his head, popping his gum in his teeth. "Should put her in isolation in case it spreads! I don't wanna look like that!"

Winona's eyes moved to Freddie with a betrayed look in her face, with hands still unsuccessfully trying to cover the white rooting from her scalp. He wasn't looking at her as his eyes were in a downward, ashamed stare on her baseball hat in his hands and he refused to look up; refused to see the hurt in her eyes, and how she was silently begging him to help her. It was the sorriest he could be without even looking at her, and what hurt the most was the blatant misuse of her confidence in him and their friendship.

Freddie didn't even know the magnitude of damage that he just caused by such a simple cruelty... Winona didn't want to think about what would happen when word spread through the rest of the vault that her hair was turning white. Would there be colossal panic? Would they think it was contagious, or even deadly? Was it deadly? Her father had no idea what was happening to her and that terrified her exponentially more.

If he demanded that she hide it, it must be something bad.

Winona felt her stomach pinch tightly in her midsection when she saw Wally clap a pleased hand on Freddie's shoulder, and she realized that Coach Gomez was right—Freddie was hanging with the Tunnel Snakes, now. His VDS was part of the problem and the little gang of delinquents used his insecurities to their advantage—using him to hurt her.

That was low... even for them.

"Hey, Butch, wouldn't you say we'd be doing a service to the vault by putting this mutant freak in quarantine? We could use one of the lockers!" Wally was pointedly grinning from ear to ear.

Freddie finally snapped his eyes upward and they were wide with panic, but when his mouth dropped open, nothing came out in protest to protect her.

Wally Mack quickly advanced on Winona and latched a hand onto her wrist, snagging the sleeve of her jumpsuit within clawing fingers and she hastily jumped back to escape his grip. Her opposing hand dropped her mitt to slap him off fearfully.

"D- Don't you dare touch me, Wally Mack—!" She cried thinly and all he did was laugh.

"Oooh, the mutant's gonna fight back? When there's four of us? Wow, you're a lot dumber than you look, Parker! Maybe your disease turned you into a stupid twerp, too!" Butch exclaimed as he came to Wally's side to help him capture Winona, advancing on her as well. "C'mon, Freddie! You wanna be a Tunnel Snake? Help us remind her why no one messes with us!"

Freddie was frozen in place amidst his panic and spiking anxiety, causing him to breathe with wheezy exhales and it trembled his hands that still clutched her cap to his chest. Paul refused to help due to his fear of being 'infected', and so it was only Butch and Wally up against her. Winona's thoughts were flying like paper airplanes all around her mind, trying to work out ways to escape with the boys teamed between her and the nearest door out. They would be able to outrun her if she took off toward any of the other doors, and she tried to stifle her fear to think more clearly; panicking now was going to get her stuffed into a locker like a block of cram too big for it's can!
That's when she saw her dufflebag off to the side, about twenty feet from her with her bat tucked away inside it. The boys wouldn't dare tangle with her swing if she had it in hand, so if she could get to it, she'd be safe! She'd be able to defend herself and back them off enough to escape.

"Hey, get back here, freak!" Butch barked when she bolted left, sprinting right for her sports bag but the two Snakes were close behind her. Before she could get within five feet of it her cleats left the atrium floor with arms tightly closed around her waist, lifting her off the ground to keep her from running away.

From the sickly sweet smell of bubble gum, she knew it was Butch.

She shrieked out from being picked up, flailing wildly in his arms with her legs kicking up in front of her and somewhere on the fringes of her hearing she heard Wally taunting about how spastic she looked. Butch grunted behind her, his grip becoming tighter until it almost hurt and she couldn't breathe, and with another surge of fight in her she reared back and elbowed him squarely in the face. His cap was bucked off his head from the force and Winona was promptly let go with his hands flying up to his face.

"Ngh—!" Butch blinked his pained, watering eyes and moved his hands away to see the blood streaking down the seams between his fingers, his nose bleeding quickly and he glared at her hatefully. "You stupid bitch!"

"Touch me again and I'll give you another one!" She promised threateningly and didn't know if she should grab her bat anyway, in case Butch's anger rejuvenated his cause to can her up. His nose was swelling slightly already and she knew her hit was hard enough that he'd eventually develop dual black eyes.

It wasn't looking good for her, and evidently, it didn't get any better when Coach Gomez walked back into the atrium.

"What in the dickens is going on here?!" Coach Gomez boomed as the atrium door opened and he stepped inside. Upon seeing the jarring scene, he dropped the net of baseball equipment that was slung over his shoulder and ran toward the two.

"She punched Butch in the face!" Wally immediately accused with a pointing finger at Winona. Butch was still holding his bloody nose and groaning with the occasional mutter of 'son of a bitch!' under heated breath.

"Winona! I am very disappointed in you! You're 14 and should know better than to react like this! Young ladies don't get into fist fights!" Coach Gomez exclaimed.

"Me?!! They were going to shove me into a locker!" Winona cried in astonishment and gestured to herself. "I was defending myself!"

"Ye- Yeah right!" Butch yelled weakly and glared at her through unfocused, watering eyes. "She was yellin' at Fre- Freddie 'bout hanging out with us Tunnel Snakes! And when I tried defendin' him, she hit me!"

"Th- That's not wh- wha- what happened!" Freddie quietly exclaimed but was heard by no one.

"Oh, like I believe that, Butch DeLoria! You've never defended anything in your life other than your no good, trouble-making behavior!" Coach Gomez shook his head and firmly pointed at the time out bench. "Both of you, have a seat! And get a towel under your faucet, DeLoria. The rest of you can hit the showers!"
Winona and Butch shot petty glares at each other before unwillingly plopping on the bench on the two farthest ends.

"Dunno why I'm bein' punished... didn't do shit." Butch grumbled but it was loud enough that Winona could hear him.

"You have got to be kidding me—" Winona snapped sarcastically at him with an annoyed frown.

Coach Gomez came over and offered a clean, white towel for Butch to put under his nose to try and stop the bleeding.

"If neither of you can say anything nice, than don't talk! Butch, keep your head back." He then turned away to shoo the other boys out the door when they continued watching. "Go on!"

"Well how long' re we s'posed to sit here for?" Butch demanded in agitation as Coach Gomez followed the others out.

"As long as I say so!" The coach called back over his shoulder as the door shut between him and them, leaving the two alone for their shared detention.

This whole thing made him sick just as much as it pissed him off.

Butch DeLoria sat silently beside Winona with a towel plugging up his bleeding nose, tilting his head back so he was glaring upward at the metal ceiling and fluorescent light fixtures. He was pissed since the beginning of practice; when he saw Freddie's face redden the moment he saw Winona and he turned into a jellified mess that couldn't string a coherent sentence about her. It was as pathetic and gross and it was infuriating.

His attempts to pit Freddie and Winona against each other were working themselves out nicely, though—encouraging the socially awkward boy to bully and take and shove was working perfectly without a single hitch. He was always looking for the approval of the Tunnel Snakes and was short of getting down on his knees to beg if it meant he could at least be in their presence. It was pretty sad… but it wasn't his fault Freddie was desperate for friends besides the Goody-Goody Girls. Butch's plan was to make Freddie one of their own so that Winona couldn't even stand being in the same room as him; break the two apart right at the hip where they were joined and make sure that they would never reattach. Winona was too attentive to Freddie, acting like he was some weak baby bird that needed to be nursed and taught how to fly and he couldn't do it without her mending touch.

It was this extremely sudden friendship of theirs that caused Butch to try bricking up a wall between them—he absolutely couldn't stand seeing some other guy get close to her successfully. These emotions started back from her 10th birthday party when her Pip-Boy bruised his knuckles. He was furious, and exceedingly bitter and he planned as many ways as he could to get back at her for what she did… all while thinking of the genuine concern in her face. How her eyes widened, and mouth trembled while ushering worried comments about icing his hand. It entrapped him in a Tug-o-War with his own emotions, being pulled from one side where he knew it was her 'good girl' act, and then to the other where a small voice stirred up curious little questions in his brain it didn't have any business in asking.

When he finally fell asleep that night he dreamed about Winona.

He dreamt about them sitting in the cafeteria at the front most booth with the jukebox playing some instrumental hit in the backdrop. That was his first clue that he was dreaming—the damn
thing had been broken for the last week with old Joe being ill, but everything somehow felt so real. His second clue that he was dreaming was Winona sitting across from him, with a Nuka-Cola pressed between her palms and she sipped it from a straw. She smiled at him, her eyes bright and warm, and she reached out across the table to his hand where her fingertips timidly brushed against his knuckles. Winona called him 'sweet' for buying her a soda—Butch bashfully told her that she looked nice in the dress she got for her birthday (basically by fumbling over his words to say she looked better than Dorothy probably would in it). She laughed and offered her soda to him, and they shared it until the bottle was empty.

Butch had never been that close to her before, where he could see every eyelash and stray eyebrow hair, and the ring of honey brown around her pupil in the foresty hazel-green of her irises, and the creases of her rarely seen smile. She had deep dimples in her cheeks that he never really paid any attention to before, but that was because she never smiled around him, and after that dream he wanted to see them more often.

Wally's fatality was lots and lots of freckles—and Paul's was brown eyes.

Butch DeLoria suspected that his undoing was going to be dimples.

Right before he woke up, Winona got up and slid into his side of the booth with her face flushed red and her eyes lingering on his lips. He immediately closed the distance between them with a quickpeck. On her mouth. He kissed her! He never kissed a girl before (willingly, Dorothy didn't count)—dream or otherwise and he liked this one so much he still remembered it vividly, to this very day at this very moment.

When his intercom sounded off in his morning alarm for class, he woke up in a flurry of mixed emotions. There was residual bitterness from the night before, along with a sort of excitement fluttering his heart around his ribcage, and his stomach felt squirmy on the inside. He was a mess of frazzled nerves deep fried in two hours of restless sleep and coated with a light sprinkle of uncertainty. It was something he felt intensely whenever Winona was near from that day onward, and Butch soon realized that he didn't want to like her—he'd much rather be on the receiving end of Andy's blowtorch like the radroaches he toasted so giddily—but there was nothing he could do about how he felt.

He was just Butch DeLoria. He didn't have that gentle nature or the good looks of Freddie Gomez, or Wally's smarts or confidence, or Paul's ability to just be cool about everything. Butch was the main bully of the vault doctor's daughter, and so he squashed any possible chance he could have with her a very long time before the feelings had even arisen.

Butch wished he could turn off his feelings like his mother and the Overseer could… they made it look so easy to do, how did it not kill them?

So he tried to hide how he felt behind a much more aggressive bully's mask. His pranks were meaner, he pulled out her chair from under her when she'd sit down at the beginning of class, called her twerp and teacher's pet and—most recently—told her she was revolting to look at. He tried anything he could do to silence his emotions like he silenced his chances at even being a friend of hers… but nothing worked. His heart would be sent into a rapid, dizzying dance each time his pranks on her were thwarted, or she'd retaliate with some weird gadget of hers hidden in his bag, or she'd meet his insults with her own without even a millisecond of hesitation. It was like she had a big book already open in her mind to flip to the most appropriate insult she could use. The fact that he couldn't stunt her, shake her, or push her around was something that was so—... thrilling.

People around their gang called them ne'er-do-wells who were a little too bored with a little too much time on their hands, but they were taken (to some effect) seriously. The three could throw
their weight around, elbowing classmates and being general jerks with scowling greaser glares and patched leather jackets, and it wasn't taken jsut at face value. They were avoided or generally ignored because they were genuine trouble, looked down on like big greasy radroaches, but no one would put the boot heel grind to them because they weren't problem enough in the Overseer's eyes. It allowed them time to establish themselves as the true rulers of Vault 101.

Butch looked to Winona, peeping at her from the corner of his eyes where she sat, languishing with a furious look in her red face. His eyes flickered towards the whiteness sprouting between the fingers that tried hiding them and he regarded the unnatural coloring with a measure of concern, but fascination as well. The striking change of her hair color looked disturbingly weird but also kind of cool at the same time... like a comic book character, or something. He also saw some white in her eyebrows and, possibly, her eyelashes.

No one but Winona Parker would stand up to him. Not only was she the only one courageous enough to mess with them on a regular basis, but she was able to continuously put Butch in his rightful place with flawless precision. He liked that and he couldn't understand why. He wouldn't normally take it from anyone else and yet he made exception for someone he shouldn't have especially.

His feelings were getting in the way just as much at it fueled him to be an even bigger creep and he knew it.

Emotions were more confusing than he could tolerate them being.

Why am I being punished for defending myself?! 

Winona sat silently and tried not to even glance in Butch's direction. She knew that if she did, she'd either feel sorry for making him bleed (but not for elbow-socking him in the nose), or her stewing anger would make her want to hit him again. The inventor didn't like this ugly anger that was beginning to fester inside her but God dammit she was being wrongfully punished! Wally should have been in detention too, he threatened her just like Butch did! And to be told that it was 'unladylike'? That was just as insulting, if not more. The unfairness of it all was upsetting her more than the events that took place and she nearly forgot to cover her hair again.

How could Freddie do that to me? Just to impress Butch? When I helped him through anxiety attacks, listened to his problems... did everything I could to be a good friend... and he betrayed me to him.

Winona's anger was slowly seeping away and she was now at the mercy of the hurt and sadness that came with the awful betrayal. She finally looked at Butch for the first time since she sat down, seeing how he angrily glowered at the ceiling, and she couldn't understand how he wasn't tired from being angry like this all the time. It was emotionally exhausting and just—... felt disgusting inside, like all her energy was being focused into this once place, like some invisible force was trying to push it's way out of her in any way it recklessly could. It didn't feel good wanting to punch something—especially another person, even if that person was Butch DeLoria and Wally Mack and they deserved to be put in their place.

With a low and slowly exhaled sigh and her eyes on the toes of her cleats, she finally spoke up.

"How's your nose?"

Butch gave her a cold glare. "What's it to you?"
"It's to make sure you aren't feeling dizzy, or to see if your vision is blurry—"

"I don't need any help from some Goody-Goody. Amscray, 'Whammy'!" He spat her nickname mockingly.

She turned toward him. "Look, are you going to let me look at your nose or not?"

"How 'bout 'or not'? You touch me and I'll do worse to your face than what you did to mine!"

Winona's expression remained indifferent as he glared with ferocious eyes back at her, as if he were challenging her to say something else about the matter. That anger inside her flared mildly before simmering.

"Here," She insisted regardless of the look he gave her and she reached a hand out toward him. "I can help you."

"I don't need your help!" He snapped, glaring at her and he smacked her hand away. Hard.

"Besides, it's your stupid fault!"

"Mine?" Winona frowned as she shook off her hand and withdrew from him. "Well maybe you'll think better of picking me up and threatening to shove me into a locker the next time you get some bright idea like it!"

Butch huffed and pulled back the cloth to check to see if his nose was still bleeding. It still was but not as much as before.

"Whatever... s'tupid anyway. Don't even hurt that bad." He muttered curtly under his breath, putting the rag back against his nose with a little wince of pain.

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure your possibly broken nose doesn't hurt that much." She rolled her eyes. "Just let me look at it you big baby and then I'll leave you alone. Or do you want Gomez to take you to my dad instead?"

"Don't gotta threaten," Butch grumbled sarcastically as he reluctantly removed his towel and turned slightly towards her. "...What're you waiting for, another Great War? Hurry up! And I better not get whatever weird disease you have or I'm gonna knock your teeth in!"

Winona remained quiet with a tight lipped mouth so she wouldn't bark back at him about her hair, and scooted closer to him on the bench. Cradling his head between her palms, she used her thumbs to trace along the shape of his nose bridge, applying pressure in certain places to check for any moving pieces that shouldn't have been moving. Butch's eyes were turned upward and away from her face so he didn't have to look directly back at her while she worked, though he winced once in a while with quiet hisses and his eyes momentarily blinking away surging pain. The little inventor knew some basic first aid, due to being in her father's clinic from time to time under the guise of fulfilling her vault responsibilities after she turned 10. She'd watch him work as she cleaned and organized the clinic for him and Jonas and learned a helpful thing or two about treating small injuries.

"Swollen, but not broken." Winona concluded and finally withdrew her hands. Turning away, she went to get her sports bag and returned with it on the bench, unzipping it to look inside for a hand towel and handed him a blue one with a yellow decorative stripe going along one edge. Butch snatched it from her and replaced it with the bloody white one under his nose without the mention of thanks.

She sat back down on her end of the bench and stared ahead with her hands in her lap. The inventor
could feel Butch's eyes on her, gawking at the discolored patches in her hair and she saw no point in trying to cover it any longer. Although Winona was terrified of what future would come—in how the residents would treat her differently, or how they might fear or ostracize her even more—all she could feel was... relief. Relief that she didn't have to hide it. Relief that she didn't have to think about ways to explain it away when the silver became more apparent than the black. She could dye it but her father first wanted to see if it would just—... go away.

But right now, she had other things to deal with; like how Butch, Wally, and Paul just messed with the only other person in this vault that she cared about, even though Freddie betrayed her. It wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the Tunnel Snakes goading him on.

"I know what you were doing with Freddie." Winona finally spoke.

"Oh yeah? And just what was I doin' with him?" Butch rolled his eyes at this and kept tending to his swollen nose.

"I'm not stupid, you turned him against Amata and I—promised you guys would be his friends if he picked on us."

"Like I give a crap about what that pill popper does with you two?"

"You've done it now, DeLoria. You're in way over your head. You thought we had a war before? That was nothing compared to now."

Butch cackled and gave a smirk, looking as cheeky as he could with the bloody nose that she gave him. Some of his blood was on his teeth. "What, you think you're all big and scary now? The dweeb's got jokes! Maybe you should be a comedian, huh, Snowflake?"

"The only one around here who'll be laughing is me when I get back at you. I hope you haven't forgotten about Hunt the Mutant." She responded and when Butch realized just how serious her threat was, coupled with her mention of Hunt the Mutant all those years ago, the smirk faded from his mouth and his expression twisted into a grimace with hardened eyes.

"You want a real fight, pipsqueak? Fine. But don't go cryin' back to your doctor daddy when you lose. You asked for a Serpent Special, geezer."

"You've really dedicated yourself to the whole snake thing, haven't you? It's cute. Real cute." Winona replied with a voice laced with mocking amusement and his face slowly began reddening at being told it was 'cute'. She didn't know if it was from embarrassment or his trademark anger. Probably both.

The atrium door slid open before Butch could retaliate with an insult gilded with curses as Coach Gomez checked on them. The officer turned coach walked in towards them with his hands sternly on his hips and his eyes flicked silently back and forth between the two teenagers, as if he were trying to decide whether or not to add calf-burning exercises to their detention. He removed his baseball cap from his head, which was emblazoned with Pip and '101' on all sides of it, and scratched a hand through his hair in thought before replacing it.

"Have you two had enough time to think about what happened?" He asked.

"An agreement was made." Winona replied vaguely. "Can we go now, Coach Gomez? I have to study for my exams."

"Not so fast, little missy! I'm not letting either of you off the hook that easy. You can expect that I'll be sending notes home to your parents about today!" Coach Gomez exclaimed but his mouth
suddenly pursed when his eyes were drawn to her. "...Wi- Winona, what's wrong with your hair? Did you get something on it?"

Butch snickered beside her at the coach's question, but all she did was take a short breath and exhaled it slowly through her mouth. "Sort of."

Coach Gomez stared between them with a keen eye and quirked brow for several moments longer before sighing and he shook his head, stepping back out of the way for them to leave.

"You two get on outta here, before I change my mind and make you both run 10 laps around this here atrium!"

Butch zipped up his jumpsuit to his midsection and slicked his hands back over his wet hair, feeling refreshed from finally getting his after practice shower. His nose stopped bleeding but it was tender to the touch and when he looked in the mirror, his face faired no better than the ass end of a radroach and he was starting to feel like it, too. He slung his bag over his shoulder after checking his sore face in the steamed over bathroom mirror one last time and walked out of the communal showers.

"You've done it now, DeLoria. You're in way over your head. You thought we had a war before? That was nothing compared to now."

He didn't know how he felt about Winona's earlier words. There was something different about it compared to the reminder of Hunt the Mutant... it was more menacing than when she promised a war back then—it felt more fierce, sending a chill through him when he replayed in his mind the cold promise of his demise in her eyes. He knew if it wasn't an all out war before, it definitely was, now. There was a sense of alarm that plagued him but he couldn't tell if he was actually scared or if he was kind of excited for the oncoming thunder he could hear in the distance.

"I hope you haven't forgotten about Hunt the Mutant."

*I haven't.* He thought grimly. *You got me back for that bloody nose I gave 'ya when we were five, but you're never gonna get me like how you got me in Hunt the Mutant ever again.*

Butch couldn't understand why fighting her was the most exciting part of his day, or why he used insults and pranks to get her attention, or why he liked her in the first place. Maybe it was because she wouldn't let him push her around (his attraction to her steadfast attitude was still under jury deliberation), and how she could meet him blow by blow and prank by prank, and here they were equals. Sometimes he got the drop on her and sometimes she got the drop on him.

Above all else he almost respected her resilience against him... but like she said, things were different now. This was more personal. Forget Freddie "Candy-Pants" Gomez, he could hurt her in other ways.

Making her hate him was easier than making her love him, and Butch was already giddy with the planning for the former.
"Founder's Day is fuckin' stupid."

The three Tunnel Snakes of Butch, Paul, and Wally stood clustered in their little den (Wally said a pack of snakes was called a den and Butch thought it was badass) to secretly exchange a half-finished bottle of gin between the three pairs of hands. While one took measured sips, the other two would stand as sentry for any adults that walked by a little too slowly or lingered a little too long, and pinch the other to tuck the bottle away.

So far publicly drinking in a room full of residents was working out pretty good, as no one bothered with the gang enough to notice what they were doing. They were too busy playing games and clustering around the snack table to vulture the food put out.

Almost everyone seemed to be in the atrium on this 'joyous occasion' of Founder's Day; some sucky holiday that was meant for the residents to reflect on their Overseer and pride themselves in having such a 'strong, fair, and selfless leader'—but most everyone around 101 knew it was a joke. Overseer Almodovar used it as an excuse to parade around how great he thought he was with everyone kissing his pompous bastard ass. The only good thing about the day was that school was cancelled and it excused the work day for most residents, so no pop quizzes, no homework to turn in, and no Brotch the Crotch to deal with so closely.

Wally was handing the bottle to Paul now after Mr. and Mrs. Taylor shuffled past them arm in arm, and he wiped his mouth after taking a considerable swig of the alcohol.

"Figures the only holiday around here that's about this clown would be the only holiday that's mandatory to celebrate." Wally snorted with arms folded over his chest and feet spread apart.

"Anyone else notice that the Overseer smiles a lot on Founder's Day? It skeevs me out." Paul's drink was interrupted by Butch elbowing him in the side, and the boys quietly waited for Christine and Susie to walk by them before Paul swallowed the drink that he already poured into his mouth. He blanched and rubbed his jaw from having to hold the burning liquor, causing Wally to clap him on the back with an impressed look.

"Shoulda just swallowed it, man—it was already in your mouth."

"No shit the guy loves this day, some asshole just made Founder's Day to be a mandatory "Kiss My Ass" Day." Butch responded.

Wally shot a condescending smirk at his fellow Tunnel Snake as the bottle was passed back to him from Paul. "It was made by Vault-Tec back when the vaults first opened and the first Overseer of 101 was picked, jackass."

Butch elbowed him hard in the side with a glowering look. "Yeah, I know what the history books say, knuckleheads."

Paul laughed at the insult though Wally didn't look too amused by it being used on him, and he shot back an expected 'fuck you, grape pomade' with a reddening look that had Butch laughing. He was riding a nice buzz that kept him from punching Wally in the shoulder for such a lame insult, so he instead found it pretty funny.
"Least there's food!" Paul exclaimed happily with a plate that was stacked with some finger foods; things like sweet snack cakes, potato chips, vegetables from the greenhouses with reconstituted dressing, and little jam sandwiches. Water, juice, and cola were the only drinks of the evening as it was a respectable event, so the boys of course had to sneak in some of the good stuff to make the night bearable.

It was easy enough for Wally to snag a bottle of gin from the cafeteria kitchens—the only food worker was too busy killing himself over making the many snacks to notice the alcohol locker being pilfered by a leather-clad miscreant.

Amata passed by them with a bitter frown twisting her face and a nasty glare to her dark eyes, and Butch sneered in response with a hand tucking the gin bottle into his jacket before she could notice it. The Overseer's daughter continued walking without a spoken word and lucky for her, he was in too good a mood to whip out an insult about her fattening ass. When he turned back to his boys, however, with gin mounted to come to his waiting lips, he noticed Paul watching after said fat ass with hungry eyes and an entranced gaze. The guy was completely mesmerized by the dipping curves of Amata's waist to her swaying hips as she strode away.

"'Ey, Paul, I know you're an ass man but really? The Overseer's bitch daughter?"

"I wasn't lookin'!" Was all he cried as his eyes ripped from Amata's backside and began shoveling food down his gullet with an embarrassed blush.

Butch stared at him for a moment longer with a look of displeasure before glancing around the room dismissively. "Whatever. I'm gettin' bored over here—feel like raising some hell. Where's our favorite professor, huh?"

"Haven't seen her come in." Wally responded as he shifted his weight to one leg and took a handful of snack cakes off of Paul's mountained plate, popping it whole in his mouth. "Don't see her 'round, neither, and the bitch's hard to miss."

At the mention of Winona not being apart of the festivities, Butch looked around to see that, indeed, she wasn't in the atrium with the rest of the residents who could attend. He couldn't see her trademark head of white hair over the sea of dwellers, and he figured that she was hiding somewhere around the damn vault, playing with her weirdo creations like Frankensten's monster. The idea of her hooking up an invention to the reactor with jumper cables, cackling maniacally with her silver hair wild and fraying, had him giggling in his gin-addled state.

"Think I'm drunk," He muttered mainly to himself and snapped his fingers toward one of the doors, gesturing for them to leave. "Let's get outta here and find our resident nosebleed... play a little game of Hunt the Mutant Freak. Easy picking's."

"But I'm not done eating!" Paul whined, and was shot with dual glances of warning from his fellow gang brothers. "...Just kiddin', I can eat on the way out." He recanted.

Butch wanted to repay the little twerp for some shit she pulled on the three boys just yesterday in class; she wonderglued all their desks shut, and old Stanley couldn't find his solvent. The old maintenance man was pretty damn organized, so it was too much of a coincidence that the guy couldn't find it the same day their desks were glued tight. Butch had his beloved switchblade, Toothpick, in it, and without the solvent or breaking his school desk apart, he wasn't getting his knife back for a while. His hand was twitching over his pocket now where he usually put her and he felt a little spike of annoyance from the blade's absence.

Wally was already heading for the door with Paul following, and with his eyes moving across the
room one more time to make sure Winona wasn't there, Butch was stopped by the sight of his mother. She was standing at the snack table with a glass in hand, pouring cold water from a sweating glass pitcher, and she swayed on her feet with the music and hummed along with a smile on her face.

It'd been a long time since Butch saw his mother all peaceful like this. The last time she tried to stop drinking, everything was good for whole a week but then she was reprimanded by her supervisor down in the laundry room. She hadn't been paying attention, and so accidentally threw in a load of white towels with a hiding jumpsuit that was freshly repurposed and redyed. The fresh dye turned the towels a watery blue and her supervisor a fuming red, and she was reamed for it to the point of tears. When Butch got home from class that day he found her home early from work, laying on the floor in a puddle of vodka from a bottle she dropped.

Butch's night ended with trying to take care of her—having to help her out of her jumpsuit, sneaking her into the boy's bathroom to rinse off in the communal shower in her underwear, and then redress her. She didn't try to stop drinking again until three days ago; she woke up sober for the first time in three years, and while he styled his hair to go out with the guys for a movie, she leaned in the doorway and watched him with such clarity in her eyes he almost didn't recognize her. When Butch turned around, her smile was genuine and her face was readable, but alcohol had already aged her so much at that point. It made her face sallow looking and bloated, causing deep creases around her eyes, nose, and mouth, where it hung from her neck... and even though she looked older than even she probably remembered, Butch still thought she was pretty when she pinned her hair back out of her face like she used to with her favorite clip. He hadn't seen that bejeweled butterfly in years.

"I'm sorry, baby. Mama's sorry. I'm gonna do better for you, now—be the mama I always wanted t'be. Be the mama God meant to give you a long time ago."

So it was three days of bliss from that morning when he saw her in his mirror. It was three days of being able to sit together and eat meals in each other's company rather than Butch alone; three days of feeling the calmest he's felt in a long time; three days of having his mom back, his real mom—the one that hugged him and didn't smell like stale beer—and would ask how his studies were going and actually remembered his response.

Just yesterday she remembered to ask him how his history test went. He said it was fine though he could tell she knew he was lying, but instead of prying about it she kissed his head and cheerfully told him he'd do better on the next exam.

Butch DeLoria wanted to believe that it was a bliss that would last longer than just a week like last time. There was something about this attempt to rehabilitate herself that was different from all the prior attempts she made; it was more focused and determined, and even her harsh withdrawals didn't seem to shake her any. Admittedly, he was... really damn proud of her, and he was happy. She deserved to be happy and sober—his mother went through too much with a husband that died unexpectedly and a son that was a no good shit head. Of course, he didn't actually know how much of his behavior she was aware of, and she never brought it up herself.

For all Butch knew Ellen DeLoria thought her son was a saint.

The King Snake suddenly remembered the appetite he had for white-haired inventors, but found that he wasn't hungry anymore in light of silently praising his trying mother.

"Hey, Butch! You coming or not?" Wally called from the open doorway out into the hall. Paul was snarfing down his food as quickly as he could before they went out on the hunt.
"Gimmie a second, will 'ya? Damn!" Butch snapped back and popped the collar of his leather jacket.

He walked towards his mother to give her a quick goodbye, and let her know he'd be back in a few minutes... but stopped when he saw Dr. Parker, Winona's father, coming up the snack table to get a drink for himself. He stopped beside his mother and she regarded him warmly when the doctor smiled at her first.

"How are you doing, Ellen? Doing alright?" He asked as he plucked up a bottle of Nula-Cola and searched the table for a bottle opener.

"Oh—! I'm doin' grrrreat, James! Really good—good... mmyeh, good." She rambled in a voice that slurred slightly. "You? How 'bout yerself?"

"I'm lovely." Dr. Parker replied with a smile, but his eyebrows had raised slightly on his face. It was the same face he made when he was in the clinic—it was the observing look of a patronizing doctor. Butch didn't like that look when it came to his mom.

"Y'know, ya've gotta very accent... nice accent, meant nice accent, haha! Wuzzat? European? British was in... in Europe, wasn't it? Before it—it 'sploded?" She asked and her smile turned into a dazed grin as she giggled.

Butch's heart plummeted when he saw that liquor touched grin and his shoulders sagged. Dammit ma', no...

Dr. Parker gave a forced chuckle as he continued observing Ellen DeLoria. "Thank you, Ellen."

She was leaning into the good doctor now, her swaying legs looking like they couldn't hold her up for another second and she was gripping the front of his jumpsuit to hold herself steady. Dr. Parker stumbled slightly but tucked an arm around her to keep her upright. The pitcher was still in her other hand and some cold water splashed onto the front of his clothes, creating a darkening splotch on his chest.

"Ellen, are you alright—?"

"T'm fine—fine! You ever thought about gettin' back out there, James? Playin' that "dating game"? I'm sure you have, you're the most handsomest man 'round this dump... an' smart... real smart, you should be a doctor, or somethin'! I know fat Debbie Horowitz would just loooove playin' Doctor with you! So would Gloria Mack but that's jes' 'cause Allen s'always sendin' her t'the clinic!"

Dr. Parker's eyes rounded slightly at the perverted mention of Dolly's mother as well as Wally's (coupled with unspoken rumors of the Mack abuse), and he finally helped her back onto even footing. Butch could tell the physician knew exactly why she was acting this way, though with how drunk she seemed to be, any idiot could tell.

"Mrs. DeLoria, would you like to sit down? Perhaps I could have a coffee ordered for you from upstairs."

"Awh, we're back t'las' names now, Miiiiister Parker~?" She giggled drunkenly as he tried to extract the pitcher from her opposite hand to put it down. "Ah, ah, this one's mine!"

Damn it! Fucking—! Why's she gotta do it here? Why's she gotta break down in front of the whole God damn vault? Butch thought with an angered disappointment that gripped his heart.
too tightly to release and it suffocated him. He could feel an embarrassed heat rising up his neck when some nearby residents were starting to notice her with Dr. Parker. *And she's gotta do it to him of all fucking people! It's always him or his brat when shit goes sideways!*

"Ma'?" He took her by the elbow gently and she peeled off of the doctor like tape without any adhesive. "You tired? You look tired. C'mon, I'll take 'ya home."

She suddenly yanked her elbow back from his grip, reclaiming her arm so it curled awkwardly into her chest and she waved around the heavy glass pitcher as if threatening to smack him with it.

"Butchie, dun' be rude! I was jes' talkin' t'James, go on back t'yer friends."

"Mrs. DeLoria, perhaps you should listen to your son."

"It's Mizz! Miiiiiiizz DeLoria! Been thinkin' 'bout using my maiden name again... though Ellen Baker sounds so booorin'!"

Butch began to notice the loud whispers and snapped his eyes back to see a crowd forming around them at the snack table. Various residents were grouped together, their whispering turning louder and sounding more like taunting mutters and brave finger points at his mother. She was too vulnerable—he couldn't let her go on like this in front of everyone, in front of Winona's father especially, and a deep breath was barely enough to keep him calm enough to speak gently to his mom.

"Ma'—... you promised me, remember? You *promised.*"

When she turned toward her son, a fleeting moment of clarity—the same as the one he saw three days ago—passed through her eyes before succumbing to a teary sadness. Her lower lip trembled despite the smile creasing her ruddy face and the pitcher was finally put down as she cupped his jaw, squeezing his cheeks affectionately.

Butch didn't know why he let her touch him when it felt like acid.

"That was borin'," She lamented with her eyes watering to the point of almost overflowing and her slurring voice thickened from the tears she tried to stop. "And yer mama *needed* a drink... she was thinkin' about your daddy again~..." The smile finally broke on her face and she pulled Butch close so his head was on her shoulder, her hands clawing against his back with desperate hands into his leather jacket to keep him from breaking apart from her. She was shaking. "Butchie, I wish you didn't have his eyes... makes me miss 'im more, 'y'know?... s'all my fault... my fault he's gone... 'm sorry, baby..."

Butch realized that it wasn't his mother that was shaking. It was *him*. He was trying to contain himself—his anger was starting to boil up inside him like a bubble rapidly expanding in his chest, his eyes looked around at the collected residents that were snickering cruelly with gossiping smirks and satisfied eyes. He heard them whisper "that's why Butch DeLoria's such a problem child, so's his mother!", "looks like Ellen DeLoria's a soaker", "I thought she was trying to be a good mother!", and Butch's least favorite and most damaging to him "I bet the DeLorias wouldn't be such a mess if Robert were still around!"

He couldn't help but push his mother away. He had enough of the empty promises, of believing that she was *finally* going to change and that he wouldn't have to wipe up her vomit another time, that he wouldn't have to bathe the spilled liquor off her another night, watch her sleep another day of her life away, and have to sit to another meal *alone* because she was too hungover to even sit up. Butch loved her more than he could ever love even himself but there was more disappointment and
resentment than before, and not only was he embarrassed for her but he was embarrassed for himself. The Tunnel Snake put all his hopes in her and she broke them all like a room of mirrors and she cared more about self-medicating than she did about being there for him.

"...I'm Sorry, ma'..." Was all he could manage to say and the tears finally met her cheeks.

"Dad—? Dad!" A familiar voice called over the crowd and Butch felt his blood run out of his heart in a seize of panic. "What's going on? Is someone hurt, please, move!"

Dr. Parker was at the edge of the crowd before his daughter could break through and see what was happening.

"Honey, why don't you go find Amata? I think I saw her just over there, I'll be with you in a minute."

"Ma', we're goin'." Butch commanded and began pulling her to the exit, opposite of where Winona was coming from. He was too vulnerable—he couldn't handle her seeing him like this or his mother like this. She could make fun of his gang, his hair, the way he talked, the way he acted, but she was not using his hurting mother against him.

Their war was too personal after the Freddie Incident last year that he couldn't imagine she wouldn't utilize it.

"A- After another drink! Put my bottle here som'ere!" Ellen DeLoria retorted and pulled her hand from his again, turning back to the table with searching hands as if she suddenly couldn't see. Before Butch could grab her again to forcefully drag her away as quickly as possible, his shame hitting a new high, she hit the water pitcher she was wielding earlier off the table. "Shit—!

Several residents gasped as the pitcher bounced once off the floor, and when it hit the ground again it shattered into several dozen pieces of thick glass and splashed water on her, soaking the lower legs of her jumpsuit. Butch was immediately pulling her away with a hand that she cried was hurting her, and with a clenched jaw he held his head higher than he felt like he deserved to, while cursing for people to get out of his way.

"Daddy, is she alright? Shouldn't someone help her?" He heard Winona behind them and it made Butch grit his teeth harder to where he felt his jaw straining.

"It's best we stay out of it—and don't you argue with me on this, I'll deal with it when the time comes. I want you to stay away from Ellen DeLoria. She has an addiction. She's too sick to help right now."

Butch would have rounded back on the doctor if his shame wasn't so overwhelming that all he could do was run away with his staggering mother dragging behind him. Once they were out of the atrium and down the empty halls, the cameras of the Overseer following them as they rounded corners and stormed up stairs, a small voice called from behind him.

"Yer so good t'yar no good stinkin' mother, kid..." She sniffled. "Guess God jes' wasn't in me t'day."

"Can't believe I actually thought you'd keep your promise this time. Can't believe I let myself believe you." He snapped back weakly and softened his grip on her arm so his hand slipped down into hers. She intertwined their fingers and rested her head on his shoulder tiredly and he didn't reciprocate her clutching hand.

"Sorry, Butchie..."
"You always are." Butch responded with a trembling voice as he pulled his hand from hers to hook his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in against his side defeatedly and his jaw rested atop her head now as they walked on together. "...You always are, 'ma..."

He couldn't say that he forgave her. He'd forgiven her too many times before—too many times for his heart to handle even one more try.

"...Is too late, now... I can't get bett'r, Butchie... never gettin' better..." Was the last thing she said to him for the rest of their night. "Never."
weakened by a lack of pomade, and he was dressed in his undershirt that left his arms completely bare with his jumpsuit tied at his waist by the sleeves. His expression turned from agitated at the bother to furious when he saw Winona, and before she could open her mouth to speak he had her by the collar of her jumpsuit threateningly.

"I figured you of all people would know better than to show your ugly face here!" He hissed and shoved her back, releasing her collar from his grip and she tried to hide the little stumble she made to get on stable legs. "Didn't your doctor daddy tell 'ya to stay away from me and my sick ma?"

Winona frowned at him as she smoothed her hands over her jumpsuit, keeping her distance so she wouldn't seem like she was trying to pick a fight. "I'm sorry. My dad didn't mean it like that—"

"Yeah, well I'm real God damn sure he did." He narrowed his cool eyes at her and his upper lip curled to show his sharpest of teeth, his voice laced with sharp barbs.

"Look, can we just drop this thing going on between us for a couple minutes? I came to help, not to make fun of you or be a bitch or something. Let's not make it personal."

"Everything with you is God damn personal!" He belted, but when he heard a stirring from sleep groan coming from one of the back rooms of his apartment—which Winona heard as well—he stepped out into the hall and allowed the door to shut behind him. "You think I need your pity? 'Ya think I want your charity?"

"No, but—"

"Just 'cause you and your old man feel like you're better than 'sick trash' like my 'ma and I?" Butch was starting to corner her against the wall with a glowering look on his face, becoming bigger and scarier than she ever considered him to be and she was starting to become genuinely afraid.

"Now you're just twisting my father's words." Winona replied in a calmying soft voice, looking up at him and feeling her back tense as it collided with the wall opposite of his front door. "Just listen—then I'll go. I'll leave you alone. You won't see me again until you have to and we'll never talk about this again. I promise."

Butch stared at her with a venomous, pondering look in the robin's egg blue of his piercing irises, with his gaze flickering over her face as he towered over her with stiff shoulders and curled fists. If he wanted to make their war physical, she knew she didn't have a chance unless she could outrun him.

"...Waddya want, Parker?" His response bordered more on a statement than question in tone, and she allowed the release of a tense sigh of relief only to herself. Him not calling her by some jarring insult, but by her last name, was a somewhat good sign.

"Your mom needs help. I want to help her—dad wants to help her, he didn't mean sick like how you think. Her addiction's going to kill her unless she can get help." Before Butch could open his tightly sneering mouth in rebuttal, Winona pulled out of her jumpsuit pockets the two tins of Fixer she stole from her dad's clinic just half an hour ago. "And these could help her get started."

"No. They don't help." He replied woodenly and turned away, slapping the 'OPEN' button to go back into his apartment. "There, I listened—now buzz off, Professor Smartmouth."

"Butch, c'mon—" She pleaded but he snapped back to her with such a hateful glare that her mouth immediately clacked shut.

"You think I don't know what he really meant? 'She has an addiction' fuck yeah, I know it!
I live with it! The fucking pills don't help, I've tried!"

"The pills won't help alone—she has to get therapy and be monitored by a doctor. She has to tell my dad she wants to enter the rehabilitation program—"

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"I know this is the last thing you want to hear, especially from me, but if she doesn't come to him then there's nothing he can do! The Vault-Tec Medical Handbook dictates that the afflicted person has to seek the help, they can't be forced to by anyone unless the Overseer commands it, and we all know how much of an ass he is!"

Butch's face slowly began to flush red with his nostrils flaring and the glare of light in his eyes turning more incensed. He pointed back at the door behind him and boomed; "She won't fuckin' go! What part of that big brain of yours doesn't fucking understand? What's so hard for you to get that she doesn't want help! All I can do is take care of her my way, and hell, it's worked out alright so far! So you're right! I don't need t'hear this from you, and I don't need help from your high and mighty bitch daddy, either!"

Winona's mouth pursed itself as he screamed at her, feeling her heart sinking lower and lower down in her body, weighed down by a saddened feeling. Her brow furrowed as a worried frown came to her face.

"...Butch, how long has your mom been like this?"

Some of the anger drained from his face at her question, and the inventor didn't know if it was because of the gentle voice that she used or the question itself. Now he just looked exhausted between the supernova spits of rage he was making.

"...What's it matter?"

"How long?"

"9 years. Maybe 10."

Winona chanced a step towards him, offering the tins hopefully again but her heart was still hiding amongst her feet in her boots. "I could talk to my dad about throwing out the big bad handbook. Who knows what kind of internal damage this has done to her—"

"You won't tell him shit!" Butch was coming at her and she stumbled back in surprised fear from the unexpected advancement he made. "I already said I don't need your help! I can do it myself!"

"You don't need help but your mother does!" She pleaded as she clutched the two tins in one hand. "Addiction kills people in this place! We've both seen it before and your mom doesn't have to be another addict that dies because of it!"

His jaw was clenched and he turned away from her, running a lethargic hand over his face and it twitched like he wanted to hit her. She'd never seen the Tunnel Snake so angry before with his eyes changing between his rage and his shame, and she knew what it felt like. Winona knew that vulnerability... she knew it well, a long time ago.

"Stop talkin' at me like I don't already know this shit," He finally spoke in a defeated voice with eyes that wouldn't lift to meet her face and he shrugged, almost helplessly. "Can't make her go. I make her promise she'll sober up, and sometimes she tries—'til she gets bored. Or sad. Or thinks
'bout my dad or about how shitty this place is or whatever other excuse she's got, and then she drinks again. Then *I'm* the one that's there to roll her over so she doesn't choke on her vomit—I'm the one that has to bathe her 'cause she can't do it herself, or I force her to eat or whatever else 'cause she's like a little kid. So yeah, I tried usin' the pills—hide it in her food but sometimes she'd wise up and wouldn't take 'em, and when that didn't work I'd *make* her eat it. You act like I don't know she'll die... I know more than you ever will 'bout what it means to be 'sick'."

Winona's expression dropped upon his last sentence, how she wouldn't know what it felt like, and she wished she could tell him that she *did*. She *did* know what it felt like to come home almost every day to a parent that couldn't keep themselves together without a crutch; she knew what it was like to hear them cry through the walls; to watch them destroy themselves and think "*God, he might really want to die.*" Winona knew what it felt like to be a lost little kid, unable to protect the one person you love the most in this dreary world because you were so helpless. To lose them to their own self-destruction would grip you with a rare, indescribable dread and it was more than just the fear of being alone.

But this discussion wasn't about her—it was about him.

"...Are you okay, Butch?"

Butch considered her momentarily before leaning against the wall parallel to her, shoving his hands in his jumpsuit pockets and he bobbed one shoulder in a shrug. His head was slumped forward so he didn't have to look at her.

"Better than I've ever been." There was something sarcastic in the prickly tone of his voice. Winona kept her distance and folded her arms over her stomach.

"Hey—"

"I ain't need your damn pity party, I told you." His voice was thick but when his eyes connected with hers he wasn't angry anymore. It was that same exhaustion and shame from earlier, and she *knew* that he thought he told her too much—he let her in deeper than he meant to.

"...Look, just because we're idiots to each other doesn't mean I want it to be like *this*. This—... it's too messed up to throw out there. I don't want to see you like this."

"Yeah, well, I don't wanna see 'ya, *ever.*" He snapped with his eyes withdrawing from her gaze, looking up the hall. She could have laughed at his snappy response if the discussion wasn't so serious.

"Okay, Butch... okay. I've done enough damage tonight." Winona came away from the safety of her corner and removed the tins of Fixer from her pockets again, offering them one more time. "But you've done this too long on your own."

"...If I take the damn things will you *leave*?" Butch grumbled in that usual blunt tone of his, and she knew that he was trying to get some ground back under his feet after showing her weakness.

"Promise." She nodded and shoved them into his hands before he could protest, then turned and walked back toward the main hall in a quick step. "Crush them up into her food, or her water or something. It'll enter her bloodstream faster. Goodnight, Butch. See you in class—maybe."

"Don't count on it, pipsqueak." He replied with his 'pet name' for her not carrying it's usual bite. After Winona turned the corner to head back to her apartment, she heard Butch sigh, and then heard the open and shut of his front door.
Winona was shaking still from the whole thing—for a minute there she thought Butch was going to actually punch her so hard she'd swallow her tongue. The anger he had during their talk was a lot different from the other times they've rammed heads and the inventor hoped she'd never see it again out of him... especially if his pals were along for that show. She didn't think she would be able to recover if it was three puberty-charged boys against a scrawny little inventor like her.

Though she wasn't satisfied with how their discussion ended, it was better than how she expected it to turn out. Winona anticipated that Butch wouldn't take a lick of her advice, help, or Fixer, and she told herself that she'd have to settle for at least making him take the tins. The only thing she could hope for, now, was that she did more good than bad—even if it was hilariously stupid of her to address him so suddenly with their current relationship—and that she'd see his mother in the clinic a lot more... and not for stitches caused by her drunken clumsiness.

*I know what it's like to watch someone you love act like they just don't care anymore, DeLoria... and that's the part that cuts through you like nothing else does.*
A/N: Hey, all! Short chapter here and it's focused on everyone's favorite father--James! Of course, throughout the story there'll be a littering of chapters dedicated to his POV as things occur but they'll be pretty rare compared to the meat of the story. It's mostly used to explain certain things, or how he handled himself during various situations in the game that we never got to see/hear about.

As you can see in this chapter, it'll be about Project Purity and his involvement! Sorry if it feels a little 'regurgitate-y' from the game or tedious to read--but I hope everyone'll still like it! :c

Unlike the last James POV chapter, however, this one will be just by itself. The next chapter will be posted next Friday, as planned... unless I change my mind and Chapter 8 immediately (due to my concerns about this chapter being kind of short and boring LOL).

Anyway, enough blathering, and onto the story! Please let me know what you think in the comment section below!

~Faerie, signing out

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**June 3rd, 2274**

James sat at his desk in the infirmary's back office, his attention swarming over the open folders and documents that laid all spread out before him, and he massaged his temples with pressing fingers. The good doctor picked up the bottle of scotch that he set to the side and allowed himself another generous shot. Gingerly picking up the small glass, he brought it to his mouth—but before he could toss back his drink there was a warning buzz from the door's intercom before it opened, like a doorbell, and in stepped Jonas.

“You wanted to see me, Doc?” He asked as he fixed his glasses on his face. His eyes immediately wandered to the shot glass held shy of the doctor’s mouth with the raise of a thick eyebrow.

James nodded in response. “I did,” then took a moment to toss back the shot and settle the glass on his desk. When the clinic was unofficially closed for the evening, he requested his assistant’s attention after allowing him to rest for a few hours. It was a long day and James had some things he needed to do himself before their impromptu meeting.

“Well—what's up?” Jonas questioned, coming up to the desk with his eyes looming over all the strung out paperwork. He knew they weren’t patient files or medical work that needed to be signed off by Alphonse... the paper it was printed on wasn't their infirmary stationary.

“I've fully realized that you've been suspicious of my activities—particularly late at night in the office when no one is around,” James began as he reclined back in his office chair, gesturing to the
scotch bottle in an offering to Jonas, but was politely declined with a shake of his head. “You've come to me before with your suspicions and asked for answers.”

“When you see a doctor wandering into the lower levels looking for access to restricted sectors, it makes you wonder.” He deadpanned curtly. “But look, you don't really owe me any answers. I just ask that you at least assure me that whatever you're doing isn't a danger to you or anyone else down here. The Overseer hates you enough as it is, don't give him a real reason to do something to you or the kid.”

“He won't know, as long as I don't get caught by the Security guards or anyone else out for a late night stroll... he can't watch those camera monitors in his office all day. He has to leave some time and those recordings can be finicky.”

“...How do you know he has camera monitors in his office?”

“I broke in while I was waiting for you to arrive.” He replied without the shame he should have felt.

“James,” Jonas exhaled in disbelief, pushing his glasses up and out of the way of his fingers as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “The Overseer brought you and Winona in here—he could just as easily kick you both out.”

“He wouldn't risk that, unless I blatantly went back on our agreement.” He replied in confidence as he stood up from his desk, collecting the dislodged papers back into their folder. “It'd break this spell of isolationism he has the entirety of the vault entranced in. He has to think about the children and the impression they'd get if they knew that leaving Vault 101 was a possibility.”

“Well, the 'children' of this vault aren't kids anymore... Winona's turning 16 in a few weeks, isn't she?”

“...Yes... yes, she is.” He answered softly with some hint of dejection in his face as he handed the filled folder over to Jonas. “Enough of that. There are more important matters.”

“What's this?” He opened it with a puzzled look about his face, his brow furrowing as his eyes darted back and forth over the contents of the first document at the top of the stack. “Project Purity...?...”

“Your mother knew what it was like outside... Anne told you stories, didn't she?”

“Yeah, about the mutation and wild men and settlements topside—the fighting, the starvation, the radiation—... the monsters.” Jonas looked back to him. “But what exactly is this, James? This 'Project Purity'?”

“Project Purity was a dream that was so close to touching reality,” He replied upon a melancholy note as he sat back down with his assistant pulling up a chair to the desk. Jonas plopped down into the seat on the other side and began reading thoroughly rather than skimming. “I've never told you much about my life before coming here.”

“I didn't want to badger, after the stories my mother told me. Besides, I know the almighty Overseer had sworn you to secrecy along with everyone else in this place—and if he knew half of the things you've already told me...?” He trailed off in a tone that suggested they be cautious.

“Never mind that. I want to tell you about who I was before I came here... about what I did in the wasteland, and why it was important.”
“Alright.” Jonas gave an understanding nod, putting the file down in his lap to give his friend his undivided attention.

“Up there, I was once a part of a team with a handful of other talented and brilliant scientists, which included Catherine. Collectively, we had a dream—a simple dream, in essence—to bring clean and pure water to the entire Capital Wasteland that would be free to any and all to utilize.”

“Really?” There was astonishment in his voice, his eyes wide. “Mom told me that clean water doesn't come cheap out there... that you'd be lucky to even find a bottle of the irradiated stuff, and it'd just turn you inside out.”

“She was certainly right in that. The common Wastelander was forced to either drink tainted water that made them ill, or die of thirst. Some were so desperate for any at all that they drank out of old toilets and filthy fountains. Not very many people are fortunate enough to be able to afford even the smallest amount of clean water. It runs, on average, about 100 caps a bottle. Maybe more depending on who was selling... and those bottles weren't very big. It didn't help that whoever did have a reservoir or a purifier kept a monopoly on it, as well. These were mostly done through major settlements.” James glumly shook his head. “In the world up there—those with a lot of caps or firepower aren't the only ones who can control the wastes. If you had a reliable source of clean water, it gave you a lot of leverage.”

Jonas chuckled at this. “Well, sounds like you're sitting on a gold mine of pure water down here, huh, doc? So this project you and your team had definitely would've made a big wave... no pun intended. You make it sound like it wasn't completed.”

“...No.” James responded, the heel of his palm pressing to his eye tiredly. “Before Catherine's death, Project Purity was facing many problems. Our calculations weren't coming back with the results we were aiming for, we were being hit with devastating attacks by local mutants—and the security force that was employed to protect and finance us was beginning to doubt that we would get anywhere. They were having their men injured or mercilessly killed for a project that wasn't showing much promise... and by the time Catherine was gone, the attacks had gotten much worse. It came to a head where they would occur daily—and they impeded our progress to the point where we couldn’t get any work done at all. We hit a dead end because of these violent attacks, our fruitless re-calculations, and one of our best scientists gone... not to even mention that the lab was no place for baby Winona to be. I—... I wanted better for her.”

“So you left the project, took her with you, and came to Vault 101 to seek shelter from the wasteland.” Jonas pieced the remainder of James' explanation himself, reading over the file again. “But how am I supposed to help you with something like this in a place like Vault 101?”

“I wish to create a small-scale Project Purity here in the infirmary. When I first arrived, the Overseer allowed me to do my experiments with the vault's water purifier for several years before dissolving my access. He believed it was distracting me from my responsibilities as the vault physician, and that I was using up valuable resources... as well as all of the problems caused with his wife's death.”

“Was he right? About distractions and wasting resources, I mean.”

“Not entirely... but I want to resurrect these experiments in secret—to see where our calculations went wrong and how it can be fixed. I've recently discovered the possibility of Purity failing because we didn't have the necessary technology, in thanks to my little 'excursion' into Alphonse's office, I think I've found what that technology is.” He explained as his hand lightly wiped his face down. “If you’re wondering why I’m telling you all of this now—... it’s because I need help, my friend. I'm in desperate need of help. You don’t know the regret I’ve had since I abandoned Project
Purity and came here. I did it for Winona's sake—but, sometimes, I can't help but wonder... what if I had never left?... The question has a knack for eating away at me.”

“I'm really sorry to hear that, James. If it's any consolation I think you did the best you could. Who knows what could've happened to you, or her, if you stayed out there? She's grown up in the best way any child could, given what's going on above—she's healthy, well read, and best of all, safe. You can't beat yourself up too bad over Project Purity. I think Catherine would've wanted you to put your priorities in your daughter.”

James knew that was true to some degree, but Purity was something akin to a child for Catherine as well; not only was it unbelievably important to her, but she envisioned that it would be important to those all over Washington—towns could be restructured, populations could grow, better farms and irrigation systems could be erected! The possibilities of Purity were endless when the water wasn't being monopolized by anyone!

But then—... Catherine died, and he couldn't stay. He didn't want to. James left their other 'child' stillborn and withering in the hands of the team; he left them to clean up the mess and he knew that was one of the worst crimes he could have committed against Madison, who was his oldest and dearest friend.

“Out with it, will 'ya? You got me on the edge of my seat, now! What'd you find in the Overseer's office?”

“Information on a pre-war invention known as a G.E.C.K.”

“A—... what?” Jonas replied with a perplexed look, his brows pulling together with a frown.

“It's an acronym. It stands for 'Garden of Eden Creation Kit'. Before the Great War, a revered German scientist by the name of Stanislaus Braun was quite well known for his skill with technology, and the theories he had concerning advanced life preservation. When the threat of nuclear war became imminent with the Chinese, he was employed by the U.S. Army to create various methods of lengthening the life of humans.” James spoke as he capped his bottle of scotch. He had enough to drink for the night—almost a third of the bottle and he was well on his way to being drunk before he even broke into Alphonse’s office.

“How do you know all of this?” Jonas asked.

“He was brilliant in his field—not many know of his talent but when I first became involved with science and medicine, I found some old books on his work that helped with my interests.” He shook his head. “Besides that, the G.E.C.K. had been created by Braun in the cause of a nuclear war and many were distributed to a handful of vaults in the D.C. area. The G.E.C.K. was designed and created to, basically, create life out of lifelessness—to cleanse irradiated soil that would be suitable for crops and plant life, for starters.”

“You're telling me that this G.E.C.K. is a terraforming device?”

“Precisely.”

“This is certainly a lot to take in, Doc...” He mused as he took off his glasses, placing them on top of the folder in his lap. “So because of its ability to form 'life out of lifelessness', you think it's what Project Purity needs in order to work again?”

“It's a working theory...” James replied as he sat up in his chair, leaning forward onto the desk on his elbows with the fingers of one hand running through his hair. “The vault didn't receive a
G.E.C.K., so if I were in need of finding one, I'd have to leave to search for it. There was no mention of any other vaults in the D.C. Area receiving one, if any one vault did at all.”

“It’d make sense... seeing as how the vault was supposed to remain unopened indefinitely. There’d be no reason for us to get one if they stocked us up with everything Vault-Tec thought we’d need.” Jonas quipped as he rubbed his chin. “Look, James—... you know that the Overseer's gonna come a-knocking if he hears about these experiments, right?”

“Of course I do. Asking for your help isn't exactly remaining 'sworn to secrecy','” James sighed and folded his arms over his chest, his elbows still on the desk top. “Be that as it may, the risk of triggering Alphonse's fury is no match to the payout of finding the hitch in why Project Purity failed to work. I don’t fear one man if I can save many. This is a big deal to me, Jonas, and I would certainly be gracious for your help—but if you choose to keep your hands clean of this, I understand. All I ask is that you keep Project Purity and my experimentation between just the two of us... maybe even forget that this conversation ever took place.”

There was a lengthy pause between the two men as Jonas replaced his glasses upon his face, pried open the folder, and continued to read by thumbing through the paperwork. Once in a while, his face turned sour with bewilderment, then changed to something akin to marveled respect. James sat silently, watching his friend as he finished reading the folder's contents in its entirety, closed it, and then placed it back onto his desk.

“I want to help. Without a doubt, I want to help.”

“I knew I could count on you, my friend.” James exhaled in relief as he collected back the folder from his assistant, a beaming smile coming to his face. “Tomorrow night we’ll begin our work—but before we lock up the infirmary and part ways for the night, there’s another matter that I wanted to speak to you about.”

“It’s about the kid, isn’t it?” He replied, to the doctor’s astonishment. “She came to the clinic the other day while you were doing an in-house visit to Mary Kendall.”

“...Butch and his little 'gang' are still bothering her about her hair, aren’t they?”

“As bad as ever.” Jonas replied with a pained sigh. “Poor kid... having stark-white hair at 15.”

“It’s not normal,” James lamented. “I don't wish to refer to her as some sort of scientific anomaly, but this isn't a case of premature greying of any sort, and it's not some genetic inheritance—I fear that this color deficiency of her hair, turning it from black to white, is the result of a mutation.”

“A mutation? That's pretty serious, doc.”

“Back during Project Purity, all of the scientists were in contact with many irradiated materials in the labs... with experimenting and the water and such. I tried reasoning with Catherine when we found out that she was pregnant, but she wouldn't have any of it and pushed through her work. She was so driven to have Purity completed before Winona was born—she wanted her to be born to something great. I made sure she regularly took the medicines needed in order to keep Winona healthy, but I'm concerned that something from the project is the cause of this change in her hair.”

“Is there any way to fix it?”

“Scientifically or medically? There’s nothing I can do about it down here. However, I told her she could go to the salon and have it dyed back to black—” He spoke as he got up from his seat after tucking his scotch into a lower desk drawer.
“I know, she told me. She also said Butch and his friends would only get worse if she tried hiding it. She wasn't going to let herself hide.”

“She sure is a little soldier,” A proud smile came to his face as he opened the safe behind Catherine's favorite biblical quote and tucked the collected files of Purity neatly inside. “I just want to help her, but she’s like her mother… Catherine didn’t like taking help at the worst of times. She wanted to prove she could handle it herself.”

“Sometimes the only person you can rely on is yourself.” Jonas agreed with a reciprocated smile. “Though that's maybe to a fault in her case.”

James locked up the small hidden safe, replaced Catherine's framed verse over it, and both men then filed out of the back office. The two quickly checked around the infirmary to ensure that everything was clean and organized for the next day, and when they both agreed that they were satisfied with the state of things, Jonas flicked out the lights for the night. It officially signaled that the infirmary was closed until soonest convenience tomorrow, and James locked the door for good measure when they were out in the hall.

“You said that you have a lot of regret from this… about leaving, and coming here—even if it was to save Winona.” James looked back at him, waiting for the question. “Have—… Have you ever thought about leaving, Doc? Going back topside?”

“…I have…” He admitted solemnly with a sight bow of his head as the two turned and began to walk down the hall towards the sleeping quarters.

“That’s dangerous thinking, you know.” Jonas quipped with a short sigh under his breath, along with an agitated mutter. “Geeze, now I sound like the Overseer…”

“I know it’s dangerous thinking.” James replied calmly, his eyes turning up to the hall lights as the two walked under them, unhurriedly strolling past rooms where blinds were pulled taut over windows for the night. “But it’s hard to live under a fist of tyranny. Free will is not ideal, but unquestioning worker bees are. Alphonse will never see that isolationism isn’t the way to live.”

“But it worked for years, like back when my mom was my age.”

“And for how much longer will it last, Jonas? The water purifier is failing. The reactor is constantly breaking or malfunctioning… it’s been 200 years since the door closed, and the vault will come to the end of it's rope eventually.”

“Ah,” Jonas grumbled with a dark comedic smile. “I just try and convince myself that anything bad that could happen will be easily fixed. Call it Vault Fever—you hope everything will turn out fine if you pretend it'll be. People down here always manage to make something work.”

“We hide the reality from our children, and I don’t know about the rest of you, but as Winona grows older it’s harder for me to lie to her about the truth of the matter—that there are people outside and all the other vaults in Washington D.C.—perhaps every vault in America—have been desolate of human life for decades, now. Vault 101 is remarkable in that it’s the last stand of Pre-War America, where all of its residents are completely untouched of deformity.”

“If you make an exception to the generations of inbreeding.” The medical technician quipped. “And me, of course, since my old man was a wastelander... but I get what you mean. People won’t tell the truth because then they have to face that things aren’t too good right now. Vault Fever strikes again.”
“At least you know you’re not the only one that has it.” James replied with a glance towards a camera pinned to the ceiling, just at end of the hall where it elbowed into the next corridor. The camera lens was pointed down the hallway opposite of where the two stood and chatted.

“It’s getting pretty late, doc.” Jonas replied with a brisk yawn and looked to the clock on his Pip-Boy. “Should let you turn in to the kid. She’s probably still up and working.”

James chuckled kindly, nodding along with him. “Oh, I don’t doubt it.”

The two said their goodnights as James turned into his apartment and locked the door behind him. The living room was dark and empty, and sure enough, he heard Winona tinkering away in her bedroom. He came in and ushered her to bed though he knew that within the next hour she’d be up and working again.

“You have to sleep sometime!” He laughed as he tucked her in. She gave a goodhearted smile about it but with how she shifted against her pillow, he knew she was itching to get back up. Her eyes looked back up into his face with a firm glint in them that said; “I can sleep when I’m dead!”

If that were possible, she wouldn’t sleep until she was 70. James thought he could go the distance, too, when he was her age; it’s what made it so easy to accept her late nights tinkering and welding and tweaking. It reminded him of fond memories from lifetimes ago.

James didn’t sleep that night at all. He didn’t rise from his bed when he heard Winona working again exactly one hour later—he didn’t rise from his bed when his first morning alarm beeped for his attention at 5 in the morning. He didn’t rise from his bed when he thought he saw Catherine sitting in the corner of his room in his reading chair in the dark, humming her favorite bible verses as she stroked her swelling pregnant belly and read a book; Jane Eyre was the only one she kept packed in her things when she was alive. She could read it over and over again and still act like it was the first time.

James closed his eyes for the last half hour he had before his 6:45 alarm, and dreamt in his conscious state about his daughter’s mutated white hair; of Catherine’s limp hand in his; of Madison pulling at his coat and screaming angrily at him through withheld tears not to leave Purity; of the first time he heard Alphonse usher the trademark “we are born in the vault, and we die in the vault” over the intercom.

He sat up in bed, hands on his knees, and welcomed in his regrets.
Winona fidgeted on the examination table in her father's office as he checked each of her eyes, with the stalwart practice of a gentle doctor, with his opthalmoscope. It was a typical Tuesday in the vault for everyone but the students, as today was the day of the intimidating and infamous G.O.A.T. exam—so the majority of them were feeling more than a bit anxious. Winona felt no fear or negativity about it, until her brain reminded her that the test was only going to determine the job she'd have until she was 65.

That was certainly a defining factor that sent her stomach into churning fits, making her want to either vomit or hide. Maybe both if time allowed.

Class was starting late that day at 11:30 rather than at the usual 8:00-sharp, and that was because the supposed exam wasn't going to take very long if there wasn't any dawdling or messing around. Winona spoke to her father, and Freddie's father, Mr. Gomez, about what to look forward to concerning the G.O.A.T. exam and they both said the same thing; "answer as honestly as possible and on first instinct. That'll help with picking the best answer for yourself."

But what if she didn't have any first instinct about any of the questions? She heard it was multiple choice with situation based questions, so what if none of the responses aligned with something she'd do in that situation? Was there an 'other' choice, or could she pen a response herself?

Mr. Gomez cracked that if she didn't like her results she could sign up for the Vault Security Team —since it was the only way out of a G.O.A.T. score if you didn't like your results. She politely laughed but wasn't exactly thrilled about that option, either. On a good day she'd be walking around the halls in boredom. On a bad day, she'd have to write up a ticket or send out a warning and get yelled at by an incensed resident, and many of them didn't like her very much, as it stood.

To make up for the free time before the exam, she decided to unwind with her father in his office where he effectively occupied her for two hours straight. Jonas was with them for a short amount of time before Stanley came in with a cough. He then rushed away to tend to the older dweller, leaving the father and daughter to their own devices; which included the two of them sitting across from each other, her father entrapped in a playful game of Doctor with her as he pressed his stethoscope against her chest, smiling kindly at her. They played it often when she was a child; a peculiar game of him examining her and she'd pretend to have symptoms of some rare disease, and he'd have to guess what she was sick with.

More often than not it was a disease she made up like Pudding Pox or Toomuchhomeworkitis.

"Hmn... just as I thought," He chuckled as he removed the bell of the stethoscope from her chest, taking the ear pieces from his ears and he draped the cord of the stethoscope over the back of his neck.

"Why are you laughing?" Winona looked up at her father in pretend fear, her palm ghosting over her mouth. "Do I have pneumonia? Cancer? Gout?"

"From what I could gather as your professional doctor," He began, rubbing his chin with an arched brow as if he were deep in thought, and it caused his daughter to snigger under her breath as he struggled to keep the expression of mock fear on her face. "I'd say that if you believe being a healthy sixteen year old is something akin to gout—… than yes. I'm sorry, but you have it."
"Oh no! Tell me! Will I make it to Christmas, doc? I just needa see Johnny one last time!" She begged in a poorly executed accent. It was one she heard women use in old romantic films, like the ones she and Amata watched on weekend nights with packages of snack cakes. The women in the films were the type that wore red lipstick with perfectly curled hair, and were fierce and passionate and intelligent, and men would swoon and call them 'dames'.

The two burst into laughter, unable to keep their 'professional' facades under lock and key anymore. James rose from his chair to go to his desk, where he picked up a piece of hard candy from a coffee mug full of other goodies next to his terminal.

"You'll make it to Christmas, my little darling." Her father spoke as he handed her the candy piece. It was peach—her favorite flavor. "Though I believe I'm going to have to meet this Johnny fellow... he sounds like a suspicious character."

Winona smiled as she unwrapped the candy and popped it into her mouth. "Johnny? Oh, yeah—he's a real bad boy. He doesn't take his elbows off the table at dinner and he throws away recyclables in the garbage. He even cuts in the dessert line."

He laughed again, much more heartily this time, with another shake of his head as he sat down across from her in his desk chair. "I suppose I'll have to keep an eye on him, then... now, all jokes aside—I saw you speaking with old Stanley when he came in. What was that about?"

"Widget crushed one of her wings in a test flight," She answered. "I was thanking him for the scrap parts he salvaged for me."

"So that's what you were up to late last night, hmn?" He mused with a soft smile. "Well—let's see her."

Winona grinned, happy that her father was taking a genuine interest in seeing the repairs she had done to her little invention, which was revealed from the pocket of her jumpsuit; Widget was inspired, in design, as a ladybug from a book she read as a child—Larry the Ladybug. The little robot was just a bit bigger than a computer mouse, and had a big bobble head with wire antennas that lit up at the ends. Metal wings sprouted from her back but they were mismatched in color since she had to fix the one.

Pushing her thumb into Widget's back where a power button was under the wings, the little robot came to life and lifted to the air. Glancing between her inventor and her father, she chirped at them in polite greeting with an unmoving mouth.

"She certainly looks in better condition—cleaned up and everything, no more rust." James commented as he watched the bug flitter over to Winona's shoulder to perch.

"Yeah. There was a lot of build-up that I thought was gonna interfere with her circuiting, but I managed to scrape it off just fine." Winona explained as the door between the office and the infirmary slid open. The two glanced up, Widget not particularly paying any attention, as Jonas strolled in with a clipboard.

"Another cold caused by stress, doc. Seems like Stanley never has a shortage of those." He explained as he glanced up from his clipboard, looking to Winona now. "And Edwin just opened up the classroom."

"Sounds like it's time, my little darling." James spoke, looking down to his daughter and smiled as they both rose up from the chairs. He came around and hugged her tightly. "I know you'll do wonderfully... just remember what we talked about, and don't let nerves get the better of you."
"Okay dad." She answered, breathing deeply as Jonas stepped out of her way to let her by. Winona stopped short of the doorway to look back to her father. "Dad?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"What did mom get on her G.O.A.T. exam?" She asked, not seeing Jonas stiffen slightly behind her. He then quietly went back to where Stanley was having a well-timed coughing fit. "We don't talk about her much from before I was born… what'd she do before she died?"

"Nona," James smiled reassuringly as he came around to her. "Would knowing make you feel better about your exam?"

Winona nodded as his hands dropped on her shoulders, gazing up into his gentle face. "Dad I'm really scared that I'll get something in the maintenance track… I'm good at fixing things, if I get anything but a job where I have to fix things for a living it'll be a mistake. A 'waste of resources', like the Oversee says. But you see how people treat Floyd, and Stanley, and Jonas' grandfather before he died last month. You say you don't care as long as I'm not a garbage burner and I'm happy—… but would mom feel the same?"

"You mother would say it's ridiculous that the others trample on the people they rely on the most. Without Stanley, we wouldn't have such a great water purifier, and Andy would constantly be malfunctioning, or the reactors would've buckled. Without Floyd, our door would have opened years ago because of malfunction. And without Jonas' grandfather, we wouldn't have a working jukebox with tunes that kept our spirits up." He chuckled with a shake of his head. She didn't smile. "The point is, Winona, being on the maintenance track isn't necessarily a bad thing. Your mother would tell you that it's just a job and that it doesn't define your character."

"But it does, dad." She deflated a little, obviously unconvinced. "I'm an inventor. It really is my character."

"You'll do fine, honey." He kissed her forehead. "Your mother would be proud of you either way. Whatever the G.O.A.T. says doesn't matter to us, because when you were born, your mother and I knew you were born to do great things in your life. If you find yourself slated in the maintenance track, we will both still be proud of you—and we both know that you'll get the vault properly underway. Maybe that's just what you're meant to do here."

She smiled a little though her nerves still felt like they were unraveling in her chest, and hugged him one last time with a quiet 'thank you' before leaving his office. Waving to Jonas and Stanley on her way out into the hall, where they also wished her good luck, she looked down to Widget, who was still perched on her shoulder.

"So—you think that this G.O.A.T. thing is gonna be the bee's knees?" Winona asked with a small smile. The best response she got back was the little bug bot playing back cricket chirps comically. No matter how hard she tried to properly program Widget's AI, the young inventor still struggled with getting her creation to clean her room like she was built to do—suggesting that her AI couldn't effectively process the commands implanted in her. However, there was a difference between not following recognizable commands and outright disobeying, which the little robot had a penchant for (by back-talking, making the mess worse, or refusing to clean at all in general). Because of this, Winona struggled with the maternal instinct she felt over her first widely successful project, and her inventor instinct—telling her to scrap it and return to the proverbial 'drawing board' when she had a better understanding of programming artificial intelligence.

"...Yeah, that's what I thought." She answered as they turned the corner, heading towards the
classroom with a somber look on her face now. "The point of the G.O.A.T. exam is to determine where your skills would be best suited… and honestly, I'll be surprised if I don't end up in mainte—"

"Don't go easy on her, man—she'll just eat her feelings, anyway!"

"Desperate for action besides your left hand, Wally Mack? It's a wonder how you don't have glasses, yet."

Winona's words caught in her throat as she heard Amata's voice following that of the mentioned Tunnel Snake's. Next to the open doorway of the classroom stood Butch, Wally, and Paul at their usual spot where they waited for people to walk by to openly harass. She watched her childhood friend glaring with tight fists at the three snakes that circled her, not letting her bypass the daily verbal assault; the Overseer's daughter shifted uncomfortably with her arms wrapped around her body as the boys kept spurring on insults that were either about her weight, or promises of sexual harassment. Widget clicked in obvious annoyance on her shoulder, her wings beating against her back in a hum to help her take flight but she was quickly caged within Winona's hands.

"I'll take care of it! I can't have you flying around the halls, you'll just get me in trouble." She whispered down to her flying companion in her hands who snapped back at her with displeased cheeps. "Look, it'll be fine. Just calm down, and I'll— Widget!"

Widget forced herself out of the confinements of the inventor's hands, rapidly flying down the hall towards Butch, Wally, and Paul before Winona could grab her again. The Overseer warned her that he was getting quite peeved by her inventions, causing havoc that resulted in loud racket and a thorough clean up. He aggressively notified Winona (and her father) that if any of her 'toys' caused any more trouble for anyone in the vault, then she would be forced to stop inventing. He'd also take meticulous care to ensure that it wouldn't happen ever again, with all of her tools given to old Stanley and Lloyd, and all her projects and blueprints would be thrown into the furnace—lost forever.

The inventor skid to a halt at the corner where she remained unseen, peeking around to watch as Widget sailed over towards the gang before dropping to the ground. She snuck up behind Wally's boot heels first, where she grasped at his loose boot laces and securely tied them together in several tangled knots. It took a few moments to do as Wally kept rocking back from foot to foot, unknowingly threatening to step on her. When he was taken care of she skittered over to Paul and repeated her actions on his own bootlaces.

Winona's eyes widened upon realization of what Widget was doing. She had to watch in horror as Widget skittered back over to Wally, flying up the curve of his backside where she crawled in under the hem of his leather jacket, while squealing delightfully.

"Hey—!" Wally exclaimed in complete panic, flailing around in an effort to reach over his shoulder and then around his sides, trying to frantically grab at whatever was crawling all over his back. He shuddered and jumped around hilariously, yelling about a radroach being on him before his tied laces hitched and he went fumbling into Paul. The dark skinned boy was also startled by what was happening, instinctively trying to get out of the way while also trying to catch his friend when his own shoelaces were pulled taught between his legs, sending the poor boy tripping forward as well.

Winona ran over just as the heads of the two Tunnel Snakes clunked together and they collapsed to the floor in a heap of confused, flailing limbs and pained groans.

"Wha—? The hell?!" Butch exclaimed, moving from his leisurely spot against the wall to gape with a stunned expression down at his fallen comrades. Widget flew out from under Wally's jacket,
causing the Serpent King to snarl in irritation. "It's one of grandma Parker's damn toys!"

Widget squealed again as Butch grabbed at her, successfully weaving through his clawing hands to Winona who caught her immediately and turned her off, shoving her quickly into her jumpsuit pocket as he came stomping towards her; Amata ran over before he could to stand bravely beside her best friend, refusing to back away with smoldering eyes and a tightly set jaw.

"You little twerp!" Butch spat with a hand seizing her jumpsuit collar. He had stepped over his friends as they collected themselves on the floor—prying apart tightly knotted shoelaces, fixing their hair, and straightening out their clothes to the best of their abilities. Red welts marked their foreheads from when their heads collided and Wally was grimacing at her with a dangerous narrowing of his eyes.

"It wasn't my fault," She argued calmly though she slapped Butch's hands off quickly. "Though you should consider yourself lucky. If it was up to me, all three of you would've been napping on the floor."

"Don't blame this on your little wind-up toy, bitch." A smirk came to his face—a taunting one—with his head rocking to the side in amusement as he stood over her with dark, hooded eyes. "Shame if anything happened to it, am I right? Like it getting crushed under my boot."

Winona frowned up at him, broadening her shoulders and she straightened up to his challenge. As the two grew—victim and bully—Butch had the advantage of being a man. He grew into the size of one with broad shoulders and strong arms while she remained nearly scrawny and small. If he ever tried to physically hurt her, he'd definitely win, as multiple times in her life he showed no reservation against hitting her and did so several times, if not grabbing her outright to scare her because he knew he could.

"You've got as much bite as an all-gums puppy. This is your last warning—you leave Amata alone or you'll be answering to me." She threatened with her voice firm.

He laughed in her face at the remark, but made no move otherwise. "Oooh, I see. Protectin' your little girlfriend. What're you gonna do, huh, Snowflake? C'mon, I'd like to see you try and pull shit like that with me."

"Widget already did the work for me." She answered back thickly, her jaw tightening slightly. "But I could've done better."

"You mouthin' off to the Serpent King?" Butch asked, leaning in so close she could smell his sharp aftershave and there was a menacing look in his blue eyes. "No one mouths off to the Serpent King."

"Who're you callin' Serpent King?" Wally spat in disagreement from behind him.

"Shuddup, Mack." He hissed in response.

"Even snakes are prey to better predators with bigger fangs." Winona shot back smoothly and walked past with her arm hooked through Amata's, moving to the safety of the classroom. Butch called after them threateningly.

"This ain't over, Old Lady Parker! You and your rottin' bucket of scrap are lucky. Just you wait until later... I'll wring that damn thing's neck! If you think that the Tunnel Snakes don't run this joint than you've gotta 'nother thing comin'!"

Amata glared back at Butch hatefully. Winona sent an entertained, but otherwise not very
intimidated, glance over her shoulder.

"Good luck on your exam, DeLoria. Hope you at least remembered to bring your pencil." She spoke, turning back without another moment's pause to enter the classroom with Amata, whom she dragged away after her.

"You alright?" She asked as they sat down together.

"Yeah… thanks for taking care of them." She nodded, then muttered under her breath. "Assholes…"

Winona smiled reassuringly at her friend and rubbed her arm soothingly. "Hey, someone around here has to put them in their place."

"I wish it was something more permanent. I don't know why they won't leave me alone!" Amata went on, practically fuming now. "I mean, I know it's because I'm the Overseer's daughter—and partially because I'm your best friend—but it's so stupid! And Wally—" She shuddered in disgust. "Wally—oh boy—he tried asking me out to the Year End dance!"

"He—what? You can't be serious." Winona responded dubiously with her jaw hanging in shock.

"Does it look like I'm laughing? That's why they were harassing me this morning, because I told him to go swim in hot garbage like the pig he is."

"The nerve of those guys..." Winona murmured in reply as Butch, Wally and Paul finally entered the classroom with Dorothy hooked under Butch's arm.

Butch and Wally were still sending scalding glares to her from across the room as they took their seats at the back of the class, with Wally making the menacing gesture of drawing his thumb slowly across his throat.

"God damn..." Wally seethed as he sat down behind Butch at their assigned seats, Dorothy plopping down on Butch's lap when he sat. "Like t'see a smile on that broad's face when I'm knocking her teeth outta her mouth..."

"You thought Miss Prissy Bitch woulda said yes?" He glanced back to his fellow gang member, calmly, despite his own bubbling anger.

"I'm talking about the Smartass."

"Relax, Wally." Butch replied. "We'll get her back for it later."

"Butchie's right," Dorothy smirked as she removed the lollipop from her mouth—the stick stained heavily with her bright red lipstick. "You guys do somethin' now, she's gonna see it comin' and be ready for it, 'ya know. We call her Poindexter for a reason."

"Fuck that noise..." Wally grumbled while still applying pressure on the bridge of his nose to see if it was broken. "I don't care if she sees it coming, as long as I get my hands on her scrawny neck. I'm tired of that Holier-than-thou cunt always messin' with Tunnel Snake fun. Wouldn't mind if she took a header out the laundry cannon downstairs."

"It's ain't that bad," Paul quipped from where he stood next to Wally's desk.

"Says the one with the thick head," He snapped back as he rubbed his own forehead. "Whaddaya
"Aw, be nice to the poor guy," Dorothy playfully pouted, an arm wrapped around Butch's shoulders so her manicured fingernails drew shapes against the nape of his neck. "Everyone knows he ain't got two brain cells to rub together."

"Wise up, Dolly." He warned. "Don't be talkin' bad about my boys."

"Sorry, baby." She retracted with a coy smile, then planted a firm kiss on his jaw as his hand skirted down from her waist to her ass and to give it a playful pinch.

Shortly after Butch turned 16, the affectionate thrumming in his heart for Winona was just about gone—which he thanked whatever God was out there for this mercy—and now nothing was stopping him from completely laying out plans of mischief-making against the inventor. As well, his hormones called for something more physically appealing than Winona, who was about as flat in body as a stale Nuka-Cola. That's where Dorothy Horowitz came into the picture; she grew into a nice pair of knockers, and was sort of pretty, but that was mostly in part to her daily laquering of make up—which is what earned her the nickname of 'Dolly' from the Tunnel Snakes.

She was still annoying as hell and had that nasal whine to her voice, but he could put up with it (most of the time, even though he didn't return her romantic feelings at all) because the woman pretty much worshiped him.

Dolly would gladly do whatever he asked of her and that was just about the only thing he liked about their 'relationship'... like giving him head whenever he wanted. It wasn't very good head, but it was better than getting the job done himself.

Either way, she likes somethin' in her mouth. Butch smirked as Dolly's hand slithered over the crotch of his jumpsuit when they broke the kiss—with her giggling as she wiped away some of her ruby lipstick that transferred to his mouth with a quick thumb. Admittedly, she looked pretty good in the Tunnel Snakes uniform of the leather jacket, and with her fluffed up hair, make up, and a cigarette or lollipop in her mouth, she looked like a chick right out of a greaser movie.

"DeLoria, Horowitz." Mr. Brotch spat their surnames from the front of the classroom sternly, his arms folded over his chest. "This is an educational learning environment—there's certainly nothing educational about the 'lesson' you're putting on for the other students. And Miss Horowitz, you can look forward to your G.O.A.T. exam next year, when it's your turn to take it. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

Butch gave his teacher a sharp look, but Dolly knew better than to get herself caught in the middle and get into serious trouble. She gave a crooked smile, pecked her 'boyfriend' on the cheek, and took the opportunity to whisper into his ear.

"Don't worry, I'll just come back for you later, King Snake." She spoke, followed by a little titter, and got up from his lap to leave the classroom after wishing Paul and Wally good luck on their tests. He watched her walk away, a smug smirk upon his lips, as he settled back into his chair with his arms folded over his chest. Mr. Brotch finally turned away to begin with the G.O.A.T exam.

She ain't the best broad out there, but Dolly'll do for some fun.

"Hmn. Based on your answers here, you're slated to be a——…" Mr. Brotch trailed off in thought as he went over Winona's results a second time, ensuring that he cataloged them correctly. She fidgeted impatiently, feeling it rise in her chest and blossom outward through her body with her
teeth sinking into her bottom lip nervously. Why was she being tortured this way?

"Vault engineer!" He settled back in his chair as his eyes turned back up to her. "Now, I know that's not wholly good news since it's still in the maintenance track, but it's still a respectable position. Well done, Winona."

Winona didn't know exactly what to say in response. Her greatest fear had been realized—she was a maintenance worker—and some part of her hoped, while she carefully circled her answers during the 30-question exam, that she'd be placed in a career track that was more well regarded. As she told her father, to put her in repair and maintenance was expected concerning her hobby of inventing—and it would be the best place to put her—but it still came like a swift punch to the gut.

"You mother would say it's ridiculous that the others trample on the people they rely on the most... the point is, Winona, being on the maintenance track isn't necessarily a bad thing. Your mother would tell you that it's just a job and that it doesn't define your character."

So Winona let out a small exhale to steady her queasy stomach and her shaking hands.

"Thanks, Mr. Brotch." She replied unenthusiastically.

"I can see you're not too happy about your results... but at least you reacted better than Miss Christine Kendall did, over there." He observed with his hands lazily folding over his lap as he swiveled slowly one way and then the other on his chair. "Look, between you and me—" He stopped to look to the other students who were finishing up their exams or fixing bleak answers before looking back to her, leaning forward in his seat to speak in a whisper. "This whole G.O.A.T. thing is a joke. If you're not happy with your results, come back to me at the end of the day and we'll talk about it."

"What?" She paused, too stunned to think of how to properly respond. "...Why?"

"Because your dad's an okay guy," Mr. Brotch replied simply as he leaned away. "Honestly, being the vault engineer isn't really a bad spot to have in life, Winona. There's a reason why "likely to be a trash burner" is an insult around here, so you're not so bad off. You obviously have a gift in fixing things so why not put it to good use instead of causing trouble with your inventions? Do something good for everyone around here, for once."

Winona nodded slowly as she took in the words of her teacher, her eyes downcast to his desk where her exam lay between them.

"Alright. Thanks, Mr. Brotch." She said much more genuinely than before.

"You're welcome," He nodded certainly. "I'll see you tomorrow to get your final homework assignment and your textbooks back from you."

Winona nodded as she turned away from her teacher's desk. His reminder of seeing her the next day resolved the feelings that bothered her; he knew he wasn't going to see her after class to change her results because she wasn't the type of woman who would run away from a mediocre hand.

"The point is, Winona, being on the maintenance track isn't necessarily a bad thing."

Amata grabbed Winona by the arm as she passed by her friend's desk. The darker haired girl had just finished her exam and was getting up to turn it in.

"Hey! What'd you get?" She asked, beaming. "I've got my fingers crossed that it'll be something
"Vault engineer." Winona replied, letting the words slide off her tongue like muddy sludge. They tasted a little bitter but came off easily and she resented it.

"Oh—!" Amata exclaimed with her smile fracturing a little. "Well—! It's still a good job!"

"Good try. Next time, try saying it without looking at me like I just had a radroach crawl out of my mouth." She responded with dry sarcasm.

"Okay look, it's not bad. It could be worse, right? We'll talk about it more when we grab lunch."

"We don't have to—"

"You're obviously upset, Winona." She replied with her smile now completely gone.

At that, Winona looked back to Mr. Brotch, who was patiently waiting for the other students to finish, then looked back to her friend.

"I think I'll be okay, though." She answered with a sigh. "This was just where I was meant to be... no one expected anything differently from me."

"You would've been good in the hospitality track." She brightly countered.

"Yeah—but I'm going to be great in maintenance." Winona set a hand on Amata's arm. "I'll be out in the hall. Good luck on your result."

Amata nodded wordlessly as she rushed off to Brotch's desk with most of the other students following, having finished their own tests. Butch, who stood in line behind Amata (with Wally and then Paul lined up after him), roughly bumped her shoulder with his elbow callously and gave a smirk as he whistled an innocent tune. She kept her expression cool as she walked by—hearing every member of the gang snorting in juvenile laughter behind her as she walked away.

After that night when she dropped by with the Fixer, for a week after there was a nice suspension from their typical all-out war, and Winona noticed it; the day after, Wally tried to stir up a fight by slurring insults about her looks and unimpressive body, but Butch quickly shut him up by saying he had better things to do that day. The inventor would have believed that... if he hadn't chanced a glance back at her over his shoulder as he walked away with Paul and Wally. There was an understanding that crossed his eyes, something akin to gratefulness, but it was too fleeting for her to be sure.

Regardless, Ellen DeLoria was never checked in and as far as Winona last heard, she was too drunk to function for work and was subsequently fired. Butch's bullying got worse for some time, when the news quickly spread that his mother was now working in waste disposal because of her drinking problem.

"Hey, Winnie." Freddie smiled, his warm greeting catching her short of the door and she stopped at his desk to make small-talk. "How'd you do on the test?"

"I'm not really sure." She answered truthfully. "I'll have to think on it, see how I feel... you haven't finished, yet?"

"No..." He replied sheepishly. "This last question about the Overseer's got me stumped. I mean, all the answers are the same! Do you think it's a trick—?"
Winona tried not to grin, looking up to see Mr. Brotch talking to Amata as he tallied up her score, then leaned in to murmur to him.

"The answer's C."

"Are—Are you sure?" He murmured back, his eyes wide and innocent. It made her heart leap before fluttering back into place, he's so cute, she thought. "I won't get the question wrong?"

"It's what I put—I'm positive it's correct." She replied with a reassuring smile as his face flushed pink, and he rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture of timidity before circling the answer. Getting up from his desk to go to the line, he turned back to her when he was only a couple of steps away, hesitated, then completely turned around to face her with his eyes never meeting her face.

"Listen, uh—... W- Winona?"

"Yeah, Freddie?"

"Ca- Can I ask y- you about someth- thing?" He sputtered nervously.

"Sure." She replied, blinking curiously up at him.

"I—... erm... was wondering if you—… maybe—..." His face burned a bright red and he quickly shook his head, eyes still away from hers. "N- Ne- Never mind, it's stupid. I'm being stu- stupid."

"Freddie, you're not stupid. You can ask me anything," Winona urged him with a comforting smile and he looked back to her, spurting his question out so fast and suddenly after a lengthy pause that she barely caught it.

"Will you be my date for the dance!"

The dance he was referring to was the one that happened at the end of the final school year, which was two weeks after the G.O.A.T. exam. It was a time for all the residents to come together, to dance and eat and play games and be happy...

But she never expected Freddie to ask her to be his date for it.

They became better friends than ever back when they were 14, after he almost tearfully explained to her that Butch said he could be a Tunnel Snake if he was mean to her and Amata. He explained that he didn't want to at first, but he wanted to have some guy friends and not be around girls all the time, and that if he could take it all back he would without hesitation. Winona forgave him with some reluctance at first, but the more they hung out again the more confident the inventor felt in making the right decision. Freddie even admitted that he'd rather have two friends as a wimp than have three as a bully—but his desire to befriend the only boys around still thwarted his judgement from time to time as they grew up.

As time passed Winona realized that she felt something more than just friendship for this boy that turned into a truly gentle, kind, and thoughtful guy; she wasn't very sure of these feelings at first—if they were genuine, or if she was just flattered that someone as handsome as Freddie wanted to be around her all the time—but she was sure of them now. More certain than she ever was about them.

"Nev- Never m- mi- mind!" Freddie exclaimed again as he turned his body away to hide his face as it burned hotly in a deep blush, shaking his head quickly. "I was jo- joshin' you. I'll j- just—... you know, disappear, in a ho- hole... somewhere..."
\"That\'s a shame, because I would\'ve loved to go with you.\" Winona playfully responded.

\"...Wait\"— Freddie turned back to face her, a look of pure and genuine shock on his face. \"...You d- do?\"

\"Mhm,\" She nodded with a keen smile, her hands clasped behind the small of her back. \"I\'d love to be your date.\"

He blinked repeatedly as if the gesture would aid him in processing her answer and he slowly grinned dumbly; an unbridled, happy, wonderful grin that took up the full estate between his nose and chin, and lit up his dark eyes.

\"Gre- Great! I—! Y- You wanna grab some lunch, after I turn in my exam?\"

\"Amata and I were gonna head to the cafeteria, anyways.\"

\"Cool beans! Alright! I\'ll be right back!\" Freddie cried excitedly as he quickly walked over to the line up for Mr. Brotch\'s desk with an enthusiastic bounce in his step. Amata quickly hustled towards her as she passed Freddie.

\"I\'m on the supervisory track!\" She squealed as the two embraced in a congratulatory hug.

\"Amata, that\'s great!\" Winona grinned, pulling back to look at her. She knew Amata was just as worried as she was to have a job that\'d please her father, since he was the Overseer and all. \"This calls for a celebration! Burgers and shakes!\"

Her friend giggled. \"Good. I\'m starving! Let\'s go grab some lunch.\"

Winona called to Freddie to let him know they\'d be just outside the classroom. As he waved back to them, the girls walked arm in arm out the door and waited by the water fountain. Winona briefly summarized Freddie unexpectedly asking her to be his date, and when she was concluded the brief recounting, Amata stared at her silently with a dubious look.

\"...You\'re really going with Freddie?\" Amata answered, wrinkling her nose slightly. \"I mean, not like the other guys are a catch or anything, but Freddie\'s kind of—... well... Freddie.\"

She chuckled. \"I like Freddie. He\'s classy, and he\'s considerate, and he\'s nice to me and he takes a genuine interest in my inventions.\"

\"It takes more than an interest in your hobbies and being nice to make a date, Winona...\" She grumbled back in disagreement.

As Winona opened her mouth to counteract the statement, infuriated roars bellowed from the classroom and it startled them both out of their conversation with a sudden jump. They snapped their heads back towards the classroom, not exactly surprised by the source of the screaming, but what Butch yelled was what had the two girls immediately thrown into hysterical laughter.

\"I\'m a HAIRDRESSER?!\"
A/N: I was actually REALLY excited to introduce this chapter! It's one of my favorites that I've written so far, and it takes a deeper look into the life of Vault 101 in the face of the G.O.A.T. exam and how different positions are treated, as well as various other vault life things, like the mentionings of greenhouses and having to ration water and such.

You can't tell me that they'd survive for 200 years on nothing but packaged food :U I don't think the supplies would've lasted nearly as long, so in my dummy head Vault 101 has greenhouses and the dwellers lead a mainly produce based diet! Aside from any packaged meats that came with the vault's closing, of course... what are YOUR thoughts on it?

Anyways, I hope you enjoy the chapter! Oh, and be sure to check out my profile, as I've recently been editing old one-shots of mine for your viewing pleasure!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie, signing out

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**August 18th, 2274**

"Ow! Winona!"

"Sorry, Amata!" The inventor laughed through the bobby pins clutched between her teeth.

The dance that marked the end of their grade school (and the beginning of their adult lives) was in a couple of hours, and so far the two young women hadn't done much work in beautifying themselves to get ready; they both had faces of light make up on with lipstick and a little mascara, though Amata tried her hand at eyeliner, but otherwise they sat in their undergarments on Winona's bed with Amata's hairstyle only partially finished. They got their hands on a hair-styling magazine, in thanks to some volumes Old Lady Palmer had from her youth, and of course Amata just had to pick an up-do that was one of the most complicated to replicate!

"Are you almost done?" She whined. "You're dangerous with a hairpin!"

"I'm an engineer, not a stylist! If you wanted hair tips, apparently you should be asking Butch!" She laughed again through a mouthful of bobby pins, peeking over her friend's shoulder to the magazine spread open on her lap for the next set of instructions. Thankfully they were accompanied by pictures—otherwise the two wouldn't have been able to figure out what to do with the written steps alone.

"I kind of really don't want to go to this thing." Amata spoke in a sigh as she pushed the magazine away from her. "The only fun part seems to be dressing up."

"If Freddie hadn't asked me, I probably wouldn't have gone if you weren't going." Winona admitted
as she took a curler from Amata's hair.

"And if my father wasn't going, I wouldn't be going." She deadpanned in annoyance. "I didn't have a choice in the matter—he didn't even ask! The whole conversation was; 'the formal is coming up soon, make sure you have a tasteful outfit!' The voice and mannerism of the Overseer's upward chin tilt, as if he were being lead around by his nose, that Amata portrayed was a scarcely spot on impression of him.

"You're getting to wear one of your mom's dresses, aren't you?" Winona asked as she used the last of the bobby pins that were held with her mouth. Amata softened at her friend's words with her shoulders slumping forward, her arms folding loosely in front of her with her elbows on each of her knees.

"...Yeah... I am." Then looked to the dress she was going to wear, laid over top of Winona's on the dresser in a protective plastic bag. "It fits me perfectly—like it was meant for me. The shoes, too... it's kind of a weird feeling to know that my mom use to wear it. Daddy said it was her favorite one."

"Has your dad seen you wearing it?"

"No." She tried not to shake her head since the inventor was still working on getting her hairstyle just right. "He's been busy with all the new schedules around here—the water rationing for showers and drinking in case the purifier craps out again, scheduled blackouts between 9 and 12 PM to lessen the strain on the reactors—the greenhouses aren't doing too good after radroaches wrecked Garden D two days ago, either."

"Yeah, I heard it's a mess downstairs... I'm surprised he even made time to go with you to the dance, with everything that's going on. How do you think he'll react when he sees you in your mom's dress?"

"...I don't really know..." Amata picked up the magazine again, flipping through the pages idly to look at all the beautiful and perfectly cool and manicured women on the other pages in their Pre-War fashion.

Winona nodded silently in response and went back to styling. A part of her wondered what it was like to have such a beautiful memory of her mother with a dress like that; it was a stunning shade of wine red that nicely complimented Amata's coloring, with a full circle skirt and an off-shoulder boat neck that ran down to elbow-length sleeves. It paired well with simple white pumps Amata found amongst her mother's very few outfits. Winona wondered if her own mother would have worn something like that to events like a formal dance or dinner party; would she have been more conservative in her fashion, or more daring? Did she prefer vibrant shades or pastels? Prints or flat color? Did she like belts, gloves, hats, jewelry, and stockings? Or did she prefer to accessorize as little as possible?

There were so many small details and unimportant questions she had about her mom that her goodhearted dad couldn't particularly answer. Sometimes it absolutely crushed Winona to know that she'd never be acquainted with her mother in the same way that her dad had been.

The dress she had for the dance was borrowed from Old Lady Palmer, though it technically belonged to Jonas' mother even though she wasn't alive anymore. It was a delicate mint green, and it was sleeveless with a high neck. The elderly woman was not only kind enough to take it in so it fit Winona better along the bust and waist, but she also fashioned a belt of white satin from a box of scraps she had to give the figureless young inventor the illusion of curves. The only shoes that fit her were black flats, creating a contrast of harshness to the otherwise soft dress—but Old Lady
Palmer assured her that she looked absolutely beautiful with a tear caught in her eye and a smile on her face after the tailoring was finished.

"I think I'm done," Winona spoke as she smoothed her hands gingerly over the pinned curls. "Go ahead and take a look."

Amata picked up a hand mirror that laid by her side on the bed and brought it up to examine her hair. A wide smile graced her giddy expression as she turned her chin one way and then the other to check all sides.

"It looks amazing!" Then turned back to Winona over her shoulder. "Okay, your turn! Get in front of me."

The girls traded places so Winona sat cross-legged in front of a kneeling Amata as she flipped to a page that had a much less intricate hairdo; a low side bun, which would be adorned with a jeweled clip the girls created from bits and bobs Old Lady Palmer let them sort through. Amata began working on gathering up Winona's long, curly hair to the side to tie it before officially working, reading the easy instructions over Winona's shoulder.

"I really wish those dumb Tunnel Snakes couldn't come," Amata spoke after some moments of silent work, sounding as if she had a bobby pin between her teeth as well. "Especially since Wally tried to ask me to be his date. Daddy says that he'll kick them out if they start trouble, but I really wish he'd just do it beforehand since we all know those three will be up to something with so many people in the atrium at once."

"Don't let 'em ruin tonight." Winona replied, flipping through the magazine herself until Amata nudged her to flip back to the right page. "This is about us. We've come a long way, so let's celebrate it properly before we go on to screw up the rest of our lives." She joked.

"I hear that!" Amata chirped, causing both girls to grin. "God, it's happening, isn't it? After tonight we're not students anymore. We're apprentices. Then before you know it we'll be graduating from the program and becoming full-fledged working adults."

"And we thought that getting a Pip-Boy on your 10th birthday was a big deal," She chuckled. "But I get it. It's hard to believe how fast time has gone… soon enough we'll be 30 and reminiscing about our childhood days."

"You know what my favorite moment with you is?"

"I dunno about you, but mine's all the times where you told me how great I am." Winona piped sarcastically.

"You're not as cute as you think you are," Amata warned with a stifled laugh. "My favorite memory's from when we were 14, and you slept over at my apartment for the first time." She rest her chin onto Winona's shoulder idly as she spoke. "And we spent most of the night staying up, eating snack cakes dipped in chocolate pudding, and watching cheesy romance movies and talking about what it'd be like to be grown ups in the Old World."

"I remember you wanted to be a florist… and you were mad that'd you have to marry guys like Stevie or Wally Mack, Butch, and Paul." Winona laughed, even though Amata stifled an obnoxious gag before pulling back to finish the last few adjustments to her white hair. "Well, definitely not Wally or Butch."

"Paul wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't friends with them… he isn't all that smart, but I think I'd be
fine with having a dumb husband if it meant I got married at all."

"Why's that sleepover your favorite memory, anyway?"

There was a pause in the conversation as if Amata was thinking. Shortly later, she completed Winona's hairstyle with the jeweled clip as the finishing touch and slid over on the bed to sit right next to her with a resigned expression in her face.

"...Because we were just two little girls talking about dumb stuff," She answered quietly as if ashamed, her arm circling Winona's shoulders. "Talking about having jobs, and having boyfriends, and being kissed and being in love somewhere far away from here... in a time that's gone. Like we're not the last chance the vault has for the next generation. Like—... Like it's not already too late for some of us."

Winona frowned slightly, not particularly liking where this conversation was going. "...Amata, why __"

"I'm sure you've thought about it." Amata deadpanned with a firm shake of her head, looking back into her best friend's eyes. "Admittedly, I'm a little jealous of you, Winnie... because of Freddie. I can't marry any of these guys because I'm—... because I can't."

"What're you saying?"

"...Will my father have to use the Procreation Law?" She dismissed her prior, suspicious statement as she looked at Winona.

"That's just a dumb rumor, it's not an actual thing!" Winona argued in mild terror. "It's cruel and insulting, your dad isn't going to make you marry someone just so you could have kids!"

"Well it's not like going outside is an option for me!" Amata exclaimed in frustration, pulling her arm from Winona's shoulders to get up to her feet. Her posture softened almost immediately as she hugged herself. "I just—... it scares me to know that I'll never be in love. That I'll never have the kind of love I've always dreamed of... that I have to marry someone eventually just because I have to make babies, and chances are I'll have to do it with someone I hate! If my dad uses the Procreation Law against me, I know I'll be put with Wally Mack—I know I will because the computer'll say we're the most compatible. I feel cheated, Winnie... I feel cheated and angry and scared..."

Winona watched Amata with saddened bewilderment. She always admired the unsuspecting strength that lied in her best friend; Winona could be headstrong at times, sure, but not in the way Amata was. She was fierce, she was unafraid to speak her mind, and would work day and night for something she had her thoughts set on. The inventor always thought she'd be the next Overseer not because her own father was Overseer (as that's not how electing the new Overseer worked), but because as a leader she would be patiently diplomatic even the best of situations and tenacious in the worst, she was focused, she understood commitment and responsibility, and she'd listen to the people she was responsible for. To hear the genuine fear in her voice acquainted Winona with a side of her bonded sister that she very rarely saw; completely raw vulnerability.

So she got to her feet as well and hugged Amata tightly.

"We're only 16, Amata... and things can change." Amata gave her a pessimistic glance. "Really. It can. You said so yourself that if Paul wasn't with Butch and Wally, he'd be a pretty okay guy—maybe one day those three will outgrow this whole stupid gang thing and grow up a little."
"Oh God don't talk up Paul Hannon to me!" She laughed, showing that tears had been dotting her eyes and she blotted them away carefully with the knuckle of her forefinger. "But you're right... we're still young. I don't have to worry about those things right now."

"Its baby steps," Winona teased. "First step is getting through tonight without any problems from those jerks. We'll worry about the rest later when we learn how to walk."

"Agreed!" Amata nodded with a stern smile of resolve and migrated to where the dresses were laid over Winona's dresser. "Now, help me get into this thing—and tell me to suck in if I have to!"

"So God damned glad this shit's over." Butch scoffed as he stood in a far corner of the atrium with Wally and Paul. Luckily, Paul's father was the checker at the door for contraband, so **of course** he checked Wally and Butch—but he hadn't considered checking his son. That was why Paul was the smuggler for the evening, as he usually was. The kids of security were often given a little leniency even **if** said kid was a part of a rough and tough gang, and it helped that the other two Tunnel Snakes could play as red herrings in that case.

"That G.O.A.T. test was a joke," Wally nodded in agreement as he brought his cup to his lips. The boys stopped at the food table to make cups of the punch that was being offered and then topped it off with the rum Paul smuggled in to better hide it. Though they knew eventually, as the night went on, they'd become braver with their alcohol consumption and start sharing the bottle in plain sight without care of someone catching them drinking while underage.

"Really? I thought it was hard..." Paul replied with a shrug. "But I guess I did okay, since I'm gonna be an engineer!"

"Who woulda thought you had it in 'ya, Hannon!" Butch cackled proudly as he clapped his friend on the back in congratulations, a giant grin marking his face. Wally raised his glass as well in a mock toast with a nod of his head in approval.

Being on the engineering track was far from a good thing, but it was better than where everyone thought Paul Hannon would end up; cleaning the trash incinerators or shoveling smelly recycled mulch for the farms. Even his parents were relieved by the results.

Paul grinned back at his friends. "The hours are mostly graveland shifts, but whatever."

"It's graveyard shifts, Paulie." Wally snickered.

"And you better not get soft on us, Mack," Butch remarked as he looked back to Wally, who had been quietly nursing his drink for most of the conversation. "The vault's new shift manager? Never thought you'd be so cool about bein' a cubicle inmate."

"It's a good position," He argued without any grit in his voice and a shrug riding on one shoulder.

"There's nothin' 'ya wanted to be?" Paul asked curiously with a cock of his head, the curl of his gelled hair falling into his eyes.

"It doesn't matter since the G.O.A.T. puts you wherever you'd best service the vault—it doesn't put you where you wanna go, unless you're lucky. People around here'll settle for something that isn't in the maintenance track." Then looked back to his friends idly. "But if there **was** a job I wanted, I could've gotten it, no problem. I picked shift supervisor because it's an easy job with a good amount of power and leeway—plus, the hours won't kill me. I get all holidays off, too, and bonus work credits if I keep a good case record every 6 months on review."
"Does this mean you'll be workin' with Amata? Since, 'ya know, you two're in the same track?"
Paul inquired.

"She better hope not," Wally growled. He was still pretty wounded about the vehement rejection from the Vault Brat and even mentioning her name made him look like his eyeballs would bust.

"Wait a sec, can we roll back a bit?" Butch squinted at him suspiciously. "You said you picked shift supervisor, waddya mean picked?"

"There's a code in the exam." He brought his drink to his mouth to toss back what remained in his glass before continuing, as if the alcohol would help him cool down. "Was pretty easy to figure out towards the end, so I used it to my advantage and picked a job that suited me best."

Butch laughed in disbelief. He knew Wally was smart, like Winona Parker smart, but he was just shy of hitting that line! He was pretty pissed yesterday when everyone got their report cards to find out that he didn't pry out an A in any of his lessons from Brotch the Crotch's grubby hands. Rumors said Winona did in two of the seven classes they had—but she was a teacher's pet, anyway, so what did it matter? She probably sucked up for those A's.

"The fuck that's how it happened!" Butch exclaimed through a mocking laugh with a dubious smirk. "You just got lucky, 'ya fuckin' punk."

"Did you put down 'B' to Question 27? The one about the malfunctioned Mr. Handy with a hatchet?" Wally replied coolly with a cocked eyebrow. Butch nodded. "And that's why you're a hairdresser."

"Isn't that a lady's job, Butch?" Paul sniggered as he chewed on some crackers, joining in on the teasing.

"I'm a barber! There's a difference!" He barked with his upper lip curling back from his teeth while his cheeks were flushed with a touch of pink. Paul laughed at his other side because of the quick jab while Wally was grinning wordlessly himself, shaking his head cockily as he brought his drink back to his mouth and gazed out towards the floor.

Tables had been spread out across the wide room along with chairs to accompany the people who were arriving. A long table of food and drinks were set out with decorative balloons to the wall under the Overseer's window, and streamers were wound around the railings on the upper floor in the vault colors of bright blue and yellow. They had been strung across to the opposing railing's other side so it created a decorative canopy above their heads. It was a little tacky and distracting to look up and feel smothered by the overdone decorations and Butch kicked a balloon away in his frustration, watching it drift through the air before settling back to the ground lazily.

Soon enough the atrium was full of people, and with how quickly it was still filling it probably would have been easier just to list who wasn't there yet or coming at all. Dolly had arrived just seconds ago but stayed with her parents, and kept shooting him perverted glances from across the room with her tongue flicking her upper lip. Her hair was fluffed up, more makeup was on her face than usual with a colorful pairing of gold eye shadow to ruby red lipstick, and she was donning a sunshine yellow dress that looked almost skin-tight on her; it hugged all her curves closely, and a bejeweled brooch was the centerpiece of her cleavage-filled top. The poster child for Daddy's Little Girl (Amata) hadn't shown up yet, and neither had the Overseer—and lastly there wasn't Parker or her precious doctor daddy, either.

_That's if they come at all_, he snorted acidly to himself as he took a stiff sip of his mixed drink. _Thinkin' that they're better than the 'common folk'... they probably won't show._
"You two hear that the Professor's got a date with candy-pants Gomez?" Wally asked with a snort, as if hearing Butch's thoughts mentioning Winona.

"What—?" Paul blinked with genuine surprise. "Seriously?"

"Bet they look ab-so-lutely disgustin' together." Butch griped.

"Thought even Tiny Tits could do better than the Pill Popper," Wally concluded with a nod. "She's had this stupid look on her face since the exams that I just wanna smack right off."

"She can smile? I didn't know she could. She's always got that weird look on her face... like how she stares at you without blinkin' sometimes?" Paul responded and mimicked her wide-eyed stare, making Wally nearly spit out his drink from his laughter.

Butch began grumbling when he saw Winona enter the atrium with Amata at long last, blushing and fussing with the belt on her dress and looking at her best friend nervously... though when Amata said something with her hand holding that of her friend's, Winona's face unexpectedly lit up and she smiled wide, laughing gleefully. Her big smile displayed the dimples he once adored a long time ago and he was suddenly grimacing at a weak little stir of fluttering inside him. It was quickly beaten down with mental fists and the threat of oh no you don't, 'ya fuckin' bastards! Why'd his weakness have to be God damn dimples? Why'd she have to be the only one in the vault with them?

"It's 'cause her eyes are freakishly big when she doesn't blink... like an owl or somethin'." He spoke spitefully and downed the rest of his liquored up punch.

"...What's an owl?"

"Don't quit your day job, Paul." Wally chortled in answer to his snake brother's question.

"I haven't even started my job, man!"

Butch continued to watch Winona as she strolled across the dance floor—now alone, as Amata hurried away to her father—where she looked like she was searching for someone. The quest was short lived as Freddie nearly ran up to her side to greet her and they walked away together with her arm tucked into his, and her body pressed a little too close to his side. Ever since the G.O.A.T. exams, Butch hadn't seen much of her outside of their last few classes together; she'd immediately zip away on the arm of Amata, or at the side of Freddie, or be with them both, when the Serpent King happened to be near. Of course he'd make a snide passing remark but she opted to ignore him, so he could barely get in a tease or two about her making the maintenance track. To hear that Smartmouth Parker, the one who supposedly got two A's out of Edwin Brotch, who was the king of refusing to give out A's, was put into maintenance had all of the residents talking. Some were shocked and saddened by the news while others whispered their 'good riddance to the lower levels' when she'd walk the halls. They thought that if she was left to rot on the lower floor where she could tinker to her heart's content, the rest of them would barely have to see her—after all, people barely saw Floyd Lewis and old Stanley with all the work that kept him downstairs (he just realized that Floyd wasn't present, either, and neither was Jonas Palmer).

It made his pride swell to know that after all these years—after all the long fights and harsh words and aggressive comebacks for pranks that they made at each other over time—his station was regarded well above her. He wasn't looking forward to being a barber, sure, but being in the hospitality track was unquestionably better than being in maintenance.
So he couldn't wait for that chance to rub it in her face that he, Butch DeLoria, the resident fuck up, was better than her.

Finally.

Winona and Freddie walked down the hall in silence with the jovial music of the atrium snuffed out by the door shutting behind them. She was feeling a little dizzy from the spotlights that crawled about the room, and the loud music, and how she had literally danced for hours already. Her head swam from exhaustion and her feet had blisters, but she was feeling elated and fun. Even though she told Amata she wouldn't have gone to the formal if Freddie hadn't asked her, she was glad that she showed up; it was a rare thing to witness most of the residents coming together and having fun with one another! There wasn't any gossiping, any worries, any conflict or fighting—past transgressions disappeared for the evening and they were all brought together over cake and punch and music (with actual singing in it rather than something instrumental, and Amata said that meant her father was probably in a good mood!).

It was a wonderful day, and from how the inside of the atrium looked with all the people dancing or playing games, it wasn't going to end for another couple of hours—maybe even longer if the snacks and drinks held up.

"Is it alright if we stop here?" She asked Freddie when she began to show more of a limp from the raw blisters caused by her flats. "My feet are killing me."

"Oh—! Yeah, sure." He nodded and immediately stopped at her side. They had walked as far as the men's bathroom down the hall and around the corner from the atrium. It was just far enough away where the muffled sound of music and laughter could no longer be heard, while still feeling a little more private despite being an open public hallway.

Winona leaned back against the wall with a slightly pained exhale as she pried the borrowed shoes off from her swelling feet. It didn't help that they were just a little snug, but she preferred that over heels that were in her proper size. Back in the atrium, from across the room, she could see that even though Amata was smiling as she stood with her father like a dutiful daughter, in her dark eyes there was nothing but pure agony for being on her feet in heels for those few hours. The thought made her laugh, since she warned her best friend to go with something more comfortable, but Amata argued that it'd be one of the very few times where she could dress up for an event and she'd accept nothing less than looking her best if an effort had to be made.

The inventor could sympathize after the two got dressed and felt like little ladies, and of course it helped to have Freddie anxiously sputter out a sheepish compliment about how beautiful she was when she came up to him. The poor guy was so nervous that in an effort to say she was 'beautiful' and 'stunning', it came out mashed together as an embarrassing 'bunning'.

It made her light up inside at how adorable he was.

"Enjoying the party so far?" Winona asked him, if only to make small talk as she let her swollen, blistered feet rest on the metal floor, cooling her hot soles. Her shoes were discarded to her side haphazardly.

"Yeah," He bobbed his head in a nod with one hand finding the back of his neck while the other dove into the pocket of his suit pants. "Are you? You were really dancin' up a storm with Amata."

Winona smiled wide as she curled her leg up under her, hunching over to massage her left foot with both hands—her thumbs pressing into the bottom of her sole and between her toes. Freddie didn't
seem to mind what she was doing as they talked.

"This is our first dance… everyone from class, I mean, and honestly I didn't think I'd have that much fun." Her eyes turned up towards his face. "But I had a really nice time getting ready with Amata, and getting to wear a pretty dress, and dance. It makes me wish we had more events like this."

"Yeah, me too." Freddie nodded along in agreement as he looked down the hall with both of his hands in his pockets now. "It's nice being with my dad… he's busy a lot with his security stuff. You know how often I see him."

It made Winona happy to see Mr. Gomez in good spirits with Freddie during the party, after how he explained that being assigned as the new jukebox technician was causing a strain between him and his parents. Freddie was more than happy to pursue the career, while of course Mrs. Gomez was incredibly displeased and Mr. Gomez was talking about sourcing him to the Overseer for a chance in the vault Security program. Mrs. Gomez was best friends with Beatrice, who was sisters with Mary and Gloria, and the connection somehow made his mother competitive to have her son in a better job than Christine, Stevie, Wally, or Susie.

Pepper Gomez was an interesting woman.

"You don't get a lot of time with him," She stated as she looked back down to her hands firmly massaging her foot. "I get that."

"I saw Dr. Parker leave earlier. What was that about—?

"Something at the office, I guess…" She muttered before straightening up and leaning against the wall again. Her hands folded themselves into the curve of her back between her body and the wall. "He probably got paged down to the clinic—I saw him talking on the intercom to someone before he told me he had to leave, so I figured it was Jonas."

"Jonas is working?" Freddie stared at her with his brows furrowed together. "But I thought everyone got the day off today."

"Yeah, but I guess he had some overdue paperwork or something to take care of—?... I'm not really sure."

Winona would be lying if she said it didn't sting her a little; Jonas had always been like an older brother to her, ever since she was a little girl, and to be told that he wasn't attending the party due to paperwork back at the clinic was hurtful. Then to see her father rush out to, undoubtedly, help him made that wound a little deeper. The night before her father told her that today was her day for making it through the exams and leaving grade school with an A in math and science from Mr. Brotch—a grade that even Wally Mack couldn't get—and that it was just as special to him as it was to her. He apologized profusely before rushing off to the clinic, and even in that moment the last thing she wanted was for him to see that she was disappointed—so she nodded at him to go on ahead with a smile on her face and acted like she didn't want to cry on the inside.

The worst part of it all was that she felt absolutely silly about her emotions, as if she were overreacting.

"Do you want to go back inside?" Winona finally asked after some moments of pause. "Like you said, you don't get to see your dad a lot. So if you wanna spend time with him—"

"No, I'm fine!" Freddie smiled at her, a soft pink flush creeping up over his jaw towards his
cheeks. "My dad'll always be there. I'm with you right now."

Smiling back at him, she felt a little sheepish herself in that moment and so bashfully turned her eyes away down the hall towards the atrium. She felt her heart soften, or rather melt or jellify itself, in her chest; knowing that a wonderful (and handsome) guy like Freddie Gomez had feelings for her put her in a constant dizzying state in his presence that she didn't know how to handle. It was that feeling of reciprocated affection and wanting to pull him close, but also wanting to keep him at a coy distance out of the anxiety that came with the lack of experience in having a romantic interest... though there was also a little uncertainty and overthinking on her part. They were best friends and had been for a few years now, but Winona always expected and even accepted that there would be things about the sweet Freddie Gomez that he wouldn't want to tell her.

Things like if he kissed someone already.

Susie Mack centered into her thoughts, as Wally's twin was shooting jealous daggers at the inventor all night with her eyes. Rumors went around that she had a crush on Freddie, but Winona didn't really pay attention to such things, though she was surprised that Freddie didn't want her for his date. After all, Wally's twin was one of the prettiest girls she knew, aside from Amata, who she thought was beyond gorgeous, but the inventor knew she was a little biased. Susie wouldn't have been a bad match either as a party date or something more intimate, and it made Winona insecure and question why he chose her, as she wasn't the prettiest, or the most well-endowed, or the most well liked, or the most interesting girl around.

"Freddie?" Her growing self-consciousness forced her to speak up.

"Yeah?"

"Why'd you ask me to be your date tonight?" The question seemed to hit him unexpectedly as he completely turned red in the face. "I mean—... you could've asked someone else... like Susie. Or something."

"Susie Mack?" He blinked, gaping at her in shy confusion and then finally shook his head. "Susie's swell, I guess... but she's not you."

Her eyes turned back up to him timidly as she straightened her back a little. It helped her feel taller when the sudden surge of emotions made her feel small. How could feeling wanted make someone feel so helpless? Weren't you supposed to feel the opposite?

"...Not me?"

"Ye- Yeah," He stammered on while looking down at his shoes to keep his eyes from her. He must have felt like she deserved some kind of thorough answer, because he continued to chatter on. "Yo- You're nice—and you're sma- smart and really creative and know a lot about interesting stuff... and th- the things you make are pretty nifty, too! And you make me laugh, and you just—... you get me. You know how to make me feel—... I dunno, safe, I guess."

She had to laugh a little—not at him, but rather for him. His rambling gesture was extremely sweet. "Thanks, Freddie."

"...I wasn't really—uhm—done..." He tacked on awkwardly.

"Oh—!" Winona exclaimed awkwardly before egging him on with a nod of her head. "I only—... sorry, ignore me. Go on."

"I was gonna say—... tha- that I think I had the prettiest gal with me at the dance tonight. I- I don't
know why you said yes, but I'm really happy you did." Freddie finished with a slow exhale to keep himself calm during his confession.

"Freddie…” She muttered as his eyes caught her face and she bashfully looked away again, feeling her neck turning hot in an oncoming blush. "That's—... That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I really like you, Winnie. Like really like you, like you." He went on, seeming to feel more and more brazen in light of her positive responses. "And I'd like to know if I could—... I dunno…" That confidence was quickly dashed away by his anxiety as he shifted his weight between his feet in a fidget, going silent.

"Yes—?" She encouraged while staring into his turned away face like a hopeless little girl, wishing that the next few words that came out of his mouth were the ones she most desired to hear.

"I wanna know if I co- could—... kiss you?" Freddie finished quietly with his eyes turning back to hers, their gazes catching one another's.

The two were standing much closer to each other now than several minutes ago when they stopped, but neither of them particularly noticed those several feet of space turning into a few intimate inches as they talked. She found her hand coming to his forearm without her brain commanding it to, and his own hand came free of his pocket to shyly find her fingers in a tickling touch across her opposite palm and down her digits lightly—seeming to want to take her hand, but was too bashful to actually do so.

"You can," She smiled up at him with a reaffirming nod. "You can kiss me."

He swallowed audibly before smiling back at her nervously, and with the hand he had taken out of his pocket he rested his palm against her cheek as he took a small step closer. Her hand fell from his forearm to take hold of his elbow as they leaned in towards each other with the distance closing between their eager lips. His eyes were in a heavy half-lidded gaze on her blushing face as she closed her own, unable to handle the building tension that towered over her. All she could hear was the sound of her heart pulsing hotly in her ears from her heating excitement as she felt the exhale of her name on her bottom lip—and then that tower was crashing down on her in a massive, suffocating wave that stopped her breathing.

This was perfect… perfect. And just like the old movies made it look like.

Until the door of the men's bathroom slid open to their side, causing them to hastily break apart without final contact. Freddie took a startled stagger back from her with his arms dropping stiffly at his sides and Winona stared at the floor, trying to steady her heavy breathing and her rapidly thumping heart. She didn't know why she reacted so sheepishly.

Daring to look up towards their interrupter, all her excitement concentrated to a cold ball of weight that dropped right into her stomach at seeing Butch DeLoria staring intensely back at them both. Out of any moment he could have appeared—free of his suit jacket while teetering on one leg in obvious tipsyness—he happened to appear right at the peak of her raw vulnerability; experiencing her first kiss.

Of course he would show up at that last second, if romantic comedies showed her anything about the true ironies of life.

So the inventor steeled herself for a backhanded, sarcastic compliment from him, or one aimed at Freddie, or something about them collectively; like his trademark "freaks of a feather". She waited
for him to curl his upper lip and spit something callously like "what're you lookin' at, Old Lady Parker?", or, God Forbid, make some remark about either of them hitting the maintenance field on their G.O.A.T. exams. Winona was responsible for the power grid of the vault, but Butch was put in the hospitality department—so even though her responsibilities would keep the vault safe, and all he could do was cut hair, his job was held in higher regard than her own. It made her a little bitter knowing that he wasn't above using that against her.

Butch's eyes turned away from hers to look to Freddie, who was still half turned away in an awkward stance, and then his eyes returned to her gaze. He smirked at her—not his usual cocky, condescending smirk, as this was something else—and wiped his mouth over with his hand idly, and she knew that he realized exactly what he was interrupting. Taking several steps backward, drunkenly bobbing his head with his hands tucked deep into his suit pants pockets, he finally walked away and continued down the hall where he disappeared out of sight around the corner.

Freddie had finally looked up upon hearing the retreating footsteps, having been terrified that Butch was going to do or say something awful, and watched the Tunnel Snake's back until he was gone.

"What was—... what was that about?" He mumbled out in question.

"No idea..." She shook her head in response, feeling a little stunned. Why didn't he say anything? Not even a little remark? Perhaps he was too soaked in alcohol to say something cutting… or maybe he didn't rightly care about what the two were up to, which was much more unlikely.

Winona wondered if the spell of the formal had affected him, too—and like the other residents, he didn't feel like starting something today.

"That was a little weird," Freddie spoke, watching down the hall for a moment longer before looking back down at her.

"I think he's been drinking." She shook her head. "I saw him sharing a bottle with Wally and Paul in the corner, and I doubt it was cherry cola."

"You think it was booze?" He frowned slightly. "Shouldn't we tell someone? Alcohol is contraband to a resident under 18."

"I know..." Then looked up to him with a reassuring smile. "But not today. This is Butch's dance, too—and Paul, and Wally's. Let them have a little fun."

Freddie stared at her with some hint of surprise in his eyes as his hand brushed back over his hair. His eyes turned away to stare down the hall again.

"I'm—... alright." He finished woodenly, making her laugh.

"You were going to say something. What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just—... you and Butch fight a lot, and really badly, too... and Amata said she wished they weren't allowed to come since they cause trouble all the time, so if you told the Overseer that they were drinking, they'd get kicked out. But you're not gunna tell him that they were drinking? It's confusing."

Winona looked down as she pulled her shoes back on, her face wincing slightly in pain as she did. Her feet weren't as sore anymore but the raw blisters still stung. She wished she thought of bringing bandages with her just to protect them from any more chaffing.
"Like I said, this day is for everyone who graduated grade school and made it through the exams. I fight a lot with Butch and his friends, sure—… but today's the only time I've ever seen most of us together, having fun and dancing and eating and playing games. No one's fighting, or gossiping about one another, or pulling pranks or doing any other crappy stuff… and so for today I want to keep it that way for as long as we can have it. In case it doesn't happen again. Butch and I can fight tomorrow."

Freddie's mouth was turned in a dopey smile at her with a red flush coloring his cheeks, and he emitted a surprised little chuckle.

"Wow."

It made her smile and blush herself, like she made some grand speech. "What?"

"You're just—…" He paused for a moment, trying to think of the proper word, but instead chuckled again in awkwardness when the only word that came out again was; "Wow."

"Thanks. I try," She laughed as well. "Ready to head back?"

Freddie nodded a little hesitantly as Winona turned away to start walking, but after she took the first step, she felt his hand on her elbow pulling her back towards him. When her gaze collected towards his eyes, his head ducked towards her to meet their difference in height and his lips were suddenly on hers in a sweet kiss.

Winona smiled against his mouth as her hands settled against his chest, and she prayed that she was doing something right as she closed her eyes and gladly returned it.
Butch and Dolly walked the halls of Vault 101, with his arm slung around her shoulders, pulling her in against his side, as was their usual position together. His mouth dipped toward her ear to whisper a dirty promise that made her blush, and caused her hand to catch the spill of nasally giggles in her palm as it met to her mouth, her other hand thumbing the ashes off her cigarette. When they turned the corner of the hall he pressed her body to the nearby wall with his hand dropping down from her shoulders to her waist, keeping her body firmly against his as he attacked her neck with quick nips of teeth and suckling lips. She let out a gasp, followed by another snort of a giggle into his ear, and nearly dropped her cigarette.

"Butchie, we shouldn't be doing this out in the open!" She cried with a smile as he grabbed at the zipper tab of her vault jumpsuit and pulled it down enough to expose her collar bones, taking care to attack at the newly revealed skin.

"The Tunnel Snakes can do whatever they want, babe. We rule this vault." He reminded her between bites and kisses against the flesh of her chest.

"So the Overseer—" A snort of surprise and then a laugh escaped her as his knee pressed between her thighs. "Really talked t'ya?"

"Yeah, he did." Butch answered after some time of kissing her neck and pulled back to look down at her with a mischievous smirk, his eyes pointed and hungry upon her. "Don't worry 'bout it, Dolly. It's big boy business."

"Whatever 'ya say, Butchie." She wailed absentmindedly, and pressed the last drag of her cigarette to his mouth. He inhaled greedily, flushing it back out through his nose before flinging the butt to the floor to grind under his boot toes, and his mouth was latched onto her neck again to ravage the skin with lips and teeth.

A handful of days ago, the Tunnel Snakes were called into the office of the almighty Overseer, where they thought they were busted for some upcoming Halloween prank they pulled; it was on the maintenance guy, Floyd, that involved a cherry bomb and a canister of chocolate pudding that exploded a little too close to the reactors, or whatever... Butch wasn't really paying attention when he was getting another reading of the Vault Safety and Other Regulations handbook from Officer Park and old-timer Officer Taylor. He only began paying some attention when the officers were dismissed from the office by the Overseer, which was a very unusual thing for him to do. He then called for a truce, and said that instead of being punished, the gang was being offered a pretty juicy deal; if a resident was acting out of line, or proving themselves to be disloyal to the Overseer and Vault 101, he wanted the Tunnel Snakes to severely annoy that person until they would rethink their loyalties, just to get rid of the gang members.

With the Vault Loyalty Inspector job phased out years back, it was less likely that someone would question a delinquent being a delinquent than an officer harassing a resident. In return for playing bad cops with problematic vault residents, the Overseer could ignore the majority of Tunnel Snake activity—under the strict order that it was physically harmless, and they left him and his daughter
alone completely.

So if Butch wanted to have a bit of fun with Dolly in the middle of the hallway at 2:37 in the morning, than he would have a bit of fun with her—and the Overseer would continue sitting up in his office, playing a paranoid God with his thumb up his ass as usual. The weird bastard was probably watching on one of his cameras, anyways. It's not like he was getting any from anyone but himself.

Butch continued working away at Dolly's neck until there were dark hickies forming. Her body went slack against his, permitting him to continue with soft moans, which stopped suddenly as her body tightened against his. When he pulled back to look at her, her eyes were trained over his shoulder at something and she was tightly gripping the sleeves of his leather jacket at the biceps.

"What's wrong?" He grinned smugly. "The Butch-Man too much for 'ya?"

"There's someone in the diner," She said in a low voice, nodding over at the big front window of the cafeteria, which gaped at them like an open mouth from the opposite wall. It was dark, which was expected at now 2:40 AM, but what had piqued his interest was a figure of someone hunched over the table at the front booth, illuminated by the eerie green glow of a Pip-Boy screen's flashlight.

"Are they watchin' us, Butchie?" She asked. "I don't wanna do nothin' if someone's around. It's creepy."

"Nah, they ain't watching." He replied in a distracted tone. Upon seeing the person tilt their head up, tucking long hair of tight curls behind an ear, the ominous green glow of the figure's Pip-Boy cast over trademark white hair and illuminated it in a green wash. He grinned upon realizing that it was Winona, alone, in the diner, at 2:40 AM, after the Overseer told him only a few days ago that he'd look the other way if the Tunnel Snakes caused trouble outside of their deal.

The tiny Poindexter was now fair game and no one was going to protect her, or get in his way.

"I'm gunna go check it out, Dolly." Butch spoke as he looked back to her. "Go home."

"But—! Butchie!" Dolly complained, surprised, in an annoying gasp of a whine. Her arms clung tightly around his neck in a desperate attempt to keep him from going when he was already gone.

"I said go home." He replied strictly with a half-lidded gaze of disinterest in her.

She scoffed in disbelief and finally released him, her hands on her hips. "You're ditchin' me?"

"I got Tunnel Snake business t'take care of for the Overseer," He said as he fixed his jacket, popping the collar and lapels and then smoothed a practiced hand back over his gelled hair.

"Seriously? You can be such a bastard, sometimes!" Dolly huffed sourly and shook her head. Fixing her vault suit and tugging her Tunnel Snake's jacket tighter around her waist, she tied the arms in a knot on her hips before storming off down the hall with what dignity she had left in being rejected; her hips moved in an irate back and forth sway like a pendulum about to break from rocking so fast as she strode away. Butch snorted obnoxiously after her before walking to the diner door.

He didn't know why he tried starting all that intimate shit with her half of the time, seeing as how she was annoying as hell and made weird-ass noises when they were doing the nasty (her moans literally sounded like death)—but he was a guy who still needed to get his rocks
off somewhere. Sometimes when he banged her from behind, her face buried in the bed, it made the sounds more tolerable. She was an okay lay, aside from sounding like some of the weird noises the vault burped up in the stillness of the night.

He slapped his hand to the door's console button, a smirk playing his lips like an instrument as it slid open, and the darkness of the diner framed a box of light at his feet where it slunk in from the vault hallways. He thanked God for whoever invented blinds because he had a lot of damn trouble falling asleep at all in the first place, and the vault lights were only shut off in common places that were closed for the night—like the cafeteria was supposed to be.

Winona's face whipped back over her shoulder when the door had opened. Unable to scramble away to hide, she relaxed slightly when she saw him and not a night guard coming to harass her. Though the guard would have been better with what he had in mind to do to her. The cafeteria table she sat at was buried under scrap parts, tools, a notebook and pencil with a broken eraser, grid paper, scrap paper, pictures, drawings, diagrams... where the fuck did all of this shit come from? Did she draw it all?

The Serpent King never saw Winona "in action" concerning her inventing hobby, and of course he never thought about the process she went through to build her things, but damn did it look like a headache.

"Hey, Whammy." He taunted snidely with the use of a nickname she hadn't heard in years. He went towards her booth with his hands buried deep into jacket pockets. "Now what's a Goody-Two-Shoes like you doin' up and outside past her curfew, huh?"

Her eyes stayed on him suspiciously as he walked over with a bored kink in his lean-back gait. "Nothin' to say, huh, Whammy? 'Ya know, I don't think you're supposed to be in here!"

Winona remained quiet, and that empowered him despite the unwavering look in her face; like she wasn't going to fight but she wasn't going to retreat, either. She'd only stand on the battlefield despite knowing his guns were on her and wouldn't budge an inch. She was taking her ground in that weird non-threatening way of hers and Butch didn't know how she managed to pull off such a delicate balance of 'fuck you' but also 'not fuck you'.

"I see how it is... maybe someone'd like to hear 'bout the vault's resident mad scientist hiding in the diner at 3 in the morning? Looks kinda suspicious... don't it?"

Winona finally sighed and gave him a cynical look. "I think 'mad scientist' is a little generous of you. Long time no see, DeLoria."

"Not long enough, you ask me." Butch responded in a low whistle as he leaned a hip against her table and placed a splayed palm a top her work, pinning under his weight one of her many notebooks. Her cynical stare turned more agitated and that caused a generously troublesome grin to come to his face. "What, you hidin' out 'cause 'ya can't face that you and golden boy Freddie Gomez split like a banana sundae?"

"You heard about that, hmn? Thought you'd be too busy with being a troublemaker, or sticking your tongue down Dolly's throat to have time for much else." The inventor replied plainly as she ripped her notebook out from under his leaning hand, causing his arm to buckle at the elbow from the shift of weight. He would have banged the table if he didn't see it coming, and was able to recover flawlessly.

"It's not my tongue that usually ends up down her throat," He replied with a goofy snigger. With
her hands occupied by her reclaimed notebook, he readily swiped a massive blueprint that was rolled out across the entirety of the table. It looked rather important—of course it'd need further inspection!

Winona practically lunged over the booth at him to retrieve it, but fell back into her seat when her hip dinged the edge of the table painfully loud. Butch was already up and on his feet despite her fumble, pedaling around the diner while examining the blueprint in a way that he looked like he was professionally observing the designs for critique; the blueprint itself was half finished and filled with many details and notes, and from what he could make out from it, it was an outline of a dog of some sort... though the ears stood taller and the muzzle was narrower and more pointed. Idly scribbled calculations littered around the edges amongst more professional notes that pointed to various parts of the drawn animal, saying things like flashlight near the eyes, wheels? at the feet, and... flamethrower with several arrows pointing fervently at the mouth.

The hell? She makin' a fire-spittin' dog or something?

"DeLoria, give it back." Winona demanded tersely as she slid out from the seat and came after him in a quick stride, trying to snatch the blueprints back when he wouldn't listen. He ducked away and shoved his back towards her to ward her off, where she bounced off of him.

"Ah, ah~! This is official Overseer business, Professor Pipsqueak. Gotta make sure you ain't doin' something dangerous 'ya know."

"And since when were you on good terms with him? You couldn't be on good terms with a nun if she even gave you the chance!" She snapped rudely with her hand snaking around his side, grabbing at the edge of the blueprint but he was already walking away from her to circle back around the diner. "God dammit, Butch—" She huffed.

"Didn't know you could swear, twerp!" He laughed as he continued reading over the blueprints even though he found nothing more of interest in them, and only wanted to harass her further. "Sounds hilarious comin' outta you, though. Say "fuck" for me, would 'ya? Bet you can't say it without stuttering."

"Oh, can I use it in a sentence?" She asked with mock enthusiasm before adding on tartly; "Fuck off, Butch."

"Winona Old Lady Parker!" He cackled with mocking glee. "I'm impressed!"

"Give that back to me. You wouldn't understand half of what's written on that page, anyway—consider it me trying to do you a favor by keeping your brain from shorting out." She responded with a small frown that creased the space between her brows.

"I know what flamethrower meansdon't I, Itty-Bitty-Titty-Committee? Maybe I should hand these over to the Overseer... tell him you're plannin' on making a weapon. Weapons are contraband, don't 'ya know, Snowflake? I'm sure he'd have lotsa fun dealing with you." He spoke indignantly as he rolled the paper up into a bundle.

Winona was grimacing now, her mouth pulling so tightly that he could see the crevices of her dimples but what caught his attention was the way her back tensed; how a fleeting glimmer of panic captured her eyes when he mentioned telling the Overseer.

This was exactly what Butch wanted when he walked in.

"I- It's not a weapon!" She exclaimed as she ran for him, gripping the sleeve of his leather jacket to
use as leverage by pulling his arm toward her, her opposite hand reaching for the designs he kept prisoner. The skinny inventor was on the tips of her toes now, struggling to reach, and nearly resorting to jumping to get some extra inches of height—but he easily held it up another taunting foot over her head. She was leaning into him slightly to try and brace herself.

"No? Well I don't think a flamethrower shoots rainbows! And which one of us d'you think he'd believe? I'mma let you in on a little secret, freak—he and I are best pals, now. I go runnin' to him with this?" He nodded his head toward the blueprint that was still held high above her. "How do 'ya say 'bye bye cool toys' in Nerdlish, huh?"

"Like I believe that you and him are even remotely on good terms after all the crap you've pulled over the years!" Winona hit a closed fist against his chest in a flash of anger before withdrawing, arms tightly folding over her midsection.

That surprised him. She never laid a hand on him no matter how angry he made her—he knew she was freaked.

"Even if 'ya don't believe it, believe that this'll see the incinerator." Butch smirked at her victoriously when he saw that her shoulders tensed more upon his threat.

Winona looked away to the door with a fixed stare that displayed her tormented thoughts, and he knew that she knew she didn't have many options. Regardless of who told the Overseer about her work, and with or without evidence, he'd use anything he could get his grubby hands on against her. Everyone in 101 knew how much the Overseer disliked Winona, what with her haywire inventions or other trouble she caused with her hobbies, but the guy hated her father even more; he would use just about anything to humiliate them both.

With an aggravated groan and a frustrated curl of her brow, she turned back to him.

"What about a trade?"

Butch's interest was piqued by this... a trade... Winona was a pain in the ass over the years, but if those 8 years of pranks, insults, bullying, and overall warring taught him anything, the practiced tinkerer was a force to be reckoned with. The only things that seemed to limit her were her imagination and the few supplies the vault could offer her for her building. If he wanted something made—to style his hair for him, maybe even tweak old faithful Toothpick, perhaps some of those homemade smoke bombs of hers?—he could get whatever he wanted.

The thought of it was tempting, but Butch DeLoria didn't want a cool new toy... he wanted something else of her.

"You know, I've always wanted a little pet—and it looks like there's an openin' just the right size for ya!"

Winona's face flushed with embarrassment as her foot rapidly began tapping against the floor. "You can't be serious—"

"I ain't laughin', am I? You do whatever I say, when I say it, and without bitchin' about it. If I call, you come runnin', and you're my pet until I'm done with you."

"Are you kidding me? For however long you say—? No way!"

"Alright, off the Overseer I go!" He sang as he tucked the blueprint into his jacket and stepped around her.
"Wait, wait!" She had her fingers in his arm to keep him from leaving before he could take another step. "Fine, you have a deal! But I swear to God, Butch—if you make me do something really messed up—"

"I'm a bastard, but I ain't an outright sicko, grandma Parker." Butch rolled his eyes as he took the blueprint out from his jacket and waved it around a little to keep her attention. "You're not allowed t'back out when I give it back. Deal?"

"Deal." The inventor hissed as she snatched the rolled up paper back from him and went back to her table to gather up the rest of her things quickly. Lord knows what would happen if he saw anything else she was working on... "You can be a real bastard sometimes. I hope it's worth it to you."

"It's about t'beegee," He sang again as he came up behind her and when she turned around, the petite dweller jumped backward in surprise. His body was nearly pinning her against the side of the diner seat backing with the way he leaned over her, a hand bracing himself on the edge of the table and she leaned as far back as she could—which wasn't very far. He felt her knee brush between his and could smell a faint, sweetly floral scent coming from her.

It was definitely her shampoo. Ever since he entered his apprenticeship in the vault's only salon, he could recognize that white lily scent anywhere. It was a favorite with the customers he practiced on, and the smell lingered in his clothes after most of his apprenticeship shifts.

"Didn't say this Tunnel Snake was done playin' with his food yet, pet." He spoke in a low, husky tone that sounded almost suggestively threatening.

"Do you have to call me that?" Winona glared weakly.

Butch firmly cleared his throat at this. "What'd I say about the rules, pet?"

"Fine. Do you want me to call you Master, too?" She snapped dryly.

"Don't gimme ideas, fun-size. Now say that I'm better than you."

The inventor shot him a questionable look with a straight face. "...I never thought I was bet—"

"I'm sure," He snorted. "Sure 'ya didn't think it when you switched out my hair gel with one of your smoke bombs last year, or when you put yogurt in my baseball cleats when we were 15. Or when 'ya screwed with my alarm clock when we were kids—and don't you deny it, I know that was you. I know when something's your handiwork."

"I never attacked you first. Anything I ever did to you was in retaliation, I never started something first." She replied quickly and squared out her shoulders to make herself seem bigger. It caused more contact to be made between them with her forearm pressed into his stomach to put some distance between their bodies, but he didn't budge an inch, and only pressed slightly closer.

The inventor's words brought forward a conversation he overheard that wasn't particularly meant for his ears… it was a year ago, at the Year End Formal, that he found his partially drunken self skulking around a corner and listening to Winona and Freddie talk about him outside the atrium. He left them without an insulting word when he came out of the bathroom (despite knowing that he interrupted something intimate) but that was only because his inebriated brain had the great idea of just hiding and watching. He didn't particularly know why he thought it was such a fantastic idea; maybe he was hoping to catch something good that he could use against her later, like if Freddie the Freak slobbered on her or Winona unexpectedly burped in his mouth.
He couldn't help but wonder if it was going to be her first kiss, and maybe that was the real reason he wanted to watch—to see if it was.

"So for today I want to keep it that way for as long as we can have it. In case it doesn't happen again. Butch and I can fight tomorrow."

Despite all that he drank, he also remembered her turning to leave—coming towards him and the drunk snake almost pulled away then—but then she was being whirled around by a burning red Freddie holding onto her elbow and the guy's mouth was suddenly planted on hers. Butch remembered how her hands rested flat against his chest to grip the front of his jacket, how she looked so trusting of him when she pulled Freddie in closer... how her eyes drew blissfully shut, and she smiled through the kiss so wide that Butch could see her dimples.

He wanted to punch Freddie Gomez so hard in the face he'd be shitting out his teeth for days.

It still made him sick to think about how happy Freddie made her... and Butch didn't know if it was because it was his mission to make her miserable, or if it was some residual feelings of his crush from long ago. Her dimples killed him from the moment he saw them and he hated Freddie—almost genuinely hated him—in that moment.

Fuck those dimples.

They played tricks on him.

He knew that the flutters of emotion he had weren't real, because last week it spread quickly through the vault that Winona the Weirdo and Candy-Pants Freddie broke up... and he didn't care at all. He didn't feel anything about it, one way or the other.

"Say it, Parker." Butch warned. "Say I'm better than 'ya."

"...You're better than me..." Winona spoke quietly with the embarrassment pinkening the apples of her cheeks.

"What's that? I don't think I heard you too good," He smirked as he leaned an ear towards her and cupped his hand to it. "Say it again. Who's better than you?"

"You're better than me, Butch!" She said louder with her face pinkening even darker.

"Good girl," He taunted as he pat the top of her head as she twisted herself away, thoroughly embarrassed. Now satisfied with how their encounter turned out, he stepped around her to leave the cafeteria. "See 'ya around, pet. Don't get too busy now, you hear me? I might need your services, soon."

"God dammit, aren't you tired of this?"

Butch glanced back at her when the door opened and saw that emotionless, big-eyed stare of hers as she tried to hide her embarrassment, but the pinkness in her cheeks gave her away—and the King Snake didn't feel creeped out by it.

"We don't have to be like this... we're not children anymore." The white-haired girl reasoned with a gentle frown turning her mouth. "Aren't you tired of what we're doing here? Don't you have better things to do than be an ass all the time?"

"Tired?" Butch pondered this with a cocked head and his eyes flitting away from hers, hands finding home in his leather jacket pockets. "...Ain't nothin' better around here to do."
The Tunnel Snake leader then peacefully left without another word, not even addressing her calling him an ass, and he didn't really know why. As the diner door shut behind him, his heart was pounding in his head louder than the electric hum of fluorescent lights above as he made his trek back to the living quarters. He entered the front room of his apartment to see his mother sprawled over the couch in an unconscious heap with a vodka bottle loosely hanging from her fingers, and he threw a blanket over her before retiring to his bedroom. Meticulously, he yanked off his boots and left them on the floor before stripping off his jumpsuit and laid on his bed, over his sheets, to stare at the ceiling.

This was his nightly ritual until Butch felt tired enough to finally drift off to sleep; care for his mom, strip down, lay in bed and count the age spots on the ceiling.

"We don't have to be like this… we're not children anymore."

Maybe I don't want it to be like that. Butch thought without any malice as he turned over onto his side to stare at the closest wall instead.

"Aren't you tired of what we're doing here?"

I can't quit it... I got nothin' left—got nothing else. He mused solemnly and his eyes traced the seams where the metal plates of wall met and he counted the bolts that held them together; thought about every door he ever opened, every inch of floor he walked since he first learned how to, every hiding spot for skittering radroaches this place could hold. There was a ritual to this place he would never escape... and she was apart of it. Winona was apart of the dull comfort and routine of daily vault life, where nothing unexpected ever happened, and he felt unsettled if the part of his ritual that included her was incomplete.

From a long time ago, he knew she was a bigger part of him than he cared to admit to even himself.

"Don't you have better things to do than be an ass all the time?"

Butch wished since he had enough conscious thought for himself that he could just be somebody else—somebody that didn't naturally cause trouble, or was angry all the time without knowing why, or was hated by most of the few other people he knew, or could actually fucking think rationally for once and not let his first response be to act like a bastard. He wished he could be the type of man that could have agreed with her words and just ignored her for the rest of their lives, and not continue to be enemies but not begin to be friends, either; only neutral parties with the simple awareness of the other person's existence. He wished that he had more friends that didn't stick around because they thought it was fun to get into trouble. He wished he was like the idea that he had of himself in his head—where everyone respected him, let him do what he want, and all the pretty girls were lining up for him to get up their skirts.

He'd be the king of everything and radroaches and Winona Parker wouldn't scare him as much as they actually did.

But the Butch DeLoria that he loathed so much was who he actually was—the one that made her vulnerable in one of the most degrading ways possible, tormented her constantly because it made him feel better, and made her feel as low as he always felt—and it only made him angrier knowing that this was all he could, and would, ever be. He'd be the Butch DeLoria that flipped off security guards in the hall, played dumb pranks on unsuspecting maintenance workers, and would have an obnoxious fight with a girl, who only wanted to make peace, for the rest of his miserable, simple, unexpected life.

He'd never be able to be somebody that was a better man than himself.
Onto 10 chapters, woo~! Hope y'all been liking the story so far! Be sure to check out my profile if you like what you see for other works, as several one-shots have recently been posted to my profile for your viewing pleasure! And don't forget to bookmark and review Winona's story if you enjoyed so I can get some feedback. New chapters are updated every single Friday!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Konfessionist, signing out
A/N: Hey everyone! Hope you enjoy the next chapter of Inventor's Absolution with a mildly intense chapter here! Also wanted to post a little memo about upcoming Christmas/festive holidays for whatever you celebrate! Or don't! You do you!

I decided that on December 25th (Christmas Day) I'd post an extra chapter to Winona's story, just for funsies even though it's a Monday! So expect Chapter 12 on 12/22, Chapter 13 on 12/25, and Chapter 14 on 12/29. As well, I'll--hopefully--be posting a little one-shot involving Winona and some Christmas antics in the vault. It's not finished yet but it'll definitely be posted, though I can't speak to the date of when. I'm hoping some time next week, between 12/17 - 12/23, since it's a Christmas fanfic and all! Want to post it up before Christmas actually gets here, haha.

So follow me if you'd like to be notified of when it's posted, and be sure to check out my profile for other one-shots/short stories I've written of my various other Fallout characters! Now, without further ado, enjoy the new chapter!

~Faerie, signing out

January 4th, 2276

“I'm sorry, honey... I—... I don't know how to fix this.”

Winona cursed under her breath as another bobby pin twisted in her trembling fingers and snapped into two pieces like a wishbone, with the longest piece left in her hand. She dug out the smaller bit that jut out of the mouth of the lock and dug into her pocket for another hair pin while holding her screwdriver between her teeth until it was needed again.

“We've run almost every test we've got, kiddo. Even the ones we didn't think we'd have to run—you're probably the healthiest gal around this vault.”

She jammed the next bobby into the lock and repossessed her screwdriver from her mouth, carefully trying to jimmy the lock though her hands trembled more than before, and her eyes watered. Her mind ceaselessly replayed the conversation she had with her father and Jonas down in the back clinic office, right before breakfast this morning; it constantly tormented her all throughout the long work day, to the point that she messed up the wiring in Tom Holden's broken Pip-Boy four times, and Stanley was forced to reprimand her for the shoddy handiwork before finishing it up himself. Winona had to take an extended lunch break to calm herself down enough where she could calmly work until the end of her shift.

“You can't tell me that there's no way to fix this! Dad, I have to be sick. This—! This has to be explainable, o- or treatable or something!”

“It's a mutation, Nona. The best we can do is put you on a steady treatment of an anti-mutagen
agent—monitor you for change, for better or worse... but you know how it'll effect you, sweetheart. The treatment could do more harm than good, like radiation cycles for cancer. It'll make you nauseated, fatigued, create a loss of appetite, perhaps even cause migranes—"

"Is that really what you want? Sounds worse than just keeping the hair, if you ask me... and it's really not that bad, you know! It makes you unique."

"I want to be **normal**! Not unique! If this is a mutation, will it progress? Could it get **worse**? Dad, look at me—could it go **bad**?"

Winona nearly shrieked, from her frustration and surprise, as her fourth bobby pin of the night snapped unexpectedly and pricked her on the finger. She carelessly dropped it on the floor and dug into her jumpsuit pocket for another from the handful she brought with her.

"I—...

"...We're not sure, kiddo."

**Come on—come on! Stupid **thing**! Just give me the damn hair dye!**

So here she was, in Vault 101's salon at midnight, having broken in to steal hair dye because she was having some sort of mental break, and it was either this or shaving all her hair off as an alternative **just to be rid of it**. Winona was tired of the judgemental looks, of the meanspirited comments, about the fear and panic that'd strike once in a while about her hair... vault residents asking if she really wasn't contagious—if her father was **absolutely sure** of it—if there was any way to isolate her until he and Jonas were **positive** that she wasn't a threat to anyone. Of course, any damage that **could** have occurred would've taken place long ago if she was ill and it was spreadable... but she was the only one affected by it. For a short time, her father surmised that the discoloration may have been caused from all the time she spent in the lower levels, gathering supplies and chatting with Stanley prior to the G.O.A.T., but the old engineer promised that she never went near the reactors or any other equipment that could have hurt her. That, and Stanley had been downstairs nearly every day since his own G.O.A.T. exam when he was 16, and he didn't have the same symptoms as her.

It left her feeling hopeless and frightened and insecure, and all it took was one slanted comment from Wally Mack during her lunch break. He asked 'does the **carpet** match the drapes?' with a sickening smirk that unceremoniously shoved her over and all she could think about was the hair dye. Not coming in to get her hair dyed, but stealing it, and that was because of the vault's newest 'hairdresser', Butch DeLoria.

There went another snapped bobby pin.

That's going on five bobbies—this should be enough of a sign not to **steal**! Why are electronic doors so easy for you but a God damn locker with a fumbly lock is hard?! You've built robots, for fuck's sake!

Winona threw the pieces across the salon to unsuccessfully vent some of her frustration before plopping on the floor pathetically, running both of her shaking hands through her hair. Closing her eyes and taking in a slow and deep breath, her hands smoothing down to the back of her neck, her knees curled in towards her chest and she counted to 10. It did very little to deescalate her boiling emotions. Winona knew how **awful** her idea was when she thought about stealing from Butch of all people—but she had no choice. Fat chance she was risking coming into the salon and being told that **he** would be tending to her! She wasn't in a position with him currently where she could
believe that he'd work professionally and not give her a splotchy dye job, or intentionally use the wrong color, or make her look like she lost a fight with the greenhouse mulcher, otherwise.

The inventor wasn't going to allow her childhood tormentor be her only salvation, especially after the events of the last two and half months where she was his God damn slave. Some days were better than others where she wouldn't run into him for days, and other days she'd see him every day for a week straight, and his mood would always determine the tasks he gave her; sometimes it was dumb or silly things like grabbing lunch for him during her break so he wouldn't have to walk all the way to the cafeteria, or take his laundry down to the cannons, or tell him how great he was all the time. Other times it was shitty punishments that nearly made her late for work, or he'd shake her down for any work credits she had on her current person, or he'd lend her out to Paul and/or Wally.

Having to do things for Wally Mack made Butch DeLoria look like a choir boy in comparison.

Winona's failure of a calming session was suddenly disturbed by the salon door gliding open. With a panicked jerk of her body, she scrambled away from the light that flooded into the shop so she couldn't immediately be seen. The inventor quickly crawled on hands and knees to hide (rather poorly) behind the closest barber's chair that sat near the salon's supply locker that she tried breaking into.

"Who's in here!" A gruff voice called into the shop, and she stiffened with her hands wringing themselves when she recognized it as Butch's voice.

Oh God this is bad! He's going to mangle you for breaking into his shop!

The inventor dared to peek over the arm of the chair to look around the room, and with a heavy heart, knew that there were very little places in the small shop to hide; there were only six hairdresser chairs, matched with six counter spaces and six mirrors, divided down the middle so there stood three stations on either side. There was the supplies locker at the back wall along with a small secretary's desk to take appointments and vault credits for the services, but she wanted to go to the door, not further away from it.

"I see you, moron!" Butch boomed, and after a digital click, she ducked just in time to see the green glow of his Pip-Boy flashlight cross the room, training on where she hid. "Okay, cut the crap! If I have t'go over there and drag your dumb ass out, I'm gonna be pissed!"

Winona's chances of escape had rapidly dwindled, as did her possibility of survival, if Butch carried out his promised threat. She was emotionally banged up already, feeling crushed by the defeating sadness from her earlier meeting with her father and Jonas. Not wanting to be physically banged up, she came around from her hiding spot after drying her eyes with her palms to mask her sadness.

"Okay, okay—I'm coming out," She called awkwardly with her hands up in surrender. "So put down ole' Smith and Wesson, would you?"

"Parker?" Butch gaped in surprise as he flicked on the salon's overhead lights and then shut off his Pip-Boy flashlight. "The hell're you doing here?"

"Can we just forget you ever saw me—?" She responded with weak hope rather than answer him honestly.

"Pet," He spat in firm warning with a raised eyebrow and a frown.
The name alone made her wince. She cleared her throat to steady herself from tearing up again, because she knew that she was too emotional from this morning—meeting Butch now in such a precarious situation was only escalating those emotions.

“Not gunna answer?” Butch spoke up as he crossed the salon lobby toward her slowly, moving with such precision that he looked like a tom cat cornering it’s meal. She was now trapped between him, the chair she tried to hide behind, and the supply locker at the wall. “If you don't tell me what the fuck you're doin' in my shop, I'm gonna tell my good pal the Overseer.”

That was one thing proven to Winona since that night in the cafeteria—for once, an outrageous lie from Butch DeLoria was truth, and she had yet to understand it. Amata couldn't clarify for her, either, as the Overseer vehemently denied any involvement with the gang... but there was something definitely there. Their gang activity was at an all time high and even Security was doing very little to stop the troublemakers. It was like they were suddenly untouchable! Or, more realistically, suddenly working for the Overseer.

“So what's it gunna be?” He spoke again in a growl.

“I was stealing hair dye.” Winona admitted coldly and hugged her arms over her chest, forcing her eyes to remain on his face so she wouldn't look like easy pickings for the Tunnel Snake.

“...You're stealin'?” Butch responded dubiously with his brows escalating toward his hairline, seeming to alternate between being curious and mildly amused. “Well, ain't that ballsy of 'ya... why?”

“I'm building a boat, didn't you get the memo?” She snapped in a voice that was weaker than she meant to sound.

“Yeah, I'm sure you're trynna build the S.S. Freakshow outta this place. What the hell're you doing, stealin' from a Snake? It's like you want me t'lay the smack down on 'ya.”

“That wasn't part of the plan tonight.” Winona skirted around the salon chair to get away from him, but he circled to the other side of the chair easily to meet her. She huffed in frustration before snapping; “You have working eyes, I'm sure it's obvious why I was trying to take it!”

“Dunno why you'd wanna go and do a thing like that—stealin' from me. Coulda came in and gotten it done.” He mused aloud with his brows still raised.

“And have to talk to you? When every time I see you, I'm being pulled on your leash? Being forced to do the things you tell me to? When I wouldn't even trust you with duct tape around me, let alone my hair at your mercy?” Her voice turned progressively louder as she explained herself, feeling her emotions bubbling up wildly inside her like an overflowing dam starting to crack and leak.

She was losing control and she knew she was. If a destabilizing reactor could feel, would it feel like this?

“Woah, cool your jets, would 'ya? Was just pointing out the obvious, Poindexter.” Butch rolled his eyes as he turned on his heel and went to another station to pick up, what looked to be, his switchblade. “Don't spazz on me, now.”

Before the thought could properly formulate and rationalize itself within her mind, Winona picked up the nearest thing to her on the counter (a wide, round barrel hairbrush) and whipped it right at his back. Her body had reacted in such a violent way without her brain ordering it to. He yelped in surprise when it connected with the back of his head and snapped back to her with an expression of
astonishment, a hand clasped against the welt as the brush clattered to the floor.

“*Jesus*—! You fuckin' lost your *mind*?! What the hell's *wrong* with you!”

“You *are*!” She cried, and the tears were coming too quickly for her to withhold—too quickly despite the voice of survival inside her that told her not to break in front of *Butch DeLoria*—but it was coming whether she permitted it to or not. “I'm so *sick* of this feud between us, Butch! I'm tired of having to watch my back whenever I leave my apartment! Having to make a comeback for every insult you and your friends throw at me—I'm so *sick* of us just tearing each other down! I'm *tired of having to put up with you*!”

“Jesus Christ, you on the rag or what?” Butch's eyes went wide as he ducked his head only a moment after ushering the offensive comment, as the inventor—who had a pitching arm that was just as good as her batting arm—hurled a curling iron right at him. “*Fuckin' hell, Parker!*”

The next few things that left her hands were several hair brushes of various sizes, one rapidly after the other, before she overhanded a squat jar of styling mousse that narrowly missed his face. Next was a hand mirror that frisbee'd him in the shoulder, and it was the only thing that hit him of the things she threw, as he continuously dodged to the best of his abilities. The tears were finally flowing freely down her face, which was reddening from all her screaming and crying and bottled commotion inside her heart that tormented her.

“This is what you've wanted, isn't it?! Seeing *Winona the Weirdo* cry? Or is it not *fun* anymore?!”

“Your hair ain't even that *bad*!” He exclaimed, holding his arms protectively over his face again as she threw a pump bottle of shampoo next, followed quickly by conditioner. He hissed and gripped his elbow from where it struck him. “You're wreckin' my shop, put my shit down!”

“You'll never know what it's *like*! What it's like to be like *this* and not know how to fix it! To be told you *can't*! You'll never understand what it's like to live everyday trying to figure out how it happened—where it went wrong! *All you know is using things like that against someone and then hiding behind your friends like the coward that you are!*” Winona kept yelling, finally picking up a jar of combs sitting in a glass container of disinfecting liquid and she held it over her head. When she lobbed it, it landed at his feet and shattered, splashing back at him.

“Now you've really *pissed me off!*” Butch boomed as he suddenly charged at her with nothing left for her to throw at him, nearly slipping as the liquid flooded the floor where it landed.

Winona yelped as he tackled her against the station, making her lower back hit the edge of the counter hard. She tried to fight him off with uncoordinated fists in a frenzied reaction and not until she tried kneeling him in the side did Winona realize that her feet weren't even touching the floor. His body was keeping her pressed against the counter to restrict her movements and she waited for his fists to hit her ribs—or worse—her face, in his rage.

The punches didn't come.

His hands were, instead, grabbing at her wrists to stop the awkward strikes of her clawing hands.

“Stop trynna slap me!” He yelled into her face and gripped her wrists tighter to accentuate his warning. She was barely fighting back at this point and instead crying uncontrollably. “You're gunna *chill out*, got it? I'm *not lettin'* go of 'ya until you do. If you mess up my face I'm just gonna have t'do the same thing back to 'ya, and—well—I'm just too damn tired for that!”

“I'm *fine*,” She sputtered through her sobs and sagged back against the counter—and though his
grip softened slightly he still didn't completely let her go.

“Yeah, like I believe that. **Damn, you're one crazy broad...**” The last part was muttered under Butch's breath as he yanked her from the counter and forced her to plop down in the salon chair, his hands pinning hers to the arm rests. “Didn't think you were *that* bugged 'bout your hair. My boys and I were just talkin' smack.”

“It's not th- the hair,” Winona explained brokenly and pulled a hand from under his grip to wipe her eyes with a quick brush of her thumb. “I can't be fix- fixed... maybe treated but th- *that's* a buster. It'd hurt me more than i- it'd h- he- help me.”

“So you *are* contagious?” She shot him a dangerous look and he raised his hands away. “Just kiddin', twerp. Trynna get you to lighten up.”

“You really don't get it, *do you? I'm* going to be like *this* for the rest of my life! A mutated freak! Now I'm just playing the 'Wait and See' game until my dad can find out exactly how much of my DNA's been compromised and how it could get worse. It's done *this* to me,” She gestured with a tired hand to her white curls and eyebrows. “*Maybe* one day I'll actually get sick—I might even be *dead* in five years, who knows?”

“You're *not* gonna die!” Butch exclaimed, horrified. “What is it with you 'big brain' types? Always talkin' about the worst shit that can happen. You ever get tired with all that overthinkin'?”

“...I'm tired of everything...” She responded plainly. Her eyes were swollen and sore, and she wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve through a sniffle.

“...You wanna—... wanna drink, or something—?” He asked awkwardly as he remained standing in front of her with his hands in his jumpsuit pockets.

The inventor shook her head and trained her eyes down on her hands in her lap, with her fingers picking at each other idly. The gravity of her situation hadn't struck her yet—the realization followed by wilting regret at what she just revealed to her long time rival; that she was a walking *mutation* and she was incurable as far as treatments were concerned. The anti-mutagen was sounding better and better as her worries doubled in size during the day, but her body would take it poorly and she'd legitimately be sick then. If she couldn't function enough to work, than Jonas was right and she might as well just keep her hair—or dye it—and wait with crossed fingers for the best in her future.

“...You're really messed up? You're not dickin' with me?” Butch asked quietly. He sounded almost genuinely concerned.

“Yeah... I'm pretty messed up.” Winona responded with her forehead bowing to her waiting palm, taking in a deep sigh and she closed her eyes. She suddenly felt emotionally drained.

“...I could—... you know, dye it for 'ya.”

Her eyes opened to shoot him with a flatly dubious stare with her hand still propping up her forehead. She found the audacity of his offer to be anxiety-inducing, as well as unbelievable. Did he actually think she'd say *yes*?

“So you can just use the opportunity to fuck up my hair? Brag to Wally and Paul about how you tore me down, tell them *all* the details about the resident *freak*—”

“I'm an asshole but not like *that!* I'm trynna be *nice*, Parker.” He grimaced and twisted away to the supply locker she tried to break into earlier. Producing a key ring from his jacket pocket, he turned
one into the lock and it creaked open effortlessly. “What color didja want?”

“Nice to know all it took was me having a complete breakdown to get you to pretend to care,” She spat with acidic sarcasm.

“Jesus Christ, you think I ain't tired, too?” His gaze pierced her over his shoulder with a fatigued glance. “If I do this for 'ya, do me a favor and stop cryin', alright? Get enough of it from my 'ma, don't need it from you, too. And don't throw anymore shit at me when my back's turned.”

“I wasn't planning on it...” Winona muttered, watching him with some inkling of caution.

“So what color?”

“...Black. Like it use to be.”

“Basic black, on the rocks.” Butch responded with a charismatic snap of his fingers and turned back to the locker, digging through the supplies with purposeful hands.

When Winona looked over his shoulder, she didn't see pre-mixed boxed hair dye as she expected there'd be; there were dozens upon dozens of boxes with colored stripes dictating, what she assumed to be, the color and shade of its contents. Alongside the dye boxes were mixing bowls, brushes, and unlabeled packages and squeeze bottles and tubes. This was detailed only from what she could currently see from where she sat, and how he blocked most of her sight into the locker. There was definitely more supplies housed inside of it.

“What're you doing?” She asked as he browsed the boxes with the shade stripes before picking out a few, then gathered some other materials before moving to the salon station.

“Buildin' a boat,” Butch responded haughtily, echoing her earlier remark. “I'm mixing your color, waddya think I'm doing?”

“...Nothing.” She responded rather than admit her suspicion or confusion.

Instead, she watched the gang member turned hair dresser (or barber, as he furiously insisted to anyone who called him otherwise) with fascination at the precision of his work; he was properly measuring out units of different things—powders and some squeeze bottles of color—into a mixing bowl to stir. The two said nothing to each other as he worked, and she saw the concentration in his face coupled with a preoccupied look in his stormy blue eyes.

“...Do you have to mix a new color for every client that asks for dye?” Winona asked quietly after some few moments of quiet with her eyes still watching his busy hands.

“Yeah. Nothing pre-boxed here, it's all custom made.” He explained idly.

Winona tapped a nervous finger repeatedly against the top of her other hand before speaking again. “Has anyone complained about your work?”

“What's this, an interview?” He snorted.

“Curiousity. You've dyed hair before, right?”

“Nah, Gina does that sorta stuff and I just watch. Get more guy clients than anythin' else—only ask for shaves or trims. Broads 'round here want the whole 9 yards and think I dunno shit about that sorta stuff. Better at mixin' than Gina is, though. She makes blonde look green and red look purple.”
“How comforting should that be? Because I don't find it very comforting.”

“'Ya got the best color technician around,” He insisted as he topped off his work, brushing it through to make sure it was mixed evenly, it looked like. “...'Ya know, if you're gonna dye your hair, why do it black? Wouldn't look half bad with coffee brown. Or burgundy. Put in some highlights, too—adds dimension.”

“...Am I really hearing this right now?” She asked with an amused chuckle quietly, and the sound was almost startling, given their current situation. “I didn't even know the word burgundy was in your vocabulary.”

“You better not tell anyone 'bout this girly shit or I'll clobber you, Parker,” Butch hissed his response without any real malice in his voice and turned to her with the fully prepared dye. “So are we doin' this or what?”

“Why are you even offering in the first place?” Winona demanded to know.

“Got some extra work credits recently. I can afford t'do a freebie.”

“Wonder where those came from.” She wondered aloud with thick, dripping sarcasm. “But I'm being serious. Why?”

Winona had a hard stare trained upon him that he couldn't slither out from under. It was always a look she gave that made even her own father squirm with discomfort. The Tunnel Snake gave a similar, watching stare for several quiet moments and she could see in his eyes that he was pondering a response. His cheeky smirk faltered since her question of why, and with a huffing sigh that sounded a little defeated (maybe even annoyed, or awkward), he finally responded.

“You did me a solid with my 'ma while back... she wouldn't go to the clinic with the Fixer, but whatever. It took real guts t'steal from your doctor daddy.” Butch's smirk returned as he tried to retain some humor during the serious discussion. “First your old man, now me. Maybe I'm rubbing off on 'ya, huh, Parker?”

“Don't look so happy about it.” She responded bluntly, and he snickered as she got up from her chair. “There isn't a chance you could box it up or something, could you?”

“I said I wasn't gonna fuck up your hair! Seriously.” He gave her a half-lidded look of disbelief. “Can't trust a Snake, huh?”

“Yes. And no.”

“Like that makes sense.” He guffawed. “Hey, not like I'm complainin' here—less work for me, and you look like you got a lotta hair.”

“You spend a lot of time staring at my hair, DeLoria?”

“'Ya make it hard not to, Snowflake.”

Winona looked on to the remainder of the salon, surveying the damage she dealt with the sudden game of target practice she started; hair brushes littered the ground, the hand mirror that hit his shoulder had a spider crack that blossomed from the corner where it hit the floor, and the jar of liquid she threw was now threading itself through any crack between the metal panels it could find. With some remorse (and embarrassment) she began cleaning up the mess as Butch tried to bottle the mixed dye for her. If the minor damage and replacement of some of the tools and products couldn't be explained to his supervisor, he'd probably have to pay out of pocket to have them fixed
or replaced.

She had some appreciation towards him for the unexpectedly kind gesture of making her hair dye, and at this point it wasn't distrust so much as a decision she subconsciously made; changing her hair color was a solution that seemed to be a long time in the making, but before this morning she was too stubborn—perhaps too prideful—in an effort to not show weakness to Butch and his friends, she made the conscious choice of not dying it. The inventor knew it'd make her an even bigger target by changing it but it was different, now. She spent all that time trying to seem strong, like nothing the Tunnel Snakes ever said could get to her, because she held out hope that she would eventually be fixed... and she only exhausted herself for nothing, in the end.

She recognized a long time ago, deep down, the knowledge that nothing could be done—and so she needed control over making the official change.

“Gotta do your eyebrows, too, Parker.” Butch spoke from behind her as she worked to clean up the mess she made. “...Your eyelashes, too. You're white everywhere, ain't 'ya? Damn. Your hair can't be clean, neither. Dye it when 'ya haven't washed it in a couple days. Let the dye bake for 'bout an hour before rinsing out—do it twice—then seal it with conditioner. You got all that? 'Cause I'm not sayin' it again.”

“Yeah.” In the middle of mopping the floor with a rag from one of the station chairs, she looked up to him from where she knelt on the floor. “...Thank you, Butch.” She tacked on after in awkward fashion.

“Whatever, don't get sappy on me.” He remarked sternly, and underhanded her two bottles when she got to her feet from cleaning. “...Thanks for cleanin' up.”

“Whatever,” She gave him a small smile, and was surprised to see it returned by him after a moment.

“Yeah, that's right, whatever. Let's get outta here.”

The two walked out side-by-side after Butch relocked the supply cabinet and silently concluded that he was pleased with the clean up job she did. As they stood out in the hall, him locking up the shop again (with a grumble about how he'd have to get the door looked at, to make sure she didn't damage anything during her break in), Winona was staring thoughtfully down at the bottles of black dye cradled in her hands.

By tomorrow I could look normal again... but I'll still be Winona. I'll still be mutated and talked about, people won't forget about my hair. They won't let me forget it, either, that I'm not like everyone else. They wanna keep me seperate from the people that are acceptable... people like Amata—like Jonas. Like dad.

“Your hair really ain't that bad,” Butch spoke when he noticed her studying the bottle as he unplugged his Pip-Boy from the door console. “Weird as hell, but kinda cool at the same time. Like—... I dunno, like Petruvia, from the Grognak comics. She had green hair 'cause her dad was a mountain goblin, right? Doesn't make her any less badass.”

Winona smiled a little at this and shook her head, brushing some of her hair back behind her ear when he mentioned it. “I guess... though Petruvia was a badass because she had awesome powers and could get shit done. She led the Siege of the Nine Kingdoms when the monarchs couldn't band them all together for the last 500 years. Issue #47 was a good one.”

“You read comics?”
“I’m a fan of a certain mythical sword-toting barbarian with biceps that could crush a watermelon—what of it?” She teased.

Butch’s mouth split into a wide grin and he whistled low, jostling her playfully with an elbow. “Damn, girl.”

It was a weird feeling for Winona to be somewhat cordial with her bully... even if it was for a single fleeting moment. Even if tomorrow, the first she’d see of her bully was him rounding the corner with that enigmatic smile on his face turning to a dastardly grin, and he'd call her his 'pet' and demand she get him a pudding cup. The inventor would still remember how they were kind to each other, like the night she tried helping his mother, Ellen. Butch would still be an angry, pomade slinging delinquent after tonight and it didn't matter to her, as she'd always have this little secret moment.

But the moment was almost over and she was disturbed from her pondering thoughts.

“Anyone asks? I didn't see 'ya around my turf tonight, and you didn't get this from me. Got it?” Butch pointed with a curled finger at the bottles of dye in her hands and she nodded dutifully.

“Got it.” Winona responded, and aside from the caution lingering in her thoughts, she gave him a genuine smile. “Goodnight, Butch.” And then walked away before he could give a bewildered response.

Yes, she would always have that moment.

January 7th, 2276

Butch DeLoria waited at the top of the stairs that led to the lower levels, shouldering the wall with his switchblade, Toothpick, picking between his teeth as he waited. The temperature control in the vault had been wonky since before he woke up this morning, sending Vault 101 either into boiling temperatures or plummeting down to freezing cold where he swore he saw his breath in front of his face. Right now was one of those fucking freezing periods and he drew his jacket closer around him, zipping it up for good measure. He glanced to the Pip-Boy on his wrist, noted the time as 6:42, and mentally cursed Paul for being late. Usually the guy ducked out of work early, where was he? Trying to help Stanley and brainchild Winona with the temperature control, maybe?

A few days had passed since he saw said brainchild that night in his barber shop, and lately he caught his thoughts—on more than one occasion—thinking of her and the incident. He couldn’t stop thinking about the way she unapologetically cried, barely able to keep herself together, screaming and throwing things like a wild woman. For a minute there while it was all happening, he was sort of freaked out by the intensity of her reaction; he thought she was legitimately going psycho, as it happened to even the most stable of dwellers like a cabin fever (or vault fever, in this case) effect, but this was a different kind of wig out on her part.

“Yeah... I'm pretty messed up.”

It was something else and it made him feel awful for all the shitty insults he made to her.

Butch never seriously thought that what they said about her hair got to the typically taciturn tinkerer. They were annoying, sure, but he figured they all rolled off her back, no harm done, because she never seemed upset by them. If Butch knew she was sick—and damn, he should have known, what kind of idiot couldn't see that?—he wouldn't have dragged it into their fight. He supposed he never considered it because, in their textbooks, mutations were illustrated as a
grotesque change in the body caused by radiation or some other DNA-altering element. White hair
deemed like a gross mutation. There hadn't been a radiation leak big enough to worry about
since they were infants, and white hair didn't equate to growing a third arm or a boil on your back
that looked like your malnourished twin, with teeth and hair and all.

Whatever her dad told her about her 'condition' sounded bad if it broke her when nothing, not even
him, did.

This bites, he decided with frank guilt.

So waiting above the reactor level for Paul to come up wasn't the only thing on his agenda right
now—even if he wouldn't admit more than that to himself in conscious thought. He hadn't seen any
of his fellow den brothers in as many days as Winona, and he wasn't able to get confirmation on
whether or not she went through with dying her hair. No one in the vault talked about any change
from her... so no news was good news, right?

He couldn't decipher why he didn't want her to dye it. It wasn't a stance on being able to squeeze as
much insecurities out of her as he could as her bully, even though he liked that she fought back.
This was a matter of—... a matter of what, exactly? Principle? How cool her hair kind of was, and
that she was probably the only broad around who could pull it off? He genuinely meant his
comment about Petruvia the half-goblin witch—her abnormal looks of green hair didn't make her
any less badass or less respected in her comic issue.

Maybe this was a matter of change and he, selfishly, didn't want Winona to.

There were laughing voices echoing up the stairs now, sounding like Paul making a dumb joke (his
favorite one was about an elevator because it worked on so many levels) with Winona laughing.
When Paul turned the corner of the stairway, Butch felt his lungs holding in an anticipating breath.
When Winona turned the corner after the darker-skinned boy, shivering from the icy cold of the
lower levels, the first thing he saw was the stark white of her curly hair and the breath immediately
released itself.

“Hey!” Butch whistled shrilly once with his bottom lip between his teeth, and they turned their
surprised eyes from their conversation up to him at the top of the stairs. “Paul, hurry up! I'm
starvin’!”

“Ye-Yeah! Comin', man!” He replied with complete disbelief that he didn't get reamed for being
cought in the middle of a friendly conversation with Winona. With a look back at her, she nodded
knowingly and he went on ahead before she followed him up the stairs toward Butch.

“Remember what I said about the switchboard?” Winona spoke solely to him when they got to the
top. She was carrying a toolbox with a heavy tool belt hanging loosely off the small frame of her
hips. Butch remained quiet as he studied her, admiring the white of her hair in her resolve not to
change it.

He was glad. Really, really glad.

“Uh—load it, then flip it?” Paul struggled to remember her directions but she nodded with
satisfaction.

“Yeah, that. See you tomorrow with the news, Paul.” She waved to him, turning away from Butch
but stopped with a curious look on her face. In a nodding greet, she muttered “DeLoria,” before
shuffling off with the heavy looking toolbox.
“Dimples.” The King Snake snorted after her but all she did was wave over her shoulder in response, continuing to walk away as he rounded back on Paul. “Geeze, man, what took 'ya?”

“Winnie and I were just talkin’. Plus all this bullshit with the climate control—was freezing my nuts off downstairs, man.” Paul responded quickly with a casual shrug of his shoulders, fitting his Tunnel Snakes jacket on himself quickly to bundle himself up. He wasn't allowed to wear it during his shift and the boy was shivering and looking a little blue in the hands and face.

“...Winnie? It's Winnie, now?” Butch interrogated heatedly with a rather sudden spike of—... he wasn't calling it jealousy, it had to have been something else. Paul froze in the middle of cuffing his sleeves up his wrists. When did it become Winnie? When did he get close to her, and how did he do it?

“Tha- That just slipped out, man—” He tried to recollect the nickname that spilled out, stumbling over his words in his effort to.

“Paul, I swear t'God if you're crushin' on little Miss Smartmouth—”

“What?” Paul balked with a confused noise. “Crushin' on her—? What's up with you, Butch, man? I was askin' her 'bout Amata!”

“...What—”

“I didn't wanna say nothin' because I figured you'd kick the shit outta me—but I like her.” He admitted with his face flushed with shame, kicking a bit at the ground with his arms sheepishly folded over his chest. “And my mom's been gettin' on me about settling down... so I asked Winona if she'd see how Amata feels about me.”

“Settin' down? You messin' with me, Paul? You haven't even finished your apprenticeship!”

“Yeah, yeah... figured it'd give me time to get to know her better. I was too chicken shit to do anything about it, and I guess Winona and I are cool now so she said she'd try and chat me up to Amata.” He replied with some hope in his face. “Look, don't tell Wally, alright? He's been kinda freakin' me out lately... and I know he'd slug me if he knew I was movin' in on his territory. And I know she's Winona's best friend and all, and you hate Winona, so—... yeah. I can't help it.”

Butch rubbed a tired hand over his face, ushering an annoyed grumble before clapping the same hand on Paul's back in a gesture that caused the taller boy to sag in relief at the acceptance. Butch nodded his head up the hallway, silently suggesting that they start walking, and with his fellow snake in tow they navigated the hall together to come up to the main floor for the cafeteria.

“I don't hate Parker.” Butch counteracted after some moments of silence, and Paul's head snapped up towards him so quickly that he thought he heard the guy's neck crack. “I won't tell him 'bout Amata if you won't tell him I said that.”

“Really? Wasn't she your servant now? You told me you hated her guts, wanted to make her suffer. You even let Wally boss her around, and he was being kinda creepy.”

“It's fuckin' complicated, alright, Paulie?” Butch snapped a little abrasively. “Just forget about it.”

“Alright, man.” Paul nodded without much thought to his reaction.

The two Tunnel Snakes walked the rest of the way to the cafeteria in silence with more on their minds than they wanted to say out loud to the other. When they were outside the door, however, and Butch looked through the diner window, he saw Wally in line picking on his twin sister, Susie.
He stopped Paul before they went in. From where they stood he could see Amata eating alone at the bar counter with a fork in one hand and her eyes on her Pip-Boy, trying to eat with her non-dominant right hand while reading something from the Pip-Boy from her left wrist.

“You gonna make a move, man?” Butch asked. “On Amata?”

“Depends on what Winona says... if she comes back with somethin’ good, maybe. If not—... I dunno, man. I dunno. It'd God damn bite liking someone that doesn't like you back.”

The Serpent King gave a slow nod as he saw Winona sit on a bar stool beside Amata with her dinner tray, and gave her best friend a small, dimply smile as they quietly talked to each other.

“...Yeah, it fuckin' bites.” He concluded.

“You like someone?” Paul gave a bewildered, wide-eyed blink. “You ain't talkin' about Dolly, are you?”

“I'm talking 'bout your mom,” Butch sniggered and nudged him with a joking elbow jab, and Paul elbowed him back with a meaningful smile after realizing his snake brother was kidding.

“You've been pretty cool about this.” He explained with a sheepish hand rubbing the back of his neck, ruffling his hair at the nape of his neck.

“Hey, ain't my business who you go bakin' muffins with.” He shrugged carelessly and waved the diner door open, walking in after Paul. “...If she goes out with you, she's not gettin' a jacket.”

“No worries, man.” A bright smile came to Paul's face. “She can wear mine... always wanted a girl who'd wear my jacket, anyway.”

Butch found his friend of many years to be the biggest dope he knew—a bigger one than even Freddie Gomez—but he was a lovable dope. A lot flew over his head, sure, but the guy meant well and was probably the nicest dweller around. Butch knew if they didn't run together in the Tunnel Snakes, raising hell and doing stupid shit and carrying out shady orders from the Overseer, Paul probably would have been a model dweller because he was unquestioningly devoted; he followed orders without much thought but it's what made him loyal, and Butch was glad it was a genuine loyalty to him and their gang and not the prick Overseer.

If Amata didn't think his brother was the cat's pajamas than she was a stuck up bitch that didn't deserve him, or his jacket, in the first place.

*Guess I'm rootin' for him, though. Guy deserves a bit of happy in his fruit punch... even if it's from the Overseer's brat.* He mused as he tried not to return the hateful grimace Amata threw at him from across the cafeteria.
James carried in two small storage boxes—one on top of the other in a small tower—into Winona's new apartment. It was the last of her things that needed to be moved out before he headed off to the clinic and her to work on her first day as an official registered maintenance worker. She was bustling about in the back bedroom, trying to rearrange the furniture into better placement so she could settle in comfortably. All of the apartments in the living quarters came fully furnished, but she had to have her table right by the bedroom door, and her bed positioned at the center of the opposite wall, and her dresser right here and her tool cabinet right there. It was a process his daughter had to perform firstly or else she couldn't rest until everything was in a place that felt right to her, and James found it amusing that it looked like her old room in his own apartment.

What a funny child he had.

"Oh—!" She cried out after a loud bang of something hitting the floor. "Son of a—"

"Hey!" He called back to her, unable to keep an authoritative tone because of his laughter. "Watch your language!"

"...Garbage burner!" She finished playfully with her head drawing out from the bedroom. Her white hair was bound up into a neat bun to keep it out of her face for all the heavy lifting of the morning, her jumpsuit was stained about the neckline of her undershirt with sweat, and she had unzipped it enough to tuck the arms into the pants.

"I suppose that's better than the other thing you were going to say," James chuckled as he deposited the containers onto the living room coffee table. "I keep forgetting that it's not my place to scold you anymore." He lamented.

"Feel free to come by and scold me any time!" His daughter replied with her head retreating back into the bedroom. "I'm only a few apartments down, it's not that much of a walk!"

James’ eyes ventured around the room as he did a slow turn on his heel, taking in the atmosphere. There were so many apartments vacant with how much the population was suffering in numbers, so he found it odd that the apartment assigned to her was the one they lived in when they first arrived; it was a one bedroom with a small living room, and it was temporary until she outgrew her crib and they could be relocated to a family size. There were numerous other apartments that could've been assigned to her, but this was the one picked by the Overseer. He wondered if Alphonse did it intentionally to spite him, or if perhaps he left the work to a random-pick generator and thought nothing of it.

The doctor knew the former was the most likely scenario if his history with Alphonse was anything to spit at.

Winona had already put up some decorative artwork (she was allowed no more than three in the main living area and two in the personal living area) of Pre-War scenery. He found his hand touching one of the framed paintings—a beautiful rolling landscape, dotted with flowers under a deep blue sky, and in the distance there was a little shack on the farthest hill from the viewer's eye
with a small smoking chimney. The other two she put up were of flowers she thought were pretty amidst bright green bushes. Green was always her favorite color.

Yes, it'll go nicely in this room... he mused to himself as he turned away from the meadow painting to the storage boxes he settled on the coffee table. Opening the lid of the one on top and removing a folded jumpsuit of Winona's, underneath it laid a copy of Catherine's favorite passage in a small frame. He expected residents to come by within the next couple of days to give her housewarming gifts so he wanted to be the first one to give her something; something that was not only special to him, but to her, too.

If only she knew of its true significance.

It was hard for him to recover from his only child being 18. Five months prior, she took the exam for her program early and passed with flying colors, so she evolved into being a full time engineer of her own devices, work, and schedule. It met one of the few criteria necessary in order to be applicable for an independent living space; she had to be formally employed, over 18, and pass the mental health exam that stated she was competent enough to live on her own. That last test was applied by Jonas, as James had been excused due to 'extreme bias' as her father by the Overseer.

As a single parent it warmed his heart in having been able to witness all the growth and success she achieved already in her young life, but to have his only child leave left him feeling desolate and with lack of purpose. It made him question if he did everything that he could, and if he did it all right and if he taught her everything that was necessary for her to know... but listening to the jovial hum of her voice as she tugged her work table to the right place reassured him that he certainly did do something right in how he raised her.

James looked back down to Catherine's passage with his index finger tracing over the lettering.

"Did you remember to bring my tool satchel—?" Winona called from the bedroom amidst her labored breathing.

"Wha- What was that, honey?" He replied back distractedly with his eyes never leaving the words in front of him.

"Did you bring my tools!" She called again, and shortly after entered the living room. "What's that?"

"Your mother's favorite passage," He answered as he stepped towards her. "I'm sure you remember it well."

"Of course I do," His daughter nodded and looked up to him. "Is that from your office? Why's it here?"

"No, no—it's only a copy." James offered it to her. "For you... a housewarming gift from your old man."

Winona smiled gratefully as she took it from him, her eyes skimming over the quote she knew by heart and nodded in thanks silently to him with her smile brightening.

"I'm gonna have to change something in here!" She exclaimed as she looked around the living room to see what she'd be replacing, and she walked straight towards the landscape painting.

"Actually, honey—" He called to stop her from removing it. "How about one of the flower ones? Maybe that one there," and gestured to the one that was a vase of flowers and leaves. "The landscape is rather lovely. You shouldn't take it down."
Winona smiled at him as if she knew something and shrugged, carrying the quote over to the painting he gestured to and swiftly took it down to hang up the verse in its place.

"I guess you're right... I like looking at that one," She agreed. "It makes me wonder if it really use to look like that outside. Do you think the sky really looked *that* blue?"

"Almost every day." James responded as he came to stand at her side, his arm around her shoulders as they both marveled at Catherine's verse.

"And grass was *that* green?"

"Yes... and it was everywhere."

"...What do you think the sun looked like?"

"Beautiful—and bright, and warm."

"You make it sound like mom," She laughed. "*Beautiful and bright and warm,*" She replied with a playful mocking of his accent that was so spot on he ushered a stunned laugh. "You always used words like that to describe her."

"Because your mother was like the sun." He smiled down at his equally beautiful, and bright, and warm daughter as his hand squeezed her shoulder lovingly. "Your mother was the sun... and she was the earth, and the trees, and the water and the air. That's what happens when you love someone... they become your world."

Winona looked back to the quote thoughtfully at his response with her face softening mildly. "...I wish I had a picture of her." She replied finally, obviously sad.

James was spearheaded suddenly by the rearing of his old guilt. Despite his quick and pretty sudden departure from the Project Purity, he had time to pack a few pictures that he had of Catherine as well as a couple of holotapes of her voice— one was a leisurely moment and the others were recordings of her notes about Purity. Unfortunately his pack had to hold more necessities than sentimental things, so most of their memories he had to leave behind. As well, the few mementos that were from Catherine he had to hide from Winona because Madison was in several photos, and in another Catherine was asleep at her work table with equipment that certainly wasn't in the vault, and in several more you could clearly see parts of Jefferson Memorial or Brotherhood soldiers getting in the way in clunky power armor. He decided that he'd rather tell Winona that he burned every memory of Catherine with her body when it went to the vault incinerator than have her raise questions about certain anomalies in the few pictures he had. She'd surely notice them and he wouldn't be able to excuse it.

He wondered a bit darkly if Madison got rid of everything he couldn't take with him, like the other photos and holotapes and Catherine's lab coat. She wasn't as sentimental as he was, but he still couldn't imagine his old friend throwing those things out— either because she deemed them useless or just to spite him for abandoning Purity.

That was the first time he had ever seen such a strong woman heartbroken, and their last few words haunted him just as much as Catherine's death and leaving Purity did. But he didn't regret doing what was necessary to keep Winona safe— she was more important, and was the core of his thoughts when he came to Vault 101, and was still now in his thoughts of whether or not to leave.

"You really don't have anything of hers?" Winona cut through his unhappy thoughts, looking up at him with hopeful eyes. "Nothing but her favorite bible verse?"
"...I'm afraid not." James replied in a solemn lie with a shake of his head.

"I don't understand how you could burn everything that belonged to someone who was your world, once." Her response was certainly more pointedly accusatory than inquisitive.

The question was almost obvious in her eyes—the question of whether or not he was telling her the truth—and he always wondered if she truly ever thought he was lying. She was perceptive enough to see through a certain level of deception, but could she see through the half-truths and blatant lies if they were coming from her own father?

James was acutely aware that in his attempt to protect her, he was also robbing her of the truth.

"I'm sorry, honey… I really am." He looked back to the quote to escape her stare. "It's something I regret every day."

"It's okay, daddy." She replied as she hugged his arm with her head resting on his shoulder.

No it's not, a voice hissed back at him from inside his mind as he removed his arm from hers to hug her properly.

"I'm so proud of you, Nona." James whispered into her hair with a soft kiss, staring on ahead. "I'm so very proud of you… and your mother would have been, too."

"Thanks, dad." She muttered back and he could feel how half-hearted it was.

Some part of his child was extremely disappointed with him and how seemingly weak he was in the face of his lie of burning all of Catherine's things; he wondered if Winona would ever start digging and asking questions he couldn't give viable answers for. She hadn't since before she was a pre-teen so he wasn't too worried, but things could change at a moment's notice... especially now that she was more independent and he couldn't monitor her as closely as before, ensuring she wouldn't ask the other residents for memories of Catherine that they didn't have. He was especially worried about her asking Lucy Palmer—she might have been inclined to reveal the truth because of her extreme dislike for Alphonse, in how he handled her daughter's permanent departure back to the Wasteland and how he controlled the residents that wanted to stay. Lucy also adored Winona, which was another reason why she might've been honest with her if questions were asked.

His stomach was dropping with increasing dread over the notion the longer he thought about it. The doctor held her tighter for a second longer before releasing her.

"I know you have some unpacking to do, so I'll leave you to it." James kissed Winona's forehead again, in an almost apologetic manner. "I love you."

"I love you, too." A genuine smile came to her lips as they parted from their hug.

"Remember, if you ever need anything—"

"You're just down the hall, or at the clinic."

"Of course. And don't be afraid to talk to Jonas, either." He nodded in satisfaction as he went to the door. "I've left your things on the table there."

"Thank you! Love you!" Winona called behind him as he entered the hall with the door shutting behind him but he didn't look back when she called.

James forced himself to walk on to the infirmary.
When he arrived, he and Jonas talked at length about Winona moving out and living on her own, and how James felt about her not only having a serious boyfriend, but also having an apartment that would allow them to get into all sorts of grown up trouble. Jonas also asked how he felt overall about her being a grown adult who didn't really need him anymore; he assured his assistant that he was fine (even though he really wasn't), and excused himself to his office where he had paperwork to fill out concerning Jim Wilkins spraining his ankle at work.

Once he sat at his desk, he left his terminal in sleep mode and instead unlocked and opened the bottom most drawer to take out the photos of Catherine. He left the holotapes in the drawer, as he usually listened to those after hours when not even Jonas was around. There were the photos of him with Catherine with Madison in the backdrop, and the one of her asleep on her work papers in their shared room at Jefferson with all the foreign equipment—but there was also one of Catherine sitting up in his bed reading a book with her other hand on her stomach (which was taken just after they discovered she was pregnant, before she even started to show), and another one of Catherine at work in the rotunda of Jefferson Memorial. She was smiling, trying to swat the camera away just as he took the picture, and behind the consoles in the murky water you could barely make out the face of Jefferson's statue; it was more ghostly than properly visible in the corner of the photo. He had a couple others of more serious note, like one of him and Catherine together in a more professional photo, and another one of the whole team together inside the Rotunda. Garza had been kind enough to take the photo so he wasn't pictured with them but was mentioned in writing at the bottom of the photo.

After looking through those few photos at length, James finally forced himself to put them away and sat at his desk uselessly. Through all the work he had that day, it wasn't enough to distract him from the bitter feelings that came from realizing that he'd be returning to an empty home that night when the work day was over.

"Welcome home!" Freddie chimed as Winona opened the front door for him. Normally she would have hugged him and greeted him with a kiss to the cheek or a peck on the mouth, but a sizeable gift in his hands was keeping that from happening for the time being.

"Thanks," She laughed as she gestured for him to come inside. "I still expect my dad to be in the other room, ready to come in when one of my inventions goes crazy."

"Are you looking forward to living alone?" Freddie was in the second to last month of his apprenticeship, so he wasn't quite meeting the requirement to get his own apartment, but he was close—if he could pass his final test—and they talked about the possibility of him moving in with her rather than getting his own place.

"Are you kidding me? I couldn't wait to get my own place!" She laughed.

"A whole apartment to yourself," He whistled as he looked around, the box still in his hands and he offered it to her. "I got you something for it… to help decorate a little."

Winona smiled at him in thanks as she pulled the top off from the gift he held up for her, peeking down into it to where her face lit up in happy surprise.

"You brought me a radio!" She smiled warmly, brushing the gift box aside just enough to kiss his jaw. "Thank you, Freddie."

"I pieced it together myself." He explained with some sheepishness as he smiled back at her. "I know you like listening to music while you work, so—… I thought you'd like your own personal radio."
"Than I know just where to put it!" She sang as she lifted the radio out from the box, carrying it off to her bedroom with Freddie following. She gingerly placed it on top of the dresser right beside her work table and then began fidgeting with the knob to set it to the appropriate station (which was the only one in the vault, but that was beside the point).

"Well?" Freddie asked apprehensively as he came up behind her. "Do you like it?"

"Why, Mr. Gomez, I love it." She replied with a beaming grin back at him. "I really love it."

"…Please don't call me that—my mom calls my dad that." He groaned.

A moment of awkward silence passed before Winona burst into a fit of laughter, making Freddie blush, but he smiled and chuckled a little as well with a stiff shake of his head. She turned to face him and hooked her arms around his neck to pull herself in closer with his hands settling on her waist.

"I love it, Freddie." She spoke softly, then leaned upward and kissed him. "I'll listen to it all the time."

"Great!" He grinned happily. "But, just in case, let me know if there's anything—… funny, about it."

"I've always wanted a radio that could tell jokes," She teased sarcastically and he squeezed her sides in response, making her squirm in his arms with an involuntary giggle.

"I'm still getting the hang of wiring." He explained. "So sometimes it'd turn from the music to static, or shut off by itself, or turn on by itself, or—… basically anything else. I'm pretty sure I fixed the wiring issue but I thought I'd mention it, just in case."

"That's alright, I could probably just tweak it myself."

When Freddie became the jukebox technician apprentice, it was hard for him to understand the material without a proper mentor; his predecessor, Jonas' grandfather, Joe Palmer, passed away on the job a couple years back so all he was left with was a large stack of Pre-War manuals and holotapes explaining how to do some of the more difficult stuff. Winona ended up helping him study and go over the material, and so in turn she learned more about jukeboxes than she ever cared to know... but it also helped her learn more about wiring, so it wasn't all that bad.

"Still, let me know." Freddie replied as he moved to pull away, but Winona stubbornly kept him close with her arms around his neck still. He chuckled. "Winona, I gotta go—"

"Stay…?" She requested in a suggestive whisper as one of her hands moved up towards the nape of his neck, trailing the length of her fingers into his hair and he shivered. Freddie's face softened as he watched his girlfriend, her eyes turning up to connect with his suddenly enraptured stare and he knew what she was trying to do; knew enough that he didn't want to stop her.

"Stay." Winona spoke again with a firmer demeanor as she captured his lips with a heated kiss before he had a chance to protest... though he hadn't planned on it.

Freddie's hands loosened from her waist as his arms encircled her fully, keeping her body pressed flush against his while his hands applied pressure to the small of her back, and one began roaming upward to settle between her shoulder blades. His touch was light as if he feared she'd break apart in his arms, and she was pulling him backwards toward the nearest wall of her bedroom as their kiss became more open-mouthed and fervent. Winona broke away first when her back made contact with the wall and her hands began migrating from his hair toward his shoulders, sliding
down to his biceps, and her breathing became labored against his mouth as she tried to get it back. Nails bit lightly into his biceps to push him to be rougher. Freddie responded in kind with his mouth diving towards her neck and she felt his hot tongue and chapped lips forming shapes that superheated her skin and made her core shiver in delight.

When she began pulling at the zipper of his jumpsuit with testing hands, hearing the purr of it parting at her touch, she pulled him in closer with her opposite arm hooking around his shoulders. A small gasp escaped her when she realized one of his hands was cupping her bottom with a firm squeeze and Winona nearly yanked his arms out of his jumpsuit with an impatience to go further—the boy knew what putting his hands there did to her—

"I gotta go," He groaned in defeat against her throat when his eagerness suddenly seemed to disappear, leaving her pinned between the wall and his body helplessly. His breathing was harder than hers as his hands released her backside to come to her hips, and it felt like he was trying to steady himself rather than keep her close.

"Right now?" She responded desperately with her hands moving back up to hook behind his neck, moving to bring his face back towards her mouth to coax him into another kiss. He gladly reciprocated it.

"My mom's helpin' me study to make sure I ace my final test in a month." His eyes were unable to meet hers when they parted. "If I hang around too long she's gonna chew my ear off about it."

"We finally have an apartment for ourselves and we can't even properly use it," Winona muttered in a disappointed sigh.

"I'm sorry." Freddie frowned in apology with his face taking on a shameful expression. His arms immediately fell away as if it hurt him to touch her and she froze at the self-deprecating look in his eyes.

"No, no, it's not you—" She quickly tried to remedy along with a quick kiss to his mouth in reassurance, trying to soothe him so it wouldn't turn into a self-loathing tangent from him. "Freddie this is important to you, there's always another day. We'll have all the time in the world when you take your exam in a month."

"You're not mad?" Freddie silently questioned as he finally looked into her eyes.

"I'm not mad." Winona smiled reassuringly and gave a confident nod. "The apartment'll always be here, and so will the bedroom." He smiled a little back at her, finally. "Go on and get back to your mom—tell her I said hi and that I'll be visiting sometime soon."

Freddie nodded as he gave her a quick kiss to the forehead and then saw himself out, trying to quickly fix his hair and get his wrinkled jumpsuit back into order. Winona's lust was effectively snuffed out, leaving her feeling rejected and more than a little frustrated, and so she turned her attention back to putting her new bedroom in order.

Even two years later they hadn't done anything outside of what was classified as a quick and clumsy fool around in the dark, with her hand down his jumpsuit grasping him, and they were interrupted by Mr. Gomez asking if they wanted to go to a family dinner down at the cafeteria. It was absolutely maddening for her constantly roused sexual appetite, and between them being interrupted or his anxious excuses in the build up, she was left in a routine where she was physically starved because he didn't want to have sex until the "timing was right" (read that as; until they were married so his mother couldn't hit him with her bible).
Winona didn't know if she could wait until then. Trying not to push him while retaining a calm, understanding patience was draining—and there was only so much masturbation she could endure before she stopped thinking about Freddie at all while she was doing it. It made her feel guilty in the privacy of her bedroom, even if he would never know of the man she conjured in her fantasies. The inventor didn't even know if she wanted to marry Freddie! But, she would because she had to, and he was the only comfortable choice... even if she didn't feel the same way about him as she did at the start of their relationship. Back then it was more intense, and loving—and innocent.

Their flip-flopping relationship of two years (as of three days ago) alternated between being awfully unhealthy and then wonderful and supportive, with breaks placed between all those good and bad days. They'd fight because his VDS would become too much for her to handle, because he was darkly insecure or would have dangerous attention-seeking behavior, or she'd be pouring more of her time into work than their relationship and neglected him. They'd then miss each other or their menial relationship, she'd promise to be more understanding or he'd promise to treat himself better, and then they'd be back together again. Winona knew they'd be together for the rest of their lives because he was too emotionally damaged to leave her, and she had gotten too comfortable with him to stay away for forever.

Freddie was safe, and safe was a good thing because it secured her future; she'd have sex eventually, they'd have to, and she'd be married and have a child and would spend the rest of her life working downstairs. That was an overwhelming success where Vault 101's regimen was concerned.

However, Winona never realized that safe could also be burdensome on the heart's desires for something more... and she knew that her constant thoughts of something bigger, better, and more exciting would damn her beyond salvation unless she could stop dreaming about it—and that was as impossible as asking her to stop breathing.

Winona was whispered awake by the sound of crackling static filling her ears. She jolted upright to alertness from her hunched position over her workbench, where she fell asleep on top of the modifications to her latest project, Gizmo. Looking up to the blueprint she pinned above her tinkering station, the side view of a robotic wolf stared back at her in her drowsy vision; it was crumpled and had a juice stain splashed across it from her carelessness at one time, along with a slightly burnt corner because she forgot about her soldering iron on top of it from her carelessness at another time. She looked to Widget at her side, who was sleeping atop the battery she was plugged into to charge. The invention hadn't been powered on for a while—for months at this point—because she caused too much trouble when she was activated. Until Winona could effectively recode her personality services, the little ladybug bot was left off.

Winona then looked to the radio Freddie gave her and saw the interface was lit up brightly as the speakers sang static in intervals of silence, then a long jolt of crackling, and then going back to seconds of muffled silence.

"I'm still getting the hang of wiring. So sometimes it'd turn from the music to static, or shut off by itself, or turn on by itself, or—... basically anything else. I'm pretty sure I fixed the wiring issue but I thought I'd mention it, just in case."

The inventor brushed away the pieces of Gizmo she was working on to make room; so far it was only two front legs and a head and neck piece, and the headpiece was mainly a skull shaped like the head of a wolf down to the muzzle, with mismatched lights Stanley let her 'borrow' (he wrote them off as misplaced, just for her) for the eyes. One was red while the other was off-yellow, and she had plans to replace them with a bright bulb and then overlay it with a reflector and a lens so
Gizmo's eyes could convert into flashlights at a moment's notice.

When room was made and the radio was placed in front of her, Winona picked up her screwdriver and moved to turn the appliance off for the repairs—

"—capital—…—friendly neighbor—" Suddenly came through the static, causing her to drop her hand away from the tuning knob in shock. Had she heard that right? Was that—… a voice? But not just any voice, a voice she never heard before?

*It couldn't be,* she dismissed mentally, though her hand flew back to the knob and she quickly began tuning over the spectrum of channels—trying to see if she could pick back up on what she may or may not have heard. The vault didn't have any speaking channels, no radio stations or even *music* with singing—and she was half asleep, after all—

"—Three—! …—oud and prou—… repo—!"

But there it was again! And she knew she heard it that time!

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon…" Winona chanted to herself as she pressed her ear closer towards the speaker, closing her eyes to concentrate on catching the ghostly voice over the radio. It was a distinctive one—deeper and boisterous with an overwhelming flair of charisma, unlike anything she ever heard—and more bits and pieces were coming to her in warbled static. It was a fight to get closer to the channel and it felt like the voice was never in the same place for very long.

Then there it was, as clear as she could get it to be, and she had to stop her breathing to hear it correctly.

"Scouts comin' ba—" A drop in static. "—Mutants—!" then another drop in static. "—outh side— the Mall—"

Then the radio blasted loud static straight into her ear from where it was pressed flat on the speaker, causing her to cry out as she flinched away with her hand quickly slapping at the volume to turn it down to near zero. She shook her head and flexed her jaw to try and get sound back into her numbed ear, wiggling a knuckle into it as she did.

*That couldn't possibly have been a—… another person...?...* Winona thought in stunned question with her eyes set on the radio as it quietly continued to play static. She turned it up a little again and began fiddling with the knob some more, but the voice she was now *positive* she heard disappeared from the channels completely.

Winona quickly grabbed a pencil and her beaten notepad and jot down in the neatest handwriting she could make what she possibly heard—just to ensure that when she woke up in the morning and saw the note, she could prove to herself that it wasn't a creation of her half-asleep dreaming. There was very little she actually heard with how distorted with static the voice was, so she wrote what she thought it may have said.

*capital* (or was it capitol? Or capital, like to uppercase something?…)  
three (three *what?*)  
scouts coming (coming for what? Or coming from *where?*)  
*south side* and *Mall* (she knew about those from old world texts—a mall was a big building meant for clothes shopping)  
*friendly neighbor*

Winona set down her pencil, skimming over the list she made and then shoved her notepad away...
with a slightly trembling hand. She couldn't make any sense of the cluster of words and how they were all connected together, but there was one on her list that made her wish it really was all a dream.

*mutants*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey all! Hope you enjoyed this chapter of Inventor's Absolution! Kinda heavy chapter here with minor sexual themes and deeper insight into what seems like a not-so-perfect relationship between our inventor and nervous boi. Other than chatting about the chapter, here's a reminder that Chapter 13 will be posted on the 25th with Chapter 14 on Friday the 29th to keep you guys reading during the very busy Christmas holidays ;) I guess I was feeling a little generous, hehe.

ALSO! If you just loooove Winona and wanna see more of her and Butch, more of vault life, and are definitely in a Christmasy mood, check out my profile for a Christmas one-shot starring those two idiots! It's under the name "Yuletide Yearnings". If you've got an itch you can't scratch for these two you'll find more of them in there, promise! Until the 25th comes up, be sure to review and most importantly bookmark so you won't miss any updates on Winona's story here, and subscribe so you won't miss out on any new content I make.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie, signing out
June 7th, 2277

Winona sprinted through the hallways of Vault 101’s living quarters, weaving around stunned vault residents that fled their homes in the chaos of the early morning, where they effectively blocked her route to the clinic. The floor rumbled beneath her feet and the walls were making noises she’d never heard before; hissing with the flushed sounds of rapidly leaking water and her engineer’s mind frantically worked at trying to decipher the source. She suspected a burst pipe and knew that hunting it down to seal it up would be hell. She’d find out what happened when she could get downstairs where she and Paul would be sent out to check the grid for drops in water pressure along all the pipelines. The inventor prayed that it wasn’t a main pipe, and that it wasn’t too close to the reactors or the mainframe of Vault 101 that kept the door closed.

The thought seized her heart in a tight grip of panic and she pushed herself to run faster.

Winona tried to recenter her thoughts on getting to the clinic. She knew she had to be downstairs to ensure the reactors were kept running, and then check on the purifier as well as hunt down the burst pipe, but all she could think about was her father, Jonas, and Amata. She, selfishly, had to make sure they were okay before she could do her job—she knew she wouldn't forgive herself if she spent days working to stabilize everything just to find out one of them (or all three, God forbid) were horribly injured during all the chaos. From what she could see, people sat out in the hallway nursing bumps and scrapes already.

She pushed the morbid thoughts away as she went careening around an elbow in the hall, her tool belt flapping painfully against her hips and outer thighs as she ran. Nearly slamming into more scattered residents that stood out in the halls, she dodged the ones she could avoid and shoved the ones she couldn't.
"Out of the way! I said out! Outta my way!"

"Hey! What's going on!" Susie Mack grabbed her roughly by the arm to stop her from running past, and an appalled look graced her pretty face when Winona yanked her arm free viciously.

"If people would stop getting in my way, I could find out faster!" She snapped angrily in a partial-liie so she could be left to find her loved ones.

Turning to continue running, another explosion below her feet sent her rocking sideways to collide into the wall from the shocking quake. Residents around her cried out in panicked fear, some children screamed and sobbed as they clung to their equally terrified parents, and all the lights dimmed out to near darkness. Somewhere she heard a burst and the escape of steam followed by more rushing water in the walls. An alarm began to sound throughout the living quarters, accompanied by orange ceiling lights with bright strobing for emergency, and an automated vault message of a femininely robotic voice played over the speakers that blossomed from every intersection of hallway;

"Residents of: Vault 101. Please, do not be alarmed. All residents are required to calmly go to the: Atrium. Please go to the: Atrium. In an orderly fashion, all residents are asked to make their way to the requested safe zone until further instruction from: Overseer, Almodovar. Please escort any lost, young, elderly, or sick vault residents to the: Atrium. All maintenance workers under: Clearance, 60D-Blue, are asked to immediately report to their according supervisor."

That was Winona's clearance... and after the sudden small explosion that just rocked the living quarters, she knew the emergency was more than just a burst pipe or two. The same panic that seized her heart came around again when she thought of the mainframe buckling under pressure and opening the door.

The automated emergency message replayed over the clamor of the growing, panicked crowd of vault residents. They pushed against Winona to get to the directed atrium while she was still trying to part through the sea of them to get to the clinic to see her father and Jonas firstly; she knew she'd be reprimanded by the Overseer for the disobedience in the face of obvious emergency, especially when she was specifically called upon, but dammit, it'd be only three minutes! Five minutes at most!

A lot can change in three minutes. Even more can change in five. Winona scolded herself.

The wind was suddenly knocked out of her as she was shoved hard by some unseen resident, sending her crashing into the nearest wall where she was pinned by the flood of the fleeing crowd. The inventor didn't have much time to get her breath back as she followed along it, squeezed between the wall and the mobbing of fleeing dwellers, and was able to wiggle her way into an adjoining, empty hallway. She hunched forward onto her knees and took gasping breaths to get the air back in her sore lungs and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her jumpsuit arm, the other holding her side where she was elbowed.

"Winona!" Large hands encased her shoulders and when she snapped back around in surprise, she was startled to find Butch DeLoria with a panicked look widening his eyes and paling his face. He was grabbing her arm now. Hard. "Parker, I need your help—!"

"I don't have time to help you!" She insisted, trying to pry him off. "I dunno what's going on, alright! I have to get downstairs—"

"Fuck that! It's my 'ma!" He cried, and then she noticed the blood drying on his hands, smearing on
her jumpsuit sleeve. "She's bleedin', just—! Help me, God dammit!"

Winona frowned at the mention of his mother bleeding, and though worried thoughts of her father were at the front of her mind still, she shoved past Butch towards his apartment and he quickly followed. She could hear pained sobs from within and when she entered, the first thing she saw was Ellen DeLoria on the floor; she sat with her leg curled pathetically against her, the pant leg of her jumpsuit stained dark maroon from the soaked up blood where a jagged piece of brown glass stuck out from the fleshiest part of her left calf. Her hands were bloody and her pallid face looked almost numb except for flashes of pain and realization that something was jutting out of her. Winona quickly flew to her side and dropped to her knees, forcing Ellen to keep from pulling the glass out again. Other remnants of the same brown glass crunched under her feet and she recognized the neck of a liquor bottle—it was the biggest piece that was intact enough to make out where the glass came from.

"Butch, what happened to her?" She exclaimed as her hands fumbled on her person, picking through her tool belt pockets for her rag but it wasn't there. She must have dropped it during her running.

"There was some explosion! Didn't 'ya feel it? Knocked her right off her feet and she landed on her damn bottle collection." He hissed as he tried to dry scrub the blood of his mother off his fingers with discomfort.

"Bu- Butchie," Ellen sobbed drunkenly with a queasy looking face. "Why's it growin' outta my leg? What is it?"

"Don't worry, 'ma, we're gonna get you taken care of—Parker, she's gonna be okay, right?" Butch demanded, rather than asked, for good news and compliance on her part. She didn't have the mind to answer him as she pulled a handful of zip ties from her tool belt shakily—some of her extra heavy duty cable ties—and used them to fashion a tourniquet below her knee.

"Pick her up! We have to take her to the clinic," Winona harshly responded and got to her feet once she was finished, trying to help Ellen up to her own uneven footing. "Dad can take care of her when we get there!"

Butch immediately swooped over and picked up his mother with surprising strength in a bridal-style carry, directing her to keep her arms around his neck (and a hot warning of not throwing up on him) as Winona poked her head out into the hall, still seeing confused and panicked vault dwellers. The alarm seemed louder now than it did earlier and almost completely covered up the automated message directing people to go to the atrium. Her ears were pounding like she had her heart in them and everything was making her head feel like it was swelling with pain.

"Follow me, alright? And stay close, it's God damn crazy out there so don't lose sight of me!" She ordered firmly.

"You make it hard not to, Snowflake!" He exclaimed once his mother was held securely enough for travel. Winona took off down the hall and he swiftly followed after, while she shoved people out of the way with pointed elbows, bashing forearms, and more purpose than before.

"Move! Move!" She boomed and was surprised to find that people actually listened. They gathered against the hallway walls to let her and Butch with his mom quickly get past, and they were down the next flight of stairs to the hospitality floor in another few feet.

"You really dunno what's going on?" Butch called skeptically from behind her. Ellen was still crying in his arms, clinging tightly to him and complaining about the bouncing of her injured leg.
"No! And like I said, I won't find out until I go downstairs! I just—! I have to find dad first!"

"The atrium's the other way, Parker! That's where we were told to go!"

"You asked for my help so do what I say!" Winona yelled back dismissively over her shoulder. "Put a little trust in me!"

The thundering of their bootfalls and the wail of the emergency alarms drowned out the unknown noises in the walls she heard earlier; the rush of undamed water, the groaning as if the vault was settling in it's hole in the earth with every cable, plate of metal, and bolt it had. She wished the emergency lights were turned off, it was only sapping energy from the reactors that it couldn't afford to give, and she surmised that there was already enough stress on it with the morning's disastrous events. Winona wasn't surprised to find Butch side by side with her, matching her frantic sprinting as they entered the hallway leading to the clinic, and knowing it was that close made her run faster to the already open door.

"Dad—!" She cried, throwing herself through the doorway toward him.

Her father turned around from treating what looked like a bad steam burn on John Kendall's forearm. His posture visibly sagged with relief upon seeing his daughter, and she flew into his open arm with the other preoccupied with an unrolled bundle of bandages.

"Oh, honey—! Are you alright, you're not injured, are you?"

"Where's Jonas? Is he here? Is he okay, where is he?" Winona asked frantically, refusing to let him go until she was done nearly pressing the air out of him. "Have you seen Amata?"

"He went to the atrium to make sure any injured persons going there could be treated. Amata is most likely either there or with her father, so I'm sure she's fine, but more importantly what're you even doing here? I heard your clearance was called downstairs!" He scolded firmly but his hug suggested that he was still relieved to see her.

"Some of us still need t'be helped, here." Butch snapped behind them with a grimace as the two turned their attention back to him. "Care to give us that glowin' bed side manner, doc?"

"Don't be a smartass!" Winona barked back at him in warning.

"If you're going to stick around, then you better make yourself useful! Winona, take them into the back office and get started without me," Her father insisted. "I'll be back there to help as soon as I can. You know what to do."

The inventor nodded and gestured for Butch to follow with his injured mom, quickly guiding them towards her father's personal office at the very back of the small infirmary. She haphazardly brushed away the paperwork collected atop his desk with a sweeping arm and gestured for Butch to set Ellen down. Winona then moved to the already unlocked medical supply locker that was behind the desk, plucking out the needed materials from the few that were left; gloves, bandages, surgical thread and needle, and tweezers.

"You sure you know what you're doin', Parker?" Butch asked incredulously.

"I spent a lot of hours in the clinic with my dad after getting my vault responsibilities when I was 10," She explained as she hurriedly prepared all of her supplies. "Small things like this I can treat, no problem. I'll leave the stitches to him, though."

"Can't you use a stimpak!" He insisted when he saw her laid out items without the mentioned drug
"Her injury isn't life threatening, we have to pool medical resources for people who might be more injured than she is!" Winona explained tersely, and when she saw a furious look passing over his face, she added on a little more calmly before he could open his mouth; "She's going to be fine. It's only a couple of stitches... and if dad really thinks she needs a stim, he'll use it, okay? I promise."

Winona then worked methodically on Ellen DeLoria. Claiming a small pair of wire cutting pliers from her tool belt, with precise but careful hands, she snipped away the leg of the jumpsuit to better access her wound up to where the tourniquet was placed. It was bleeding badly but not as much as it could have been, and she guessed that the piece of glass was blocking vessels from spurting. Butch talked calmly to his mother as she worked to distract her from watching the treatment take place.

"How're you doin', 'ma?" He asked and she clamped down on his hand for comfort until his fingers were red and white but he didn't complain.

"Thir- Thirsty for a drink..." She replied bluntly in a faraway voice and slumped against him to rest. "Jesus, you gotta fuckin' piece of glass the size of Alabama stickin' outta your leg and that's all you care about." Butch curtly responded under his breath and Winona saw his comforting hand slacken from his mother's in his hurt annoyance.

"She's numb to most of the pain." Winona explained, despite not having to... considering she pulled out the shard of glass already and Ellen didn't so much as stir. It was replaced with a clump of bandages to help stop the fresh bleeding with gloved hands. "Still doing okay, Mrs. DeLoria?"

Butch's mother smiled drunkenly at the inventor when she opened her eyes and gave a small, sloppy giggle. "Doin' fine, doin' fine! You've got such pretty eyes, you know! They're so big~! I always admired hazel eyes... don't see them 'round the vault... all brown—or blue, like my son's hussy girlfriend."

"Shut it, 'ma!" Butch demanded defensively with an agitated clamp of his jaw, and she gave him a pouting look.

"When're you gunna bring home a nice giiiirl? Like that Amanda! The—... The Overeer's one! She s'a—she's a pretty one! Or even James' daughter, here! She's a lil' skinny, but I bet 'ya put some meat on 'er, she'd have the hips of a homemaker! And I don't wanna daughter-in-law that's a slut!"

"Mom!" He exclaimed in embarrassed disbelief. Winona tried to ignore the hostile exchange between the mother and son, but Ellen was talking to her solely again.

"He uses that voice when I'm s'posed t'be quiet!" She whispered gleefully. "Or when I give 'im too many kisses~! Shhhh!"

"God dammit, 'ma—" Butch groaned with a rising pink flush in his cheeks as the heel of his palm pressed against his face.

"He's got his daddy's hearing." Ellen whispered out of the side of her shut mouth, thinking it was the equivalent of using her head voice in her drunken state.

"I'm sure he does..." Winona muttered awkwardly as she replaced the bandages after checking the blood flow. "Butch, check the cabinet for me—I need antiseptic. Big brown bottle."

She hoped that distracting the Tunnel Snake with keeping busy and away from his mom would put
an end to anymore arguments and him getting mad; it was the last thing Winona wanted to be in
the middle of when she wanted to get in and out of the clinic quickly and downstairs. He brought
the antiseptic over without complaint and uncapped it for her.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Winona asked as she pulled the second round of bandages from Ellen's
wound and inspected it, seeing that it wasn't as deep as she thought. With a quick apology she
soaked another rolled clump of clean bandages with the antiseptic and cleaned Ellen's leg, causing
the older woman to whimper from the sting as it foamed.

"Nah. Just focus on her, would 'ya?" He asked with a nervous hand brushing through his hair. The
pandemonium of the bursting pipe(s) and the sudden, unknown explosions woke everyone up and
Butch didn't groom his hair into it's trademark styling; instead it hung loosely in his face until he
brushed it back with practiced hands. Some of it fell back into his eyes, anyhow.

"Yeah, dad's definitely gonna have to stitch her..." Winona admitted as she kept the plug on Ellen's
leg. Almost at the mention of his presence, her father came through the office door and
immediately to her side, frantically pulling on a pair of clean gloves.

"Get me up to speed, Winona." He spoke as he brushed her hands away to inspect the wound
himself.

"Wound on left side of left calf, not very deep but it's a little wide and needs stitches. It's already
been cleaned."

"I'll do another round." Her father insisted and gave her a pressing look. "I've got it from here,
sweetheart—so march yourself downstairs! And be safe."

He kissed her on the forehead as she peeled off her gloves with a reassuring nod to him. Grabbing
her cutters forgotten on the table, she moved to walk past Butch who stood in the corner by the
door, but instead grabbed his arm to pull him out after her. He went quietly with a glance back at
his mother cooing at Dr. Parker with praise for his gentle touch, and he tried his best to ignore her
so he could work with a softly mumbled thanks just to be polite to her.

"Before I go, Butch—the clinic's going to need more supplies, things like antiseptic... and dad was
running a bit low before all the craziness happened, anyhow. I saw all the vodka in your apartment
and—..." Winona trailed off, hoping that he'd understand what she was implying, so she wouldn't
have to say it out loud and possibly offend him.

"...Yeah. Yeah, I get it. Wanna get rid of all of it, anyway." He responded without any malice
drawing out the insult. It seemed more playful than ribbing. "Don't do nothin' heroic down there, alright? If the
vault's finally goin' to hell, Stanley better sprout some more hands if you ain't around."

The offhandedness of his concern—how it effortlessly rolled from his mouth as if he didn't mean
to say it out loud—was weirdly touching.

"Am I making a promise like a scout's honor kinda deal, or what?" She teased and his thin upper lip curled slightly.

"Just get back up here in one piece, alright?" He responded grudgingly and turned into the back office when he heard Ellen calling for him. "See you tonight, Parker."

Winona didn't take the time to watch his retreating back as she whipped around on her heel and went sprinting out of the clinic with paced breathing. She thought about Stanley, and poor Paul, the guy was most likely struggling down there, unsure of what to do! Floyd was probably jumping between reactors trying to keep everything stable, too. She caught the tail end of some loud, unashamed discussion between Butch, his mother, and the voice of her hushing father as she turned to the stairs to go lower into the vault.

"You should see if she's single! You jes' turned 20, an'—and your father an' I got married when we were 18! Wouldn't yer daughter be sweet with my son, Doctor James? When're 'ya settlin', Butchie, huh?"

"How 'bout when you stop drinking! Get off my back, 'ma!"

"Please, we have other patients in the clinic! I'll need you both to refrain from yelling!"

Butch sat on his couch, eyeing the cardboard box teeming with alcohol guardedly as if it were going to spring up and attack him, like a rabid dog. It sat across from him on the coffee table lifelessly instead and he bounced his knee impatiently, glancing at his Pip-Boy clock though he already checked it half a minute ago; it was about a quarter to 11, and Winona—despite the craziness downstairs—called ahead on the intercom to let him know she'd be late for the scheduled 9 PM pick up. Luckily he wasn't tired yet due to his irregular sleep schedule (after work was the only time he could see the boys or hit up Dolly, so his insomniac-like habits had their moments) and he didn't mind staying up a while longer for Winona to show.

He thought about what the day was like in the atrium—it was packed tighter than what anyone would be comfortable with, and he was crammed in with just about every single person he ever knew in his life. Butch and his mother got there about half an hour after Dr. Parker finished up his work on her, and directed the Tunnel Snake on proper care and medicine until her leg fully healed. Butch found a place for them to sit on the upper level of the atrium catwalk where he bundled his jacket on his lap for her to nap and he watched the frantic business below with bored eyes—not particularly taking in the seriousness of what was happening, but not really ignoring it, either... just watching, straining his ears for any updates on what was going on. Shortly after, the alarm stopped as well as the robotic announcements to go to safety, but the lights remained almost completely dimmed out to sip little power from the reactors.

It took about an hour for people to start getting chairs and other things to sit on, getting comfortable when it looked like it'd be a while before there was an 'all clear'. The atrium grew hot and stifling with all the bodies in it, with people busying themselves with work until there was nothing left they could do, and at one point everything grew much too quiet; it was eerie to be in a room of dozens of people when a collective moment of fear silenced everyone. People were looking at each other helplessly in a tense lull before hushed conversation started up again when water and snacks were passed out. Butch took his share but gave it to his mom for when she woke up. Eventually, Wally joined him upstairs—Dolly did at one point, too, but was called back to her pig of a father—and the boys barely talked at all, instead watching together everything happening below on the atrium's first floor.
Wally made one of his smartass educated guesses and said it was probably a few pipe bursts and a destabilizing reactor. The explosions made sense. Butch hoped 'destabilizing' meant that it was still fixable somehow.

At around 4 PM, the Overseer finally announced over the intercom that everything was in order, the emergency had passed, and everyone could return back to their living quarters. There was some relieved clapping all around as everyone gathered up their things and filed out. He lost track of Wally, then, as he tried waking up his mother on his lap, and he knew better than thinking that everything was fine; if it was, Winona wouldn't have had to call him to say she'd be late.

Something else was going on downstairs, as Wally's words about a reactor breaking down echoed in his thoughts.

Butch stopped bouncing his leg on the floor with a continued stare on the box of liquor, and resolved that he'd have a drink before it was carried off by the inventor. He plucked out a bottle of beer that stuck out from the corner closest to him and took Toothpick from his pocket, popping off the bottle cap with a skilled swipe of his switchblade. A sip was all he had when the front door console buzzed and he got up, tying the sleeves of his jumpsuit in a tight knot at his waist while he stood only in the lower half and his undershirt. The sleeves flapped behind him from his hips.

'Bout damn time, he thought restlessly, stopping on his way to the door to peer into the hanging mirror beside it. In the reflection he smoothed a hand over his combed hair, on the left then the right, tucking back fly aways into place to look more presentable, before opening the door for Winona.

"Took your sweet ass time getting down here," Was his greeting and she graced him with a hauntingly disapproving stare that carried an almost palpable, unspoken sarcasm.

"Yeah, thanks for your contribution in this trying time, DeLoria." She responded with a nod to the beer bottle in his hand and he mentally punched himself in the gut for not noticing how tired she looked; long curls messily roped into a bun, her eyes bleary from exhaustion and framed by dark pockets underneath, and her body was slumped forward as if she'd fall asleep standing up. If he noticed it beforehand he would have said something different than that.

"Damn, you eat at all t'day? You look like crap." He said, mentally punching himself in the gut a second time as she came into the apartment and looked to the box of, mainly vodka, his mother's favorite, waiting for her. "I gotta bag of chips 'round here somewhere if 'ya want it." He tacked on in a nicer tone.

"I ate something on the way up here, thanks. This everything?"

"Everythin' I could find. Checked every hidin' spot she's got in this damn place. Dunno if you could use all the other stuff 'ya didn't ask for, but whatever."

Winona glanced towards the back bedroom that she knew was his mother's—she had a look in her eyes like she expected a tired, slurring and drunk Mrs. DeLoria to stumble out at any moment, coming to reprimand them for touching her stash. When nothing changed and she didn't come out, Winona looked back to him wearily.

"I thought I'd give you the head's up—dad's planning on putting in an order to the Overseer about raiding the liquor counter in the diner for more supplies. I dunno if it'll be approved, but if it does most of the alcohol will be out of her reach. Well, mainly vodka and rum... maybe the gin, too. We'll have to check the alcohol content on the whisky and bourbon."
"That's about 99% of her Saturday night preference, so shit, your old man can go hog wild."

There was a numb kind of relief for him that came with the situation, like when you've been on a journey too long that when you finally come to the end, there's no celebration because you're just so damn tired... you've been through too much to find the relief inside you to celebrate. His mom has tried quitting cold turkey with the Fixer, even some self-help book from the library — anything but actual professional treatment — so he hoped this could be the permanent end to her addiction. It was a forced quit she had no control over and maybe that was just how it had to be. She had enough chances to get clean. He didn't look forward to the beginnings of her withdrawals, as she'd get kind of nasty when they occurred, but he preferred that over just leaving her drunk. It'd be dangerous with all the shit that happened today, as neither of them could afford her being inebriated in case they had to quickly escape.

"It's probably the exhaustion finally hitting me, but," Winona spoke quietly, mainly to herself it sounded like, as she took a bottle from the box to examine it with a look of consideration about her exhausted eyes. "It's a weird thing to think about but I've never had a drink before... and now all of it's heading my dad's way."

"You know the drinkin' age's 18, right?" Butch sniggered as he shut the front door and came to stand beside her. "Or are you just that square?"

"Like you're one to preach to me about drinking ages and other proper social conducts." She gave him a teasing little smirk that dimpled one side of her mouth. "I never wanted to, I guess. It's not a big deal."

"'Never wanted to' my fuckin' foot, I bet even Amata's had a drink. Sit your ass down." With a perked white eyebrow, she obliged the Tunnel Snake and took a seat where he was previously reclined on the couch. She sighed in relief to finally being able to sit, and looked like she could have fallen asleep right there. "You're gettin' a God damn drink before all this shit gets wasted on idiots like my 'ma, getting themselves hurt and whatever."

"Don't you look like the work day just got cancelled?"

"'Bout the same thing happened today, didn't it?" He answered as he withdrew another beer from the box. Using the same technique from earlier, he opened it with the edge of his switchblade and sent the cap flipping carelessly to the floor. When he picked up his beer and handed the freshly opened and hissing one to her, she regarded it with a measure of curiosity and caution. Like a typical dweeb would.

"See you were already sampling it for the clinic," She joked as he toasted to her, clinking the necks of their bottles together. "Checking the content?"

"Checkin' to see if the time'd fly by faster. Makin' me wait for you for two hours, girl— damn." He huffed as he gathered his bottle to his mouth and took a swig, taking place next to her on the couch while kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. Winona didn't drink hers, but rather rolled the beverage between the flats of her palms.

"Anything interesting happen while I was down under?" Winona inquired as she sat with a leg tucked under her, unzipping her jumpsuit down to her navel and shimmied her narrow shoulders out of the sleeves so they loosely fell around her waist, similar to him.

"Dunno. Didn't hear much. Everyone was crammed into the atrium after you took off—no one told us anything, and the Overseer was runnin' around like someone cut his dick off trynna do damage control, I guess. We didn't get the green light until about 4."
"...Did anyone die?"

Butch finally looked at her with his bottle threaded between his fingers and bobbed his shoulders in a lazy shrug. "Ain't heard nothin' about that. You? Was Paulie okay down there?"

"Yeah, actually... he was great," Winona smiled warmly at the mention of Paul. "He did everything right—battened down the hatches and got the job done. I wouldn't be surprised if he'll get a raise out of this, even Stanley's impressed."

"My snake brother deserves one! Stuff up here went sideways, people thought bombs were droppin' again or some shit." He snorted with some amusement.

Winona finally brought her beer to her lips and took a drink—one that was too big, like she were expecting fruit juice and not the yeasty bitterness of beer—and nearly choked on the sip. He laughed at her expense as she forced down what was caught mid-way in her throat and then gagged in a broken cough.

"We- Well, it's not Nuka-Cola, that's for sure." She wheezed through a surprised laugh.

"That's what you thought it'd taste like?" Butch was grinning now. "Guess Professor Smartmouth ain't so smart."

"I dunno what I expected it to taste like, honestly... maybe something heartier? I dunno. I always thought liquor'd taste better than this if people suck it down like it's Nuka-Cola."

"...You gotta drink the whole thing, 'ya know. It's the rules." He nodded sagely and her unabashed guffaw that made for a surprised response was a hilarious sound.

"What—? I do not!"

"Hey, I don't make the rules, you gotta do it! Unless 'ya can't." There was a devilish flare in his voice, and Winona almost looked like she was gearing up to rise to his bullshit challenge.

"I think you just wanna see me choke." She smirked back at him before taking another sip, shuddering when she swallowed. "God—how can anyone enjoy this?"

"They don't drink for the taste, drink for the feelin'." Butch responded as he tossed back the remainder of his beer and pulled for another one.

"So it gets tolerable?"

"Yeah, once your brain's so soaked it don't know any better."

"Does the other stuff taste worse? Like the vodka?"

"You wanna find out? We got all night, think I even got some scotch 'round here," He purred at the prospect of getting piss drunk. It was a long day for every damn resident involved, but between the two of them she looked like she needed a blackout drunkening more than he.

"My dad's a real fan of scotch... at least, he use to be," Winona revealed as she glanced into the cardboard box with a shuffling hand, quickly surveying the contents of its insides for what she'd bring back to the clinic. "He had a drink almost every day when I was younger."

"Least it's just that. Ma's a fan of anythin' in a bottle—hell, she'd probably suck on a deodorant stick like it was a fruit pop if she was feelin' the squeeze." Butch snorted bitterly as he opened his second
beer and immediately took a swig.

"Yeah, I guess you're right... about the scotch, not your mom." She backtracked.

"Smooth."

"You know what I mean," She sighed, unwinding herself into the couch cushions and rolled the beer back and forth between her hands again. "My dad hasn't touched it since I was 16, though."

Butch observed her with a raised eyebrow at her words, shifting slightly towards her with a heightened curiosity. His body turned in a way where his arm hooked lazily over the back of the couch and his knee was crooked in front of his body. There was look in her hazel eyes that he recognized from a place within himself that was threaded too close to his heart; the look of being paralyzed in the face of helplessness.

"...What made him quit?" He asked.

She shook her head uncertainly in response. "Not a damn clue. I remember him coming home late... really late, actually... like at 3 in the morning that night. I was up working on something when he came in and he just reeked of liquor—he'd usually tell me to go to bed, but he didn't say anything until the next morning. He told me he did something stupid but I couldn't get him to tell me what it was. After that he never touched scotch again. I think Jonas knows what he did, but I couldn't get him to tell me, either."

"Musta been somethin' really fucked." Butch whistled low. "People don't just decide t'quit."

"He wasn't ever an alcoholic. I don't think... maybe he was, I always wondered. It's hard to think of him like that."

"Yeah I'm sure his glowin' reputation makes it hard to think the second coming of Christ was an alcoholic." Winona shot him a prickly look and he gave a lop-sided grin in response to let her know he was kidding. "Trust me, Parker—if he was, you'd've known. Everyone but them always knows it." Then took a few more sips of his beer with closed eyes.

"...Hey, Butch?"

Winona's voice took on a different tone then, dropping in volume with a glimmer of sentiment passing through her eyes, and it was rare that someone said his name like that—let alone Winona Parker, who rarely ever called him by first name. She suddenly looked so small on his couch when he looked at her from the corner of his eyes mid-drink, and he saw something akin to a pained lapse in her demeanor. After swallowing what was in his mouth, he set his bottle against his knee in a cupped hand.

"S'up, girl?"

"You remember that night I came to your apartment when we were 15?" He nodded and her eyes turned towards his face. "...I know what it's like—... to have a parent that's struggling. I know how your mom makes you feel."

Butch looked down to the bottle in his hands, thumbing the neck of it and he refused to look back at her. Her words brought back some vague recollection of a few of the things he yelled at her that night; about how her and her doctor daddy could float above it all, how she talked at him like he didn't know his mom was hurting, and he snapped that she'd never know what it was like to be in that situation—to watch the person you love completely tear themselves apart—to have everyone look down at you like you were so pathetic and small, and no one wanted to help you get better. He
mainly remembered feeling so exposed at revealing too much of the one thing that made him vulnerable, and it brought him shame; his mother's absence from his life because she liked to drink and victimize herself to her misery, even 15 years later, because she cared more about that than she cared about him. Yet, he was still immensely protective over her, and that was because behind closed doors he had to be the parent while she got to totter around, making bad decisions like she was the child.

"...Wanna talk about it?" Butch asked quietly after a few moments of silence.

Winona was staring down at her beer bottle as well, seeming like she was refusing to look at him, too. There was another measured sip of her drink and she didn't shudder this time—looking too deep in thought to be disgusted by the taste.

"When I was younger, dad was depressed all the time... he missed so much work because he couldn't leave the apartment. Spent a lot of time laying in bed but he didn't sleep—I remember big, empty bottles covering his night stand... I remember hearing him crying when he thought I wasn't home. I think watching him lay in bed and stare at the wall was the worst because he didn't want me around when he was like that. One time I tried to get him to eat and he just looked right through me, like I wasn't even there, I—... I still get chills thinking about that."

"Ya know what got him all twisted like that?"

She nodded and her body sunk slightly into the couch cushions, her eyes interpreting that the subject made her want to disappear but her expression was otherwise unreadable. A small, hurt smile came to her face and she finally looked at him.

"...Because my mom's dead and he's still in love with her."

Butch didn't know a damn thing about Winona's mother—just a subconscious realization that she had a dead mom like he had a dead dad, but he never wondered how she died. Everyone knew about his dad passed; tripping down a flight of stairs one night coming off of work when Butch was five years old, but the Tunnel Snake suddenly noticed that no one talked about her mom's death. Everyone talked when someone died—gossiping about the means of their death if it was tragic just to have something to gab about—but it struck him as odd that he didn't know how Winona's mother passed. Even to this day, people talked about his own dad's death like it wasn't old news, like it didn't hurt him still, and it made him vaguely wonder if his own mother personally knew Winona's when she was alive. They were probably around the same age, right? Did they go to school together? Were they friends? His mom didn't talk a lot about what her life was like before his dad married her, so Butch didn't even know how they fell in love and got married.

Butch almost thought of asking Winona how her mom bit The Big One but thought better of it.

"...My 'ma's in the same way," He admitted painfully. "...Sorry." He responded in typical consolation of hearing pitiful news.

"Dad's better now, so I'm okay." She gave him a genuine smile despite the hurt that lingered and he couldn't return it. "I'm glad you took the tins that night, even if it was just to get rid of me. I wouldn't have known what to do with them if you didn't... it'd be sort of weird trying to return something you stole from your own dad."

"You really took 'em out from under your old man, huh?" He couldn't help the grin from returning to his face in amusement, and he turned an ear to her with a hand cupped around it. "Goody-Goody Parker stole somethin' for me? Am I hearing that right?"
"For your mom, creep. Don't get it mixed up!" He was surprised at the laugh that graced her smile and she jostled his arm playfully in a little shove. "That whole day sort of sucked, didn't it?"

"Gave everyone another reason to talk shit about us, that's for damn sure." Butch was finishing his second beer now while Winona was still on her first, but he made no teasing remark about it.

"Most everyone in here's an asshole." She agreed with her bottle drawing to her lips.

"...Makes sense, since half of 'em are from Wally's family, anyway." Winona coughed just short of taking another sip and sputtered through laughter. "What? It's true, 'ya know. At this rate he might just have t'shack up with his sister, the rest of you broads won't give him the time of day. Or night."

"Never thought I'd hear you talk smack about one of your guys."

"I may be friends with the guy but he's still the biggest dick I know. I got the right t'talk trash about him, but that don't mean everybody else can."

"And that's exactly why no one'll give him the time of day," Winona spoke accusingly with a wiggling finger point but she was smiling. "And God, don't you even say that about Susie. For all we know Dorothy could be a distant cousin of yours."

"...You want me t'throw up? 'Cause that's how you make a Tunnel Snake lose his lunch." He grumbled indignantly but took the last sip of his beer anyway. Winona was smiling so wide and laughing so much, her dimples were extremely apparent. He'd never seen them that close before and damn was his face getting hot or what?

"I should get going, DeLoria. It's late." She spoke after her laughter drained from her smile and she forced herself to finish the last half of her beer. Ignoring the taste with her eyes screwed shut, she slammed the bottle down on the coffee table victoriously and made a shivering jerk followed by a small cough.

"Wow. Pure sex, right there." He snorted mockingly and she looked about ready to throw her bottle at him, but instead lightly kicked his shin. When she got up she was pulling her sleeves back up her arms and zipping her jumpsuit midway up her torso.

"Is your mom going to be okay with all her stuff gone?" Winona asked with a slightly furrowed brow. "I could bring down some more Fixer, it'll help with the transition."

"Maybe it'll stick this time. I could carry that down with 'ya, 'ya know. It's pretty damn heavy. Got enough hooch in there to fill a sports bar." He pointed down at the box as he spoke.

"Nah, I got it," She waved him off and picked up the box off his coffee table, shifting it in her arms to get a better hold on it for the long carry. "I carry heavy stuff all the time. You think Paul's the strong one downstairs? The guy wishes."

Butch snorted at the mental image it conjured. "Hey, you're the boss, pipsqueak." And walked her to the door, opening it for her first and right when she stepped into the hall he couldn't help but stop her.

"Hey, Parker—before you go—"

"Yeah?"

"How bad's it downstairs?"
Winona looked stunned by the question, glancing down the hall and towards the cameras mounted at the forking intersection—as if scared that someone would come around and hear her response, or the cameras could pick up what she was saying from their position several feet away. Tucking the box under her arm to settle it on a stuck out hip, her face leaned in toward him and she spoke in a voice that wasn't quite a whisper, but still pretty hard to hear.

"Pretty bad. Things downstairs were crazier than I thought it'd be."

"Crazier how?" He frowned.

Winona sighed and had an expression on her face that implied there was a lot of reluctance to speak about it to someone who wasn't in maintenance. "We blew one of the reactors, and two of our Tier 2 water pipes busted completely while a third one sprung a leak—extreme rust build up, we think it is. Stanley had to shut off the entire Tier 2 system."

"You tellin' me we been drinkin' liquid rust?" He retched in disgust.

"No, luckily the water purifier was getting most of it, but Stanley and I think that it's what's been making the purifier break down every few months lately. The rust contamination in Tier 2 kicked the purifier into overdrive and caused a lot of build up... it broke down the metal and caused a massive pipe burst and we can't repair it. So it's shut off for now."

"You mean it's never gettin' fixed? Seriously? Even with you two on it?"

"We spent all day trying to figure out ways to fix it, but in the end we decided we had other things to worry about. We still have running water but Stanley had to put forward a maintenance advice ticket to the Overseer—water's gunna be rationed now. Short showers, drinking water'll be distributed solely through the cafeteria... even the water fountains are going to be turned off. We're weaning off how much gets sent to the greenhouses, too. We're hoping they won't take a nosedive because of it."

"Shit, Parker... that's—" Butch struggled to find the proper words, but found that he was at a loss for them in his shock. "...Shit. It's shitty."

"There's a lot of stress on the core but we managed to even it out and relieve the pressure back to normal levels," She was staring at him pointedly now with a hard look. "And you cannot tell anyone I told you all of this. Not your gang, not your mother, no one. I could get fired for even thinking about telling you."

"Yeah, yeah, got it, Officer Parker." He rolled his eyes. "You think Tunnel Snakes are snitches? You dunno shit."

"Cute." She mocked playfully, shifting the box from her hip and back into her arms again.

"Anyway—... I'll see you around, DeLoria. Keep your nose clean and swing by the clinic if your mom's looking a little worse for wear... and thanks—for the drink."

"You're tryin' whisky next time!" He called to her retreating back as she walked away and she responded with an obnoxious snort of laughter... and before he realized what he was doing, he jogged out after her with a damning thought lingering in his mind. "Hey, Parker, hold up a sec!"

"Holding up." She responded cheekily as she turned back to him, trying to even out the box in her arms.

"Look—" Butch began before awkwardly going quiet, unsure of how to continue. "...You don't—you're not—this Tunnel Snake's done playin' with 'ya, okay?"
"...I didn't realize we were playing a game—?" The inventor watched him with a peculiar stare and a raised brow.

"You're not my pet anymore." He clarified as he walked backward while still facing her to go to his apartment. "Don't go puttin' any ideas in that big brain of yours 'bout it! Just figured I don't needa pet anymore, and whatever. That's it!"

"We'll call it that." Winona responded in a knowing smile before turning away to officially mark her exit as he turned back into his apartment. "See you around, Butch."

If anyone told him he'd one day have a nice time over a couple of beers with his childhood nemesis and overall favorite dweeb to harass, he'd have punched that guy in the nose so hard it'd be on the backside of his head. The King Snake never realized before how—... similar they were to one another, at the revealing of this information about her righteous doctor father. He never considered them to be any more similar than a book to a pocket knife, but something about it made sense... even her comment about most people in the vault being dicks; he knew how much shit she put up with from the general population, as people made it as clear to her as they made it clear to him that she wasn't well liked. Her inventions caused unintentional trouble, her hair made everyone keep their distance out of paranoia, and she was otherwise ostracized because she was different from in an obvious 'black sheep' kind of way... and she wasn't going to change the way she was just to be accepted.

Something like being seen as weird frightened him and yet she embraced it with grace.

While Butch collected up the few empty bottles from their little wind down powwow, he reviewed the things she told him—the irreparable water pipes, the blown reactor, the stress on the core... Wally was pretty damn close on most accounts. What Butch thought about more during her explanation was the terrified look in her eyes; he knew what it all meant, especially the bit about the vault's mainframe. If that shorted out the door would have opened and killed them all within minutes, maybe even seconds, with lethal amounts of burning radiation. It sent a blistering chill up his spine at the thought that while they all sat in the atrium, only a few rooms off from the vault's front door, wondering when they could all go back to the living quarters, that the engineers were struggling to keep them all from dying. They would have been hit first in the atrium if the core failed and the door rolled open.

Winona had every right to be freaked out.

If they were being poisoned by the radiation, would they have known it and just fallen asleep one by one, he wondered? Or would they have suffered and died and been fearfully aware of it the whole time?

He pushed the thoughts from his mind as he walked out into the hall with the bottles to send them down the recycling chute. Returning to his apartment and back into his room, he tried not to imagine what it would have been like; being stuffed into that loud, busy, tense atrium with almost every other resident and watching them die—watching the radiation flaying their skin from their meat and muscle and bones, and he wondered what it'd feel like to choke on oxygen burning with radiation, searing the inside of his lungs and throat with every intake of struggling breath.

But Butch DeLoria thought about it too much already, and had nightmares and restless sleep all night long over the brittle skeletons of his mother, friends, and Winona Parker.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Hey, hey, hey! I hope everyone had an awesome holiday, and here's a follow up of the 'good cheer' with the usual Friday update! "A Snake's Venom" was originally meant to be only one chapter, but at 20 pages in Word I felt like it was too long to digest as one piece so I'm splitting it up into two. So yeah, a long 'chapter' (two-parter) heading your way so I hope you're ready for it~ a lot of heavy topics will be addressed in them that'll change a lot of things for many of our characters.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out

July 17th, 2277

Wally Mack sat at the terminal in his work station in the supervisory wing, reclining back in his chair as the interface for the Vault Database of Records was windowed on his screen. He tapped into the login the username and password of a temporary sign-in and waited for the system to accept it... which took a while for it to register. The damn thing was about as old as the vault and loading times could sometimes eat up his entire lunch breaks.

Ever since graduating from his apprenticeship program and transitioning to a fully commissioned shift supervisor last year, he had clearance and full access to any and all documents processed through the vault; even something as unimportant as a receipt for table repair never went unchecked and unscanned, and anything that the residents thought were private to their own terminals was fair game for the Overseer to review. There was a reason why the Vault Loyalty Inspector career was phased out years back—what was the point of the position if the Overseer could view any malicious and damaging thoughts towards Vault 101 himself, and then send the Tunnel Snakes off to do the grunt work?

Outside of work it was a pretty sweet gig, and though they were working with (not for, there's a difference) the Overseer, he and Butch achieved their goal for the gang a year and a half ago now; they ruled the vault and not even the ball-busting Overseer was in their way. They made it and they were staying on top of it all, despite recent events of the vault falling apart inside out.

Concerning his actual work, however, Wally hadn't realized how much power came with his position when he deciphered it in his G.O.A.T. exam. Though he was only a shift supervisor, he still earned the same access to the vault's records as someone who could have been the Overseer's personal assistant—he could pull up the lists of all the first dwellers, their ancestors, that were catalogued entering Vault 101 200 years ago.

So it bothered him that one of the files he had the most interest in was locked... two of them, actually, despite his impressive clearance that opened almost everything else to him. So was the Overseer's file but that didn't interest him as much as those files. The only thing he knew about these two files in particular were a vague description of what was inside them by their titles;
When he clicked on both, the Tunnel Snake was immediately met with messages saying he didn't have proper clearance and that he was to turn himself into the Overseer immediately for snooping.

He could read every file on every resident but them and it set off alarm bells in his brain, itching him through the long nights he worked to finish up his other case files. Ever since he received clearance, Wally would spend his breaks reviewing files for idle entertainment on throw away accounts, trying to find anything meaty and embarrassing on the other residents for Tunnel Snake business... and for months now he agonized over why those files were the ones that were sealed off. Why did it have to be cunt Parker and her cunt daddy, the only ones he had any genuine interest in picking through!

So, several months ago, he created several temporary sign-ins that couldn't be traced back to him or his personal work terminal. It was easy enough to figure that out once he got a good foothold on some of the programs supervisor's utilized. The throw away accounts were mainly to keep the Overseer off his tail; he could monitor Wally's terminal usage, and if he saw the Tunnel Snake looking through people's resident files he'd be in a lot of hot water. He had clearance for it, sure, but with his history as a gang member, the Overseer would just get paranoid and probably shut down his access. He didn't need the headache.

The sign-in was done processing for access, and Wally navigated through the annoying menu interface branching towards the database of current residents. Looking around to the other work stations to ensure all of his coworkers were out for lunch, he took the plug from his Pip-Boy and hooked it into his computer, and loaded into it a holotape he plucked out of his jumpsuit pocket. It was designed to run a hacking program for him—he swiped it off his grandfather after learning of it's existence, as apparently some of the older models of terminals would lock up when it shouldn't have, and the program on the holotape was meant to bypass the lock to reboot the appropriate systems. Wally was smart but not very tech smart unless he had time to explore and test a few things out, so he hoped that this hacking holotape could get him into the files.

If it couldn't, he knew it'd take him a while to find other means of breaking into them—but at that point he wouldn't know where to start.

Wally watched the striped loading bar after loading the holotape, waiting for it to slowly fill along with the appropriate percentage. It skyrocketed to 84% rather quickly. He was giddy with anticipation, feeling his chest cramp from the excitement growing inside him and he could only fathom what would be in those files. Wally spent all of last week digging through all the other resident files after hours, telling his coworkers he had to 'balance the books' before leaving for the evening while he looked for a Parker family tree. After hours of searching, he was astounded to find that there was nothing; there were Parkers when Vault 101 was first shut, but the name disconnected as generations went on and assumed different surnames through daughters, or names died out with families who didn't have children.

He couldn't find a file on Winona's mother, either—not a death certificate or a marriage license to Dr. James Parker, documents on her apprenticeship graduation or G.O.A.T. results, not even so much as a name. What was even more curious about the whole thing was when he asked various older members of his family (like his grandpa or his adoptive mother) who would have known Mrs. Parker, none of them could give him a solid answer. The subject was quickly changed to something else but his mind wasn't so easily swayed. He could smell the bullshit and he was too invested in it now to turn back—too full of grudges and hatred for Winona Parkerto let it go—so he
hoped that the files of her and Dr. Parker would help him understand a little better and answer those nagging questions.

Maybe even dig up something no one was supposed to know.

The loading bar finally filled the 100% marker, and Wally was stunned when the logo of a padlock merrily unlocking itself popped up on his screen. The program actually worked! A devious smirk of triumph graced his face as he first opened the residential file of Dr. James Parker to carefully browse through.

_Gotcha, bitch... now let's see what you, your patronizing daddy, and the **Overseer** are trying to hide..._

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_July 18th, 2277_

Butch didn't like the look in Wally's face as he and Paul treaded just behind on either side of him—he didn't like that look **one fucking bit.**

He knew his den brother inside and out so well that Butch recognized the meaning behind every mannerism, word, and glance Wally made—to the point that he could tell what Wally was generally **thinking** just by the look on his face. From what he could tell by the purposeful stride of his best friend's boots, his clutched fists at his sides, and his brow furrowing tightly over his intense eyes—Wally had a bone to pick with someone. Several, Butch added in conclusion, from the incensed flare in Wally's gaze, and by the time that snake was done striking at his food with sharp fangs, whoever his victim was would need a mortician more than a doctor.

Butch's anger issues were one thing, but for Wally Mack it was something **else.** He had his father's anger and his quick trigger-fists, and that only became more obvious as they grew up; he even held onto a lame grudge against Amata for not letting him pork her, and it was so bad that he still harrassed her when the rejection happened **years** ago. Somehow the Overseer hadn't found out what he was doing, in lieu of the rules of their deal in working together, and Wally was pretty smug about the whole thing.

"What're we huntin', Wally?" Paul asked sheepishly, also having noticed Wally's scary change in demeanor. "Is someone itchin' for an ass-kicking?"

"I feel like playing a game with that cunt Parker. I finally got into her sealed file I told you guys about—and let's just say she's got a lot to 'fess up to. I'm gonna pull it out of her like it's taffy." Wally responded cryptically while Paul shot Butch a tense look. "The plan's to find her and take her somewhere where we can get a little privacy. Where would she be after work, Paul?"

"What? Ho- How the hell should I know, Wally?" Paul stammered.

"Don't think I don't know you're all cozed up to Parker. I know you've been spendin' a lot of time with her." Wally replied smoothly, and the glance back over his shoulder was so icy Paul looked like he was going to vomit after he dethawed himself.

"Ye- Yeah, well—I work with her, we ain't close or anything. I have to put up with the freak when I'm downstairs." The dark-skinned boy replied woodenly with a worried look.

"Then why'd you go to her apartment the other night if you only put up with her downstairs?"

"You did what, Paulie?" Butch rounded on his other brother, who was looking visibly tense. "What
were 'ya even *doing* at her place?"

"Sh- She just—we w- were hanging—how did y- yo- you—?"

"Doesn't matter how I know, you've been *lying* to us, Paulie. You two good friends now, is that it? Are you *fucking* her, now? *Freddie's leftovers?*" Wally taunted cruelly.

"*Jesus,* man, would you lighten the fuck up?" Butch barked defensively for Paul, who was a little too stunned now to say anything for himself. "Parker ain't even worth our time! I got better shit t'do than put the screws on her. She ain't no fun no more."

"Then I don't *fucking* need you." He snapped in response, stopping his stride to glare back at him.

"*What* the *fu*—you don't need *me*? Hah! That's a laugh and a half, Mack! I ain't in the mood for playin' around with Professor Snowflake. We got other shit t'worry about so if *I* say back off it, you *back the hell off!*"

"And who the fuck made *you* the boss around here?" Wally was yelling in his face now, and it took all of Butch's willpower not to punch him in his big fucking beak of a nose. Instead, he grimaced and got right back into his best friend's face.

"No one made me leader, *I* made me leader 'cause Butch DeLoria's *all leader! I made* this gang!" He thumbed back at himself.

"*You* did? Maybe all your fruity pomade fumes are frying your brain cells, but if I remember right, *we* made the Tunnel Snakes, jackass!" Wally retorted. "Don't make me knock you around to get you to remember shit right!"

"*You're fucking threatenin' me*—*you shit-faced punk?*" Butch shoved him hard once, and there was a look of realization that suddenly passed in Wally's eyes in that moment. He knew he was picking a fight with someone who could not only out punch him, but out pace him, too.

The realization seemed to calm him down a little, but now Butch was in his own pissy mood. *Who's this asshole think he is? He thought, he's never talked *me* or Paul like this.*

"Parker's all kinds of *weird,* but her old man's worse. You didn't see his file. It's different from everyone else's. You don't wanna nail her skinny ass to the wall? After all that hot air you made about how much you *hated her* when we were kids? You're missing a golden opportunity, but I won't, so I'm doing this with or with you. You're not the boss of me." He spoke too calmly for his anger, clenching his fists tighter so he wouldn't get into a shoving (then punching) match with one of his two best friends.

Butch was glaring now as his own clenched fists went into his pockets, like he was sheathing a weapon. "...Spit it out, then. What'd the doctor's file say?"

"It's what it *didn't* say that got me thinking," Wally began as he turned and continued walking, up the stairs towards the living quarters. Even Butch knew the inventor would either be in her room, or somewhere with Amata. "He doesn't have a birth record—not a list of his duties after he turned 10, school report cards, G.O.A.T. exam or results under file or who his mentor was. Fuck, not even a *marriage* certificate to Parker's mother—and that's *another* thing—"

"Maybe his shit got lost in the mail," Butch interrupted cheekily and Wally visibly twitched in agitation that he wasn't being taken seriously. "Man, I think you been hittin' the coffee pot too hard, even for a cubicle monkey."
"You think so? Then explain to me why her mother isn't listed in the system."

"What're you talkin' about, man?" Paul asked with a furrowed brow, despite looking like he didn't want to be involved at all—like he wanted to disappear and go somewhere else. Maybe to warn Winona.

"Exactly what I said! Even on Winona's birth certificate, the field for 'birth mother' was filled in as 'N/A'—Not Available. Her mom's a damn ghost, I can't find any files about their family that don't lead me right back to just the two of them. Can't find their family tree in the system, either."

"Stuff around here's breakin' all the time, Wally. Especially now. Your computer could just be broken. Or the system's fried." Paul tried to quietly reason, seeming a little protective of their wayward victim. "Stanley said some of the terminal connections to the vault's hub ain't lookin' too hot... actually, they are too hot. That's why it's not workin' good."

Butch would have found his point to be an astute one, especially for a dummy like Paul, but the more Wally talked the more he was getting the creeps about the whole thing, to the point where he couldn't ignore his instincts. Winona's mother wasn't in the database or even on her birth certificate? Dr. Parker didn't have any of the important life documents that everyone and their sister, brother, mother, and father had? Butch knew Winona had a mother, at least—she mentioned her during one of their few good talks when she admitted Dr. Parker being a liquor fiend, but said that she died a long time ago. Plus, everyone had a mother... so where was hers? Especially on paper?

Even Stevie, Wally and Susie had a mother on file before the Macks adopted them.

"What else did 'ya find, Wally? Or not find, or whatever?" Butch asked curiously. They traveled in a horizontal line, side by side, down the halls of the living quarters.

"The first document scanned under Dr. Parker's file was a license certifying his position as Vault Physician. It wasn't a G.O.A.T. stamped result but it was authorized and signed by the Overseer. It was filed at the beginning of August in 2258. I did the calculations, our good doctor would've been 32 or 33—that leaves dozens of milestones missed—it's 30 years of documents uncatalogued and unchecked into his file. Nothing so much as a noise complaint or excused absence of illness for the first 30 years of his life and then he was suddenly marked into the system by the Overseer."

"And Parker?"

"Her first document was her birth certificate, but it was filed in about two weeks after she was born. Everyone else has theirs scanned in on the day of their birth or the day after, it's never been that late. Ever."

"So watcha thinkin', Wally?" They were in front of Winona's independent apartment now, convening just outside her door and Paul was still quiet; looking up and down the hall in hopes that someone would come and deter Wally from doing something insane.

"I don't know... but I bet Parker's got some answers for us. So if she's home, we're gonna get it out of her." Wally responded sternly. "We're gunna make her squeal like a pig and walk out with the bacon, you feel me?"

"I don't think we should do this," Paul piped up honestly. "C'mon, man, can't you let this shit go? Butch-man's right, we got other stuff to deal with. I'm bustin' my ass downstairs all damn day, tryin' to keep the purifier running and to keep another reactor from blowin' to hell—you know how much energy this damn tub eats up?—when I get out I don't wanna do stuff like this! I wanna drink
a beer and mess around or something. Go see a movie or shoot pool or some shit."

"Well, when you say it like that, Paul—it sounds like you don't want to be a Tunnel Snake anymore." Wally mused aloud with a suggestively dark countenance in his voice, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"I don't wanna quit the Tunnel Snakes! I'm just sayin' this kinda stuff isn't fun anymore. Was at first but it's tiring, man. I'm tired. My parents keep getting on me about getting married and startin' a family and whatever, we can't keep doin' this."

"What do you say, Butch? Isn't that a traitor if you ever heard one?" He sneered.

"Aw, man, would 'ya grow up?" Paul groaned.

Butch's eyes flickered back and forth between his two best friends, deciding to remain firmly neutral because damn he was still trying to process the pile of shit Wally just dropped in front of him by the brick. He was surprised Paul even spoke up and said something—something that sounded akin to unfaithfulness to the Tunnel Snakes—as since they were kids, he'd always go with whatever they told him to do, even if it was clear he didn't want to. Butch knew Paul didn't want the two of them to think he was unloyal or unable to make the Tunnel Snakes creed proud, and in that, it was what made him a good friend.

He didn't think Paul was a traitor except that he was growing up—outgrowing them and their gang—and Butch sort of resented him for it. He felt a flare of anger for it. He felt a little betrayed by it and by the thought that the Tunnel Snakes weren't a forever thing like he wanted it to be. That scared him because it meant he wouldn't be on top of the world as the Serpent King for much longer.

Maybe another couple of years at best... another few months at worst.

"Stay outside, Paul. We'll deal with 'ya later. You're just gonna get in the way if you like the dweeb so much." He spoke in finality and tried to ignore the drop of Paul's shoulders in stunned disbelief. "Let's say we run Cobra initiative, Mack."

"You know that's my favorite one," He smirked as he buzzed Winona's front door. "Corner them like a little mouse between two snakes."

Paul stood behind his snake brothers helplessly as they collectively waited for Winona to answer the summons. When she didn't, Wally buzzed again in an annoying repetitive tap tap tap until the intercom clicked and an aggrivated voice barked through the speaker.

"What?" Winona's voice came through the crackling, and Wally put a single finger to his lips for his friends to let them know to be quiet. "...Hello? Anyone there?"

Butch wondered what Winona would have to say about their questions, like what sort of explanation she'd make, or if she'd try to hide it, or inch around the issue. No, she wasn't the type to be evasive necessarily, but what Wally came up with was some pretty insane information and he doubted that even Winona "Smartmouth" Parker could reason her way out of this one. It felt like old times in a certain sense; the three of them cornering her because of some bullshit trick she pulled on one of them the day before, or because of an insult she made that especially rubbed Butch the wrong way... but it only took a glance at Wally's face to remind him that what was happening right now was nothing like all the fun they had before at her expense. This was so personal it was brutal and vicious.
There was something more than just being a bully in Wally's eyes... it was really like he was a cobra on the hunt for a mouse that he wouldn't stop chasing until he swallowed her whole. It was lethal and it made Butch want to turn around and walk away, because he knew something bad was going to happen—he knew it—but he couldn't get his legs to move. This was what Tunnel Snakes do and he'd be damned if Wally thought he was a traitor, too, just because he was okay with Winona now.

Butch ignored the guilt swelling in his chest when he thought of the handful of times the two hung out in secret, and the guilt of not wanting to hurt her.

The thing about Butch's grudges is that they were like a 'candle burning from two ends' he heard Broetch say at one time—they were short lived because he got angry about everything and would probably find something else to piss and moan about before the week was over. Winona proved to him long ago that she wasn't some perfect, stuck-up, self-involved doctor's brat that masturbated to being a goody-goody; she had her demons and damn if after all their years of fighting, Butch DeLoria didn't hold some amount of respect for her. He put her through the ringer a few times growing up and she came out the other side bumped and bruised and a little singed, but still holding her ground like an unweathering stone despite years of torrential storms in pretty damn impressive fashion.

But Wally Mack and his grudges?

He never forgave, and he never forgot until he beat you down to nothing... until he could say that he was the victor, indefinitely. His grudges made him do psychotic things and unspeakable shit.

At this point, Wally was continuously buzzing in on Winona's front door, and Butch heard an agivated huff from her before the intercom turned off. He didn't realize he was mentally chanting to himself, don't open the door, don't open the door, don't you fucking open the door, Parker—until the front door peeped open to reveal a tired Winona Parker. She stood with bare feet and half her jumpsuit shucked off, and before she could react to the presence of the Tunnel Snakes on her doorstep, Wally shoved her back into her apartment. Butch nearly winced at the sound she made hitting her dining table, and how the legs skid on the metal loudly to hold her.

"Keep watch, Paul—ring us if anyone we should be worried about comes looking for her." He instructed as Butch followed them in and shut the door.

"What do you two want?" She grimaced when she regained her balance and her composure, holding herself up against the small dining table in the center of her equally small living room. "You must be out of your damn mind to be in my house—!"

"I suggest you not lip off, girlie. We're just going to have a little talk, and how this talk goes depends on you. So if you don't want it to go bad, how about you take a seat, and answer our questions? Pretend you're back in Mr. Broetch's class being a teacher's pet again." Wally requested (this was the nice word for it) with a flat voice, his eyes boring into her.

Winona's mouth tightened at the demands made against her and watched them with a calculatory look; Butch could see hundreds of scenarios pass through them, and knew that she was thinking hard about how to get out of this one and he could see her hands shaking a little. She knew she was fucked. This was fucked. That feeling he had of something bad happening was only increasing as they remained here, threatening Winona in her own damn home.

He didn't want to do this to her. If Paul still wanted to disappear, he'd gladly go with him and take Parker with them.
"Alright," She finally responded in defeated voice. "Alright. We'll do it your way, Wally. You have the power here."

"Damn right I do, so sit your scrawny ass down!" He barked and she did exactly as she was told, sitting on one of the chairs at her bothered table. "Now empty your pockets, we don't want you interrupting our friendly little discussion with one of your toys."

Begrudgingly, she—slowly, to not alarm them—put her hands in her jumpsuit pockets and turned them inside out, showing that they were full of nothing but loose lint. When Wally gave a satisfied nod she packed them back in, and he finally began his interrogation.

"Where's your mother?"

The question clearly caught her by surprise, as it illicited a small scowl on her mouth and her brow furrowed over her hazel eyes in confusion. She opened her mouth to speak, looking as if she couldn't fish out the words from the pit of her throat, and then shut her mouth again—still unsure of the question or why Wally was even asking it in the first place. Her eyes flickered to Butch almost helplessly and he tried to pretend that he didn't notice.

This was wrong, damn it.

"Well?" He pushed.

"My mother's dead." She replied impassively, though it had a sharp edge to it. "Why're you asking?"

"I'm gunna be the one asking questions here. Ask something again and I'll remind you who's in charge, got it? Now tell us—if she's really dead, how'd she die?"

"She had a heart attack when I was a baby." Winona responded hatefully.

The way she said that was what cracked Butch a little. He couldn't imagine what that was like (not really knowing one of your folks at all) and he thanked whoever was listening to his thoughts that at least he had some memories of his dad before he died. At least he remembered his dad putting him on his shoulders and flying him around the apartment like an airplane, warming Butch's pajama jumpsuit on the radiator for when bath time was over, showing him how to tie the shoelaces on his boots and giving him the last butterscotch pudding cup, even though Butch knew his dad really wanted it. Butch then went on without his dad being there for the things he really needed him there for, like teaching him how to shave or how to talk to girls without sickening them, and Butch couldn't imagine what he would've been like if he didn't have those few memories of them together; of them being a happy family because his mother wasn't drinking her pain away, and because he didn't decide he wanted to pick on other people to avoid his own crippled emotions.

All Winona probably had were a few photos of her mom and a depressed dad for the first handful of years of her life. His guilty feeling was only inflating more and more the longer he looked at her, but she refused to look back, instead keeping her gaze cautiously on Wally.

"Do you have proof of that?" Wally questioned without apology in his voice.

"That's how my dad told me she died." She narrowed her eyes at him, her shaking hands gripping the edge of her seat hard enough to still them but her knuckles were now as white as her hair.

"Do you even know if that's true?" He taunted. "Maybe you were adopted, it's not like you knew your mom anyway, right? What was her name?"
"You've got no place saying that when you're adopted, genius!" Winona got up from her seat with a defiant stance and an acidic look in her eyes. "Now you assholes need to leave, before I—"

All it took was a swift backhand from Wally across her face to send her teetering, with the thick, unforgiving sound of his knuckles on her jaw and a surprised shriek out of her, and she was plummeting to the floor. It happened all in slow motion to Butch, who stood dumbly aside and watched, his body too stunned to move. Winona laid still on her front, an arm sprawled under her and her hair in her face, and Butch panicked in thinking that she was hit hard enough to be knocked out. But then she stirred, sitting up with a trembling hand nursing her reddened cheek, and when she looked back at them her eyes were wide with fear. They didn't look focused, her gaze almost faraway. Wally certainly smacked some sense out of her in that one hit.

"Before you what? Call your bastard daddy to come clean up your mess for you? To come to your rescue? It's just you and us, bitch! No one's coming, not your dyke girlfriend, not your pill-popping boyfriend, not even your daddy."

"Man, what the fuck?" Butch barked as he shoved Wally away by his shoulder to put some distance between him and Winona.

"I'm handling it, Butch—don't be a fucking pussy." Wally grimaced and slapped his hands off in warning. "And don't fucking touch me."

"I'm a fuckin' pussy? Says the guy that smacks girls 'round for fun 'cause he knows he ain't have a chance against a real man!" He yelled back with such vitriol that his friend looked like he wanted to change that statement with a baseball bat in hand.

"Do you even know what's going on here, man, or are you that God damn thick?" He snapped as he pointed an accusing finger at Winona, who still sat on the floor watching them argue. "Her mother isn't in the database, Dr. Parker basically didn't exist until after 30! You're getting your fucking panties in a twist over knocking around this bitch, you're not even looking at the bigger picture! There's something going on here and she knows what it is!"

When Wally looked back at her sharply, she was suddenly controlled by blind fear and sat up enough to draw herself backward a pace or two, trying to frantically escape in case he came at her again.

"Tell me what her fucking name is or I'll knock out some teeth next time!" He threatened.

"Her name was Catherine, Jesus Christ, Mack!" She yelled. "Why are you even asking about her? Why isn't she in the system?"

"See, man? She doesn't know what the hell you're talkin' about—" Butch tried to deter the conversation, but Wally wasn't having it. He was getting irate again and Butch could see the hungry, poised to strike snake in his eyes.

"Catherine Parker isn't a name in the system. Not in the records of deaths, either." He spoke coolly. "You're lying."

"No, I'm not! I don't know what her last name was, dad never married her!" Winona insisted.

"You're still lying, Parker!" Wally boomed as he stomped towards her and she scrambled away hurriedly, trying to get herself up to her feet when her legs were already kicking at the ground to run.
Butch, with quick hands and a sudden wrathful surge to protect Winona, grabbed at the nape of Wally's jacket collar and pulled him back with a hard yank. It caused his fellow Tunnel Snake to stumble and round back on him. He aggressively smacked Butch off and grabbed at his jacket lapels, hauling the Serpent King towards his face and Butch's chest went colliding into Wally's braced forearms and elbows.

"The fuck are you doing?!!" Wally yelled in his face, shaking him hard once and Butch's head snapped back. "Huh?!!"

"You put another God damn hand on her, and I'll make sure not even Susie'll recognize your ugly fuckin' mug," Butch hissed in a threatening promise as he pried Wally's hands off and then shoved him hard, glaring at the taller boy as he hit the table before sorting out his jacket. "You hear me, Mack? This is fucked up, you're actin' like a lunatic!"

"...I knew it," Wally spoke in a darkly calm murmur. His small, piercing eyes seized Butch in an accusatory, almost disgusted, gaze. "You been getting friendly with Parker, too. You're a traitor like Paul! What the actual fuck, man—!"

"You're both leaving now," Winona demanded dangerously from a corner away from where they argued.

When the two turned to look at her, seeing the swelling of her jaw from where she was hit, the inventor held in her hands what looked like a metal dog head; with a long, sharp muzzle and tall pointed ears, welded plates formed its shape but it was missing the lower half of its jaw, and in its eye sockets were mismatched lightbulbs—one yellow and the other red. Where the missing jaw should have been did a barrel jut out, looking like a small pipe tapered at the end. She was weakly trembling despite the promising look in her tearing eyes that said she wasn't backing down.

"I'm warning you! Leave!" She repeated.

"Another cute little toy of yours?" Wally mocked with a deadpan tilt of his head, snorting in laughter. "You've never built anything dangerous in your life!"

Her eyes narrowed at his challenging remark, and her hand moved beside her to her workbench near the door, against the wall of her bedroom. From it she picked up a small cylindrical metal tank and Butch suddenly took note of the tubes leading from it to the robotic dog's skull weighting her other hand. There was a click from the invention in her hands and a spark ignited at the mouth of the barrel before casting a plume of hot, liquid flame that made them both scatter back in shock. It had enough propelled distance that it splashed the floor about a foot from the toes of their boots and Butch could feel the heat before the flames dissipated harmlessly.

"Unless you want a recreation of what it's like to be on the receiving end of Andy roasting up radroaches, I'm going to give you one last chance to leave my apartment!" She shrieked threateningly. "Now!"

"Alright, alright—we're leaving! Put it away, Parker, we're goin!" Butch DeLoria knew that the petite inventor wasn't messing around. He still doubted that she'd actually fry them alive, barbeque a la Tunnel Snake, but they did enough damage already and he wasn't willing to stick around and find out if she would.

"Wally, let's go." He shot Wally a warning look that said not to fight him. Wally's nostrils flared angrily and he locked a wrathful stare on her that looked almost daring.

"Fine. I'll leave the little girl alone... but this isn't over, cunt. I won't stop until I have what I need—
until you tell me everything. You wanna play with fire? I'll gladly watch you burn." Wally smoothed his jacket out and strode off to the door.

Butch glared at his back before returning his gaze to Winona, watching her as she kept her stiffened stance with the dog skull and fuel tank still dangerously in her possession. She raised it slightly, attempting to enhance her earlier threats, and he shook his head in the negative to tell her he wasn't going to try anything.

"'M sorry, Parker." Was all he could say in a quiet mutter before quickly heading out of her room, rejoining his friends out in the hall.

But Paul was standing alone, rubbing his arm before silently hooking a thumb down the hallway to gesture that Wally was already gone.
CHP 15 - A Snake's Venom (P2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

July 17th, 2277 (cont’d)

Winona remained frozen in place long after she knew the Tunnel Snakes were gone—clutching the head of Gizmo, her robotic wolf in the making, and the fuel tank linked to his flamethrower. Her head was still a little unfocused from the slap she received from Wally, and her jaw ached, and all she could think to herself was did that really just happen to me? Was I just assaulted in my own home?

She was exhausted from the day's work. It was another back-breaking shift that pulled her thinly in all directions it could; have to restart the purifier again, there's a malfunction in sector 4 for the 7th time this week, radroaches chewed through some cables in the clinic! Winona gladly took that one as she hadn't seen her father, or Jonas, since the reactor blew a month ago... but the work was soon fixed within a half hour and she had to return back downstairs. She just wanted to cry and go home and relax the stress of the day from her body by tinkering. However, she hadn't seen Amata in some time either, but the girls understood that the other was busy with work and there wasn't any resentment about it. Freddie rang her a few times but Winona refused to answer his calls. She meant it when she said that she needed a break and he had to leave her alone.

The inventor felt awful for breaking things off, but Freddie was becoming unbearable about her schedule; constantly hurt that she couldn't make time for him, getting upset that she was too tired when she wasn't at work... and the moment he accused her of cheating on him with Paul, and that was why she was too busy, she ended it. She wasn't going to stand for that kind of accusation when she was downstairs, running herself ragged, trying to keep the vault well-maintained and everyone safe. Having to physically break herself for the vault to only emotionally bend backwards for her anxious, paranoid, almost constantly depressed boyfriend met Winona with a new level of fatigue she didn't have the time or patience for.

Maybe when things calmed down and she wasn't so preoccupied with work... maybe they could try again—but the thought of it made her sick. It made her feel trapped and she didn't want to associate that feeling with Freddie, the guy she use to love.

She was thinking about him, and Amata, and her father and Jonas while she worked and the door rang. Winona thought it was a malfunction with her doorbell; she wished she looked outside, first. She was mentally punching herself for not doing so. Being exhausted from work, she didn't have the necessary reflexes when Wally barged his way into her apartment, and she knew it.

What Wally did was reckless... more than reckless, it was condemning. Winona thought she could regain some semblance of control, make him think he was in charge and just act the part of victim and answer his questions, but then she got angry—angry about the things he said about her mother and the things he implied about her father—and she snapped. And Wally snapped back, hard, sending her reeling to the floor and realizing that God, he might kill me. He could really do it. Winona could see in Wally's eyes the eyes of his father and she could only imagine, from her own terror, what Gloria Mack felt on a near nightly basis.

Luckily for her, Butch tried to stop Wally. Luckily for her, Butch didn't condone what Wally was doing and that would have surprised her to some degree if her head didn't feel like a child's rattle. Luckily for her it was enough of a distraction that she was able to escape to her room. The
only thoughts she could form were ones of escape and fight, and she picked up Gizmo's unfinished head. Wally Mack was right, she never intentionally made a dangerous thing in her life—weapons weren't her nature as an inventor, only inventions that were meant to be helpful but malfunctioned and went horribly wrong. He was right aside from one creation... aside from Gizmo and his flamethrower, which was hooked up only the day before tonight for frying the radroaches (this was inspired by Andy) that scuttled about the maintenance level and impeded their work.

Winona knew she could have shut and locked the door and Wally wouldn't have been able to hurt her, or get to her. She could have waited it out for him to get bored and leave but who could she tell? As far as she was aware, they were probably still working for the Overseer if their Tunnel Snake behavior was still going on unchecked. Tonight Wally hit a new low in victimizing her in her own apartment, demanding answers to prying questions about a woman she really didn't know much about, smacking her and knowing he could get away with it because the Overseer was on his side. Winona knew running and hiding and waiting and hoping he'd leave was an option, but it wasn't the option she wanted to use. It'd only prompt Wally to come back and try and 'talk' to her again.

She had to make his exit a permanent one... and lay traps at her door if he thought about kicking it in again. The inventor wasn't going to let Wally Mack get the upper hand in a situation like that again.

Winona finally set down Gizmo on her workbench, clicking off his flamethrower flint, and sat numbly on her chair with trembling hands gripping the knees of her jumpsuit as she tried to keep from falling apart. Deep breath in—deep breath out—you're okay, Nona, pull yourself together. You can handle them.

"Her mother isn't in the database, Dr. Parker basically didn't exist until after 30! You're getting your fucking panties in a twist over knocking around this bitch, you're not even looking at the bigger picture! There's something going on here and she knows what it is!"

Winona always had that feeling—the instinct—that something about the stories her father told her about her mother didn't make sense. One time he told her two different stories about what she did for Vault 101—he said she worked in hydroponics for the greenhouses, but later on he said they worked in the clinic together. When Winona brought up the inconsistency, he awkwardly backtracked and tried to claim he was tired and got the memories wrong. He never officially corrected himself.

Then there was the issue of her mother's belongings. He always told her that he couldn't handle the grief of her passing, and in a fit of despair threw all of her things into the crematorium oven with her. When Winona was young, she lamented (and at times resented) that she didn't even have so much as a picture of her mom... but as she grew older, the more those details nagged at her, and the more she started to wonder—to feel that instinct—if what he said was true. It didn't make sense to her, and the love he described that he had for her mother, for this woman, Catherine, was the only thing that kept her from confronting him. That love... that hurt... was too genuine to fake, coupled with his crippling depression and drinking when she was young.

Winona had nothing that could rationalize these feelings towards her father, or the thought that he was lying or covering something up, but now she did; now she had some proof that her feelings weren't baseless and it was, oddly enough, in thanks to Wally Mack and his big mouth! Because he thought she knew something when she didn't!

She knew now that her father was lying... but lying about what, she had yet to find out.
But I'm going to. Winona thought determinedly as she got up to her feet and pulled on her boots, tugging her jumpsuit back onto her to leave. I'm going to.

Winona waited for hours for the clinic to close for the night, with her head ducked around the corner from the infirmary to watch her whistling father finally come out and lock the door.

The inventor already checked his apartment before coming to the clinic, as she still had access to it even though she moved out years ago. She found nothing of use—nothing hiding away between his mattresses, or tugged away into the vent above his bed, or under his socks in his dresser. The apartment was so clean she doubted her father spent much time in it in the last few weeks, considering the rise in radroach bites that had taken hold of the vault in recent days between the odd bumps, burns, and work related injuries.

She saw Jonas leave the clinic hours earlier so she wasn't particularly concerned about him when her father was alone for closing. She watched him undo the connecting wire from his Pip-Boy to the door after it beeped in locking and he went on his way in the opposite direction, completely unaware of his daughter hiding right around the corner as he thumbed through some files he had with him. She waited until he was gone from sight and counted another minute in her head before going to the clinic door. Wielding a screwdriver from her pocket, she used it to unscrew the cover on the door's button consoles and tucked her hand inside for the manual override—the door willingly wheeling open at the touch of an engineer's fingers. She'd have to remember to relock it on her way out.

If her dad kept anything as evidence to his lying, she couldn't think of him hiding it anywhere but his apartment or his personal office in the clinic. The vault had many hiding places but these were the two closest, and most secretive, that he had access to that no one else reasonably did. She ignored the front room of the infirmary and went straight into his office, first deciding to check his desk.

The top middle-most drawer was full of nothing but office supplies; nubs of used up erasers, pens, white out, tape, some stray paper clips... she shut it and went down the row of drawers on the lefthand side of the desk. One was full of random files, and she idly flipped through a few to find that it was paperwork addressed to the Overseer about supplies, malfunctioning x-ray machines, and various other things that needed his signed approval to be remedied. The next drawer down was a bottle of scotch about 2/3s filled with a shot glass and she visibly recoiled upon seeing it, quickly slamming the drawer shut. She tried to push down memories of her father nearly hanging off the edge of his bed with unkempt hair and unshaven face, staring at the wall with dead, tearing eyes and the name of her mom on his lips.

This is what you're here for—to find out who your mom really was. You can start freaking out about breaking in here and snooping through his stuff afterward!

Winona continued her searching through the drawers on the righthand side, now. The top drawer was more scattered office supplies like hole punchers, a stapler, and several pairs of scissors. The next one had more meticulously sorted paperwork, and with a quick thumb she read through a couple to see that they were open files on several dwellers; one on Mary Kendall for a refilled prescription of Wellbutrin (an antidepressant), a routine check up for Amata (with the Overseer present during, much to the displeasure of Winona's father, as detailed in a small marginal note), and a smaller file on Ellen DeLoria. Winona found herself reading that one more closely than the others, as it had personal notes and not professionally written ones about Ellen's alcoholism and her refusal to come in for treatment. Apparently her father personally tried to talk Mrs. DeLoria into coming in, but she wouldn't.
Everything was tucked back into the drawers before Winona pulled for the bottom one—and was shocked to find it locked. She tugged several more times to ensure it wasn't just stuck and plopped down in front of it, taking out several bobby pins and her screwdriver to try and break into it.

*This is it! If dad were hiding anything, it'd be in here!* She thought with a mixture of dread and excitement rapidly stacking on top of each other in her chest, while twisting the screwdriver gently to have it catch and then she immediately eased off. *If I can get this damn thing open!*

Winona got better at jimmying things open during her time as a maintenance worker. Over the course of 200 years, drawers, cabinets, lockers, and doors would get stuck or remain locked when keys broke or access cards malfunctioned—she had to learn to open things manually when it wasn't electronic, and it was good practice, but this lock was proving to be problematic. It was finicky under the torque of her screwdriver and she tried to remember the tricks Stanley taught her.

Winona stopped momentarily to tie her hair back out of her face and froze when she heard the front door of the clinic slide open. A whistling tune broke through the silence afterward and heavy footfalls grew louder as the intruder came closer to the back office.

*Oh God, if dad finds me here—!* She thought in a panic as she scurried under the desk to hide and tucked her knees in towards her chest, curling herself up as tightly as she could manage in the small space. At that moment the office door opened and the whistling was exponentially louder and closer. Winona's eyes followed the source of the noise as it circled around the desk and a pair of booted feet came into view. Her eyes fell to the floor, watching in horror upon realizing that her screwdriver was left forgotten when she tied up her hair, and the boot lightly nudged it by accident. The whistling stopped when the tool was noticed and the figure bent down, one hand braced on the desk as they leaned, and she saw a black hand rather than the expected white one reaching for it.

*It's Jonas.* She breathed in relief, but the exhale was caught in her throat when his face ducked into her hiding place in an effort to pick up the screwdriver for examining... and their eyes locked on each other's in a surprised staredown. It was one of those rare times where she saw him without his lab coat, and his jumpsuit sleeves were folded up to his elbows.

"*Winona—?*" He finally spoke, blinking dumbly. Then he crouched to hand her the screwdriver. "Well, that answers *one* question... I guess this is yours, huh, sport?"

Winona nodded silently and took it from him. "Hey, Jonas."

"Now, what're you doing hiding under your old man's desk?" He questioned as he offered her a hand and pulled her up to her feet, bringing her out from under the desk.

"Maintenance ticket," Her mouth was lying before she could formulate the fib as she pocketed her repossessed tool. "Wobbly desk."

"That right? I don't recall your dad saying he had a problem with his desk," Jonas mused aloud with a raised brow of suspicion. "Do you have to be *under* the desk to check it?"

"He told me when I was in here earlier, checking those cables. I said I'd come back later to check it after work." Winona continued to lie, her hands unknowingly clutching the sides of her jumpsuit in sweaty, white-knuckled palms as she hoped she could evade his second question by simply ignoring it.

"Uh-huh... okay..." She could tell he wasn't at all convinced, but there was a small look of doubt in his eyes. "...You maybe want to try the *truth* this time? It could do you wonders."
“Do you know what’s in this drawer?” Winona asked frankly after a defeated sigh, and crouched down in front of it. “Or do you have a key, by chance?”

“It’s locked for a reason, kiddo—you're not supposed to be in there. It's your dad's private files... and I put emphasis on private.” Jonas insisted.

“Is there anything in this drawer about my mom?” She frowned when the medical assistant visibly stiffened and wouldn't answer her. “…Should I take that as a yes?”

“Lo- Look, kid, I don't know what your dad has in there. And even if I did, it's not my business to tell you what it is. Okay?”

“Jonas, please. This is important to me—more important than you know. If there’s something in there about my mother—... if there’s something in there that I need to know, you have to tell me if you know something about it.” She pleaded desperately. “Jonas—please.”

“…I'm sorry, kid.” He shook his head firmly after what felt like an eternity of contemplation, but it only passed as a cursory moment in his eyes. “I'm going outside to finish my work. You have a minute to get all your little lock breaking stuff and get out of here. I don't want to tell the old man that I caught you trying to get into his personal things, okay?”

“...Okay, Jonas...” Winona responded disappointedly with a hanging of her head. There was a bubbling resistance in her—a defiance that called out, speaking ‘no! I'm done when I'm done! And no amount of 'big brother' voice and scolding will stop me!’

“Good. One minute, sport, that's all I'm giving you. Don't make me regret it.” The assistant warned before turning back out of the office, after ensuring that Winona was kneeling down to pick up all her bobby pins off the floor.

The door hadn’t even shut behind him before Winona took her screwdriver and jammed it straight into the open mouth of the locked drawer with a loud, jarring noise. She knew it was now or never—with Jonas catching her, she couldn't come back into the clinic without him watching her, or being on high alert that she'd try to break in again. He was like family, and he knew Winona didn't give up when everything in her was locked and loaded on something... especially something having to do with her mother.

Holding the edge of the desk, she kicked in the screwdriver and the length of the shaft plunged right through the lock, popping the drawer open. Jonas immediately ran back in at the noise.

“Winona Parker!” He scolded with a loud voice she never knew he had, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Unheedingly, Winona was pulling out a multitude of things crammed into the drawer and hurriedly leafing through them—surprised to find photos and a couple of holotapes spilling out from between the loose papers. Jonas was coming around the desk to snatch them back from her and she dodged him to the other side, trying to put distance between them while flipping through the pictures—but her feet stopped in place suddenly. The inventor had to grab hold of the edge of the desk to keep herself upright from the shock that racked through her body upon seeing the face staring back at her.

It was a dark-skinned black woman with short dark hair, and her beaming smile was framed with creases of the many smiles before it, and her eyes were alight despite the black and white of the photograph. Her arm seemed to be tucked around someone's body that accompanied the snapshot with her, her other arm outstretched to the camera as if trying to steady it, and in the upper corner was the chin and all-teeth grinning mouth of a partial face. Winona immediately recognized it as
her father's mid-laughing smile. Her mother really made him happy.

*Her mother.*

This woman... this beautiful, warm, smiling *stranger* of a woman... was *her mother*. Winona knew it the moment she saw the face; this woman was supposed to be her mom—*is* her mom. This woman is Catherine... and Winona touched her own face in amazement, realizing that they looked *identical* to each other. The main difference was her white hair and slightly lighter skin tone. Anyone would've looked at them and noticed the uncanny resemblance.

Winona barely registered Jonas's hand on her shoulder—no longer trying to stop her, but to comfort her—as tears swelled in her eyes and she continued flipping raggedly through the photos in her hands.

The next picture looked like the inside of a dimly lit building that she couldn't quite make out from the grainy quality of the photos. Lights were strung above litterings of equipment she didn't recognize, and standing at them was the back of a woman in a white lab coat, black hair pinned up into a neat bun, with her hands splayed across the console's board of buttons. Winona could tell at the least that whoever this woman was, she wasn't wearing a vault suit under the lab coat but a dress and short, clunky heels. The next picture was of the same scene but the woman—Asian, with a dour face and glasses balanced on the end of her nose—was looking at the cameraman with an irritated stare.

The picture after was another of her mom, Catherine, shoving the camera away from what looked to be like important work spilled out in front of her. There was a smile on her face despite the annoyed curl of her brow, and fingers of the cameraman spidered from the corner of the photo as if they were trying to protect the camera from her swatting hands. Winona could imagine her father laughing behind the lens and telling her mother to *'pretend I'm not even here!'*.

The one after was a picture of 7 people standing in a line together in front of a massive water-filled structure. Two of the people in the line of 7 Winona recognized immediately, one of them being her mother, and the other being her father at a much younger age. Her mom was looking up at him with a small, loving smile in her face instead of back into the camera for the picture. On the other side of her dad was the small, stern-faced Asian woman from the prior photos. The other four people, all in dingy lab coats, Winona didn't recognize at all—not even vaguely.

She turned it over with a shaking hand, and found written in the familiar, messy doctor's handwriting of her father's on the back;

*Project Purity Team*
*Jefferson Memorial – April 13th, 2256*
*Catherine, James, Madison, Daniel, Anna, Janice, Alex*  
*(and cameraman Garza)*

*I—... I don't know any of these people besides mom and dad...who are they?* Winona wondered as she sniffled through tears and wiped them away on the back of her hand, still holding the picture.

"...Winona," Jonas spoke gently from behind her and she nearly jumped out of her jumpsuit, completely forgetting that he was there. "C'mon, kiddo. I think you've seen enough."

Winona shoved him away on reflex when he moved to take the files and pictures from her, and she moved to the door to get away from him. Another photo of her mom was looking up at her and a
new waterfall of tears were threatening to come upon seeing it; her mother sitting on a messy bed, a swollen pregnant belly acting as a table for an open book, looking like she was reading aloud from it and unaware of her picture being taken. The caption on the back, in her father's handwriting, read:

*Catherine and Baby*

34 weeks pregnant
June 17th, 2258

*name yet to be decided*

An added note below the last scribbling, in neat, precise cursive, was a playful addendum;

*if it's a girl her name's Winona whether you like it or not Dr. Parker ;)*

The sobbing tears couldn't be stopped now and Jonas was holding her tightly, trying to comfort her with the paperwork and pictures and unread files encased between them.

"It's okay, kiddo—"

"Da- Dad told m- me—!... He said he bur- burned everything! *Everything!*" She sobbed against him. "Wh- Why did he keep these from m- me, Jonas—? Why would he l- li- lie about something he kn- knew was important to me? He knew I n- needed these pictures!"

"Only he can tell you that, kid. I can't help you there." Jonas admitted as he parted from the embrace to look down into her face, helping her dry her eyes. "C'mon, let's put everything away, before your dad finds out you got ahold of these—"

"*I can't!*" She yelled, causing him to flinch away in surprise. "*Not after this! I need to understand!*"

She juggled around the things in her arms to bring the files to the front, opening them to start reading.

"*Winona, put them away!*" Jonas demanded but she wasn't listening, facing her back to him. "*Dammit, Winona—! Give them to me! Stop!*"

She jerked her shoulder away as Jonas half-heartedly grabbed at her again, thumbing through stapled paperwork as her quick gait directed her into the next room to remain uninterrupted. She was skimming the texts with her eyes locking on sentences her fumbling mind couldn't absorb.

*Project Purity calculations have come back unsuccessful—*

—purification complete failure.

—low scale experiments will be necessary—

*Potomac River water rigorously tested; drinkable but with extreme caution.*

*Potomac River—and Jefferson Memorial?* Winona shut her eyes tightly, trying to collect the unbridled thoughts bucking wildly around the corral of her mind. *Think about your history, you know your monuments! Mr. Brotch taught you that Vault 101 was built in the heart of America! Washington D.C.! There was the Washington Monument, the White House—Lincoln Memorial—c'mon, remember! You've heard that monument before!*

Her eyes snapped open as the spark of realization finally engulfed her.
Jefferson Memorial was a monument in Washington D.C., too! It's by a main waterway, the Potomac River!

Winona sprinted out of the infirmary with Jonas's startled, but firm, voice carrying out after her. Her boots were pounding against the floor as loudly as her heart was in her ears, and the only thing navigating her through Vault 101 to her father was pure muscle memory of the halls.

"Hey, kid—! Winona!" Jonas called behind her but it barely registered in her dizzied mind.

All she could hear amidst her own loudthoughts were bitter things about her father lying to her during the entirety of her life—about more than just her mother, about more than just his place here in the vault. Everything Winona ever knew about him, and Catherine, and herself felt fabricated and the sting was so striking and sharp she didn't recognize the knife sticking out of her back, yet. There was a repetitive notion in her head of how her father wasn't here in 2256 when that picture was taken with this Project Purity team; a notion of Wally Mack claiming her father didn't exist in the database before he was 30; there were flashes of the unfamiliar faces in her head, the ones with the names of Madison, Daniel, Anna, Janice, Alex, and an unseen cameraman by the name of Garza, as ghosts of her parents' past.

Winona was flying down the stairs toward the living quarters, continuing to run after she pushed by an Officer she didn't pay attention to in her crazed state ("Slow down before you hurt yourself!") It was Freddie's dad. She finally skid around another corner to a halting stop in front of her father's apartment. She went in without knocking to find him silently eating a bowl of tomato soup with his Pip-Boy playing instrumental music while he looked over some paperwork with bifocals on.

His head immediately whipped upward in alarm when the door opened without warning, and frowned upon seeing his crying, swollen cheeked, and distressed daughter.

"Winona? Nona, what's wrong?" He removed his spectacles and put them atop his stack of folders, rounding his chair to come to her. "Sweetheart, are you hurt?"

Jonas came up behind them, puffing and leaning into the open doorway to collect himself.

"Sh- She found out about Purity, James." Was all he could muster before leaning over onto his knees, trying to catch his laboring breath.

Her father tensed and finally noticed the mess of opened files, loose paperwork, and the remainder of photos she hadn't dropped, tucked away in her arms. She tightened them against her chest almost protectively, as if the look he gave alone was enough hint to say he was going to forcefully reclaim them back from her.

"Nona, where did you get those?" He demanded to know. "Why were you in my desk?"

Her emotional suffering—the years of questions, of wondering, of the voice told her that something wasn't right—came tumbling out in an enraged voice. She was yelling, shaking, unable to stop herself as she furiously slapped everything in her hands into his chest in an aggressive gesture.

"You lied to me!" She shouted and he visibly flinched. "You lied right to my face since I was old enough to talk! Since I was old enough to understand! You've lied to me every day of my life about everything! You lied about mom! You lied about the vault!" Before she could stop herself, she hit a closed fist against the folders he was now holding against himself and he stumbled back a step, unable to look at her as some papers slipped out. "You lied about everything!"
"Winona, please—please—keep your voice down! Sweetheart, you don't understand—"

"I think yo- you should listen to him," Jonas agreed while still trying to get his breath back. "Woah I'm outta shape!...

Winona was sobbing again now without the hysterics of it; the tears freely flowing down her cheeks in angry rivers and being told to calm down only invigorated her rage. "All the talks you've had with me, a- about honesty! An- And loyalty! 'We are born in the vault and we die in the vault!' You don't know a damn thing about them! You've used the Overseer's words and you're not even from here! Am I even from here?" The final sentence passed through her mouth before she could even stop it. "Is mom even dead?"

She regretted it immediately when her father's eyes rounded, stunned by the implications of her barked question. There was a look in his eyes that she almost didn't recognize—a look of guilt, maybe, or shame—but it was gone as swiftly as all those feelings were replaced with a silently firm anger hardening his features. Though he looked calm, the folders were slammed down on the table, rattling it, before he grabbed her by the shoulder to force her to sit in his chair.

"You listen to me closely, young lady," He began with a tight voice, and she looked down at her lap, ashamed and almost scared. "You will lower your voice and think twice before you speak to me like that again, do you hear me? I don't care how angry you are—"

"So you're invalidating my feelings." She stated numbly though it was meant to sound like a prying question, and her eyes met his. "I have a right to be angry!"

"You do, you have every right to be mad at me, but I will not tolerate you speaking to me that way. Not now, not ever. Do you understand me?"

The shame in her was starting to dwindle as her anger was building up again, and she was mortified by it. How could she feel such a way after insinuating something so awful against her father?

"Do you even feel bad for lying to me?" She exclaimed. "Nona—" He tried to quiet her with the same warning tightness in his voice as before.

"No! You don't have any right! I don't have the right to talk to you like that? What about me? What about the way you've talked to me all this time? The way you've kept me in the dark, lying about absolutely everything? Lying especially about mom?" She snatched a photo up from the pile of folders she took from his desk, waving in his face the picture of Catherine smiling with just his chin making the photo. "When you knew how important it was to me to have something of hers! I should've known better than to trust you, when I knew you were lying! I knew something was wrong!"

"You don't even realize how dangerous it is, what you've done!" Her father yelled back at her, ripping the photo from her hands to slam it back down on the table with the others. "What you've uncovered—it was kept secret for a reason. Not just from you but from everyone here in the vault! If the Overseer finds out you know—"

"I don't care anymore!" She screamed over him, and he was stunned into silence. "I hoped he was lying, and was just trying to find ways to hurt me! Now I know the person I can't trust here is you! Now I can't trust a thing that comes out of your mouth! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"
Winona snatched the photo of her grinning mother off the table and bolted upright from the chair she was forced into, sprinting out the door where not even Jonas—who had been standing there, watching the whole ordeal—had stopped her. He quietly let her go as her father chased after her into the hall but stopped upon seeing her back turn the corner, disappearing from the sight of both of them.

"Winona—!" He cried helplessly after her with all his anger draining from him, leaving him sickly looking and guilt-ridden. ".Dear God, Jonas, what have I done? If Alphonse finds out she knows —"

"What even caused her to come looking in the first place?" Jonas responded quietly. "...She said 'he'. Someone told her Catherine wasn't in the database. But the Overseer wouldn't have—?"

"No, he wouldn't have... the Overseer definitely wouldn't have. After the deal he forced everyone to abide by? Everyone agreed that it'd be best if our children never knew about the outside... that they never be told the door was opened." James responded despondently and looked down at his assistant. "He's the biggest advocate for isolationism that I've seen in this place. Someone else told her."

"But who? And why now?"

"I don't know, Jonas..." He sighed exhaustedly with his hand finding his face, massaging the bridge of his nose to ease an oncoming migraine.

"I'm sorry, James. I should've tried harder to stop her—and I know she's angry now, but when she's calmed down and you can explain yourself, she'll understand. I know she will." He supplied reassuringly.

"This time it's different. This is more than just an 'unfair' grounding or petty argument. I don't rightfully deserve her forgiveness."

"You kept the truth from her for a good reason," Jonas frowned worriedly.

He smiled bitterly. "...Did I? I'm not quite sure of that, anymore. The Overseer will have to be told that someone talked."

"It doesn't have to be tonight—won't be any more damaging tomorrow. It's been a rough month for everyone down here and I think the last thing we should be doing is causing a panic, especially at this time of night." The assistant insisted with a shake of his head and he clapped a hand on James' shoulder.

"Do you think she'll tell anyone about tonight?"

"I don't know. Maybe Amata? But I know the girls haven't talked to each other in a while."

"And Freddie?"

"I guess you didn't hear, but they broke up about a week ago, doc. Maybe longer, I don't know. Those two can't seem to make up their minds about each other."

"It'd seem so..." James responded as Jonas turned him away to go back inside.

"C'mon, doc. It'll be better tomorrow."

James wanted to believe him—the repressed optimism of his assistant would have normally kept
his spirits up and some remaining hope alive for said 'better tomorrow'—but all he could do was continuously replay in his mind his daughter screaming that she hated him. He always wondered if she would ever catch onto his lies, and the vault doctor told himself that she was always the calm and sensible one between the two of them. When he was her age, he had a rage that was long ago neutralized by his aging and Catherine's death—so to hear his resigned anger coming from his daughter's mouth was shocking. It made him rethink that, perhaps, he didn't know her as well as he thought; he knew they had grown apart since she moved out because they were both busy in their lives, but he didn't think either of them had changed that much.

James was sure he must have said, several times, to his own parents that he hated them while he was growing up, but he never meant it. Not even a little bit—not even once.

But Winona... she might have meant it, and for that he couldn't forgive himself.

*Catherine... you would've known what to do. You always knew how to handle things like this. You were always better with words... better at making people feel better and getting them to understand. I wouldn't have been able to even if our daughter gave me the chance...* 

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And that concludes the end of the two parter! As always, if you enjoyed be sure to bookmark Inventor's Absolution for all the future updates (which happen every Friday, I might add). Also drop a review to show this story some love, especially if you have any interesting thoughts or comments about things that have happened in chapters, much like this one!

Otherwise check out my profile for more fanfiction, as well as a recently posted one-shot by the name of Yuletide Yearnings that involve Christmas, our favorite inventor and Tunnel Snake, and a bit of mystery, warm fuzzies, and comedy!

As always, thank you for reading.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
CHP 16 - Jailhouse Rock (P1)

Chapter Notes

A/N: In thanks to a very sudden spark of an idea I had for this story, Chapter 16 - Jailhouse Rock, now has a Part 2 and Part 3! Gosh I hate when that happens, but the timing couldn't have been any better with the posting of this chapter and the ideas I have for future chapters.

I've also decided that when chapters are split up into multiple parts, they will be posted in a way leading up to next Friday's update so I'm not plunking all of it down at once (especially in the case of this three-parter here!) and readers have something to keep them satisfied until the next update instead of waiting all week. Now, this will only be for chapters with parts, not for chapters that can standalone, so it'll be a special surprise every few weeks if a chapter happens to be a multi-piece.

So concerning this chapter's pieces, the dates for posting are as follows;

Chapter 17 - Jailhouse Rock (P2) - The Culling (P1) - 1/9 (Tuesday)
Chapter 18 - The Culling (P2) - 1/12 (Friday)
Chapter 19 - (CURRENTLY UNNAMED) - 1/19 (Friday).

Thanks for baring through my indecisiveness! Enjoy this little part, and I'll be seeing you on Tuesday for the next chapter! Don't forget to follow/bookmark this story if you're new so you can get automatic notifications whenever it's updated.

~Faerie signing out

July 25th, 2277

"I'm sure you're all wondering why a vault-wide meeting has been called, and I would first like to reassure everyone that there's no matter of emergency."

The atrium was filled with rows of metal-backed chairs, standing like an army before the General of the Overseer's podium at the front of the room, and in each seat sat a vault resident, listening intently. Various members of the Security team were stationed at points around the large atrium, watching the meeting for trouble makers with condemned stares and circling walks. When there was mention of 'no matter of emergency', the sitting residents looked to each of their seat neighbors and whispered quietly amongst one another in the time it took the Overseer to clear his throat into his fist.

"Pardon me," His voice echoed from the booming microphone. "As I was saying—though not an emergency, a crime has been committed against the vault and its people. A breach of security has occurred concerning the Vault's Database of Records. Certain restricted documents were viewed by person, or persons, who weren't permitted access in viewing these documents... and as you all are
aware this kind of criminal deed is heavily frowned upon, and so must be punished accordingly."

Winona was in a chair to the far middle of the crowd from where the podium was at the front. As the Overseer let the mention of punishment sink into the stunned residents, she was bouncing her knee agitatedly with her arms folded over her chest. Tom Holden, who sat to her left and closest to her bouncing knee, gave her a slightly perplexed glance that she ignored. From where she sat she could see the back of Jonas' head in the very front row as he sat with his grandmother, Mrs. Palmer, and Winona couldn't see her father sitting anywhere in the meeting. She hadn't talked to either of them after the night she confronted him because she couldn't ignore how betrayed she felt; she didn't care about his reasoning for hiding these things against her, especially her mother's photos, because nothing he could say would excuse lying to her for nearly 20 years. Nothing excused the lies about the vault and her life.

The days after the discovery were spent trying to make sense of the evidence, which she reviewed hourly in her head; the six strangers in lab coats her father never told her about. The unfamiliar equipment in unrecognizable rooms that she was certain weren't in the vault, featured in several photographs. There was the date (March 21st, 2256) and location (Jefferson Memorial) at the bottom of that Project Purity Team photo that timestamped when this project took place and when her father knew these people. There was mention of physically testing the quality of water in the Potomac River that was undoubtedly outside. The evidence stacked up to only one conclusion in her mind; not only was the outside safe, but it was inhabitable—and it was inhabited by assumingly thriving people.

And her father was from there.

It explained a lot of things to her, like why her mom wasn't in the resident index and why her dad was a 'ghost' before 30 (if what Wally said was true); why he had nothing of her mother's; the unknown and eccentric voice on the radio Freddie gifted her (the voice that dad convinced her she dreamt up)... it was the only conclusion that explained so many other little things in her life. It felt like a puzzle she didn't know she spent her whole life piecing together, thinking that it was full and complete, but little did she know it was missing corners and single pieces in places she never thought needed them. This puzzle now felt complete but with finality and she wanted to keep it that way.

So if Winona was right about it—if she was right in thinking that it was safe to go outside, that her father wasn't originally from Vault 101, and that the door had been opened before—could the door be opened again?

Ever since last month when one of the reactors was blown to hell and all the chaos ensued with the busted pipes, she knew the purifier was on it's last leg and they were running out of parts to keep it going. More water pipes could be rusted through that they didn't know about, which would put more strain on the purifier, in the end—and with the rationing of water, two of the four greenhouses had dried up and died so there was a sudden and rapid decrease in food supplies, even with all their packaged food. The vault was in constant need of repairs that just Stanley, Paul, Winona, Floyd and several other maintenance folk couldn't keep up with. Vault 101 wasn't running to full operation because of the lack of people in such a large bunker, and not every function was self-sustainable—but that was another problem in itself for a later time.

The vault couldn't stand for another few generations. Maybe one or two, if they were lucky... but if they could go outside—if they could explore, gather, and most importantly, grow—they could bring themselves a fighting chance. They could bring fresh DNA to the generations of the distant cousin inbreeding pool that was Vault 101, strengthen their numbers again, and do much needed repairs to the vault with more supplies that they didn't have to ration accordingly. There was an
An inkling of memory that touched her about Amata's distress years ago concerning marriage and who her husband would be; maybe that could be fixed now, for all of the young dwellers. They wouldn't have to be held entrapped and in duress under the boot heel that was the civic duty of procreation.

It left Winona wondering how many people knew that it was safe outside... how many of them in this very room? If she was certain that her father wasn't from here, and neither was she, than anyone from back then had to be aware that the outside was safe. With a quick count of heads in the room, she calculated that it was easier to say who probably didn't know, and that was almost the entirety of the newest generation; about 10 or 15 dwellers, give or take.

**But they might not count,** Winona realized as her eyes panned toward the Tunnel Snakes that sat in the row right in front of her, at the end furthest from her. She could see the backs of Paul's, Wally's, Dolly's, and Butch's head in that order. Wally has to be the one who did the break in, and looked through restricted files—he knew things he shouldn't have about mom and dad. He doesn't have the same information that I do, but he's just as smart as me. He might have the same idea about the outside, and he might have a family member that could be more forthcoming with the truth than dad was.

Winona sunk lower into her chair when she saw the Overseer's eyes pan across the room, amongst every face of every dweller that sat silently. He knew the truth as well, and from what she gathered by her father's panic upon confronting him that night, ensuring that the Overseer wasn't aware that she knew was a big deal.

"**I'm certain this deplorable resident is in this room, at this very moment.**" The Overseer spoke coolly into the microphone with his hands gripping the edges of his podium. "**And I give my word as your Overseer that if you hand yourself over to my Security team, then you will not meet the maximum punishment of two months in holding. You will, instead, be given a week of community service and a temporary, unpaid suspension from your job—and you will forfeit any current raises in said job and return to minimum credit wages of your position... perhaps even a setback of position in your career path.**"

A deafening silence overcame the entirety of the atrium, and even the Security guards who were watching for unruly residents were now looking to the Overseer nervously. The members of the crowd, a sea of blue jumpsuits and yellow 101’s, refused to look around out of fear that even coughing would implicate them in a crime they didn't commit. Winona wanted to stand and speak, she wanted to point a finger at Wally and accuse him of it, but she didn't. She had other things to worry about without making a spectacle of herself—and if Wally wasn't arrested, he'd come around with the plan of doing something worse than just hitting her (she touched the yellowed bruise on her jaw in thought of this)... and if he was arrested, she still had the other two Tunnel Snakes to worry about.

As well, after what happened in her apartment the other night, Winona was rightly terrified of him.

Paul wouldn't hurt her, though. She knew that he was an okay guy, and though he was still a Tunnel Snake they made amends with one another a while back. He apologized for all the shit they did to her when they were kids, and she accepted the apology, so Winona was certain he wouldn't come after her. But Butch DeLoria? Him, she was still unsure of. Dare she say they were pretty alright around one another—Butch wouldn't sling insults at her, or try to trip her up or cruelly prank her, or hound her about the halls... there were times where they passed each other in private and actually had something nice to say to each other. They'd even steal away in secret and talk idly about various topics, and to her surprise he was smarter and more perceptive than she thought he was. There was also an accumulation of moments between them as they grew up together—like her
trying to help his mother with her addiction, and him making custom hair dye for her despite
catching her stealing—that not only made the other's company tolerable, but kind of comfortably
casual.

There was more than once when Winona was alone and Butch popped in to ask her what she was
doing, or she'd happen to be walking by the salon and she'd say hello if no one was in, or ask how
his mom was doing. It was an interesting predicament of sorts—finally being unafraid, of not
having to prepare herself for a fight any time she heard Butch's voice carry up the halls... but that
could all change at a moment's notice. If she messed with Wally, she didn't think he'd hesitate to
come after her.

"You put another God damn hand on her, and I'll make sure not even Susie'll recognize your ugly fuckin' mug, you hear me, Mack?"

That moment, back at her apartment, was the only thing that made her question how sure she really
was about Butch DeLoria coming for her.

Winona thought about how Butch pulled Wally away to keep him from attacking her. Maybe
he wouldn't come after her? He never defended her before, and for him to do it to his brother—
threaten to decimate him for smacking her—was stunning. It was almost enough for the inventor to
forgive all the slithery little shitty things he did to her while they grew up together... even though
she wasn't innocent, and would deliver it back just as bad, if not worse.

"No one?" The Overseer clucked his tongue in disappointment as he leaned onto his forearms on
the podium. "What a shame... I was hoping we could resolve this amicably, especially after
offering a generous sentence in comparison of the maximum punishment." He straightened up
though his mouth dipped to the head of his microphone, and his eyes were immediately trained on
her—easy to spot with her head of stark white hair amongst the crowd. "Winona Parker, will you
please stand?"

It took Winona a moment to understand why everyone was slowly turning back in their seats with
mortified gasps toward her. She was distracted by her thoughts, and with wide eyes and a pit that
completely bypassed her stomach to the heels of her feet, she slowly got up from her seat
uncertainly.

"Yes, sir?" She responded with polite confusion.

"This is your final chance to speak honestly. Miss Parker did you, or did you not, break into the
database, and review sensitive, restricted, and otherwise classified information?" The Overseer
asked frankly and all eyes were on her now, anticipating her response.

"...I—... did not?" She answered with some hint of a befuddled voice. She was the one being
accused? What in the fresh hell—

"I see... I'm disappointed in you, Miss Parker." There was a smirk he could barely keep off his face
when he spoke and it sickened her. "Accusations have been made against you with extremely
compelling evidence. I have no choice but to have you detained for your crimes, since you choose
to lie to me, and the great people of this vault."

The inventor knew he was enjoying this due to his hatred for her dad, and her, which lasted
for years. He was constantly trying to find reasons to argue with and belittle her father or to see her
punished, and this display was no exception. If it were anyone else but her he wouldn't have made a
big show with the meeting and calling all the other residents—it would've been a private affair. He
wanted to embarrass the Parkers and publicly prove that he was finally pinning her for something.
It made Winona nervous in knowing that the Overseer seemed certain she was the one who broke into the 101 Database; he wouldn't have called the meeting if he wasn't sure, he wouldn't risk humiliating himself on such a grand scale if he wasn't.

This is bad. Really bad. This is the pudding catapult incident with Beatrice bad.

"Daddy, Winnie wouldn't do that!" Amata proclaimed from the front row at the furthest left side, coming up to her feet. "How could you accuse her of something like this?"

"There has been evidence turned over to me that overwhelmingly proves her guilt, and now she must stand in her truth and face what she's done."

"My truth?" She frowned, balancing a throwing dagger on her tongue about the long held secret of outside, but when she saw Jonas' mortified face the dagger was sheathed begrudgingly. The worry in his eyes was enough to disarm her, despite her still being upset with him.

"As Overseer, I hereby declare that you, Winona Parker, will be held accountable for your actions against Vault 101 and it's people. Perhaps the time in holding will do you good and help you to reflect on the things we hold above all else in this vault—matters of loyalty, integrity, hardwork, and justice."

"Justice? Daddy, this isn't justice! You're accusing her of something she wouldn't do, there'd be no reason for her to! If this were justice there'd be a—a trial and a panel of her peers! Not just you claiming there's evidence you won't even present!" Amata insisted ferociously.

"I wanna know who's accused me!" Winona exclaimed in following as two officers advanced on either side of the row that she was in, so when she climbed out of the crowd she could be apprehended swiftly. "Who are they? I want to know what they said!"

"This is bullshit!" Butch was up on his feet in seconds to everyone's surprise, nearly flinging his chair backward from the force of it. Winona saw Wally stretch an arm across Dolly's lap to yank on Butch's sleeve to sit him back down with a deep scowl, but he was promptly shrugged off.

"If you believe Miss Parker needs a cell mate, I'll happily oblige you!" He exclaimed with a curled palm hitting the edge of his podium in anger. "Do not test me!"

"Why don'cha tell everyone 'bout outside! Tell everyone that it's safe, and that the door's been opened tons of times before! Even you opened it!" Butch yelled with an accusing finger point and Officer Hannon Sr. was looking too stunned to even think about withholding him now, all eyes pivoting back to the Overseer.

That—... That was something Winona didn't know. The door was opened before her and her father were let in? If it was opened so many times, why wasn't it just left open, allowing passage for dwellers to come and go? What was so awful about the outside that they were being trapped in a web of lies like this?
"I have done no such thing! How dare you accuse me of something so heinous, and further go on to imply that above ground is even remotely safe for us! That's a dangerous idea to put in the heads of impressionable young residents, Mister DeLoria! Youself included!"

"Butch, shut the fuck up and sit your dumb ass down!" Wally hissed at him in a hard whisper to, again, be ignored by his fellow Tunnel Snake.

"Butchie, please, be quiet!" Dolly pleaded desperately in a worried hush, standing up to grab for his hand to yank him back toward his chair, but he wouldn't move. "I don't want 'ya gettin' in trouble!"

"You're a lyin' scumbag! You've been lyin' to us all our damn lives about outside, and for what? So you can keep control over us? So you can keep shovin' us around, pretending you're the greatest asshole around here? That you can keep us safe? 'Ya can't even keep half of us safe from the radroaches!" Butch grimaced and gave the Overseer both of his middle fingers. "Fuck you, man! You lyin' sack of dog crap!"

"Guards! Please remove Miss Parker and Mister DeLoria from this meeting, immediately! I won't have another word said against me or the vault!" The Overseer boomed.

As Winona was hastily pulled from the seated, bewildered masses of vault dwellers, one of her arms was twisted behind her back to force her to comply, despite the fact that she was too stunned to resist. While being yanked towards the exit by whichever officer grabbed her, Butch was given a harsher treatment; all she saw was a flurry of two officers, Hannon Sr. Included, grabbing and pulling at the King Serpent. He was elbowing them off with seething promises of cracking skulls if they touched his hair or jacket, to be unceremoniously shoved toward the exit after the guard with Winona.

There was barely a rallying cry from the residents, not even Amata, who stood in shock over what transpired, and it made Winona wish her dad had been there... that way the walk to the vault's only holding cell wouldn't have felt so terrifying.

"What, don't I get a phone call or nothin'?" Butch exclaimed as he pounded a fist against the reinforced glass window that looked out of their cell. "Hey! I know you can hear me, Kendall! I want my damn phone call!"

Winona sat on one of the only two beds that furnished the holding cell, her legs crossed in front of her with her elbows on her knees and her fingers threading through her hair. With an exasperated huff she finally opened her eyes and looked to him as he continued pounding on the window.

"Butch, could you stop?"

"No way, man! I'm wearin' him out already, look at him!" Butch cupped his hands around his mouth to better project himself through the glass. "Hey, Kendall! Your wife works gloryholes in the bathroom on Sunday mornin's, and I'm first in line!"

John Kendall, the officer on duty, looked visibly incensed by this—but instead of responding through the intercom, he got up and walked out of the small jail hub of Vault 101 to cool off. Winona could see him shaking out the tension in his fists, which was a silent threat of wanting to punch the stuffing out of the mouthy Tunnel Snake. The door shut behind him upon exiting, leaving the two alone in the cell with no other officers watching from the hub.

"Don't you ignore me! Get back here! Lemme call my 'ma!" Butch demanded. He was now
punching the glass with knuckles rather than pounding on it with the brunt of his fist, watching as Officer Kendall retreated from the room. "Bastard!"

Winona got up from the bed and grabbed for his arm, effectively pulling him away from the window in a backwards stagger.

"Would you shut up?" He pulled his arm from hers and straightened out his jumpsuit shoulder. His jacket was confiscated, along with his switchblade and some loose pocket possessions. "You want a phone call? He'll give you a fat lip!"

"Tch," He snorted with his arms folding tightly over his chest and his eyes looked to the wall rather than her face. "Like I couldn't take him on, Parker."

"I'm sure," She responded flatly and shook her head. "Look, DeLoria—our chances don't look too good. If we want to get out we should just do what they say."

"Maybe that's how you operate, but that ain't me, got it?" He frowned at her. "Tunnel Snakes don't do good behavior."

"Well if this Tunnel Snake wants a phone call, he's going to have to do better than talk crap about an officer's wife! What's your mom gonna do if you're in here longer than the night? What if the Overseer keeps you all week?"

Butch grimaced and finally looked at her, opening his mouth to say something in defense but it immediately clacked shut with a growl. He shoved past her to lay down on the left bed with his arms still folded over his chest, staring up at the ceiling with an angry, twisted expression. Winona sighed and came over to stand at his bedside.

"The mess we've gotten ourselves into..." She muttered tiredly under her breath and rubbed her eye with the heel of her palm, her opposite hand cupping her elbow.

"...Dunno why you didn't just say it was Wally," He continued to grimace at the ceiling as if it had personally offended him. "...Not like you'd be lyin'..."

The inventor gaped at Butch in astonishment before the expression settled to one of neutrality. She took a seat beside him on the edge of the bed, and he looked at her with a suspicious stare under heavy-lidded eyes. The color of them peeped out like strained orbs of watery blue due to the harsh fluorescent lighting of their shared cell, and a crooked, impish smirk came to his face at their proximity.

"If you wanna get closer t'me, that's all you gotta say, girl." He said teasingly and she responded silently with a peeved look, causing him to snicker childishly.

"I didn't say it was Wally because it'd just make this whole damn thing worse. It would've given him another reason to come after me." Winona admitted with a repressed huff and looked to her lap, where her fingers knotted themselves together timidly. "...You guys told the Overseer it was me, didn't you? That I was the one that broke into the database, to cover up Wally's tracks?"

He snapped up stiffly at her question, his weight propped up only by an elbow on his flat pillow and he frowned with thick eyebrows scrunching over his eyes.

"Don't ya think for a damn minute I was apart of that! Fuck that noise! I didn't wanna have nothin' to do with it, especially after Mack went all psycho and tried t'fuckin' kill 'ya." He huffed as he turned his body so he sat perpendicular to the way she was sitting. With his back pressed against
the wall, the back of his head connected to it in a small thud of frustration and one leg was brought in toward his chest to uphold an arm. The other was stretched out in front of him lazily, his shin touching her thigh. She didn't pull away.

"I—... thanks. For stopping him back then." Winona replied and tucked some of her curls behind her ear. Her knuckle lightly tapped her jaw where the bruise was, sending a thrilling ache through her cheek. "...I'm glad you were there. If you weren't—?... Yeah. You know."

"...Yeah. Well—" The Tunnel Snake awkwardly fumbled for something to say and idly pulled the zipper up and down on the front of his jumpsuit a few times before stopping. "...Glad you're not dead or somethin'."

"I'll take that as 'Tunnel Snake' for you're welcome," She chuckled.

"Don't be puttin' words in my mouth." He deflected weakly, but the look in his face was all the confirmation she needed that she was right.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

"Something else?" Winona deadpanned.

"It's like you want me t'be a smartass, Parker!" Butch smirked cheekily. "Fine, fine, don't gotta look at me like that."

"How did you know about outside?"

"...The fuck, how do you know about outside?" He squinted suspiciously while leaning forward towards her. "If this s'one of those things where everyone knows but me, I'm gonna be pissed as hell—"

"You first." She insisted with a firm shake of her head. "Butch, this is serious—how'd you know about up top?"

"...The database," He spoke frankly with a shrug and scratched the edge of his jaw, settling back against the wall. "'Cause of Wally. He got into it—don't ask me how—and he got his hands on some meaty hush-hush stuff that the Overseer was trynna hide... aside from that stuff about you and your dad."

"The Overseer—... was trying to hide things about dad and I?" Winona questioned aloud, frowning in mild confusion, when Butch nodded. "You're talking about our files, aren't you? The ones Wally got into? I thought all resident files were sealed."

"Wally said it was just you twos and the Overseer, everyone else he had clearance for—but he got into your guys' shit and said that he found a lotta weird stuff about your dad's file." Butch explained before his eyes broke the contact they made with hers to stare at the wall. "That's why he dragged us down t'your place. He thought you'd know somethin' about it."

"What sort of things? What else did he find out?"

"I dunno, he said he found out some shit 'bout outside—said it was messed up. Real messed up." Butch frowned as he revisited the memory he spoke aloud. "All he said was the door's been opened before."
"Did he find out why the door was shut again?"

"Nah, man... actually, I dunno. He was being weird 'bout the whole thing, wouldn't tell Paul and I nothin' after what he tried doing to you. He thinks we're traitors 'cause Paul's all buddy-buddy with you now and I stopped him from beating the crap outta ya."

"And Dolly?"

"Trust me, she'd tell the whole damn vault if she knew something. She's gotta big mouth."

"I think she's got you beat there," She responded impassively with a dead stare, implying the incident of the meeting when Butch jumped out of his seat.

"You think I'm cool with dyin' down here? The hell was the point of keepin' us trapped like rats in a maze, with shit breaking all the time and the roaches everywhere, if we could go outside?"

"I don't know, DeLoria... I don't know."

"Whatever, Snowflake. Listen, I'm still real interested in some show-'n-tell, so how'd you know about outside—?"

"My dad. Sort of." Winona sighed with a dejected shake of her head as she stared at the floor between her intertwined fingers. "I always knew something wasn't right—the stories he told me about my mom, and about the way he grew up. After you left with Wally that night, I—... I went looking, hoping to find something that would prove I was just thinking crazy, that Wally was thinking crazy... but my dad was lying."

"That bites." Butch nodded in agreement. "What sorta stuff was he hiding?"

"I can't say... I still don't really understand it myself, I didn't get a good look at everything. But once I get out of here we're going to have a talk. I think the only good thing that came out of all this is that I finally know what my mom looks like."

"Wait, you didn't know what your 'ma looked like?" He crowed in disbelief and turned towards her, his jack slack and his eyes wide.

"My dad lied and said he got rid of all her things when she died," A bitter smile came to her lips and she couldn't look at him, feeling embarrassed. "It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud. I didn't realize it before... I don't know why I didn't push him on it. I should've known it was a lie, it was so obvious and it—... I let it fly right over my head."

"...I don't think it's stupid. My 'ma probably woulda done somethin' like that when my pops died. And I would've believed her, too. What else are 'ya gunna do about it, right?" Butch spoke with some measure of weak reassurance in his voice as he stared down at a seam of two floor plates that met in a bind of flat head bolts. A shrug rolled off his shoulders when he looked at her.

"What's your 'ma look like, then?"

Winona could feel a genuine warmth coming to chase the bitterness in her smile. She released an airy chuckle and shook her head, looking back up at him.

"I look a lot like her... but with my dad's eyes. She's older than I thought she would've been, too. Maybe mid-40's, at least." The bitterness quickly returned to her expression. "...I think it's why she had a heart attack giving birth to me. She was too old to be having children."
"...Hey, don't get all sad on me and whatever. You start cryin'—shit, dunno what I'd do." Butch warned blithely.

"Duck, probably." She responded with sarcasm that made herself laugh. The memory of that night in his salon was once a great embarrassment to think about, but now she could laugh at her own expense about it.

"Yeah, so don't go throwin' shit around, alright? Not alotta places to hide in here." He mused as he looked around to the two beds, a cube shaped table that sat between them, and an unwalled toilet at the far corner. "...You think we'll get out before one of us has to take a leak?"

"I believe that would all depend on the two of you and how compliant you decide to be," A condescending voice rose from the intercom at the door, causing the both of them to look up.

They didn't have to see the face of the Overseer to know that it was his voice coming from the speaker.

Winona held up a hand to Butch when she could hear his mouth open up behind her to slew a hateful song at the Overseer, and she shook her head in the negative. She cautiously gestured for him to let her do the talking and he, unwillingly, allowed her with an obnoxious grumble. She walked to the intercom and intercepted the call.

"How could we do that?"

"If you meet my conditions, I'll have the guards release you both within the day."

"What are your terms?" She asked with a shoulder leaning against the doorframe, looking to Butch who had a matching expression of disapproval. "And don't take this as agreement—we're not agreeing to anything until we hear it out."

"Very well. Firstly, you will accept that you were the one that broke into the database and viewed classified information on various residents and private files. You will also personally apologize to your fellow residents for your wrongdoings and commit to 500 hours of community service, during which you will be suspended from your job. Without pay or benefits."

Winona closed her eyes to quickly calculate the numbers in her head; 7 hours of community service per day, divided by the 500 hours total... that was 72 days of community service, just about—so two and a half months living on rations supplied by the community service program. It'd be just enough for her to scrape by while still suffering, somehow.

"And if I wasn't the one that broke into the vault's private system—?"

"I doubt you could very well prove innocence with such compelling evidence against you, Winona."

She looked back at Butch worriedly but he didn't seem to be paying attention anymore. He was laying back on his bed, eyes trained on a spot on the ceiling with his arms crossed under his head, but his eyes momentarily flickered towards her. Butch knew she was asking for support; there was no way she could prove her innocence and he was the only one who had a chance of providing that evidence... if only he was willing to flip on Wally.

"What are your other terms?" She spoke back into the intercom with her gaze still locked with Butch's.

"Secondly, you will hand over all of your tools, your blueprints, your inventions, your supplies, and
your workbench will be removed from your quarters along with your personal computer. You will also sign a written agreement stating that you will no longer create your little toys, ever again."

Winona felt her body go rigid and her lungs plummet into her stomach, unable to draw a strangled breath back into her. The shock completely knocked the air out of her body and she looked through the window to see him sitting in front of the intercom in a pulled up chair. No one was with him. He shot her a prying look and she disappeared from the windowsill.

"What does that have to do with any of this—"

"I have allowed you far too much liberation here. Your inventions have caused nothing but trouble time and time again. Causing messes, disturbing the peace, nearly injuring multiple residents in one malfunctioning second. This recent debacle of yours has cleared my mind and made me realize that I’ve failed in my duty as Overseer by allowing my daughter's pleas to manipulate my decision making... but no longer. All of the things I have listed will be turned over to me for incineration."

The inventor was barely able to regather herself from the debilitating blow, brushing her hair out of her face to help her focus better and her eyes screwed shut, trying to think. She couldn't turn everything over! Her inventions, her blueprints! They were things she had for years, since she was a child, they meant the world to her! Widget was her pride, Gizmo was her joy, her blueprints encompassed all the brilliant ideas that filled her head as she learned new things and it showed a timeline of growth as an inventor. To part with them—... to part with all of it was unbearable for her.

"Thirdly—and this is directed at you, Mister DeLoria—you will issue to me a personal apology for your outburst during this morning’s meeting. I will not tolerate such an attitude from a vault hoodlum like yourself, and if you had half the intelligence of your late father, you would realize the damage in your accusations. Your mother needs to take as much care in managing you as she does with her—... 'hobbies'..'"

Butch lunged up from his bed at the intentionally slanted mention of his parents, stomping toward the door with a fuming, reddened face and fists curled so tightly at his sides that they were white-knuckled and trembling. Winona quickly made contact with him, gently pushing him back from the intercom before he could say anything with hands against his chest and she muttered in a hard whisper;

"Calm down! This is what he wants, he wants you to get mad. Don't give him a reason to keep you in here any longer than you should be." Her eyes met with his while her hands remained braced against him. "Think about your mom. She needs you to get out of here."

"Lastly, you will both agree to never speak of the door being opened or the outside world ever again. To plant the seed of doubt amongst our people that the world above is anything but a radiation-filled wasted land of lifelessness is purely incomprehensible. My duty as Overseer is to protect the people of this vault, and this duty will not be undermined by the infection of a vivid imagination from two of the vault's most troublesome children. I will not have residents think that outside is anything but dangerous! I refuse to have that blood on my hands."

Winona looked back to the intercom as she tried to keep Butch away from it, feeling the hard, angry breathing that rose from his flared nostrils. She had to think, think... she could handle the community service. She could handle the temporary, unpaid suspension and the public apology if her integrity would allow her to admit guilt for a crime she didn't commit; but she couldn't hand over the things that represented so many years of her life—of herself—to have it all destroyed! Winona couldn't fathom not being able to invent anymore, that was part of who she
was! It was like breaking the legs of an impassioned dancer. She couldn't agree to the Overseer's final demands of never speaking about outside again, she knew that if they all stayed down here, they would die out. They couldn't sustain themselves any longer with how things were currently deteriorating..

But when she opened her mouth to speak, it wasn't her voice that answered the Overseer.

"You don't break her shit. She gets to keep it, all of it."

"That doesn't meet the expectations of my end of the deal. No dice, Mister DeLoria."

"I dunno about you, but I bet Winona's got somethin' juicy 'bout some things going on around here, Overseer," Butch responded smugly. "Things you wouldn't want gettin' out... things you wouldn't want Amata knowing."

Winona stared at Butch in astonishment, too struck by the coyness of his smile in how he manipulated the situation, built upon a foundation of shock over how quickly things were being swayed. She waited with a breath held in the back of her throat, anticipating the Overseer's response to be one that was too proud to let Butch's negotiation be met.

"...I have no idea as to what you're implying, Mister DeLoria." The Overseer responded in a voice that was meant to sound certain, but they could both hear the break in it.

Butch nudged Winona with an elbow and a warning look for her to come up with something. She shot back an exasperated glare, panic rising up from being unsure of what to reply with—and suddenly they were both frantically communicating with one another in half-finished gestures and flailing hands translating the silence. Finally, the Tunnel Snake shoved her to the intercom as a means of getting her to speak up and she cleared her throat, hoping that the first thing that came to mind was something that would work.

"I don't think she'd like hearing that you've been working with the Tunnel Snakes, Overseer." Butch jerked in surprise and hit her in the back with a look of 'not that!' but she slapped him off comically and kept talking. "You think she'd want to know that her father was into some shady business with the three boys that made her life pure hell for years? Oh, but not just Amata, almost the entire vault? Forget about outside, it won't matter what's up there when people find out that our Overseer has been siccing these... what'd you call them? 'Vault hoodlums' on almost everyone in the vault? I'm sure Amata wouldn't be the only one who'd like to hear what you have to say about that. And before you think that no one would believe me, Overseer, I've got friends that are more convincing than you think. They're more convincing than you, and that's all I need."

"...As an addendum," The Overseer began slowly and with a frustrated voice. "Winona, you are never to speak to anyone about the things you've seen in the database. If any copies of the things you've discovered in your escapades exist, they will be turned in to me immediately. Amata will also be told nothing of this. And—... And I will allow you to keep the machinations of your hobby, under the understanding that if another incident occurs because of your inventions, everything I listed previously will be removed from your possession quite aggressively."

"You have my word, Overseer—I don't have a single record of such things." She promised despite Butch snickering quietly behind her, suggesting that Wally may have had such records. Well... she wasn't lying, at least.

"We'll see about that. Now, do you agree to the terms stated?"
"We want an hour to think about it. I think that's reasonable, Overseer." Winona added on.

"...Fine. You have your hour, but don't expect an increase of time if you haven't come to a decision by then. I'll return later for your response."

Cautiously, Winona peeked an eye out from around the edge of the windowsill to see the Overseer getting up after the intercom clicked off. John Kendall returned from his enraged exit, and after properly saluting the Overseer, took his seat again at the desk just outside the same window. When he flipped open a magazine the moment the door shut behind the Overseer, she released a quiet sigh and turned back to Butch after clicking off her own end of the intercom.

"Why would you do that?" She exclaimed. "What if I didn't have anything to come up with!"

"Ya got through it alright." He was smirking, trying to stifle a snigger at the irritated face she was making at him.

"You're lucky I did." She huffed before gesturing back to the door with an open palm. "...Why did you do that, Butch? I thought you hated my inventions."

"They—... aren't too bad, I guess. Annoyin' as hell, but whatever. Plus, the Overseer see's that dog thing you've got with the fire mouth and whatever—?"

"Oh, God dammit, you're right." Winona clapped a hand to her forehead in disbelief.

"...That thing looks cooler when you're not on the teeth end of it." He admitted and a small smile of pride came to her face. "And I think you should tell on Wally. He had it comin'."

"I—... you—" She shook her head, throwing out her hands in a flustered manner, unable to keep the shock from touching her expression as her proud smile dissipated. "What?"

"He's been actin' psycho since he hit up your place, acting all squirrelly and hidin' stuff from us Tunnel Snakes... think he's hopped up on some kinda power trip, or whatever—plus, like I said, he's pissy with Paul and I. So you knock him down a few pegs, I didn't snitch, and you ain't gotta tell people that you did somethin' ya didn't do. It's not like you to let one of us Tunnel Snakes get away with it, anyway, twerp." Butch explained smoothly.

Winona frowned in thought up at him, trying to decipher the meaning behind what he said. Not only was he telling her it was fine to out his best friend, but he was the one suggesting it? She couldn't understand why, didn't this count as snitching to him?

"...You're not gunna round back on me, are you? This isn't a trick?"

"I said do it so just go and—do it. Get down with your bad self before I change my mind, Parker."

"Butch, I'm serious. If I convince the Overseer that Wally did this, he could be thrown in jail. He could still come after me, and you know how smart he is—what if he comes after you?" She asked worriedly.

"Pft—Wally Mack? The guy's been a fat chicken since we were kids. He gets off on bein' the big man in charge but he's a scaredy-puss when it comes to rumblin' with the real big boys around here. You knock some sense into him? He'll come around." Butch nodded certainly at his statement, crossing his arms over his chest. "...Wally's been different since he found out 'bout your dad. He's gonna get all tangled up in some bad crap with the Overseer."

"More than already with your little truce?" She deadpanned.
"Aw, 'ya know what I mean!" He spat weakly.

"DeLoria—... as much as I want to nail Wally's sorry ass by a thumbtack to the wall, I can't. I have to keep my head down. I have to talk to the Overseer about opening the vault, and I can't let Wally get in my way again. If I let him think he won this time it'll give me breathing room to prepare. If I let him think he won he'll leave me alone."

"The fuck you will," Butch grimaced. "It ain't right! Why're you lettin' him wi—wait, did you say 'open the vault'?"

Winona nodded determinedly. "If I'm right, Vault 101 doesn't have much time left—maybe another decade or two. The greenhouses are failing, we're down one reactor—supplies are dwindling or being eaten up by radroaches if they're not coming after us, and the vault isn't running to even half it's intended operation. If this keeps up we're going to die out."

"Holy shit, Parker—and 'ya think goin' outside would fix it?"

"I—... I don't know. If we knew what was outside better, I could say more certainly. We know at least that the outside isn't deadly. The radiation probably settled decades ago. There's something out there that survived—don't ask me how I know, I just do—and if we can open the door and explore, I think we can thrive again. We can bring in new people, find more supplies, repair the vault so we can keep it running for another while longer." She frowned up at him and it was more than a little fearful. "...It's not safe anymore down here."

"...Well, good luck tellin' the Overseer that." He tch'd with a sarcastic air.

"Yeah, well, I'll burn that bridge when I get to it I guess." Winona sighed. "... So—this is happening? You're going to apologize to him?"

"Don't have a choice," Butch grumbled in displeasure. "But God damn I might just end up back in this fuckin' box for kickin' the shit outta him, instead. Hate the way his stupid face makes that stupid smile."

"You're not the only one." Winona nodded in agreement as she looked out the window, watching John Kendall as he turned the pages of a Meeting People magazine without any attention toward them.

All they could do now was wait out their hour for the Overseer to return—they took their seats at their claimed beds, alternating between stretches of silence and conversing with jokes that actually made the other laugh. There was more idle discussion followed by personal thoughts and stories after the laughter died away. It was all they could do to settle the anxiety that plagued them both as they waited to sign off on paperwork, and make unspoken vows that would condemn them both in official records for forever, for things they didn't do.
July 25th, 2277 (cont'd)

It was nearing evening when Winona and Butch were finally released from the vault's prison and back into the halls amongst the masses. The Overseer had enough gall to demand the written apology from Butch by 9 PM tonight; which was to detail why he was apologizing, why he felt sorry, and what he would do in the future to ensure his bad attitude wouldn't get the better of him. Winona, on the other hand, had to issue her vault-wide apology over the intercom the next day in the morning's typical announcements, as well as denounce the possibility of living safely outside alongside Butch... and the hardest part for her was confessing guilt for a crime she didn't commit—all throughout signing the paperwork, she had to ignore the rising rebellion in her throat like bile she could barely swallow down. A cackling Wally reclined himself in the recesses of her mind on a beach chair with a tropical drink, and though she was allowing him to get away with this devastating strike against her, the inventor part of her—the part Butch mentioned that wouldn't normally let the gang get away with their trouble-making business—was raging for justice despite her fear.

In the end, she had to remind herself all throughout giving her verbal testimony and signing the paperwork that it wasn't in her best interests in the long term to go after Wally.

He could have this one.

For now.

Until he was unguarded and certain that he was triumphant, that's when she would strike, and it'd
As the two walked out of the vault jail hub with stern warnings of behaving from Officer Kendall, Winona had to drag Butch after her to ensure he wouldn't flip anyone off and get thrown back into the cell. They walked in near silence towards the hospitality floor to get back to the living quarters—Butch with his hands in his reclaimed jacket pockets and Winona tying her long hair back into a lazy ponytail—and it wasn't until they were turning into the stairwell to come to the infirmary that one of them finally said something.

"Do you think the Overseer'll keep working with the Tunnel Snakes, now?" Winona asked, looking up at him.

"Fat chance," Butch snorted and knocked a shrug off his shoulder. "Wally's gunna be pissed about it, but whatever. Couldn't care less anymore. If I feel like shitifying someone's day, I'll do it 'cause I wanna—not 'cause the Overseer says so."

"...Would Wally still go poking through the database, after what happened today?"

"Hell if I know—with you in the doghouse 'til your community service is over, maybe he won't. He got no one t'blame it on since 'ya got your hands tied. Or he'll just be sneakier about it." He reasoned, but the inventor could tell he wasn't completely convinced by his own thoughts. "You gonna talk to your old man?"

"I have to. Before today I thought that he couldn't give me a reason good enough to excuse how he betrayed me... now I want something that'll just help me understand."

"You think he'll be honest this time 'round?"

"There's nothing he can hide behind anymore. The naivete's gone. I know more than I did before and he can't keep lying if he doesn't want me to be angry at him for the rest of my life." She came to a stop when she saw the clinic door several more steps ahead of them, still feeling unsure of going back inside. "I'll have to clean up my apartment, too."

"Yeah, bet the Overseer's pigs turned your place upside down lookin' for 'evidence'," Butch grimaced in reference of the guards who searched her apartment to look for any copied documents or other condemning materials. "...You want help cleanin' up, 'er somethin'?"

Winona offered him a small smile of genuine gratitude. "Thanks for the offer. Really. But you need to get back to your mom. She's probably worried sick wondering where you are."

"Probably celebrating, 'what she's doin'." He responded curtly and kicked at the ground a little, refusing to look at her as he went on to explain; "She got her stash back."

The inventor's smile faltered before completely relinquishing itself to a frown. "What—? How'd that happen? My dad put in the request for the liquor locker—"

"The diner was still full of booze, so I guess the bastard Overseer gave your daddy's pretty please the big 'X'. 'Ya didn't know?"

"No, I've been too busy with work... and the last time I saw my dad we weren't exactly talking." She admitted glumly, wondering how the Overseer was enough of an idiot to deny that kind of request—did he think people could magically disinfect their own wounds? Or did he think the low supplies of antiseptic weren't that low? "I'm sorry, Butch. I can't believe he—"

"S'whatever," The Tunnel Snake responded with a surprising amount of indifference (or maybe it
was disappointment) and skirted around her to keep walking—but not before he thumbed her chin in a quick bop of his pointer finger knuckle and turned on his way. "See 'ya around, Parker. Don't be a square."

"Talk to your mom!" She called after him with a hand hovering over where he tilted her chin. "See what she says about all this!"

Butch only snapped a check mark of his fingers over his shoulder at her in response before she took a deep, steadying breath, and walked into the clinic. Jonas sat in the front room with Stanley, scolding the older man quietly about his wheezing cough because he wasn't 'taking it easy' like he was prescribed. When the doctor's assistant glanced up to see who walked in, he did a double take with surprised eyes before rising from his seat to come to her.

"Winona—! How'd you get out? Did the Overseer—?" He trailed on, confused.

All she did was hug him tightly, probably tightly enough that she was hurting him. He kindly returned the embrace in rivaled strength without complaint or sign of discomfort regardless.

"Jesus kid, you really scared me pantsless this morning." Jonas whispered into her white hair and she nodded silently in understanding.

"I'm out for now. I worked things out with the Overseer." She explained as she looked to Stanley, who was standing up from his stool as she departed from Jonas' arms. "I'm sorry, Stan—"

"Now, don't you say another word, Winona. I know you just as well as your daddy does, I say—and I know that you wouldn't have done all that. I think the Overseer's got the wrong person!" Stanley reassured with absolute confidence. " Heck, I don't think anyone really thinks you'd do something like that."

"Oh, so people around here don't already hate me?" She teased with solemn sarcasm and a lingering thought of telling Stanley what a piece of crap his grandson really was. "Everyone around here knows I'm good with computers. They wouldn't think it was anyone else."

"Anyone that matters doesn't think that way about you." He rephrased with a hacking cough into his arm and he cleared his throat. "It's just a shame that we won't have you downstairs for the next few months... got the papers from the Overseer about half an hour ago and I'm sorry to hear it."

"That doesn't sound 'worked out' to me," Jonas frowned as he rounded back on Winona. "What's Stanley talking about?"

"It was either community service and pleading guilty or letting myself go crazy for two months in a holding cell to try and hold onto my innocence." Winona explained darkly. "I didn't have a choice. I had to pick the lesser of two evils."

"Guilty? And you agreed to that?" Jonas balked.

"Like I said, I didn't have a choice." Not if I want to try and talk to him about opening the door.

"You ask me, the Overseer's being a real piece of sh—shooh-hoo—piece of work," Stanley corrected himself quickly before he spoke what was really on his mind. Winona tried not to laugh so he wouldn't be embarrassed. "You're our best man downstairs and we could use all the help we can get after what happened last month, the Old Girl's still reeling from it."

"Paul'll make you proud, Stanley, just give him a chance. Hell, with me gone, he might actually have one." Winona smiled and her mentor laughed, clapping a merry hand against her shoulder.
"He just might! The boy'll get a kick outta that one. You take care, okay, Winona? And believe me, I don't care what the Overseer says about this community service malarkey—you maybe wanna check on how things are downstairs from time to time? I won't stop you. Heck, I'll even give you some compensation for it! I'm not letting the Overseer's delusions run this vault down to her last leg, no sir." He stated determinedly.

"I'm real sorry about this—about all of it, Stanley. I'll make it up to you when I'm back to work."

"Don't you worry about a thing... I'm sorry you had to agree to that kind of deal, but I'm glad you're not sitting in that holding cell rotting away for a couple months instead. I'll keep my fingers crossed for a good behavior bargain so you can get back to us downstairs sooner."

"Remember what Dr. Parker said about resting, Stan." Jonas warned as the engineer went to the door.

"I would have taken it into better consideration if I wasn't down a body downstairs, Mister Palmer, but I'll do what I can. Thanks for seeing me!" He reassured before the door shut behind him, and he was on his way back down the hall with his prescription in hand.

"Where was dad this morning?" Winona questioned as her attention was diverted back to Jonas.

"Had some paperwork to turn into the Overseer that was important—but he came running down to prison hold the moment he heard about what happened to you." Jonas frowned with a shake of his head. "The guards wouldn't even let him in the door."

"Why? Dad had the right to see me!"

"Overseer's orders." He sighed warily as he hooked a thumb back to the closed office door. "He's back there—go on in."

Winona hugged him one last time before swiftly going to the door, and when she opened it she saw her father looking much more haggard than she remembered him being; his tired eyes squinted through bifocals as he wrote up his reports for the day, his lab coat ruffled with creases, and he looked like he hadn't shaved his grayed stubble in days. The only thing neat about his appearance was his combed hair, but even that fell in his face in strands as he bent over his desk, turning to type something into his terminal every once in a while.

"Daddy?" She greeted when he didn't look up, but the mention of his paternal name caused his head to whip upwards, and his eyes looked gargantuan behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

"Nona—?" He responded in disbelief, immediately getting up to go to her. He skirted quickly around his desk and threw his arms around her with such force that they were both stumbling backward together, but Winona caught them and gladly returned the hug with equal warmth. She buried her face into his shoulder, clasping the back of his wrinkled lab coat, and suddenly all anger she had towards him for the last week was gone when all she wanted to do was cry. The hurt feelings seemed to matter very little now—to the point where she could set them aside for the time being, if only to be with her dad after the trials of the day.

"Oh God—honey, are you alright?" Normally he would quickly look her over for bumps and other things, but he couldn't pull himself away from their embrace. "Jonas told me the moment it happened. They wouldn't let me in to see you, the Overseer personally wouldn't permit it—Amata tried to come and see you, as well." He finally pulled back from her with his hands set on her shoulders, lowering his face to her eye level. "Why did this hap—oh, sweetheart—what happened
to your cheek?"

Winona didn't flinch when he examined the yellowed bruise on her jaw with a tender touch and the gaze of his kind eyes—though there was the noble look of a doctor observing his patient that came to his face as he did so.

"The guards didn't do it," She supplied, unable to tell him the truth.

"I know, this looks to be some few days old. Did someone hit you?" He frowned with a protective anger of a dutiful father, tucking a lock of her long curls back behind her ear to see her face better.

"Work accident. Just a little bump. Seriously, I'm fine, dad." Winona lied in a voice that was as convincing as she could muster and took his hand from her cheek, holding it between her palms. "I get banged up at work a lot, I've got bruises and scrapes everywhere."

"I would have at least liked for you to come in, so I could take a look at you." He insisted. "It would've let me see you more often."

"Defeats the point of me moving out," She replied with a smile so he knew she was being lighthearted. "You're seeing me now, dad."

"Jonas told me you were arrested this morning, and would most likely be in Security's custody for some time. The Overseer and the guards refused to tell me anything, and about my own daughter's arrest, no less... how were you released?" He asked as he gestured for her to sit down. She did, in the chair placed across his desk as he leaned back on the edge of it, his arms folded over his chest.

"I had to agree to the Overseer's conditions if I didn't want to spend the next two months in prison." Winona lamented with a shake of her head. "Dad he made me plead guilty so I could get out, but I didn't do it, I swear—"

"...This has to do with whoever told you the truth about me—doesn't it?" He asked with a quietly commanding tone and she nodded reluctantly. "So you know who was really behind this, don't you? And why didn't you tell the Overseer?"

"You think he would've believed me? Fat chance! Besides, Wally was working for hi—"

"Wally? As in Wally Mack?" Winona clamped her mouth shut, staring with wide eyes. Crap. "That no good boy of Allen's—" He seethed. "How did Wally find out about such a thing? You can't tell me he was the one that got into the system."

"He did. Wally's smart, yeah—but I dunno how he managed to pull this off. Butch told me all about it while we were in holding together."

"And Butch DeLoria... I can't say I'm surprised. Jonas mentioned he was arrested with you for back-talking the Overseer. Does he know about outside, too, because of Wally?"

"That doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter? My daughter was wrongfully accused, arrested, and threatened with being imprisoned if she didn't take blame! The insolence of the Overseer—what kind of investigation did he run?—as if you would do such a thing—"

"Daddy, I know the truth about me." She interrupted his incensed rambling. "I know I wasn't born in the vault... you can't hide it anymore." It was her father's turn to look shocked, with wide eyes
and a clamped tight mouth. "Wally told me mom wasn't in the system, and neither were you until your thirties. Then I saw the things in your desk—I saw the picture of you with those people. I saw mom. Why didn't you give me those pictures of her? You knew how much it would've meant to me to have something of hers, and you had something and you kept it from me and you lied!"

"I had to for your own protection." He frowned with a remorseful expression as he leaned away from his desk, rolling his chair that was on his side of it to come around and sit down beside her, facing her. "I know it sounds quite unbelievable—the flimsiest excuse I could make—but it's the truth. When we were allowed into Vault 101, I was sworn to silence by the Overseer if I wanted us to keep our place here. I was never to tell you about outside or the truth about me... about us. I couldn't show you the pictures of your mother, it was too risky."

"Not even one picture?"

"If I knew back then what I know now, I would have given you every picture I could have... no matter what the Overseer made me promise."

"There's a lot of things we could've done back then," She responded flippantly and folded her arms over her chest, slumping back a little in her chair with her eyes averted from his in disgust. "...You never told me how much I really look like her."

"You're more like her than I could admit... and it's a blessing that you are. Your mother was the smartest, kindest, and most courageous of the two of us. Winona, my darling—I'm sorry I lied to you all this time, but I'm not sorry for having to protect you. We would've been thrown back out, do you understand this? It was better for you—for everyone—to not know or forget that the door was ever opened. It was easier that way."

"Were you ever planning on telling me?" Winona questioned sadly. "Ever? What are you even trying to protect me from? What's outside that no one's telling us about, that the Overseer's trying to hide?"

Winona's father gave her a sympathetic look as he rose from his chair. He returned it back around his side of the desk silently and took a seat in it again, staring at Catherine's quote hanging from the wall with a thoughtful, faraway gaze. Sober conviction came as a phantom expression in his eyes, almost as if he were deciding on something with finality, and he leaned out of her view toward the right side of his desk where she heard the open of a drawer. It was shrill and unforgiving, as it was the one she broke the lock on, and from it he produced several pictures as well as a small holotape. The pictures were of her mother—a couple of them she didn't see that night she broke into his things—and the holotape was labeled as Bonding Time.

He put it atop his desk and slid it across to her with an expectant, unspeaking look.

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**Bonding Time**

"James, try the other switch—n-no, the other—hee, ha, ha! You can work the most temperamental of our equipment like the best of them but not a little recorder?"

"In my defense, the recorder's over 200 years old."

"And so is most of our equi—I think it's on! Look, there's a red light now!"

"I told you I could get it working."
"And that has nothing to do with me, I'm sure. Oh, she's kicking! Quick, get your butt over here before she stops—! Awh, I'm sorry, James. I thought you would've felt it that time. It was a big one."

"And why is it when I put my hands on your belly she stops? Heh, heh. Little tyke, maybe she doesn't like me."

"How could anyone not love you?"

"I think Agincourt's been away too long if you've forgotten without all his constant, snippy remarks. I'm sure he has a list readily available for reference."

"Har, har. Just wait until our baby sees that handsome mug of yours and she'll love you just as much as I do. Don't worry, honey, you'll feel her kicking eventually."

"I'd like for it to happen before she's out. Perhaps she's just shy. She won't show her face in the ultrasounds, either—it's like she knows when mommy's getting a check up done."

"Madison says it's actually a good thing... our baby can tell it's you, you know, when she stops kicking. You're comforting to her."

"It's getting rather tight in there, isn't it, my little darling? Are you ready to come out and say hello to us? Daddy's ready to see you."

"Oof---! And so is mommy!"

"Hah, hah, hah—another hit to the kidneys, hm?"

"De- Definitely a sucker punch. Mmpf. Here, put your hands here—mommy needs a minute to recover."

"Hello in there--- hello, my little scientist! Soon you'll be out in this great, big world with us, where mommy and daddy can show you just how much we love you already. Maybe she can be our little assistant in the lab."

"If we don't finish the work before she gets here, that is. I'm more determined than ever!"

"Not without my say-so, you're not. Dr. Parker here says that you need to be on bedrest and remember to take your suppleiments more consistently."

"You know I can't stop work, now!"

"You can for her."

"Yeah... for her."

"For Winona."

"...You're finally coming around to the name--- aren't you, daddy?"

"I suppose you've turned me to it. Winona Parker has a ring to it."

"Better than Eleanor."

"Ah, but that's my mother's name!"
"That's right, so we don't need two Eleanor Parkers in this world! And Winona will fit her perfectly... you'll see that I'm right when she gets here."

"You've always had a nose about these things, Catherine. I trust you."

"I think it's time for bed for our little future peace maker. Time for a song, my little love?... I think so~... A-hem. Liv-ing, for you—is easy liv-ing... it's easy to live—when you're in love... I'm happy to do, what-ev-er I do, for you... for you... may-be I'm a fool, but it's fun... people say you rule me with one, wave of your hand—darling it's grand—but they just don't un-der-stand—"

"I love you, Catherine."

"Hee, hee—even with my bad singing?"

"It's never sounded bad to me."

"You're so sweet, even though I know you're lying—hah, hah!—I love you, too, James."

"I love you more... more than you'll ever know."

July 29th, 2277

"The hell do 'ya mean, he didn't tell you anything?"

Winona had just completed her 7 hours of community service that day, and happened to be walking by the hairdresser's on her way back to the living quarters where she spotted Butch DeLoria, working a dead shift alone. She poked her head in and Butch took a lunch break to chat with her, and where he leaned on a shoulder against the wall, he powered through a bowl of pork 'n beans and repurposed salisbury steak. She watched him from the opposite wall of the hallway with repulsion as he tactlessly devoured the meal with shovels of his spoon into his mouth.

"...You're disgusting, you know that?" She responded blandly. "And exactly as I said—dad refused to tell me anything else. He handed off some pictures of my mom and a holotape and told me I had to leave his office... said I knew too much already and I shouldn't know anything more."

"The hell's with everyone in this place..." Butch grumbled after he swallowed the food that filled his mouth.

"He told me I couldn't talk about it anymore. Not to anyone. He said it was 'too dangerous' to keep talking like this and that the Overseer's cracking down. Did your mom tell you anything good?"

"Not a thing," He shook his head and took another fast bite of his food, talking through it stuffed into his cheek as his spoon stirred about the beans in his bowl idly. "She said people don't like talkin' about the door, and I couldn't understand half the other crap she said. Paul got nothin' from his parents—woulda asked Wally, but he and I aren't really on speakin' terms right now. He'd only get the crap smacked outta him by his dad, anyways."

Winona bit down a rising snap about how Wally would deserve it. "Why ask them?"

"The snakes spread out, we catch more prey, get it?" He nodded as he departed from the wall to stand beside her. "But I ain't stopping till I find out what's goin' on up there. I'm gonna get it outta someone around here."
"Anyone who really knows the truth have their mouths locked up tighter than the Security armory, and we're stupid if we think it isn't for good reason. Dad said the Overseer forced everyone to never talk about outside or opening the door—and he said if he told me anything we could've been kicked out... I didn't like the look he gave me when he told me that, either. I think the Overseer would've really done it even though he can't afford to lose my dad as a doctor."

"Fuck the Overseer! If we gotta chance of getting outta here, I'm not gunna let that asshole stand between me and the door! Wally's sure of it, the door's been opened before and it can be opened again."

"How many times before—? And when was the last time it was opened?" Winona asked as he finished the last of his food.

"Oh, fuck tons of times! Wally said he found logs of people that went in and out like scout parties, all organized and shit that logged all the stuff they brought back here. A lotta the logs were broken or whatever, though. He said something 'bout them being so scrambled he couldn't read 'em."

"They must've been corrupted." She thought out loud. "Strange."

"That's what he said while he was throwin' a bitch-fit about them being broken. He said the last time the door opened that was recorded was when you and your doctor daddy got here, like, almost 20 years ago. If it's been opened again after that, he didn't see." Butch explained.

Those corrupted files could show the other times the door was opened... maybe they were 'scrambled' on purpose.

"Well, dad's definitely not going to tell me anything... not anymore." Winona wondered critically if the Overseer came and spoke to her father to ensure he didn't plant ideas in her head; that he didn't tell her about where they came from, or the truth about outside, or anything else that was condemning in light of what happened in that meeting—though she already had some idea about most of the truth without his help.

But now the can was opened and the worms were everywhere, regardless of her dad's honesty, and now there wasn't a vault dweller in the entirety of Vault 101 that didn't know the truth—even in the newest generation of them. That was all in thanks to Butch DeLoria during that morning meeting four days ago, and the gossips that were Beatrice Armstrong and Mary Kendall getting more airtime from it. The sisters got a little too brazen in their morning rumor mill, and even Winona—who wasn't one for gossip—knew that they were working overtime in hushed whispers. Everyone was probably talking about the latest development in the politics of 101, and she was gleeful in the idea of the Overseer overclocking on his duties to do some crucial damage control.

He'd be busy for weeks trying to silence everyone and he more than deserved the stress.

"Hey, what about Beatrice? And Mary? Mary Kendall? Loose lips sink ships, as they say." She suggested.

"Yeah, well, I ain't gotta ship, how about you?" Butch deadpanned and shook his head in the negative.

"I could talk to old Stanley—"

"Wally tried his gramps right after he got into your files. Said nothin'."

"God dammit, if he won't talk to his own grandson, than he sure as hell won't talk to me. No one's talking." Winona lamented with a hand to her forehead. "We have to open the
"New people? I like the sound of that," Butch's face split in a cheek to cheek grin excitedly. "You think people look alright up there? Not all—... zombified or somethin'? I'm tired of looking at all the same damn faces. Tired of eatin' the same food, staring at all the same walls, doin' the same old borin' shit like cutting hair and shooting pool—for the rest of my life. I wanna get outta this dump. You ever think 'bout that kinda stuff, Parker?"

"I think about it a lot... more than I wish I did." She admitted in a gloomy voice. "I think about working all the time until I can retire—I think about never going on great adventures, like the ones I use to read in the comics. There's only so much you can do down here. I don't want to resign myself to getting married and having babies... honestly, I don't think I even like kids."

"No marriage, huh? And here I thought girls like that kinda stuff. You're not even gunna marry your pretty boy Freddie Gomez?" He teased.

"Well, what about you with Dorothy?" She retorted a little more defensively than she wanted to sound, and he raised an eyebrow at her. She and Freddie were officially through and she didn't want to hear another damn thing about him.

"Ooh, touchy. You think I'm gonna let myself get strapped down to that crazy train?" He made a sarcastic guffaw of a snort. "Hell no. Just 'cause I ride it once in a while doesn't mean I don't get off at other stations."

"Poetic. A double entendre—two of them—I see what you did there. Are you sure you're not the one doing the railroad ing?" Winona cheekily pointed out and Butch looked momentarily surprised at her suggestiveness before playfully jostling her with a bump of his elbow. There was a laughing smile plastered on his face and she recognized just how incredibly good looking the gang leader was.

Butch DeLoria was generally attractive to anyone who had eyes, but he wasn't always that way; he had to grow into his nose, and when they were children his mouth was too wide for his face with sort of buggy eyes so he looked almost toad-like—but now that he was grown up, all of his once awkwardly big features evened out handsomely over time. She never had the mindset to study just how handsome he was so freely. In some ways, he was even more attractive than Freddie, in face and in body; between the two of them puberty was kinder to Butch, as it graced him with a strapping physique with toned arms and a broad chest, while Freddie was slender everywhere and about as short as she was. Scars, callouses, and little past injuries marked the Tunnel Snake's hands from the wounds of devoted practice to tricks with his switchblade, and there was something oddly arousing about their roughness. He had nice hands, too.

Winona liked hands. They could tell you a lot about a person.

Freddie's hands had been gentle, which could be nice sometimes, but they didn't feel 'lived in' like Butch's looked like—and Freddie's hands definitely weren't meant for spanking.

Winona was quickly losing herself to her physically starved thoughts. She never would have imagined herself thinking about playing conductor with her many-years enemy, so she tried writing it off as a lapse in judgement caused by their current relationship. They shared things about themselves she never thought she would, showing the other vulnerable wounds and proactive ideals—and he surprised her by being more intelligent than she gave him credit for, and she in turn surprised him by showing how hilariously inappropriate she was between her dry sarcasm and crass humor. They were now equals, and they showed the other that they were plainly human and plagued with flaws, problems, and inner demons.
So, perhaps, there wasn't any harm in daydreaming about how well that handsome train could lay down some solid track.

Stop thinking in train metaphors... also, trains can't put down tracks. They're trains.

"You've got a real freaky side, don'cha, Parker?" Butch laughed as he tossed his garbage into a pull out chute from the wall beside the door of the hairdresser's. "I can get down with that."

"Wait until you hear my joke about a virgin on a water bed."

"...Get the fuck out, I've gotta hear this one."

"It's called a cherry float."

"Fuckin' Christ—" He guffawed through boisterous laughter. "You're more of a freak than I thought! Say, I've been thinking—how 'bout you invite me over for a drink tonight?"

"And why would I do a thing like that?" She responded coyly, her arms folding loosely over her stomach as she reclined back to the wall, most of her weight held up by her shoulders against it. He was smirking now, in a way that if they were initiating an exciting game, he was in the mood to play, and braced a forearm against the wall just above her shoulder with his face leaning in close to hers.

The musk of his cologne was enticing as well as masculine.

"So we can make a toast to us, Parker. For not bein' locked up, for turnin' this vault around—shit, just for being awesome. So you gunna invite me over or what?"

"I vaguely recall something about trying whisky," She chuckled as she pinned a finger to his chest, giving him a playful jab so he was forced to lean back away from her. He only put on a beaming grin, liking how the game was turning out. "I'll bring snacks if you bring your good behavior."

"Like I even know the meanin' of 'good behavior', girl." He responded in a slightly gruff voice.

"What's going on here?" A voice from the corner came barreling through their conversation, and the two looked over to see Amata accelerating towards them in frightening speed with a displeased look crumpling her face. Butch quickly withdrew from Winona, trying to pretend like he wasn't just caught possibly flirting with his childhood enemy.

"None of your damn business, that's what!" Butch returned with record insult. "Don't you have people to nag at?"

"Don't you have hair to sweep up?" She responded briskly and grabbed Winona by the arm, shoving herself between the inventor and the angered Tunnel Snake to seperate their closeness to one another.

Winona allowed herself to be dragged away, looking back at Butch DeLoria who stood outside his shop with a fuming sneer on his face. He stormed back inside, his lunch break effectively over and ruined by the sudden appearance of Amata, as the girls turned the corner at the opposite end of the hallway.

"What the hell was that about?" Amata demanded to know, finally releasing her arm to turn back on her. "Butch asking you out for a drink? Is he serious? And you said yes?"

"Asking m—? He wasn't asking me out," Winona insisted rigidly. "It was something else."
"Are you two friends now?" She accused with a curl of her brow over her dark eyes.

"It's—... hard to explain... we were just talking."

"Oh my God, you're actually friends with him now? I hope you guys didn't bond while you were in jail together!" The inventor flinched under the acid in her best friend's voice. She immediately softened upon seeing the hurt in Winona's face. "I—... oh God, Winnie I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that, I don't know where that came from. I just need to know that you guys aren't hanging out—you're not seriously friends with him, are you?"

We sort of are, Winona's mind sounded off, but she didn't want to admit that out loud to Amata after the severe reaction she just had to catching them. That, coupled with the lecherous thoughts she had of the Tunnel Snake only moments ago... it was fatally incriminating.

The young inventor didn't want to lie to her best friend, but as it stood she somewhat liked Butch's company—they had similar senses of humor, and things that other residents would viciously judge her for, he wouldn't, and they had surprisingly deep conversations about the expectedly menial life of the vault and what new things could be outside—but it was a secret she had to keep intact. Somehow befriending him went hand-in-hand with talking down the Overseer, especially when they both wanted the same thing; to open the door. She needed to have someone else in her corner.

So Winona Parker lied, even though she didn't want to.

"We just tolerate each other. Well—no, tolerate isn't the word I'd use. We don't fight anymore at least."

"When did that happen?" Amata inquired as the two continued walking together up the hall.

"I'm too busy to keep fighting with him like we use to, so I started ignoring him and he got bored with messing me with I guess. A lot's changed in the last year."

"I really thought he was asking you out for a second there." She vigorously shook her head at the idea, as if the motion would help get it out of her head. "...It just looked bad, Winnie."

"Like Butch would have the nerve, even as a joke. He's with Dorothy." The inventor laughed at the idea but thought about Butch's reaction if she ever told him. Dorothy was the flimsiest of smokescreens that she could use, considering that everyone knew that Butch didn't like her for her personality.

"Like that means anything. Horowitz has been in love with that idiot since we were kids and he just uses her for a good time." Amata rationalized out loud and looked to Winona, hooking an arm through hers and they both found themselves overcome by a sense of nostalgia... like it'd been so long since they walked together like this, while also feeling like nothing changed since they last met up.

"It's not like he tries hiding it." She responded with the vague recollection of Butch likening Dorothy Horowitz to a crazy train.

"It's stupid—but I thought he was asking you out because of all the things that happened when we were kids."

Winona turned on her, stunned. "...Okay, you've lost me. I don't exactly have any fluffy memories of DeLoria."

"I always thought he liked you." Amata admitted. "I mean, c'mon—he's always had it out for you,
more than anyone else. He was focused on you like a heat-seeking missile! The constant fighting, the back and forth insults, and trying to get your attention by doing stupid pranks on other people? You know what they say, a boy will pick on a girl because he wants to get her attention... and he was always looking at you in class."

"I think we both have enough experience with Butch to know that he genuinely hated me when we were kids." Winona balked in surprise. "And yeah, I sat right in front of him back then. Of course he'd look at me. He probably would've pulled out my chair every chance he got if it hadn't been attached to my desk."

"I'm not saying it's true or anything—just something I've always sort of suspected. I mean, Paul liked me, and he picked on the both of us constantly while we were growing up... and we know what Wally wants." She shuddered. "Butch liking you didn't seem like too far of a stretch, in that case."

"Paul wasn't as bad as the other two, though. He has a chance of redemption." Amata shot her a dubious look to accentuate a silent point. "I'm serious. Paul's a really good guy, he's not like those other two. He's sweet and he's smarter than a lot of people give him credit for even though he's a little slow on the up-take. I'm not saying you have to give him a chance if you're not even a little bit attracted to him, but he wouldn't be the worst guy to end up with in here. Aaaand, he's actually kind of handsome!"

"Then maybe you should give him a chance. You two work together, anyways." She replied dismissively with an awkward smile.

"Well it's not me he wants!" Winona laughed as she pulled Amata in close again and the two girls continued on their way, traversing the halls together.

"Feel like grabbing some dinner? Maybe catch up a little? I need to know what the hell happened the other day with the meeting," She stiffened under Amata's arm, hooked through hers still. "...Winnie, I need to know what my father made you do. You have to tell me eventually."

"What makes you think he made me do anything?" Winona's eyes didn't meet her friend's face.

"Because when I heard you were released, my father and I got into a fight. He told me I wasn't allowed to talk to you ever again. It just gave me a feeling."

He think's I'll tell Amata about his involvement with the Tunnel Snakes, like I threatened him with, Winona realized with a growing frown.

"...He—... He made me agree to a few things if I wanted to be released. Look, we should talk about this somewhere else—somewhere private."

"No, you're going to tell me what my father did! I don't care if he's watching us," Amata replied fiercely as she took Winona's hands into both of hers, gripping tightly. "I don't care if he see's that I'm talking to you. You're my best friend, I wouldn't turn my back on you for anything, you know that, right?"

"Amata—"

"I know it wasn't you that broke into the database. I know it wasn't. If we could just prove your innocence and find out who really did it—if we could find out what 'evidence' dad has—"

"Amata," Winona mildly barked so she'd be heard over the darker-haired girl's rambling. "I'm not kidding. Let's go somewhere more private." Then began pulling her along toward the living
quarters, onward to her apartment where they swiftly entered and she made sure to lock the door behind them.

"I've never seen you look this freaked out before," Amata replied with rounded eyes and a crinkled brow. ".Winnie you're scaring me, what did he do? What did he make you agree to?"

"It's not about that." She shook her head with a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose as she moved away to sit at the dining table. Amata pulled up a chair as well. "It's about—... all of this."

Looking back to her best friend, there was silent communication transpiring behind their connected gazes, until Amata's hand came across the table top to ask for Winona's. The inventor looked down at the gesture, thinking of all the things that happened to her in the last few weeks—Wally breaking into her apartment and assaulting her, of being blamed for his break in into the vault's records and files, of being forced into a binding agreement that made her—in writing—take blame for his crimes... but most of all she thought about all the new things she discovered about her own father, about Vault 101, and about herself.

How was she supposed to tell her best friend that she wasn't from the vault?

How was she going to explain that she knew it was safe outside, and both of their fathers had evidence to prove it?

How could she drop all of this on the one person who was the closest to the Overseer, whom was doomng them all? Reveal to Amata that her own father was slowly killing them for an ideal that died out a long time ago? That was violated from the very first time the door was opened to the outside however many years ago?

Winona gratefully took Amata's hand on the table, squeezing helplessly.

"There's a lot that I have to tell you, Amata... a lot that you might not know—that you won't want to hear—that you may not even believe—"

"Winnie, you could tell me anything and I'd believe you 100%," She responded in a quiet yet determined voice as she returned the hand squeeze reassuringly. "You could tell me that purple is really green, or that Andy's piloted by a kid's remote control, or that I'd die tomorrow and I'd still believe you."

"I—... alright. I found out something about myself last week, something that I think I—... that I think I knew all this time, since we were kids. Well, not knew, but just felt. I always felt like something wasn't right, that some things didn't make sense... especially when it came to things dad told me."

"What is it?" She replied worriedly.

Winona made eye contact with her from across the table, her grip tightening by a small fraction as if she worried her best friend would pull away at the news. Amata only drew closer.

"I found out that I'm from the outside."
Amata was seated in the waiting area outside of her father's office, sitting with crossed legs and a commanding posture as she thumbed the magazine in her lap idly. She didn't read any of the articles encased within, only leafing the pages to distract her hands. Her knee was starting to bounce uncontrollably on the fringes of her conscious thought as her eyes skimmed over pictures and articles her mind wouldn't cling to. Sitting with her was Floyd from downstairs, most likely to deliver the day's maintenance tickets, and Beatrice Armstrong who hummed cheerily to herself as she rearranged her handmade tarot card deck. All week she'd been trying to convince the Overseer to let her open up a mystic's club, so the entirety of the vault could revel in the 'mysteries of the great beyond!', but she was vehemently denied at every proposal. Her stubbornness was equal parts impressive and idiotic, as Beatrice never lost her charismatic nature through it all.

"Dad was hiding documents that date back to when he was in his 30's and apart of some scientist team, I think it is. 'Project Purity'. The documents talked about the Potomac River, and testing water, and about an Pre-War monument called the Jefferson Memorial—I remembered learning about it when we were still in school, it was built in memory of President Thomas Jefferson back in 1943."

"Oh my God—! And these photos you mentioned, of those people that you think were his colleagues, you think they might still be out there?"

"I—... I don't know, I guess? Dad never told me why he brought us here, or what happened to this project. He never mentioned any of those people before, either... but mom was on the team, too. They could all still be out there somewhere."

"Amata," She looked up at the call of her name to the secretary's desk that sat beside the Overseer's office. A pointy-looking woman with large glasses and kind eyes gave her a wrinkled smile. "I could tell your father you swung by to see him, you know. You don't have to wait out here all day!"

"That's alright, Mrs. Wheeler. It's kind of important that I talk to him face-to-face."

"If you insist." The smile remained on her face as she turned back to the terminal in front of her, fixing the glasses that slipped down her long nose. It looked like she was transcribing some shorthand notes of the Overseer's announcements.

Amata continued to leaf back and forth through the magazine before deciding that it was too thin, without enough pages to flip between to distract herself with. She set it down on the coffee table in front of her and picked up a thicker catalog that featured a Fall theme; the cover advertised that inside the reader could find Autumn recipes, reviews on the season's current fashion do's and don'ts, ideas for fun craft projects to do with your children, and how to set your Thanksgiving table in a way that would impress even the prickliest of mother-in-laws.

About 200 years outdated I'm afraid, she observed by the printed date at the bottom; October 22, 2077. Halloween hadn't even passed yet, in thanks to the world ending the day after the issue was printed.
Her mind went back to Winona soon enough, and the discussion they had the prior evening.

"**Wally** broke into the system? That little—! Vomit-inducing, small-brained, bird-faced **bastard**! We're getting back at him, aren't we? What's the plan?"

"...There is no plan."

"You're going to let him get away with it? Wha—why?"

"Because it's important that I let him **think** he won. I've fought with Wally Mack alongside Butch and Paul long enough to know that if he wins at something, he likes to roll around in his victory like a pig in mud for a bit just to rub it in your face. If I don't go after him, he'll leave me alone while I get my other plans put together."

"What plans? Answer me, Winnie, what're you planning?"

The sound of the Overseer's door gliding open startled Amata out of her thoughts. Her father stood in the open doorway with an equally stunned expression upon seeing her in the waiting room.

"I'm going to talk to the Overseer about opening the door."

"Amata—?" He questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a proposition that I'd like to bring to your attention," Amata explained as she got up from the seat, tossing the Autumn catalog back onto the coffee table. "May I speak to you in private, Overseer?"

After she turned 10 and received her first official vault responsibilities (reading to senile residents, putting up new announcements on the notice boards, sweeping the classroom, etc.), her father told her that in public she couldn't refer to him as her dad anymore; now he would be the **Overseer** when other company was around. She felt that she lost her daddy that day and ever since he couldn't differentiate his duties as an Overseer from his duties as the dad she needed him to be. He would religiously review her scores in school, watch her every step in the halls through his dozens of cameras, and attended her **private** female-inclined appointments in the clinic.

The time Jonas asked her if she needed a prescription of birth control was a memory that still scarred her, even now at three years later. She was practically dragged out of the clinic by her fuming father and interrogated at home about which boy she was seeing—it took a full week to convince him that she wasn't seeing **anyone**, as she was too busy with schooling and then the G.O.A.T. exam to even **think about** having a boyfriend.

Not that she **wanted** one.

But Amata still wondered if he was actually convinced, or if he only decided to drop it after composing his own thorough search.

"Of course, come in. Mr. Lewis, if those are the work tickets just leave them with Tilda and I'll respond to them as quickly as possible. I will see you momentarily, Miss Armstrong." The Overseer responded as he stepped politely out of the way for Amata to come in.

She dreaded speaking with him in his office. He was more of a political fence-rider in that environment but this couldn't wait another day, another hour, another **minute**. Perhaps it was a mistake coming to talk to her father about opening the door, but the girls knew that **Winona** definitely didn't have a chance in hell of even convincing him to change taco night
from Tuesdays to Fridays; so Amata decided, without Winona's blessing, to go in alone.

If anyone could convince him to do something he'd consider being impossible?

It was Amata.

"Take a seat." He instructed while coming around his desk to sit in his chair. As Amata planted herself in the seat, he tidied up his desk before turning to her with hands clasped together and his fingers intwined. "What brings you by my office today, Amata?"

"There's a matter I wanted to address about the betterment of Vault 101—one that I think would ensure progress and a better future. You've told me that you wish the vault could be like it was when you were younger, and I think I can help with that." She responded in a civil air.

Amata disliked the feeling of having to be someone else around her own dad—like he couldn't accept who she was, which was someone that could not meet his expectations. She'd speak as if she had embodied Shakespeare, keep polite eye-contact during the entirety of the conversation, and her expression needed to remain impassive at all costs. If she showed even a hint of good humor, through a nervous smile or an anxious chuckle, her father would immediately discredit her.

"Is that so?" Sitting up straighter in his seat, her father took a moment to straighten the stapler beside him. "Color me intrigued. I see that your work in the supervisory track has gifted you with forward thinking! And what do you hope the results of your proposal would be?"

"The target is immense expansion in population, supplies, and resources—of being able to give the vault the proper repair and care it requires so it can run for another 200 years. And, most importantly, to remedy the 44% decrease in production that's occurred over the last recorded 10 years. It's effectively kept us from running at full function, and in turn, has resulted in a lack of vital resources. To restore productivity would also reopen all the sectors of the vault that had to, unfortunately, be shut down because of that decrease I mentioned."

"Amata, to say that I'm impressed with you would be an unforgiving understatement... however, I am quite curious to hear how you wish to achieve all of this, as it sounds like it would take a miracle to do such a thing."

"I want you to keep a brighter future for the vault and all it's residents in mind when I say this," Amata warned, to which he graciously nodded. "My proposal? An appeal to have the door opened, and have it remain open—"

"Open the door?" Her father barked as he was launched upward from his chair with his hands splayed across his desk. The ferocity of his tone immediately clamped her teeth shut, her eyes going wide. Why was he suddenly so—... hostile? "Absolutely not! How preposterous! Why, not just preposterous, but impossible! The door cannot be opened and you know exactly why!"

"Daddy," She pleaded in a voice that wasn't cordial enough for their meeting to sound like one between the Overseer and a concerned resident any longer. "You can't keep trying to hide the truth from everyone anymore! After what happened in that meeting—? With Winona being arrested and Butch DeLoria saying those things?"

"Winona Parker—? Have you been speaking to her when I specifically forbid you from remaining in contact with her? Did she plant these dangerous ideals in your head?"

"I'm not going to stop talking to my best friend just because you want me to! Just because you don't like her or her father! I don't know what it is you have against them, but I'm not going to let
that stop me from being her friend." Amata concluded determinedly. "It's true, isn't it daddy? That it's safe enough outside for us to leave if we wanted to? To open the door if we wanted to?"

"None of it is true! None of it!" The Overseer boomed as he came around the desk to go to the window. His stride was long-legged and jarred, displaying his temper quite well. "I refuse to give in to the lies of the parasites in this vault! And you, for all your mother's smarts—if she could only see you now, making such accusations—"

"That's not going to work on me." She replied in an extremely hurt voice as she got up from her own chair. "Not this time. You can't use mom every time I start becoming my own person, with my own thoughts and opinions and ideas! You can't use her as a weapon against me whenever I disagree with you! I'm not a child anymore!"

"How dare you!" He snapped back on his heels to face her. "After everything I've done to raise you to the best of my abilities, to instill within you all the traits of a steadfast and good-hearted leader, you accuse me of something so heinous! So unequivocally atrocious!"

"Stop trying to hide something everyone knows! Everyone knows about the door, and no amount of damage control that you try to do will keep people from talking about outside. Listen to me, daddy—if we open the door, think of all the good it could do!" She tried to remember all the points Winona told her during their talk. "We could expand and gather supplies, like food, medicine—other resources for the vault like materials for repairs!"

"You don't know what you're talking about—"

"The people that live outside can teach us about the world, we could make connections if they have organized settlements and start supply trades. We could let in more people!" She pushed on ahead despite him trying to speak over her.

"—there's no one to let in!—"

"If we can increase our population we can focus our efforts on production increase, and we could introduce a new and more effective system for job allocation! Continuing to rely on a currently outdated system hasn't done us any favors in the long-term! Daddy think of the progress we could make, think of all the good you could do! That we could do, together!"

"Absolutely NOT!" He suddenly boomed wrathfully with the brunt of his fist striking the round window overlooking the atrium. Amata's eyes rounded in horror at the aggression in his reaction and her hand was clapped over her mouth in shock, almost as if it was trying to subconsciously keep anything else from spilling out of her.

The Overseer stood at the window with his rolled fist still against it, breathing a little raggedly with a face reddened by his anger. Shutting his eyes, he quickly gathered himself and straightened up to his full height with his hand relaxing upon the cool glass. Looking through the window and down below, he watched several vault dwellers bustling about the main room to get to and from their responsibilities of the day; to go home to their families, returning from a lunch break away from work, several older female residents were clustered together and giggling amongst themselves. His calmed expression relinquished itself to one of meticulous reflection, his brow going slack and his eyes turning thoughtful in his reflection in the glass.

Amata exhaled the breath she held in all that time and studied him. This was a side of her father that she never encountered before; the side that portrayed him as an ignorant, raving and aggressive lunatic. Growing up, no matter what everyone else said about him, she put good faith in his leadership abilities and knew that he was only doing what he could to help everyone—constantly
struggling over making the decisions that were necessary, no matter how hard they were to make, if it meant bettering the vault.

But who he was now?

She didn't know that man... as her father or as her Overseer.

The one she knew from her childhood wouldn't be so adamant to retain a life of lies at the cost of the future of Vault 101. Especially if the future could be a better one, filled with new things, new people, and a new, more successful way of living. There wasn't anything salvageable in an existence that felt mediocre at best and tedious at worst—only trying to survive through another day of stamping paperwork, through another taco night Tuesday, through another moment where everything was so dull and listless.

The genteel touch in the Overseer's face withdrew as Amata continued studying him, turning tenacious, firm—almost unreadable and frightening. He turned away from the window finally and went back to his desk with his eyes ahead, reclaiming his seat before pulling in his chair up to the desk. His forearms rested atop the marked up calendar mat laid out in front of him and his eyes finally met with hers. She remained standing, rattled by shock with her hand still over her mouth, holding in another breath as she waited for him to speak.

"I have made my decision... one that will be hard to make as an Overseer, as I'm sure it'll be met with opposition from a good portion of the vault—but I will do what has to be done. To correct the mistakes of past residents will require sacrifice from the current ones."

Amata's hand finally retired from her mouth and she swallowed hard, befuddled by his cryptic reply. "I—... are you accepting my proposal? Are you going to open the door?"

"No. Certain unnamed persons in this vault have become too idealistic for their own good, and to continue speaking of the door and outside as if it were possible to create relations above is only adding more kindling to the fire. A fire that will soon be out of my control if I don't act."

"What are you going to do—?" She asked fearfully, the hand on her mouth having rested against her chest to clutch the zipper of her jumpsuit. "Daddy, what are you going to do?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago." He responded as he pressed a finger to the small speaker box on his desk. "Tilda, would you come in here, please?"

"Daddy, what are you going to do!" Amata cried as the door opened behind her and in stepped his pointy secretary, Tilda Wheeler.

"Tilda, will you please escort Amata out? Our meeting here is done and I have important work to do."

"Yes, sir." Tilda smiled warmly at Amata, though the furrow of her brow gave away her concern to Amata's distress. "Come on, now—out 'ya go! The Overseer has busy work to tend to, we wouldn't want to bother him, now, would we? That's it, follow me, dear."

She gave her father one last desperate, sidelong look before following Tilda out, defeated. She tried to fight down the feelings of fear, the animosity that burned in her chest, the bewilderment that took the place of the resolve she once had. All she could think was how could he do this? How could he do this to us, the people he was tasked to protect? How could he throw me out? that played like an unforgiving song in her thoughts. Now she was being overwhelmed with that crippling fear of hers, the fear of failure, in how she failed not only the vault and bettering it, but
how she failed herself.

Amata Almodovar knew she set in place a chain of events that didn't sound like it would help the vault in any way... and all she could do in response was hate herself for it.

That, and wait for what the announcement of this 'sacrifice' that her father had to employ.

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**August 2nd, 2277**

"Attention all residents of Vault 101—this is your Overseer speaking, in regards to the bulletin that was posted on the 31st in the communal areas. As a fellow citizen and a friend to you all, I regret to announce that the bulletin is not a joke by any means, and will be initiated on the allotted date. For those of you who are unaware of the notice that was issued, or have forgotten what it entailed, I will paraphrase it here."

"The Procreation Law has come into effect and will commence on August 3rd with testing between 8 AM and 8 PM, and is mandatory for residents between the ages of 19 and 45 with a marital status pertaining to 'single' and 'without offspring'. Residents who meet both of the mentioned requirements will be called down to the infirmary for a medical evaluation during the 8 AM and 8 PM timeframe. On August 5th further testing will take place for residents who pass their medical evaluations, which will occur between 10 AM and 4 – 5 PM in the classroom. This test will be administered by terminal, but written tests are also available upon request."

"On August 6th, the results of these exams will be posted on the notice boards found in the cafeteria, the atrium, and recreation room A. The results of these extensive tests will be calculated through specialized software that determine the probability of success between two residents. For any citizens who disagree or disapprove of said results, please see me in my office where we may negotiate possible replacement or retesting."

"In advance I apologize for any uproar this may cause, as to upset the citizens of Vault 101 is not my intention. As your Overseer, it's my civic duty to make the hard decisions that need to be made in order to achieve a better future for all. Consider this not a bump in the road, but a highway to progress, improvement, production, and happiness. Please keep this in your thoughts during testing, and ensure that all tests are taken in complete seriousness. Be sure to read the bulletins on the notice boards if you have any further questions about the Procreation Law, and for questions about testing, please see myself or Dr. James Parker, and his assistant, Jonas Palmer. Thank you and good day."

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**August 5th, 2277**

Winona Parker stood outside the vault classroom uneasily, pacing in front of the closed door, fidgeting with her zipper tab, counting the bolts that held the walls together and the minutes that ticked past on her Pip-Boy screen... doing anything to keep her anxiety from completely overtaking her. She could only imagine what was happening on the other side of the door as her mind became frantic and frayed; she still couldn't believe something like this was happening. Happening to the vault, happening to her friends, happening to her.

Even through Amata coming to her apartment after the proposal meeting that went haywire with the Overseer, crying and repeating how sorry she was and that this was all her fault, Winona didn't want to believe it.

Even through her medical exam that her dad refused to administer on principle, leaving her and
Jonas alone, awkward, and upset as they were forced to continue with the evaluation. Security forces had been deployed in the infirmary for the medical evaluations to ensure no one became unruly. She still couldn't believe it.

Even through hearing her name being called on the intercom just some 10 minutes ago, telling her to come down to the classroom for her test—her mind still tried to reject everything that was going on, as if she were floating through a very realistic nightmare. When she arrived to her old classroom, firstly haunted by memories of a simpler time, Officer O'Brian notified her that a resident was still taking their exam and it'd be another couple of minutes before she could take hers.

He did not tell her what she should prepare herself for.

Winona gladly waited outside, though, and refused to even glance inside the classroom while the door was still open. She was absolutely terrified for what was to come, trying to keep her hands busy as she paced and her thoughts on other things so she wouldn't have a completely stress-induced melt down. Trying to think about new things to invent wasn't helping, and concentrating on the repairs she'd need to make on Gizmo when she returned to her home for the evening wasn't distracting enough. It only made her more anxious, somehow... and then she had to be up bright and early tomorrow for community service, so she wouldn't see the results until after she was released; meaning she would be antagonized by all the possibilities for 7 hours.

Winona wanted to be somewhere far away from here—absolutely anywhere—as long as it had a bathroom. It felt like her body wouldn't be able to do anything but vomit what little she had for breakfast, at this point.

Looking at her Pip-Boy again, it was now 12:19. She had been waiting for the last 6 minutes, but it must have felt like 6 years.

From who she saw during the hour that she was in the clinic yesterday for the medical evaluation, other residents that were being examined included Beatrice Armstrong, Janice Wilkins, Stevie Mack and his cousin, Christine... and technically Jonas, since he met the necessary requirements, being 35 and currently single. The inventor didn't want to ask who else had to be tested, and of those who were evaluated, she didn't want to know who moved on to the second stage of the compatibility testing.

The only thing she could take comfort in knowing was that Amata wasn't forced to undergo the invasive exams. With her birthday being in October, she was still only 18 and just a few months shy of meeting the age requirement. It made Winona wonder if the age of 19 was picked specifically by the Overseer to ensure that his daughter would skim right under the Procreation Law, meaning that she wouldn't be eligible... at least until the next culling would come into effect, if it ever did.

Thank God Wally Mack didn't qualify, either. She sagged in relief as she stopped at the water fountain beside the classroom door, drinking to help the dryness in her mouth. He's not turning 19 until May next year... but God, what if I'm compatible with Stevie? What if Amata gets him next time they initiate the Procreation Law, when they're both of age?

The door opened beside the skiddish inventor, causing her to sharply inhale the water she was drinking and she retreated from the water fountain, hacking into her fist. When she looked over it was Officer O'Brian escorting Butch out of the classroom, who carried an unreadable expression. It was in his striking eyes that she saw he was just as frightened as her, if not more, despite how nonchalant he looked otherwise as he pulled for the cigarette tucked behind his ear. It was then stuck between his lips to bit lit, dangle lazily from the corner of his mouth.
"Winona Parker, next." O'Brian announced. Her name being mentioned caused Butch to falter in the doorway with his eyes snapping up toward her face as she tried to clear her throat. They weren't their typically vibrant blue color, looking more watery and pale.

"Butch?" She wheezed, trying to make conversation if only to stall the inevitable. "You had to take the test—? Why? Aren't you with Dorothy?"

He snorted, trying to seem lighthearted and jokey. "If I gotta chance of bein' tortured by some other broad for the rest of my life, I'm takin' it. I was about ready t'get off that crazy train anyways. Got my fingers crossed for somethin' good!"

"This isn't an arcade where you play for best prize, you're gunna have kids with this person." She deadpanned, though was surprised that he was willingly going through with the test. Butch DeLoria wasn't dragged into the classroom, kicking and screaming? Surely the floor was opening up under their feet!

"Hey, I still gotta few more years! No one said I have t'make little Tunnel Snakes right this second," He smirked arrogantly but the fear in his eyes wouldn't leave. "It's whatever. This whole thing's a joke, and tomorrow when the results come out, everyone and their mother's gunna be runnin' down to the Overseer's office t'complain and get them changed. That'll make him pull his head outta his ass."

"...And if it doesn't?" Winona questioned in a small, terrified murmur. His smirk faltered slightly at her question and he definitely didn't know how to respond.

"Miss Parker, you're next." The officer repeated impatiently.

The inventor gave one last glance back to Butch when she was called on, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth before moving to go into the classroom. When O'Brian turned away, satisfied that she was following, Butch discreetly grabbed her hand to lean in and whisper to her."

"Ain't nothin' Professor Smartmouth can't handle. You got this—so kick it's ass." He remarked before slowly releasing his hand from hers, just before she could take it for reassurance. Part of her wished she had enough confidence to at least pretend that she wasn't absolutely scared out of her mind—but the fear was certainly written all over her face as she walked into the classroom and the door was shut behind her.

All the old school desks were stacked in the front corner, leaving only Mr. Broth's desk in the very middle of the room with a chair. There was a computer sitting on top of the large teacher's desk, looking bulky and outdated and with a smaller screen and mouse. The projector screen at the front of the room was unfurled with the start of a movie paused upon it from the whirling projector overhead, causing the inventor to assume she'd have to watch a video first that explained how the compatibility testing worked.

The lights went out as she took her seat in front of the idle terminal, her hand trembling over the computer mouse in front of her. The video was started with a jovial Vault Boy in a picturesque landscape, sitting with a beautiful blonde on a picnic blanket amidst a garden of flowers.

"This instructional video brought to you by the same creators of the G.O.A.T. exam and the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. workshop—Vault-Tec! Revolutionizing safety for an uncertain future!"

"Hey there, fellow Vault Dweller! You've been hand-selected by your Overseer to partake in the Future, Achievement, Marriage, Impact, Lineage, and You initiative—that's F.A.M.I.L.Y. for short! Our F.A.M.I.L.Y. initiative guarantees a fun program that will help even the
most forgetful of vault dwellers remember the 6 things necessary in order to keep their vault safe, happy, and ever growing! Think about the FUTURE and how to ACHIEVE it. Find a like-minded individual to MARRY, and work alongside them to bring positive IMPACT as well as a LINEAGE that will continue to create your vision of a better tomorrow! Lastly, and most importantly, think about YOU! As without YOU, there is no F.A.M.I.L.Y.!

August 6th, 2277

HEADLINING BULLETIN OF THE DAY

Results of F.A.M.I.L.Y. Evaluation (08/06/77)

If your name is not listed below, that means the F.A.M.I.L.Y. program is still hard at work trying to find you a suitable partner to enjoy your future with! Postponed results will be revealed August 7th through the 10th, so mark your calendars accordingly!

Order of partnerships listed in ALPHABETICAL ORDER based upon MALE'S SURNAME

MALE . . . . . . . . . . FEMALE

Alvarez, Thomas . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Nakamura, Katherine
Armstrong, Steve . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Blakely, Peggy
DeLoria, Butch . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Parker, Winona
Gonzalez, Roberto . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Dawson, Jane
  Lewis, Floyd . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Yanez, Gina
Mack, Stevie . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Hamilton, Georgina
  Palmer, Jonas . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Wilkins, Janice
Richards, Dennis . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Armstrong, Beatrice
  Wilkins, Jim . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Kendall, Christine

Congratulations on your newfound partnership!

(please see the Overseer if you find the results to be incorrect or incompatible)
A/N: THAT TOTALLY PREDICTABLE PLOT TWIST! Sorry that you guys will have to wait until next Friday for a proper conclusion on this chapter here. Until then, how about you drop your thoughts about it in a comment/review? I love hearing insight from readers, especially in follow up to a pretty heavy chapter (like this one here!)

Otherwise, thank you so much for taking the time to read another chapter of Inventor's Absolution! Hope you enjoyed, and don't forget to bookmark/follow Winona's story so you'll get timely notifications on chapter updates.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
A/N: Heyo, everyone! Welcome back to Inventor's Absolution~ before you get into the chapter, I wanted to do a quick announcement. Next week's chapter, Chapter 19, sort of connects to Chapter 20 even though they're two separate entities, so this will be the posting schedule for next week:

Chapter 19 (NAME EXPUNGED DUE TO POSSIBLE SPOILERS): Tuesday, 01/23
Chapter 20 - Things To Never Say: Friday, 01/26

Thanks for tuning in guys, and be sure to review if you have any interesting thoughts or comments as I love reading them--and they certainly are more important to me than many readers realize! If you're new, be sure to bookmark the story to get notifications when Winona's story updates.

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Konfessionist signing out

August 7th, 2277

Whatever bullshit 'highly intelligent program' the Overseer ran their F.A.M.I.L.Y. evaluations through must have been a broken piece of crap. For Butch DeLoria to be paired with Her? Out of everyone that was tested, and who still had yet to be tested and given their results, the program calculated that they were the best suited for each other?

It was weirdly unsettling. It made his stomach roil, it made his thoughts all abuzz in confusion, it made his palms clammy with a cold sweat... why was he reacting this way?

Marriage was always a foreign concept to Butch, mainly due to the fact that he hadn't seen his parents married long enough to understand what their partnership represented. As well, more than half of the married couples in the vault seemed utterly miserable together, and had no shortage of lazy or dopey husbands and boozing or gossipy wives. There were also cheating and abuse scandals galore. You take your pick of any vault resident and their name was tagged by the rumor mill somehow; Allen Mack beats his family, Debbie Horowitz (Dorothy's mother) would climb on anything that had a pulse because her husband was a pig, Jonas Palmer was a Nancy boy, Beatrice Armstrong had been in love with Edwin Brotch since they were kids, which explained why she was 45 and unmarried...

When you lived in a contained vault with less than 60 people, word got around and it got around quick.

Just like the first batch of F.A.M.I.L.Y. results that had a successful match—which set the vault alight due to an extremely unexpected coupling;
Butch DeLoria and Winona Parker.

Like most other rumors, the war waged between the inventor and the Tunnel Snakes wasn't a hostility unknown to any 101 citizen back when they were kids. The pranks, verbal sparring, and World War 3-inducing meets in the halls had been a typically daily occurrence for many years. They once despised each other and made sure the other person was constantly aware of those feelings, so for them to be calculated as compatible was shocking. It called into question if the system actually worked like it should have, but no one came forward with such an astounding accusation, as far as he knew.

Actually—... he didn't hear about anyone complaining about the Procreation Law. He expected there to at least be small-scale rioting—but for people to just let it happen? It wasn't normal. It wasn't okay. Forcing people into marriages they didn't ask for to have kids they didn't want to make was a fucked up law to push forward, and it was like something out of a horrifying sci-fi movie, or a vivid nightmare.

Butch certainly felt like he was trapped in a nightmare. It was too surreal to think that all of this was actually happening; that he and Winona were expected to marry, and have a minimum of three brats, and live the rest of their lives stuck together, and be happy about it? Their given history coupled with his past romantic feelings for her made the whole thing darkly ironic, and he would've laughed if it had happened to anyone else but him.

So he didn't find it funny, and he definitely wasn't laughing.

Dolly wasn't laughing, either, when she came pounding on his door yesterday morning when the results were posted. His on-and-off again arm candy pitched a fit on his doorstep, wailing through the intercom about how embarrassed she was to be told by Susie Mack that Butch was not going to spend his life with her. She yelled about how angry and betrayed she felt because he didn't even mention that he went in for the F.A.M.I.L.Y. testing, and how it was such a screwy thing for him to do behind her back.

Butch told her he didn't have any choice—he met the qualifications and had to apply for his evaluation. Truth be told, he didn't feel even a little sorry for Dolly because, yeah, though what he did was fucked up, the broad was a basketcase with a capital 'CRAZY'. She would constantly demand to know where he was when he wasn't with her or the guys, she'd blow up his Pip-Boy at all hours of the night to ensure he was home, she'd swing by to bother him at work by trying to coax him into the nearest utility closet—demand that he stay away from other women because 'ya don't need 'em when 'ya got me, Butchie!'. The last time he tried dumping her she retaliated by shredding half of his jumpsuits (since she worked downstairs in the laundry room), and he had to front the bill to get them replaced. It cost him a whole cycle of work credits!

She was a demon half the time and he only stuck around for the benefits, which over time, became more hassle than they were worth. He had been trying to get rid of Dolly for months now since that last 'break up' and she just wouldn't let herself be rid of.

But that was how he found out about his F.A.M.I.L.Y. initiative results—through Dolly, because honestly he was a little nervous to look at the post himself. She actually found it to be a laugh and a half, that Butch and Winona were supposedly compatible with one another, saying that it was a pretty glaring miscalculation.

He thought so at first, too... until he realized that it wasn't all that outrageous.

The two connected in a lot of ways that were seemingly important or he admired; they enjoyed comic books and the same kind of movies, Winona was a hellraiser in a very subtle way
and damn did he like that because he was all kinds of trouble—they both hated the Overseer (which was a huge plus in his book), he could make her laugh, she was brutally honest with him, they weren't afraid to think about the outside or to openly talk about it, and they both wanted something bigger and better and just more for themselves than whatever Vault 101 could offer. They talked about the future, the mediocrity of life, he impressed her with how much he knew about the vault (thanks Paulie!), and they understood each other.

The test results only proved that they were more alike than he ever considered; sharp-tongued and quick witted, haunted and flawed, and more complicated than how everyone else perceived them to be... and now, if the Procreation Law held up and they couldn't have the pairing revoked, Winona Parker was going to be his wife.

Referring to her as 'his wife', even if it was only in his head, struck Butch with that same feeling of utter disbelief as earlier. It felt harsher than just saying they had to get married, it felt more territorial to call her His, and it filled him with a nauseating dread as he neared Winona's apartment.

Butch rang the buzzer once, twice, then a third time with an impatient finger before retiring his hands to the pockets of his leather jacket. The intercom clicked on.

"Hello?"

"Open up, Professor."

"...I think I might've missed something," She responded curiously.

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"I didn't realize that's how people say 'hello' now a days." Her voice was cheeky through the speaker. "If you want entry you have to cater to my ego first."

"Can it, smartass." He smirked with a forearm leaning against the door frame, his other on his hip. "I ain't kiddin', lemme in."

The door peeled open before him seconds later, showing a particularly disorderly looking Winona; her white curls spilled about her face wildly, framing the honey hazel of her eyes and the subtle creases of her dimples. She looked like she had a long day in community service, being dressed down in a gray t-shirt and the pants of her jumpsuit. The inventor parted from the doorway, signaling that he could come in.

"You read the post?" He inquired upon following her in with the door rolling shut behind them.

"Not until I was released last night, but Amata had already filled me in." She replied with a finger tapping her Pip-Boy screen, in reference to the messaging system in it. She went to her sofa and plunked down onto it tiredly, reclining her head against the back cushions and closed her eyes with her legs stretched out in front of her.

"Can you even believe this shit—?" Butch grimaced as he remained standing beside her, his arms folded over his chest. "Overseer Asshole has lost his God damn mind! I say we storm his office and make him shut it down."

"We can't," She responded with an exhausted sigh and her hand coming to her temple and forehead. "Apparently the F.A.M.I.L.Y. initiative was met with a lot of 'positivity' with only about 8-percent of the residents that were tested being unhappy, so the Procreation Law is passing."
Her hand dropped from her forehead and she stared ahead at the wall, slumped back into the body of the couch. Butch expected her to have some kind of plan, to be upset about all this—but she looked uncharacteristically defeated... like she resolved how she felt about having to marry her schoolyard antagonist.

"Those 8-percent of complaints were from people who weren't fucking complacent enough to not say this whole thing's rubbish. Silence doesn't mean positive reception, but what's that matter to the Overseer if the numbers look good on paper? 8-percent is literally only two people."

"Two people—? Two people? Are 'ya kidding me! So outta all the people that were forced to take this stupid test, only two people were mad about it?"

"No one's happy about it, Butch." Winona's dimmed gaze finally lifted to meet his. "...People in here are just conditioned to go with this kind of stuff. Like... Like they're brainwashed or something, I dunno. Everyone's miserable and whoever's not miserable is either an idiot or not paying attention... but you ever notice that no matter how miserable they are, they don't question anything? They don't get upset or argue or even admit that this is all seriously messed up? The Procreation Law is violating and it wasn't even officially approved by Vault-Tec."

"What're 'ya talking about, Parker?" Butch frowned as he sat down on the edge of the coffee table in front of her, his hands clasped between his knees.

"The F.A.M.I.L.Y. initiative was a project created in case the population got too low... meant to be an absolute last resort. You forcibly pair people off to make new vaulties, it boosts population but happiness and productivity plummet as a result. Vault-Tec didn't officially sign off on it because it could do more harm than good in the end, and it's not like they could've tested it to ensure it'd be successful. Most of it was just—... guess work and running simulations, probably."

"So then how're we gunna fix it?" Winona frowned at his question and straightened up from the sofa. "Cause I'm not fuckin' brainwashed, and you're not an idiot. We're the only two people in this damn tub that know what they're doin' and we don't take no shit from anybody! 'Sides, that program s'a piece of junk if it said we were compatible, right?"

Winona's eyes turned back up to his face, her brow softening at his words and she looked like she wanted to say something—something important—but her mouth didn't open. Instead she got up from the sofa and went to her dining table to grab a large manila envelope, carrying it back to him where he remained sitting on her coffee table.

"Got this this morning. Our results." She explained as he took it from her with some confusion.

"We already saw 'em—"

"Not like this. I went to the Overseer's office earlier to overturn our match, he said no and that we had to come back and complain together in order to get it overturned, and then gave me that." Winona nodded to the envelope as she skirted around his knees and sat down again, now sitting beside him on the table.

Butch opened the already unsealed envelope and pulled out a small packet to idly thumb through it. From what he immediately saw, the front page was just a lengthy explanation of how the compatibility program worked, how it would pair people up, and then gave a summary of the different categories it calculated compatibility from; religion, politics, parenting methods/raising a family, work ethic, loyalty to the vault and Overseer (which sounded like a trap and it definitely was) and personality, just to name a few since the test itself had been 150 questions long and covered several facets of a compatible partnership. There was a page that involved vague results
about their medical evaluations from the day before the F.A.M.I.L.Y. exam and how they were genetically matched as well (family medical history, mental illness, preferred genes for making brats, etc.), but he wasn't very good at biology in the first place so he gladly skipped it. When he flipped to the next page, it showed by percentage how they matched in each of the aforementioned categories. It also specifically highlighted important questions where their answers were similar to one another, with the impression that it would give the two of them something to chat about.

"Hey, we're being paired off because we're both devout Christians and are so brainless that we want to work on our days off if only to appease the almighty Overseer! Also we both like blue!"

What a fucking crock of shit (and Winona's favorite color was green, he noticed upon actually reading this page... he'd have to remember that for later).

But it was the final page that struck him—it showed their overall compatibility result in a big printed number.

91-percent.

"...Jesus Christ, I never gotta 91 in my life," He muttered off-handedly in his shock and Winona gave a dry, strangled chuckle. "Why're 'ya showin' me this?"

"Because we can't fix this, or get out of it or make the Overseer change his mind. He'd rather do this than open the door, don't you understand?" Winona replied with a single finger tapping their compatibility result. "He's going to defend this to his grave, plus it's almost like he's running this as a distraction because of what happened during that meeting—because people won't stop talking about outside. Besides, how're the vault's two most vilified citizens going to convince everyone else, whether they were tested or not, to open the door?"

"...Let's blow it open ourselves," Butch responded seriously as he dropped the packet on the couch and looked her straight in the eye. She was stunned by his response. "Think about it, Parker! We give this hellhole the finger and bust the door open! You and me, out there, goin' on those adventures like we always talked about! You'd know how t'do crack the door, right? Since 'ya work downstairs?"

"I am not going to possibly destroy the vault so we can get the door open!" She cried, horrified. "I'm trying to help everyone, not kill them! The point of opening the door is to use Vault 101 as a safe house, take excursions out to get what we need when we need it and bring people back to grow our population again. To break the door—"

"But I'm so sick of this crap!" He barked as he snapped up to his feet, stomping away from the alarmed inventor. 'I'm so tired of feelin' like a rat in a trap! Doin' the same old shit day in and day out—God—'ya ever feel like you're suffocatin' down here, where everythin's got it's damn eyes on 'ya? You ever wish 'ya weren't here? I don't wanna get married, or have a bunch of snot-nosed brats, or be a barber for the rest of my life! I ain't done living yet, and if there's something out there —somethin' different, I don't give a fuck if it's worse than being down here—I wanna see it! I wanna do it, I wanna be there! I didn't sign up for any of this shit!" He yelled, gesturing back to the packet discarded on the couch with an exasperated flourish of his arm.

Butch let out a frustrated yelp in conclusion to his rant, unsure of how to further vocalize his outrage as he stood alone, quietly heaving with flared nostrils while his hands flexed with the desire of hitting something. He heard Winona get up from the coffee table, evident by the straining sound of the wood, before hearing her quiet steps toward him. He felt her hand come upon his
bicep in an attempt to comfort him and his shoulders slowly slackened, the vitriol immediately draining out of him. Coming around his front side, her chin was tilted upward to make up for the height difference as she gazed into his face with an understanding look.

There was always that look in them whenever they were alone... the kind of look that made him feel completely accepted and like he wasn't being judged. She was tired of it all, too; of being run down by the pure monotony and how Vault 101 strained any life, dream, or hope out of everyone it sheltered. It was a place of despair and they were both victimized by it, being at the bottom of the social totem pole.

"We're just a couple of kids in a fucked up world... aren't we, Butch?" Winona started quietly with her eyes still on his.

"'Ya still sound funny when 'ya swear, Parker." He teased a little brokenly and she gave a small smile in response, which he gladly exchanged if only to pretend that he wasn't done with everything for just a moment. He was so use to pretending like he was okay even if he wasn't, it was like his greatest skill.

"I feel the same way. I don't think this is right—none of it is—and it shouldn't be like this, but it is. So why—listen, okay?—why don't we try to make the best of it?"

"...You serious? You sayin' we should just—... do it? Just roll with it and get married and all that?"

"Well—... yeah, I am."

"...Like there's anythin' good about us shakin' up," He deadpanned. "Our brats would be evil geniuses or whatever." Winona laughed, shaking her head and it made him feel a little better... and a little comforted.

"We have to get married, sure, if just to keep up public appearances. We'll probably be forced to anyway, or they'll put it down in the records whether or not we show up to sign the paperwork—but what they can't do is force us to have kids. You can still see Dorothy if you want—"

"I don't want Dolly," Butch replied quickly. "I'm done with that."

"All I'm saying is you're not going to be stuck with me. You can go off and do whatever you like."

Butch was unsettled by this, of the idea of being married—of having to share a bed and a room and a life with someone, because divorce wasn't a thing in the vault—but instead he was out and sharing that bed with someone else. It's not like he could love any dame down here enough to want to keep them long term, or to even admit that he loved her (that kind of shit was too mushy for him, anyway), but he didn't care about that. Butch DeLoria didn't love anybody but his ma, and nothing else besides his leather jacket, his Toothpick, and his hair pomade.

He knew what he wanted from a woman and it wasn't love, and any potential lady knew that, and were smart enough to stay away from him.

"What 'bout you and Freddie?" He asked instead of saying something that would imply even the slightest of flutters for the old romantic feelings he had for her. "You wanna—... get back with him?"

"...I don't want Freddie either," She responded with her hand on his bicep gliding slightly down to his elbow and giving him the gentlest of reminders that it was still there, willingly touching him. "He—... I'm not getting back with him, not this time. He slept with Susie Mack."
"He wha—? What the fuck," Butch's eyebrows skyrocketed to his hairline and his mouth suddenly had a bad taste in it. Freddie had the balls to cheat on her? On Winona fucking Parker?

"I found out from Amata. She overheard Christine and Susie talking, and apparently he's been seeing her for weeks now behind my back... guess I was too busy with trying to keep the vault from falling apart that I didn't have the time or attention he wanted out of our relationship." Winona spoke in a deflated voice. "...Honestly? At that point, the cheating didn't even matter. I was ready to get out but I didn't know how, and I haven't loved Freddie for a very long time. I was too exhausted by him to be hurt. He's betrayed me before and I should've seen it coming."

"Takin' your hat and sleepin' around ain't even in the same city as each other," He grimaced, in reference to the memory of when they were 14—when Winona's stark white hair was first revealed to everyone, and he felt a stab of guilt about it. "...Freddie's a real piece of shit."

"It's over with now, and has been since before the public meeting."

"What? Why didn't ya tell me? That was like a fuckin' month ago!"

"Like I said, I haven't loved Freddie for a long time, and after the first year we only stayed together out of—... well, I guess out of convenience, really. He doesn't matter anymore. I've taken the F.A.M.I.L.Y. assessment and took my last step to the incinerator." She shook her head, looking up at him. "But if you still want out we can go down to the Overseer's office and get it overturned."

"That right?" He mused in a quiet voice.

"...Can I be honest with you, Butch?"

She was saying his first name an awful lot during their conversation... more than he's heard before—but still less than what he really wanted to hear. His eyes fell upon her face, softening at the emotionally vulnerable expression it carried, and there was something about it that was wholly disarming. Butch then noticed his own hand gripping her elbow, reciprocating her touch, leaving their arms to cradle the other with her hand on his forearm.

He didn't pull away and neither did she. She wanted to be comforted just as much as he did, and she was strong enough to openly admit she was weakened. He could only say so through pulling her closer in toward his body, just shy of her front touching his own.

"I ain't the boss of you, girlie. Shoot."

"I don't think we should ask for a replacement." Winona admitted with a small shake of her head but her eyes didn't leave his. "If we do they'll put us with the 8-percenters, and I don't wanna take a gamble on that. I don't know who they are but I'm not taking a chance of landing with Stevie Mack and getting indoctrinated into the Mack Madhouse," She made a small face in distaste. "Or Jonas. He's like my brother and that'd just be all kinds of weird."

"Weirder than us bein' put together?" Butch quipped playfully and she smiled a little at him. "Sounds like you don't even know the meanin' of weird, girl."

"My point is we could be miserable with other people, or we can be slightly less miserable with each other. Besides, I gave you permission to be with other women!"

"Guess that makes 'ya wife of the year," He snickered and she gave a playful little shove to his chest with a sarcastic looking smirk on her face.

"I'm not your wife yet, get your facts right, Serpent King." She teased thinly, sounding a little
"You sure you wanna do this?"

"...If you do, I'm on board." Winona nodded firmly. "I'm not saying I like it anymore than you do, and I'm not saying we have to like or even tolerate each other, but we have to make good out of whatever crap the Overseer puts on our doorstep."

Butch was mildly surprised that Winona even contemplated the idea of them staying together, especially out of fear that she could be put with someone worse than him. If they asked for a replacement, the worst he had to worry about was Beatrice and that was just because she was old and nuts.

But Winona?

Her worst was Psycho Stevie, and the entirety of the Mack clan at his back. It meant she would be forced to be around Wally as well, which was even worse than having to be Stevie's wife... and now the chick who stole her ex-boyfriend out from under her nose.

Butch didn't want to think about what Wally and Stevie would do to Winona if she was at their mercy. He quickly cleared the notion from his thoughts to keep himself from gagging or pissing himself off.

"...Guess that settles it." He concluded.

"...Yeah... I guess it does." She considered aloud and ducked her eyes away from his stare to see their intertwined grasps—her hand clutching his leather jacket on his inner elbow now, his own was creeping up her bicep and they were closer together than they had been moments ago, their bodies making full contact in what felt like a partial embrace. They both pulled away in quick and awkward unison, leaving her to fold her arms over her stomach just to keep her hands to herself, and he was pretending to fix his hair although nothing was out of place.

"Should, uh—... should head on out. Ma's probably wonderin' where her dinner's at." Butch explained as his hand found the back of his neck.

"Sure, sure. I'll walk you out." Winona gestured to the door and then followed him to it, politely opening it for him to leave. "We have until September 1st to get everything ready, so—... we've got time to change our minds."

"Get ready? For what?"

"I got a booklet on married life, too, when I went down to the Overseer's office." She rested her arm and shoulder in the open doorway, putting her weight into it in an idle stance as her arms remained crossed in front of her. "We have about a month to figure out who moves in where, and give a proper date for a wedding... and decide how to do the wedding, and we have to also...

At the mention of moving house, Butch thought about his mother and immediately zoned out of the conversation. Damn, he wanted out of that apartment and being her caretaker as soon as he could qualify living on his own—at the time, he didn't want to be around her any longer to watch her self-medicate by self-destructing. He was tired of feeding into her habit with the fractured hope that she would eventually come around, that she would eventually seek help and fix herself, but then came to the cold realization that some broken people—... they just didn't want to be fixed. They wanted to continue victimizing themselves to their own demons because succumbing was easier than fighting them back (and he knew that battle well, by acting on his insecurities as a child).
But after two denied applications to have his own apartment—with the reason being 'inconclusive evidence; applicant does not meet the requirements to live alone' and Butch figured that was the Overseer's way of saying 'fuck you'—he resolved to staying in with his mother. It was a shitty choice to make because damn did he want the freedom of being independent and having his own pad, but the truth of the matter was that as long as his mother was destroying herself, she needed him to be around. She needed someone to pick her up off the ground because she wasn't strong enough on her own two legs, and he loved her too much to leave her lying there; no matter how many times she lied about getting better and betrayed him, or hurt him, or put him in a position where he had no choice but to get her dinner, and clean up the broken bottles and the vomit, and get her to bathe herself, or force her to eat, he still loved his crippled mom.

So if it came down to having to pick somewhere to live?

Butch couldn't leave her, but he couldn't ask Winona to move in with them, either. He didn't want her being exposed to that place of toxicity in his life any more than she already had been—and he didn't want to imply that she would take share in his problems. She showed more care in his mom than anyone else had in a very long time, and for that he was grateful, but Winona had seen too much and done more than enough.

"Did I lose you? Ground control to Major Butch?" Winona asked with a small smile and a hand waving in front of his face obnoxiously.

"I'm listenin', I'm listenin.'" He grumbled while smacking her hand away.

"Fine, we'll plan our winter wedding another time." She teased sarcastically. "Until then?" She glanced away from him, as if sheepish to speak what was on her mind next, before she silently resolved the issue with a nod to herself and looked back at him. "Feel free to text me, or swing by if you feel like it."

"You're invitin' me over?" Butch grinned devilishly from ear to ear, and she rolled her eyes with a daring smirk of her own on her face. "And you're doin' it willingly? Guess my handsome mug's growin' on ya, huh Parker?"

"Yeah, like a cancerous tumor. Your luck'll run out one of these days, Butch-Man." She warned with thin playfulness before taking a step backward into her apartment, her hand upon the door control. "Don't be a stranger's all I'm saying."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear 'ya. See you 'round, Professor Smartmouth." He said in goodbye and turned, walking on down the hallway to get back to his apartment.

The day gave him a lot to think about... actually, the last two weeks have. One day he was a the top dog with a babe on his arm and his best pals backing him up in general delinquency, and not even the Overseer could stop them with all his power—but now?

He'd be picking out curtains with his soon to be wife, Winona Parker, he spat in the Overseer's face, one of his two best friends was nowhere to be found, and he was more open-eyed than ever before about the small world that was Vault 101. He now knew that there was a whole other, larger, grander, more exciting world up above.

It made Butch reflect on how much had drastically changed since he was on top of the world. Part of him wanted that back, to roll with his brothers with Dolly hanging off his hips before she got so crazy and annoying, to be respected through fear and not have to answer to anybody, no how. One of his biggest fears was to be pulled under the crashing tsunami wave of ADULTHOOD, where he would have to grow up and give up all the things he worked his ass off for; when it came to the
'real world', being the leader of a badass gang didn't mean you would go anywhere good or do anything useful. In the grand scheme of real life in the vault, he was at the bottom of the food chain and there was no way to climb himself up out of that pit.

But the other part of him was tired of living that life, too.

He was tired of never being good enough for anyone, of being perceived as an idiot and an asshole with too much time on his hands, who liked terrorizing people, who could be nothing more than the leader of said badass gang. The time to grow up was near and he didn't know if he wanted to welcome it, or shun it vehemently, more.

But life's a ballbuster, ain't it? Butch considered solemnly as he tucked into his back pocket to get his cigarette pack and lighter. Life's a ballbustin' bitch and ma's right—nothin' good ever sticks around... sometimes I do feel like a little kid in a fucked up world, but I guess it ain't so bad if Parker feels the same.
A/N: Hey readers! Wanted to throw a quick notion your way before the start of the chapter; I've recently created a dumb 80/90's grunge inspired tumblr blog dedicated to my fanfiction OCs and stories (mainly fallout OCs but more will be put up in the future, hopefully!) if anyone would be interested in checking it out. It's mainly an ask blog where characters like Winona will make their own posts and talk about interesting topics, and you can chat with them and ask questions-or ask/questions talk to me personally! There will also be little quip writing posts and prompts for your viewing pleasure since I have no other creative skills ROFL

Tumblr blog: https://thecoolkidsbasement.tumblr.com/

I hope to see you there! Until then, enjoy the chapter! Reviews are ALWAYS welcome, and be sure to bookmark the story to get updates if you're new! (Please let me know if there's any spelling or grammar issues, it's 2:30 AM right now and my brain isn't in an editing mood)

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out

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August 11th, 2277

It took them years.

Gathering all the supplies they needed for Project Purity's low-scale experiments took a year alone. James, with the help of Jonas, had to work and collect and sneak about without arousing suspicion—especially with an increase in scouts roaming the halls. After the incident with the database burglary, the Overseer increased nightly patrols to ensure no more suspicious late-night activity took place. Another issue was finding places outside the clinic to work, as overclocking on hours would cause the shift manager to look into why they were in the infirmary until the odd hours of morning. Eventually they began using the shooting gallery that was set up for Winona's 10th birthday, as rarely anyone—even Winona, after she turned 13—came down to that room.

They were once spotted walking around by Herman on his nightly patrol, but he turned the other way silently and pretended not to see the two nearing the lower levels.

Herman was a good man.

As long as they didn't raise any questions amongst the wrong people, and thoroughly cleaned up before leaving, they weren't going to get caught. They knew when the Overseer was watching his cameras and when he wasn't. Through all the gathering, and the sneaking around, and the work in the clinic, and being there for Winona through the harrowing trials of her community service and
now impending marriage, it was done.

It took them years, but they finally did it.

The calculations came back with more promise than James could have ever hoped for; each experiment they ran had phenomenal results 9 out of 10 times, which was much better results than what they had back in Purity. He couldn't nitpick about it not being completely perfect results. Everything was falling into place nicely, and it gave way to the final solution as to what the project needed, which was—as James predicted—a G.E.C.K. The technology would still need to be put to the test, of course, and he didn't exactly know where to find one through all the years of preparation they did. When they finally drew the miniature project to a close, they packed up the remnants of the experiments, tucked them somewhere safe, and returned to the clinic for a celebratory drink and to talk about what would happen next.

Jonas couldn't properly say whether or not James' leaving was a good idea, though the assistant could tell it was on his mind.

At one instance, Jonas would be trying to convince James to stay in the vault since it was cleaner, safer, and he already started a successful new life amongst the residents. His daughter was all grown up and if he left he'd be missing other major milestones in her life, like her having children now that she was to be married. To this, James admitted it'd pain him to miss seeing possible grandchildren, but considering the agenda of Vault 101, it also disgusted him knowing that those children would be made by force (if she ever considered procreating with Butch DeLoria, and oh God James hoped not). As well, Jonas brought up a valid point of how it was 20 years later, and for all James knew, so much could have changed on the outside; maybe the project had already been completed without him and Catherine, or maybe some of the other scientists who were involved at the time were dead, or unwilling to revisit Purity if they were alive and found. He could see the latter being true in the case of Madison, and definitely Agincourt... the engineer was always rather peevish, but he was downright fuming when James announced his leaving. Noticeably more than Madison, who was extremely upset herself.

Then Jonas began arguing for why James should return. He said that maybe the project wasn't completed, but the remaining team members wanted to return. The Wasteland would still need a large source of pure water to dip into, and it could give way to proper agricultural stability in the Wastes. Most Wastelanders made their own booze or chems, or farmed Brahmin, or set up some other trade—farming crops was a long and usually unrewarding effort due to the dry weather and hard soil in D.C., especially since they were directly hit by the atomic bombs. Giving the people of the Capital a promising source of clean water was a responsibility the team had shouldered throughout the sacrifice, problems, and naysayers that claimed it'd never work, or that Purity was only a rumor carried on the wind. If they managed to complete it this time, maybe real change and real progress could be made toward a sustainable future without any main power or faction having a monopoly on pure water.

It was 200 years after a nuclear war, and perhaps civilization should have rebuilt itself by now—but something happened along the way that kept it from becoming reality. Project Purity wasn't going to solve all of the Capital's problems, but it was a start for that journey. It could at least inspire someone to want to do good things.

By the time residents were waking up and slogging themselves to breakfast, James and Jonas were more than a few drinks down and came to a final, somewhat bittersweet, conclusion; James was escaping from Vault 101. They concocted a plan (which they'd review when they were sober for clarity's sake) that would make it easier for the doctor to leave, and it required Jonas to cause a distraction to keep the guards away from the main floor. In the couple of weeks leading up to the
planned day of escape, they would implant rumors amongst certain residents (chiefly Beatrice, who was a flighty little gossip, and someone more credible like her sisters, Mary and Gloria) of a growing radroach nest in the lower vaults. The majority of the police force alongside Andy would have to go down and explore for said nest if the demand from the residents grew too loud for the Overseer to ignore. This extermination would most likely be carried out with a majority of the security force at night, so there'd be no disturbance in the vault's schedule during the day.

It'd be perfect if they could keep clear of the remaining guards that were on night patrol. So until then, it was only a matter of waiting until the first few steps of their plan with Beatrice, Mary, and Gloria came to fruition.

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**August 16th, 2277**

James was sitting at his desk in the back office of the infirmary, with hands typing up the closing of a case for Monica Kendall's stubborn cough while his mind was elsewhere. He thought about the plan, about the rise in concerns from the dwellers about a possible roach nest in the lower levels (despite Stanley's insistent claims of the opposite, *we're sorry for the trouble, Stanley*), and wondered if the Overseer would take action sooner than he and Jonas anticipated. Surely he wouldn't brush such claims off, but in the last few weeks, Alphonse had grown increasingly tyrannical. Especially after *that meeting*, and then bringing to life the ever-rumored, but never confirmed, *Procreation Law*.

As a doctor and scientist, James didn't want to think of the repercussions of the stagnant gene pool that was Vault 101 (aside from himself, his child, and Jonas, since his father was a Wastelander).

Alphonse was so concerned over the wrong kind of safety that he was ignoring his true duties as Vault 101's Overseer. There were now constant checks on the residents for their loyalty to the vault, not so cleverly disguised by civilian visits from various vault guards probing for information, and almost *all* terminals were now locked if they weren't being used in a workplace. Even the vault *library* had become more intense about books with sensitive topics being checked out. Meanwhile the rising clamor of scared residents were ignored, all but *two* greenhouses were dried out, and the purifier was breaking down every other day. The roaches had been all but properly handled, and so James wouldn't be surprised if there actually *was* a nest in the lower levels.

James turned his attention away from his computer, rubbing his tired eyes with a thumb and pointer finger, and his bifocals were pushed upward to rest atop his head.

*You can't become so distracted from your clinical work, James. Continue working, don't seem absent-minded in your reports—you can't give the Overseer any reason to send a member of Security to your door for questioning.*

"Hey, doc?" Jonas knocked against the metal of the open doorway. "The kid's here to see you."

The only doubts he had in his plans of escape were settled on his daughter... especially in knowing that she would be (forcibly) bound in holy matrimony to her school years bully. Seeing the results had made him sick, and he called Winona daily that week to talk with her about it but she would immediately clam up. He couldn't understand why.

"Please, let her in."

He ignored the warning look from his assistant as Winona walked into the office. Her face was long and tired, her jumpsuit, which was drawn down to her hips with the torso tucked into the pants, was flecked with brown and black splotches. Her hands were dirty and her hair was twisted
up into a greasy bun—she hadn't looked like she showered in the last couple of days.

"And what happened to you?" He chuckled goodnaturedly as she dropped into the chair across from his desk, sighing blissfully from being able to sit with her legs stretched out across the floor. She looked like she could have fallen asleep right then and there.

"Two laundry cannons malfunctioned, it took me all day to fix... then I had to clean out the grease traps in the cafeteria along with the deep fryer." Not until she mentioned the fryer did he smell a sickening odor of stale fries and rendered burger fat. "I've got grease and oil and grime in crevices amongst crevices in places I didn't even know I had. That's not even the worst of what I had to do today. Do you know how filthy the men's bathroom is?"

"Sweetheart, you look exhausted. A nice, hot shower, dinner, and some sleep is what you need." James responded in his doctor voice without meaning to.

"I had to come and see you." She admitted as she slumped back in the chair, looking up to him. Her statement struck the doctor with a nervous dagger—did she know he was leaving? Did she have more questions about Catherine, or despite her exhaustion, was she planning on cornering him about outside again? It was a conversation they'd had multiple times since he turned over the holotape and pictures of Catherine, all which he swiftly ended with a cleaver's precision not because of Alphonse or the oath to secrecy he was forced to make... but because he knew he'd reveal too much to her. They'd talk about outside, and then he'd explain that he was a scientist, and then he would have to tell her—want to tell her—all about Project Purity and the good that they were trying to accomplish.

Then he would want to bring her with him.

*She would've been a fantastic help with the equipment.* James thought bitterly. *Catherine would have insisted she come with me.*

And maybe he should take her with him, if only to keep her from being forced into a marriage with a man she didn't love and strong-armed into having children she wouldn't want to have under those circumstances; but to want that was a silly and selfish thing—she would surely be in much worse peril if she was taken outside. Butch DeLoria was a roach to a deathclaw, and the boy wouldn't have the gumption to lay a hand on Winona without her explicit consent.

His child was fierce in that way, and Butch was nothing more than a little boy that hid his insecurities behind the mask of a bully. He was more annoyance than threat but James disliked him very much all the same.

"I would've come to you, honey. How about you get that shower and I'll come by your apartment after closing?" He answered.

"I'd fall asleep by then!" She laughed tiredly and forced herself up from the chair on wobbly legs. "I just had to come by, it's on my way home, anyway... I dunno, I had a weird feeling."

"A weird feeling?"

"Yeah. I dunno, something just told me to come see you. You're not busy, are you? I can come by tomorrow instead—"

"Oh no you don't," He chuckled and had her sit down in the chair again so she could rest for another few moments. "It's actually good timing that you've stopped by... there's something I have to talk to you about."
"What is it?" Winona responded eagerly, leaning forward into his hand that pressed her down into the seat by her shoulder. He knew she wanted it to be about outside, he knew.

"You—... this will be a difficult conversation to have. I found myself thinking, the other day—... Mrs. Taylor came in again for heart palpitations, you know."

"Is she okay?" She frowned worriedly.

"A diagnosed gas bubble," In her tired state, his daughter laughed deliriously. "She's fine, but as you know she has a weak heart. Mr. Taylor was worried that it was finally giving out... and I'm sorry to say it got me thinking about some things."

"Like what?" She asked through her giggling.

"Things like how I'm not going to be around forever, Nona."

The statement immediately halted her laughing and shattered her smile. She stared at him with dread filling eyes in a sagging frame of tired purple bags. Her hands came to find his palm pressed into her shoulder, holding it tightly.

"Daddy, are you—?"

"I'm not sick. I'm as healthy as I've ever been! But I'm also getting old, sweetheart. Your mother and I had you later than most parents do—I was 32 when you were born, and your mother had just turned 40. I can't help but think about what could happen to you when I'm not around anymore."

"...Dad, you're scaring me, promise me you're not dying." Winona pleaded in a small voice.

"I promise you, there's nothing wrong with me. When you're older and have faced some of the things all people my age do, you'll understand. You'll understand why you start thinking about these things, and why they can come out of the clear blue sky rather suddenly. I—... I won't be around to hold your hand forever, and when the time does come that I'm gone, I don't want you to be unprepared for it. I don't want it to hurt you like—..."

"...Like how it hurt you when mom died." She finished for him quietly, her head bobbing once.

"...Yes... Yes, exactly..."

"...You'll just have to discover a cure for death, in that case."

"Nona—" James sighed seriously.

"Dad, I'm kidding." She reassured as she got back out of her seat with her hands still holding his, keeping it between them as she looked up into his face. A small smile came to her, despite the grimness in his own and in his words. "I know you're older than most people's parents around here, and I might not have as long as everyone else does with their folks to be with you. I just don't wanna think about it after everything that's been going on, lately. Stanley's been keeping me updated on downstairs and now there might be a roach nest—"

"I love you, my darling." James interrupted as he pulled her into a squeezing embrace. His nose was suddenly filled with the smell of cooking grease and her unwashed hair, but he didn't care—he just wanted to hold her. He wanted to hold her every day, remember every mark on her face, and those dimples of Catherine's that he adored more than anything, and every white hair on her head. He didn't want to think about having to escape, about having to leave her behind, as if she would be able to tell his thoughts through how tightly he hugged her.
At that moment, it was only them and not even leaving mattered.

"I love you, too, daddy." Winona responded with some surprise as her face pressed into his chest, with eyes drawn shut and hands clasping the back of his lab coat. They tightened suddenly. "...Promise me you're not going anywhere."

"...Of course. I'm not going anywhere, my little love." He lied with a mouth pressed against her hair and he lovingly kissed the top of her head. "I apologize, I shouldn't have dropped this on you after the day you've had."

"I'm glad I came in." She smiled up at him, leaning up to kiss his stubbly cheek in return and he melted. His child looked so much like Catherine when she gave him those warm, comforting little smiles. His demons were, momentarily, put at ease.

"How have you been? In light of—... well, the Procreation Law? Have you spoken to your match at all?"

"Dad, you can call Butch by his name you know." She leveled him with a tired gaze. "...We've talked a few times, yeah."

James was surprised that Winona was willingly opening up about it—finally. "And how does he feel about all of this?"

"I—... It's hard to explain. To talk about." Winona withdrew from his hug to look up into his face, and he could see in her eyes a lingering thought; one that said she wanted to say something, but was too afraid to say it. She was withholding something serious from him.

"What is it, darling?" James assured her. "He hasn't been giving you a hard time, has he?"

"No, no—nothing like that—"

"It's not too late to ask for a replacement, you know. I'm aware that there's not many men down here that would make for suitable matches, but perhaps you could forward a memo to the Overseer about getting a new match—or if you and Freddie could reunite?"

"Absolutely not," She blanched at the mention of Freddie and almost physically recoiled. "Butch and I are staying together."

"You're what—?" He guffawed, being absolutely shocked. His daughter's face pinkened at his response and her eyes wouldn't meet with his.

It took a good minute before she could gather up her courage and look him in the eye to explain herself.

"Butch and I talked about this. About staying together and going through with the marriage." She explained brazenly. "We decided we'd rather be stuck together than stuck with any of the other candidates. I could get put with Stevie Mack, or Officer Richards or someone else who I know would hurt me. And Butch—... Butch wouldn't."

"How do you expect to make that work, Nona?" He replied firmly with a worried frown.

"The Overseer can't force us to make babies," She gave him a piercing stare that seemed determined, almost battle-wise. "He'll have to shackle me to the bed if that's what he wants. The point is—!... The point is that Butch and I are going to make this work!"
"You still haven't explained how," James pointed out.

"Butch isn't the type of person I thought him to be. And before you say anything, I know you're
going to bring up the past. You're going to bring up him bothering me back in school."

"That's not bothering, that's bullying. He bullied you alongside his friends for years, sweetheart. It's
rather difficult to overlook that."

"And didn't I do the same thing back?" She inquired. "Didn't I put glue in his styling pomade, or
yogurt in his baseball gloves, or the time I rewired his alarm clock? That tortured him for days."

"It's not the same. You were defending yourself from his attacks."

"...There was a point where it turned from defending myself to bullying him back, daddy." His
child argued with a shake of his head. "I never let myself be victimized by him. I met him blow for
blow, I put him in his place more times than he'd ever care to admit—and you know what? I've
helped him, too, when no one else would. And he's helped me back because he wanted to, not
because he had to. I've forgiven him for whatever happened while we were growing up because it
was stupid and we were children. We're friends now."

"You're—" He stammered. "And when did this happen?"

"A long time ago. We just didn't know it." She replied quietly. "So we're doing a small ceremony,
with only you, Jonas, and his mother as witnesses. No one else. Not even Amata, not his friends, no
one else. It's already been agreed to and we're turning in the paperwork to the Overseer next week.
We've also agreed to let the other person see whoever they want outside of the marriage—we're
under no guise of trying to even act like we're married in public. He's remaining with his mother,
and I'm remaining in my own apartment."

"I don't know about any of this, sweetheart." James responded bluntly and shook his head. "It feels
like you're playing with fire."

"I know it all sounds unbelievable—that our reaction to it isn't rational, or mature, or like we fully
grasp what we're getting ourselves into—and you're absolutely right. We don't know what we're
doing, dad." She admitted soberly with her arms crossing over her midsection. "So we're just trying
to do what we think would be best to do, and so far? It's working out. We'll have to see if the peace
holds up when we're actually married, but I have other things to worry about that are actually less
important than this."

"And what would that be?"

"...Community service, and trying to get my job back. Trying to keep myself above water—trying
to keep my sanity through all this chaos." Winona murmured and looked up into his face, her lips
pursed. "Dad—... do you ever have that feeling that it's like the 'beginning of the end'? Like— Like
everything is going up in flames around you because it's building up to something worse?"

"...I've felt that many times in my constantly uncertain life... and it's never a good feeling." James
sighed knowingly with a hand brushing over the stubble on his chin and jaw, smoothing down over
his mouth. His daughter was too perceptive for her own good, because he had been feeling
the exact same way for the last month.

"I know this isn't something you wanted to hear, but Butch and I are trying to make the best out of
a crappy situation. He's the best option between staying with him and taking a chance in asking for
a replacement." She insisted and moved to take his hand. "I'm sorry if I'm disappointing you—"
"You could never disappoint me." James replied pointedly as he, instead, cupped her jaw in his hands to make her look up at him. "You're my daughter, and I love you and will support you above all else if you think you're doing what's best. Just keep in mind to be kind to yourself during this, okay, darling? It's okay to put yourself first, and think this through thoroughly before it's too late."

She nodded once in understanding while looking back into his eyes while he spoke. "I love you, daddy."

"I love you too, my little love." He pulled her into another body-crushing hug that she gladly reciprocated. His cheek rested against the top of her head as he rubbed her back. "More than you'll ever know..."

James remembered those words well—some of the last words he said to Catherine, recorded upon their final holotape together, before she went into labor an hour later. Another 7 hours later, she was gone. It was peculiar—the way life tended to repeat itself when you least expected it to, slithering in right under your nose without your noticing.

These would be the last words he would say to the light of his life, just like they were some of the last words he said to the love of his life.

"Go on home and get some rest, okay?" James gently ordered as he withdrew from the embrace to look down at her, offering a warm smile. "Maybe I'll put in a work ticket for this temperamental computer of mine, hmn?" He winked knowingly at her and she giggled.

"Say it starts getting hot after being turned on for a short time. Stanley'll probably throw it my way." Winona explained as she neared the door but stopped, looking back at him. "Nighty night, daddy."

"Goodnight, my little love." The door remained opened after she left and the smile left his face when Jonas entered the room again, lingering near the doorway.

"Have plans changed?" The medical technician inquired as James was pressed with a melancholy look.

"...No," James responded firmly after a stabilizing sigh and replaced his glasses on his face, sitting on the working side of his desk to finish his report. "I think our talk resolved some things. Nothing about the plan changes."

"Alright, doc. I'll finish up work here and let you know when I'm leaving."

"Thank you, Jonas." He replied dismissively.

James waited for the door to finally shut, closing off his office from the front room to begin working again but he couldn't refocus his thoughts.

"...Like how it hurt you when mom died."

His spectacles were removed from his face and he lazily tossed them onto his desk top, leaning back in his chair with hands smoothing back over his combed hair, settling on the back of his neck with interlocked fingers and he stared at the ceiling with a blank look.

"Promise me you're not going anywhere."

James stared at the ceiling for another few minutes before sitting upright and turning to the lower drawer on the right side of his desk. He pulled it open as quietly as he could, which wasn't very
quiet, given that he hadn't gotten it fixed yet (he didn't want to risk someone else besides Winona having to come and do the repairs), and disregarded the files of Purity for the pictures underneath. The first one that was retrieved was of Madison staring at him in annoyance at the secret photo he took.

"I'm just cataloging the experiments, Maddy."

"...What you're cataloging is the waning of my patience, James."

"I wasn't aware you had any!"

The memory put a small smile on his face as he picked up another picture—the one Garza had taken shortly after the full team was assembled, right before they began their work on Purity. James remembered the heartaches as vividly as the day they happened; the calculations that missed their mark by triple-digit numbers, the constantly degrading equipment, the super mutant attacks and the losses of good soldiers for the Brotherhood. He remembered the day Elder Lyons had a messenger send them a holotape detailing the pull out of their ranks. Madison was seething that he didn't come down personally to tell them this, but James thought the Brotherhood leader had dodged a bullet by avoiding her.

James looked to the dauntless face of Madison in the group photo again, and found himself smiling despite the odds that towered over him. He knew the risks if he was caught trying to leave—if he was apprehended before he could even get the door open—but dammit was he going to try, and try his hardest.

I'm coming, Madison... and we're going to get it right this time.

August 17th, 2277

"Hold on, Jonas! I need to record this first!"

Jonas gave a small sigh of disapproval beside the doctor and shot him a cautious look. James knew he didn't have a lot of time, and he should have recorded this much earlier for his child, but until now he didn't particularly have the strength to say the things that needed to be said. He also had to organize his thoughts properly before continuing to speak, since he didn't want to give any hint as to where he was going or what he was doing, in case the recording didn't meet her hands firstly.

The time to leave had come a little over a week earlier than their decided plans and so was completely unexpected. James had to convince his assistant that if they didn't strike now during this sudden population boom of roaches that came from the reactor levels, they wouldn't have another chance for quite some time. Jonas barely had time to make a joke about them possibly working with Beatrice as psychics in her fortune telling hobby before they were off and running to James' apartment.

"I don't really know how to tell you this..." James went on truthfully as the recording rolled on, and he could feel Jonas' eyes on his back. "And I hope you'll understand, despite everything I've done... despite all the things I've kept secret from you and have still kept secret from you. I was wrong that night you found out about everything, and yelled at me. You have every right to be angry with me, to treat me the way you feel. I've thought about this for a long time—a long, long time—and in the end—... in the end, I decided it would be better that you not know. It was better that I never told you. This was a choice I made regardless of the Overseer, and the vault, and the rules. I made this choice as your father."
His eyes turned back to look towards Jonas, who went back to staring out the window of James' apartment for guards. By the way his assistant was fidgeting his weight between his feet, he was expecting them to come by at any moment and catch them. James turned his eyes away, bowing his head down towards the recorder in resignation with his hands splayed out on the dining table.

"I know that this is another betrayal in a long string of them from me, but there were a lot of things that could've gone wrong if you knew what I was doing, Nona... and frankly, there's no telling what could happen now that I'm gone. But everything's going to be alright in the end as long as you stay here, in the vault. This is something I have to do, and you're an adult now that's already on her own. You're independent, and responsible, and you're strong. You don't need your old man anymore to hold your hand. I've always known you were strong, but after our conversation last night, I've come to realize that you're even stronger than I've ever given you credit for... and I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

James closed his eyes, feeling the tears surging on him. He forced himself to push them back and to keep his voice from shaking.

"Ma- Maybe things will be different someday—and the situation will change and we'll see one another again... I can't tell you why I left or where I'm going, and I have the expectation that you're not going to bother Jonas about it, either. Life in Vault 101 can feel predictable and stifling at times, and I know it's not perfect, and neither is anyone in it, but what matters is that it's safe. It's safer than whatever you can imagine would be on the other side of that door... and believe me when I say that's not an overexaggeration. The world out there is not meant for everyone, and it's claimed many good people."

His eyes rolled around the room before settling back on the door to Winona's old room. He hadn't stepped foot into it since she moved out last year, just like he barely stayed in the apartment anymore. Keeping himself to his work and the experiments were suited as a reasonable distraction in the last few months. The only thing left behind by her was an emerald green, printed bandanna she used to keep her hair back while she worked, and he already resolved upon taking it with him to have something of hers to keep close—to help him forge onward.

"You'll be safe, and that's enough. That's enough to keep me on my way. Just know that none of this is your fault, my dear—this was something dadd—..." James swallowed down the tightening of his throat. "This was something your father had to do... and if we meet again, I'll explain everything to you, then. I promise."

"Doc?" Jonas called a bit impatiently, turning away from the window.

"I know, Jonas—"

"I'd just feel better if we got this over with. We don't know how much time we have for this."

"We're going." He nodded with resolve as he turned back to the recorder. "When things have calmed down here, you know where to look for the answers. You know the combination. Goodbye, Nona... I love you. I love you more than I could ever make you understand." And clicked the stop button. "I don't know how she's going to react any better than I know how Alphonse's going to react."

"You know how the Overseer's gunna react," Jonas countered as the recorder processed the holotape, and it was popped out to be handed to him. He slipped it into his lab coat pocket for safe keeping. "When he asked me about mom, he was pretty angry and thought I knew something. He'll press Winona for answers, like he did with me, and as long as she doesn't know anything she's safe. You remember what happened with Henry Park."
Jonas was referring to a vault dweller with a twin brother, on officer, by the name of Harry Park. Five years back Henry had escaped from the vault unexpectedly, leaving the older generation in a terrified scramble to cover up the sudden emergency and to hide the truth from the children; the week prior to his escape, Henry was reassigned to waste management by Alphonse due to an incident between the two that called his mental competency into question. James applied a mental wellness exam that proved the notion to be true, which regrettably reinforced Alphonse's personal motive to move Henry downstairs.

The children were told that there was an accident on the lower level and Henry died. His twin, Harry, couldn't look at anyone during the mock funeral out of sheer anger, and was questioned rather aggressively the next day—but it was resolved when he vehemently denied knowing anything about the escape.

"Is the recording a bad idea?" James asked him as they quickly went to the door, taking flight down the hallway. "In case the Overseer discovers it? It leaves a trail."

"It'd be worse idea if you didn't leave one," Jonas replied amidst a lighthearted chuckle. "Don't worry, I'll put it somewhere safe once we're done here and give it to her when the Overseer shifts his suspicions away. He won't know."

James nodded his thanks as they took flight up a stairwell and turned the corner, lurking cautiously for night patrol. Due to the unexpected events that rushed their plans, they didn't know what route to take that would bypass any straggler night guards that weren't called down to the radroach issue. They had to be extremely careful not to get caught in case anyone lingered in the halls. James had become rather good at sneaking about and using a little sweet-worded charm when he was a resident of the Wasteland—he was a doctor, after all, not a trained fighter in any right—but as they were approaching the atrium he had to stop to rest for a few moments. It didn't help that he was carrying a good 30 pounds of food, water, medicine, and various other supplies on an already aching back... and probably another 20 pounds in his gut.

James didn't realize how much he aged in the comfort of the vaults until his physical condition suddenly mattered. Sitting comfortably at a desk for nearly 20 years filing paperwork, writing reports, and seeing patients didn't do him any favors, and he hoped that his trigger finger wasn't as weak as his joints were. Any preparation he planned to do had to be abandoned in light of recent events—like ensuring that he could still properly use a gun. At this point he had to hope that good old muscle memory would do him service when the time came. The only weapon he had was a .32 pistol as old as his daughter that he didn't declare when they entered 101, and over the recent years he didn't perform ritual maintenance on it like he use to, so getting a new one when he arrived in Megaton was of utmost priority once outside.

The two men ran in nervous silence on through the atrium when he was rested enough. The door separating them from the entry room proved to be no match as Jonas quickly unlocked it, and when they came in, the steel door of Vault 101 felt smaller to James than he remembered it being. He began feeling more anxious than he thought he would now that the time to escape had arrived.

"You sure you wanna do this, Doc?" Jonas asked as he stood beside the taller man, gazing back at the massive vault door. He looked up to the doctor when he wasn't answered. "James?"

"We've come this far." He finally replied quietly after some moments of silence.

"Just thought I'd ask before the point of no return," He shrugged idly while still staring at the door. "Care to do the honors?"

"In a moment… Jonas, I just wanted to say—"
"Aw gee, don't get all sentimental on me now!" Jonas exclaimed with a laugh.

"You were a wonderful assistant." He went on with a smile regardless. "I enjoyed our partnership over the years… you're someone I will *always* consider to be a good and loyal friend. I doubt this would've been possible without your help—and when Purity is resurrected, I'll make sure everyone knows of the part you played in making it happen."

"You're gonna make me blush, Doc." He teased as he struck out a hand. "Maybe I'll be topside one day—and I'll swing by and see you."

"If you make it out, there'll always be a welcome place for you in our team." James nodded as he shook his hand firmly. "Thank you, my friend. And take care of Winona while I'm gone."

"I will, though you know she won't need me." Jonas answered as he nodded towards the console that opened the door. "Now let's get you out of here."

James nodded as he placed his hand on the lever. He started thinking about his daughter, asleep at her work table with her radio left on and a tool in one hand with a half-finished part in the other. It made him smile without much happiness in him. He turned his stare onward to the large steel door and yanked down the switch quickly before the thought of turning away could register.

The floor tremored under their feet as a mechanical arm came down from the ceiling and neared the door, taking its place in its keyhole. Jonas slapped his hands over his ears as the door was pulled out of its frame with a cacophony of metallic screeching and grinding from disuse, watching with wide eyes in awe. As the vault door finally settled and he pulled his hands from his ears, James came to his side. The assistant watched on, dumbstruck, as the dust settled to clear the sight.

"Is this what it was like for my mom?" He muttered. "Was it this—... freeing?"

"Do you want to step outside?" James offered. "Only for a second, to see it for the first time? The sun isn't out of course, but the moon is just as lovely. And it has less of a chance to hurt your eyes."

The younger man's expression deepened from being dumbstruck to intricate thought as he regarded the darkness that obscured the end of the cavern from view. Silence echoed back to them, as well as other unfamiliar sounds and smells of the earth and the night that his senses immediately picked up on; there was the whisper of wind, some report of gunfire in the far distance, and the smell of stale dirt swarmed his nose. The ancient skeletons at the foot of the vault's steel door didn't bother him in the slightest, and James could tell that he *desperately* wanted to go outside.

"When I see you," Jonas finalized with a disappointed sigh. "Then I'll go outside… not now. We already wasted enough time."

"Goodbye, Jonas." He spoke with a final handshake and a heavy hand of fondness on Jonas' shoulder. "Look for Rivet City when you're outside, but be careful if you do. It's *extremely* hostile. Then follow my trail from there."

"Rodger-dodger, Doc." He nodded. "Be safe out there. Good luck. And if you—... if you happen to come across my mom? Tell her I miss her and I hope she's doing okay."

James parted with a goodbye wave and stepped over the threshold, following the length of the cave to the rotted wooden door at the end. When he was outside, with the screen door clapping shut behind him, he heard the vault door close on the other side and settle with a deep, old groan. He stepped to the scenic overlook, gazing at the carpet of ruined Wasteland that laid out before him and felt things that were once familiar come to welcome him like old friends; He felt the dust
thread through his grayed hair in a hot breeze, felt the crunch of pebbles and hard dirt under his boot heels, felt the stare of the half-moon down at him without a single cloud to hide its peeping. He inhaled the musty, stinking air eagerly.

Nothing had changed at all... like the Wasteland didn't go on without him for 20 years. This was the most at home he felt in a long time—but as he walked on to Megaton, Winona's sleeping face was his only circulating thought during his trek there.

The ghoul behind the bar counter was a new edition to Moriarty's Saloon, and hadn't said much other than to offer a drink before returning to his nightly chores with filmy eyes that never looked up. A pretty prostitute from the far corner (who introduced herself as Nova) had strut over and ensnared James with an arm around his shoulders after he settled on a stool. When he asked for Colin, her retreat was notably quick as she disappeared through the door behind the bar after a curt but reluctant '. . .sure thing, handsome, I'll see if he's in'. He caught the start of Moriarty voicing his annoyance in being bothered before the door shut behind her. James didn't think the man would still be around, but at least there was one familiar face to him in Megaton.

Even if that face belonged to Colin Moriarty.

Colin came out from his back room after a bit of muffled arguing with Nova behind the door, and that's when his surprise hit. The moment his eyes laid on James, his brows crept up his forehead and he immediately came around to pull up a stool beside the doctor with a near bestial grin. The snake-like Irishman had graying hair of his own since the two last met, and a bit of a gut appeared in his midsection as well, either from age or drinking, and his crusted teeth were yellowed from years of cigarettes and lack of brushing with two back teeth noticeably missing when he smiled wide. His breath was just as stale as his empty bar when he spoke.

Their conversation began with idle chatter. The typical 'how are you's and the 'what have you been doing', until James traipsed into the topic of all the major going-ons in the Capital since he hid away in Vault 101. James surmised on his walk over that the barman would be just as greedy as he was upon their first meeting, and was proven right when Colin clued that he helped James all those years ago by telling him about Vault 101.

Helping him again was unprofitable, he said.

He wanted a little bit of compensation, he said.

They talked for some time more, James slowly working away at his 'good will' with a bit of gallant charm until Colin finally cracked and agreed to talk with him. At least his ability to be diplomatic didn't need to rely on muscle memory to work, but Alphonse gave him practice over the years.

Soon enough they were away to the back room to talk privately. Apparently quite a bit had happened in the Capital Wastes since he was last above ground, and James eagerly listened to what Colin Moriarty had to say; an exclusive sect of vigilantes known as The Regulators came from out of state to deliver 'righteous justice' to persons of extreme evil, as well as some gun-toting do-gooders that called themselves Reilly's Rangers—but they were much more recent and not as well-known as the vigilante outfit; last year internal conflict within the Capital's tribe of Brotherhood of Steel created a group of AWOL brethren that had some technology-obsessed agenda to fulfill; five years back a 'howling lunatic' named Three Dog started a radio news show out of the old Galaxy News hub and gave reports about the Capital, such as what places to avoid and anything newsworthy otherwise of more unnamed good people—however, as of the last few days, the only thing Three Dog was reporting was static.
James specifically asked about Rivet City when Colin finished talking, and was told that the area surrounding it was the same as it always was; dangerous. He then asked about Project Purity, to which the barman replied that it was a pipe dream that went to shit a long time ago. It reaffirmed to James that things were just as bad as they’d always been... maybe even worse.

Otherwise the Wasteland was as it always had been—full of slavers, raiders, mutants, and anything else that wanted to kill you (this reminded Moriarty of the surging rumors of a town higher up north that was home to a large deathclaw nest, but James already knew about Old Olney). As their conversation came to an end after an hour, the doctor excused himself back to the counter while Colin returned to his terminal. The ghoul behind the bar (whom Nova referred to as Gob) fiddled with the radio set on the counter after serving James a scotch. Gob seemed to be rather annoyed that, as Colin relayed, Galaxy News station was static. Soon enough the radio was shut off when Colin yelled from the back that he'd be out with a bat if it wasn't turned off because the noise was getting on his last nerve.

James soon parted from the bar with directions to the nearest shop by Gob. Walking around in a pristine vault jumpsuit was one of the quickest ways to get killed, so dressing more appropriately was definitely required. It took a bit of navigating but James found Craterside Supply eventually, and knocked until the door swung open to reveal an unusually chipper woman with frazzled red hair, and goggles that left a clean cutout through the soot on her face. She started to scold him almost comedically about interrupting her in the middle of an important project, but then had just as quickly yanked him into her shop when she recognized his jumpsuit. The shopkeeper introduced herself as Moira Brown as she gestured grandly to a Vault 101 jumpsuit hung up behind the shop counter, modified by plates of hardened leather and metal scrap.

It made James wonder if it had been Anne Palmer's—Jonas' mother—but as Moira went on to say that the 'vaultie' didn't know a thing about the Wastes, his next guess was Elaine Newman. Elaine disappeared just as Henry Park had, but it was suspected for a different reason. Being anything but straight in a place like Vault 101 wasn't tolerated, since same sex relations didn't bring in the next generation of dwellers.

Moira commenting about how she never came back for her jumpsuit made him glad it wasn't Anne's, but thinking about Elaine's demise was disheartening. He was thinking about Winona again. She'd be up right about now to get a snack, then patter back to her workbench and tinker for another hour before falling asleep over her inventions again. In another couple of hours she would be up to go to work in another day of community service.

Soon enough James was distracted away from the jumpsuit when Moira rushed up the stairs to the second floor of her shop, rambling excitedly about interviewing him as she tried to find her recorder. It took a few moments to talk her down to a level that was conversation worthy, and they struck a deal—she could interview him about the vault, but in return he wanted a better firearm and some clothes that would make him a little less noticeable. The eccentric shop owner happily agreed, claiming his words to be invaluable. James also managed to barter his run down .32 and his jumpsuit for a handful of caps.

The interview went on quickly and he received his change of clothes—thick jeans and a zip up leather jacket reinforced by license plates and other bent metal, a brimmed hat for sun protection, and he kept his boots—and a better gun (along with losing the caps for some appropriate ammunition). He was allowed to go upstairs to change and rest for a bit until he went out on his own when the sunrise came. Despite the bodyguard that openly advised Moira that keeping James was a bad idea, she was extremely generous.

Naively generous, but he wasn't going to complain about that.
He asked about any trouble closer to Rivet City for when he'd leave first thing at sunrise. Moira was helpful in this; explaining that following the Potomac River would be the fastest way if he was in a rush to make good time, but it could be dangerous if he encountered mirelurks or any raider encampments along the way, since they'd dredge the water for drinking or for anything valuable. Otherwise he could chance it in the metro tunnels, as one of the main crossings came up to the surface on the same side of the river of Rivet City, but that was even more uncertain with what could be down there. If it wasn't raiders, it was feral ghouls or super mutants trolling the metro.

He didn't know how he was going to get there in one piece without a guard. Paladin Cross left the Memorial with him to make sure Winona was transported safely, and now he was completely on his own. He thought about traveling with a caravan but he hadn't seen one camped outside... maybe there'd be one in the morning.

James rested but didn't sleep at all. His thoughts were active and his mind remained awake as he thought about his daughter and Jonas. His eyes kept looking over the railing to the armored jumpsuit mounted on the wall behind the counter like a trophy. It made him think about Anne again, and if she ever found Jonas' father or if she died out there like Elaine Newman did. It brought him to a dark train of thought riddled with doubt as to whether or not he could survive the Wasteland himself.

He was older now, and knew now that the situation hadn't improved any since he was last outside.

When he and Madison parted almost 20 years ago, she told him that Jefferson Memorial was being abandoned. The team couldn't go on with Catherine dead and James determined to head west with baby Winona, along with the Brotherhood's not wholly unexpected exit from their project. Too many of their kind had been killed or dragged away by super mutants during the constant attacks, and Project Purity proved to be extremely bleak by way of results, leaving nothing for them to bribe the Brotherhood with to make them stay. It was at that time that Madison told him the team would be relocating to Rivet City since it was the closest civilization, and she heard of a scientist there by the name of Horace Pinkerton who had some pursuits of his own underway.

Of course, she mentioned this in a backhanded comment about being a part of a team where one of the leading scientists wouldn't abandon them... but it was all he head to go on.

But insult or not, it was the only lead he had in finding her. Best case scenario was that she was still in Rivet City after almost 20 years, which James found to be almost extremely unlikely. Worst case scenario was that she was no longer there, no one knew where she was, and/or she was dead. James had no doubt in his mind that if Madison was gone than Project Purity would never be revisited, and escaping Vault 101 was for nothing. He tried not to let those thoughts cloud him any longer and closed his eyes to continue resting; he couldn't work himself into thinking that his journey was pointless before it even began, as it'd damn him beyond hope.

James tied Winona's green and dappled with oil stains bandanna around his neck. He focused his thoughts more positively while going in and out of light sleep, and tried to figure out what to say to Madison when he did find her in Rivet City. He fluctuated between thinking a grand speech was best, or something more personal would do better.

Either way the conversation would have to begin with 'I'm sorry'.
Amata sprinted through the hallways with her hair messily caught in her eyes, her panting breath a single exhale away from hyperventilation as tears streamed down her face. She hit the wall at the turn of hallway where it cornered to the barracks, and couldn't continue on. She collapsed into the wall as an orange light revolved above her head amidst the shadowed dark, following after a blaring siren. Incoherent wails of despair wrenched themselves from her mouth one after another in a tumble, her eyes clenching tightly shut and in the darkness of her mind she saw too much as her fists came to her eyes. She forced them open so she wouldn't have to see it anymore, forcing herself to keep from vomiting again but she kept her hands clamped over her mouth just in case, too scared to even breathe.

Oh, God—! There was so much blo— blood!... How can people have so much? How could people even look like that? How?

Amata was woken up by the sound of voices outside of the apartment she still shared with her father. He was up earlier than usual, and spoke in such an enraged voice it immediately snapped her out of her sleep. She sat up in bed, listening to him talk to a few other voices that had accompanied his own (Freddie's father, Paul's father, and one or two others that she couldn't immediately recognize). All the Overseer's daughter heard were the startling words of the vault door being opened, how another reactor was fried, the radroach infestation was suddenly booming and the alarm would have to be set. He went on to describe it all being Dr. Parker's fault, and that after the team took care of the necessary precautions for the safety of the vault residents, they would go after Jonas and Winona for questioning.
Soon enough she heard someone enter the conversation (it was Stevie, she recognized), accompanied with Jonas who was ushering calm and sleepy words of how he didn't know what was going on.

She thought she was in some horrible dream and that none of it was real. As a child she had grisly nightmares of the vault door being opened and the radiation coming in, and they were all slowly poisoned by the air they breathed and died one by one. She had to watch as her father and Winona and everyone else rotted away will she was completely unharmed.

But as Amata looked around her room, it made her feel cold and frightened because it was obvious she wasn't dreaming. The conversation outside was real, Dr. Parker had done something terrible, and she couldn't wake up from it.

She could hear the conversation beginning to escalate outside—Mr. Gomez was yelling things like 'what are you doing?!' and 'stop! This is wrong!' over the sound of assault and Jonas grunting and pleading through tears that he didn't know anything. When she opened the front door to see what was going on, she saw Officer Mack—Wally's big brother, Stevie—wielding his baton and standing over Jonas sprawled out on the metal floor with blood flooding from multiple wounds on his bloated face and head. Jonas had weakly reached for her, silently begging for help, but all she could do was scream and was then shoved back into the apartment by another Officer. Her father yelled afterward for her to stay inside!

Soon enough Mr. Gomez was harshly dismissed to go to the clinic, the other guards were told to resume patrol at main exits, and Stevie was allowed to continue his 'interrogation'. The last thing she clearly heard was the hissing insult of her father berating Jonas, hatefully saying; "your mother shouldn't have fornicated with a Wastelander... you were never really one of us."

Amata couldn't hear anymore weakened grunts and groans coming from Jonas as she sat on the living room floor by the door and sobbed, her hands clamped over her ears. She quickly had to recollect herself when she heard Stevie being given orders to patrol her bedroom, and Amata locked herself inside just as he entered the apartment.

At this point she knew she had to get to Winona before any of the other guards, or her father, could. The first step of her plan was to escape, and she did that by way of an air vent above her bed. It took her a minute to unscrew the screws holding the filter in place (she used a bobby pin), and then it took her another few minutes to climb up into the damn thing and replace the lid without alerting Stevie outside.

Using her Pip-Boy map, Amata navigated herself to her father's office where she took a pistol and a handful of ammo. She didn't know where her father was, but she didn't rightly care as long as he was far away from her. A glance out the circular window showed a line of Security guards departing through different exits of the atrium. When she had everything she needed, she ran out of the office and was forced to skirt around Jonas' mangled corpse that was left on the ground, to where she vomited out in the hall the moment she left the room. By that time the lights were dimmed, the alarms were on, and her father's voice filtered through every hall—it came in a looped message of how nothing was wrong but the residents would have to remain in their rooms until further notice or face punishment.

Amata had been running ever since.

Jonas' blank and deadened expression hammered its way into her thoughts like a sudden sickening pulse that made her body heave. She had to vomit again, and she was struggling not to let her body release the bile flooding her throat and mouth. Amata had to force herself up to her feet to keep
"Winona…!—up…! Wake—!... You— up!"

Somewhere in her half asleep state, amidst the darkness behind her eyelids, Winona heard the panicked drawl of Amata's voice beckoning to her. It wasn't enough to fully wake her up. It wasn't enough to register any panic.

"FUCKING WAKE UP!"

Until the scream came.

Amata's voice suddenly crashed down upon Winona so piercingly that she finally snapped her eyes open—just in time to see her best friend shove her mattress with a surprising heave of strength. It was pushed off the bed frame with Winona still on it, and her body was too tangled in her sheets to scramble away.

"What is wrong with you—?!” She yelled back, annoyed and disoriented, as she sat up and brushed her pillow-messed hair from her eyes. The inventor began to notice the sirens howling outside her apartment, sounding as if they were coming nearer with how they were getting louder and louder the more she came out of her sleepy haze. Winona looked to the window to see that the hall lights were dimmed down low and orange alarm lights revolved eerily, casting flares up the walls.

The last time she saw the vault like this was when the pipes burst and one of the reactors blew out, and that was only a couple of months ago.

"Amata?” Winona murmured, looking up to her friend who stood on the other side of her bed. "What happened, did another reactor blow—?"

"My father's g- gone insa- sane!" Amata looked like she was struggling not to scream. Her shoulders were trembling as tears rolled down her reddened cheeks towards her pursed lips.

"A- Amata—? Oh my God," She spoke worriedly as she got to her feet, tearing the blankets away so she could free her tangled legs. "Are you alright? What's your dad doi—"

"The do- door—! I don't kn- kn- know how—!" She shook her head as she walked around the bed to Winona's side, hugging herself tightly as her body continued to tremble.

"What do you mean your dad's gone crazy?” Winona asked sternly with her hand upon her friend's shoulders, trying to snap her out of her dazed and struggling state. "And what about the door?"

At that moment, the door of Winona's apartment opened and a tall figure entered, clad in Security combat gear and brandishing an extendable baton. Amata immediately shrieked in terror and her reaction caused Winona to hurriedly leap over the bed frame to run to the door. Slapping a hand to the door console to shut it, she turned over the lock mechanism from inside her room so he couldn't get in.

"What's happening?!” She yelled as Amata began to cry more, still holding herself as if it was the only thing she could do to keep herself together.

"My da- dad has the whole vault on lock d- do- down!” She screamed. "He's coming after you!"

"Wha- What? That doesn't make any—"
"Winona Parker!" A stern voice called on the other side of the closed door, followed by a loud series of violent knocks. It was Chief Hannon Sr., Paul's father. "By order of the Overseer, you are to come with me for questioning! Come along quietly or face an arrest!"

Winona's hand twitched against the door console, unsure of what to do. She was so confused and scared—the vault was on lock down, the Overseer's officers wanted to question her, but what for? What did she have anything to do with all of this? Did Wally accuse her of something again? Looking back at her best friend, her dark eyes wide and swollen and rimmed with tears that continued to come, Amata slowly shook her head in warning and with a quivering mouth, silently formed the words "please... no..."

"Winona Parker! Open up, now!" The officer yelled, banging on her bedroom door louder than before. "We don't have to resort to force, we can make this simple and easy!"

"Winona, please—" Amata begged, coming to her side to tightly grab Winona's arm with trembling hands. "Do not let him in!... Don't! You'll be making a big mistake, they're going to hurt you!"

"Open up!"

"They—! My father's making them do ba- bad things!"

"Open. Up!"

"He let Stevie Mack murder Jonas!"

Amata's words made Winona's stomach heave up against the base of her tightening throat, wanting escape as her hands began to shake at her sides. Chief Hannon Sr. continued to bang on her bedroom door heatedly in a far corner of her mind, and at the front of her skull—in the space between her left and right temple—a weight began to slowly place pressure there, like a solid brick, until the stunned tears came. Everything ached, her skin crawled over her flesh and bones like her body wasn't hers and she was some intruder inhabiting it, and the tears completely swarmed her vision as she dropped to the floor. She couldn't tell if it was her head that was spinning or if it was the room around her as she clutched her aching chest, a tight pressure burdening her lungs so she could scarce breathe without feeling like she was suffocating, and her mind was unwilling to accept that Jonas was gone.

It was too surreal, it couldn't have been true!

Amata came down to her knees at her side and hugged her tightly around her neck, rocking them together as Winona loudly began to sob, gasping weakly for air between the weeping in her bereavement. It was only a few moments of respite before Amata was pulling at her—knowing that they had to escape from the apartment and they couldn't spend another minute sitting on the floor and grieving.

"W- We have to get you ou- out of he- here." She murmured brokenly as she sat back on her haunches and wiped her reddened nose with the back of her sleeve, sniffling hard and breathing heavily. "I ha- have a plan to keep you s- safe, bu- but you have to listen t- to me—okay?"

Winona nodded, lifting her head to look to her best friend, and wiping her eyes dry as best as she could. Chief Hannon Sr. wasn't banging on the door any longer, so it could be guessed that he left to find assistance to get it open.

"My da- dad, he—... he was saying cra- crazy things!... That the vault door was o- opened, an- and there's radroaches everywhere, and the reactors exploded or so- something!..."
"How? How was the door opened?" She asked fervently. "And by who?"

"I—…" She shook her head, getting up from her knees on the floor shakily before helping Winona up. "I thou- thought you would kno- know—…"

"How could I know anything?" Winona cried in a strained tone.

"My dad said yours was the one who opened it!" Amata exclaimed, her voice cracking as she hiccuped from how hard she was crying. "I fi- figured he ma- maybe told you he was leaving!"

"I—…" She gawked at her friend with wide, teary eyes in awe. The door was open, and her dad was the one who opened it? Why? Was it because of that project he was once apart of? Was it for those people, his team, that she saw in his old photos? Was it because of her mother?

"Things like I'm not going to be around forever, Nona."

"…You re- really had no idea… did you, Winnie?…"

"...Of course. I'm not going anywhere, my little love."

"...No." She shook her head, her gaze staring off blankly and she was feeling sick again. "I—… he never said a thing…"

"I'm so sorry it had to be like this… with my dad, and Jonas and you having to find out everything this way." Amata murmured solemnly. "But I—… when I woke up, I heard my father talking about your dad having left the vault, and said something about a town out there that's up the road. I think he called it Megaton."

"Megaton—?" Winona replied with wide eyes. "Like a town before the war?"

"I don't know." She replied truthfully. "My dad said something like 'he's probably at Megaton by now', so I assumed it was a town or a city or a place or something, I don't know."

Winona swallowed thickly and looked to the radio on her dresser knowingly. It was the one Freddie had gifted her a long time ago, when she first moved into her independent apartment and still loved him.

"So what do we do?" The inventor asked.

"My original plan was to get you somewhere safe to hide until I could talk some sense into father," Amata replied with her teeth sunk into her bottom lip in thought. "But now I have no doubt in my mind that he'll stop at nothing to find you."

"Well my two options can't be hiding or turning myself in!"

"They're not." She replied firmly as she went to Winona's dresser and started pulling out some of her jumpsuits. "The new plan is to open the vault door, and from there you're going to find your dad."

"What?" Winona cried out fretfully, following Amata. "Are you insane? We don't know what it's like out there!"

"I know but like you said your choices are either hiding or turning yourself in! As it stands with Jonas being murdered, turning yourself in isn't really that much of an option, so I'm giving you another choice!" Her friend snapped back loudly as she thrust the clean clothes into Winona's arms.
"Now start packing! Your only chance is getting the door open! After that—!… After that, I don't know... I don't know what you're supposed to expect out there."

"You're saying that either way I'm going to die!"

"No you're not!" Amata yelled back, coming to her. "It's risky, I know, but for now this is all we got. So I meant it when I said start packing!"

The girls made short work of packing a bag for Winona. They used the old duffle bag that once carried her baseball equipment and filled it with all her clothes (three jumpsuits, some underwear, undershirts, and socks), sanitary things like a toothbrush and paste, deodorant, tampons, and then dumped in some medical supplies from a first aid kit in the living room. From her work table, Winona gathered up her tool satchel, the few pieces she had of Gizmo's body, and some other little trinkets and gadgets she had made over the years; a handful of smoke bombs of her own design, a high-precision pen laser that she was still trying to perfect (created in lieu of the incident of Wally forcing his way into her apartment), and a small device that acted as radroach repellent (it would admit a frequency that would keep them from acting hostile, but instead it seemed to paralyze them which worked just as well). Widget went straight into a pocket in her jumpsuit for closer keeping. They agreed that she'd need to get food, water, and possibly more medical supplies on her way out, so she would need to make stops if it was safe enough before getting to the door.

"Has your dad locked up anywhere I'd have to get into?" Winona asked as she zipped up her bag and slung it onto her back, each arm in a handle so it rested like a backpack. Gizmo's muzzle dug into her lower back uncomfortably. "Would he lock up the clinic? He'd definitely lock up the main door to the entryway room if he thought for even a second I'd go after my dad."

"I— I—… don't know…" She answered with a shake of her head, her arms folded tightly over her chest to hold herself. "I think he'd expect you to turn yourself in quietly, but—… he's different, now. I don't know what he'll do." She shook her head. "Anyways, it doesn't matter if he locked the main door—I know how to get around it! In the Overseer's office is a tunnel. He told me about it in case I'd need a quick escape for one reason or another… it's activated by his terminal."

"We can leave, you know—go out together." She looked back at Amata hopefully, but from the expression on her friend's face, it didn't look like an option for her. "C'mon, Amata! You and me —!"

"Winnie," Amata sighed, as if frustrated. Or maybe she just couldn't find the proper words. But when she finally spoke, her eyes wouldn't meet Winona's. "With my father acting this way, he thinks that what he's doing is in everyone's best interests when it's not. He's dangerous and unstable… he watched as Stevie murdered Jonas, and he said awful things! The only one who can talk some sense into him is me. So no, I—… as much as I want to, I can't go with you… besides, you have to go out and find your dad and I'm sure I'll only slow you down."

Winona's lips pursed in disagreement but she couldn't bring herself to speak those thoughts out loud. Wordlessly, the girls instead went in for another long and breathless hug. When they broke apart and finally collected themselves enough to continue on, Winona picked up her old baseball bat and went to the window. Her hands gripped the neck of it tightly, remembering the familiarity of practice with Coach Gomez what felt like decades ago, and muttered over her shoulder for Amata to stand back. With several hard swings, each cracking the glass more and more, it finally shattered and showered the hallway with shards of glass. The sirens blew into the bedroom like a hurricane and struck them both.

"After you get everything you need, we'll meet at my father's office!" Amata called over the deafening alarm as she collected the sheets up from the floor and handed them to Winona, who
cleared away the remaining jagged pieces still in the windowsill with them. The sheets were then laid over the sill so they could climb out without cutting themselves on stray glass shards.

"Won't your dad be there?" Winona replied, giving an uncertain frown as she swung a leg out before pulling her heavy bag through with her.

"He wasn't when I was there last—but I'll make a distraction, just in case!" She smiled, but it seemed hollow upon her lips. "I'll find a good way to get him to leave! But before I forget—"

Amata's hands dove into her jumpsuit pockets as she spoke, each bringing out something that called for Winona's attention; in one hand resided a pistol, while in the other was a handful of bullets. Her body went rigid upon seeing the firearm as the only people who had them were certified members of Security.

"A- Amata! Where did you—?"

"I stole it from my dad's office! I thought that maybe—" She gave a short sigh and a meager shake of her head. "I- I don't know what I was thinking when I grabbed this!... I was just scared! I thought that, maybe, I'd need some protection, but right now you need it more than me so I want you to take it!"

Winona stared at her friend, eyes slowly dropping back down upon the gun. Just looking at it made her feel uneasy because so much could go so wrong with just an unintentional twitch of the finger. Someone could be seriously hurt—or worse, killed—and it was a responsibility she didn't want to have. She didn't want anyone to be under the impression that she was looking for a fight or willing to kill people to get away.

So she left Amata with a goodbye she couldn't bring herself to say, and the gun that she refused to take.

"Someone—!"

"C'mon, Butchie!"

"—help me—!"

"We can make a run for it! We could go outside!"

"—please! Anyone!"

"Nobody's gunna be by the vault door, we could do it!"

"That's my 'ma in there, Dolly!" Butch barked at her, but she continued to paw at his jacket, trying to coax his attention away from the screams of his mother just in the next room. The familiar chittering sent rattling chills down his spine and his feet were planted in place—he couldn't go in there. He just—… couldn't. He was too terrified to even think about taking a single step!

"You think I can't hear that?" She snapped back at him, finally dropping her hands away from his jacket so they curled tightly at her sides. Her face twisted up in anger with her lips pulling taut, pursing under flaring nostrils.

"You're a moron if 'ya think for a second I'm just gunna leave her and let her die!" He exclaimed, looking back to the closed door of his apartment where his mother's screams could be heard on the other side. He called himself a Tunnel Snake when he couldn't even fight off a roach?!
"Why not? You were always shit-talkin' 'bout her, I thought you hated her!" Dolly seethed through clenched teeth, throwing an accusing hand out towards the apartment door. "I thought you would want somethin' like this 'happen to the drunk bitch!"

The final word she spat out caused Butch to turn sharply on his heel with his eyes fixated upon her in a white-hot glare. There were a lot of bad things his mom was and still is, but no matter what Butch DeLoria knew that his mother loved him more than anything else—and just because he talked shit about her didn't mean anyone else could. No one was permitted to speak that way about his mother—not Wally, not Paul and especially not Dolly.

"You fucking take that back." The Serpent King spat in a hiss.

"It's the truth, ain't it? All she's ever done is held you back!" Dolly grimaced back at him, unwilling to apologize. "I love you, Butchie, but God, sometimes you're so damn thick!"

"Can't say the feelin's mutual!" Butch snarled, and something broke apart in Dolly's eyes, which were bulging in shock. "That's right, 'ya heard me! I don't love you! Jesus Christ, finally! Get it through that thick fuckin' skull of yours!" He roared, two fingers coming up to tap his temple to accentuate his point. "I don't fucking love you! Why do 'ya think I took that stupid F.A.M.I.L.Y. test? 'Cause I'd rather take a chance at another broad then be stuck with you! 'Cause you're too fuckin' stupid to know when to leave me alone!"

"I can't—! I can't even believe you!" She screeched in response as her tears began to surge on her eyelids, polluted by her caking of mascara. "After everythin' we've been through together! Since we were kids! How could 'ya say that t'me?! How couldja say 'ya don't love me?"

"I just wanted someone t'suck my dick s'what!" He bellowed back at her angrily with an accentuated thrust of his hips in a suggestively brutish fashion.

"You're such a bastard! You're an absolute bastard, Butch DeLoria!" She screamed with a finger suddenly jabbing irately into his face—but before she could scream on, his eyes caught sight of someone running down the hall in their direction. When he looked over Dolly's head, he saw Winona stopping to catch her breath with her body hunched over, her hands settled on her knees to keep her upright. She looked on ahead in the direction she had been running, her silvery-white hair sticking to her forehead and cheeks with her sweat.

Parker—? Butch's eyes widened in horrified realization that his mother was still trapped in their apartment by the radroaches. He quickly shoved Dolly out of the way and went sprinting toward Winona.

"Hey—!" Dolly screamed. "Butch, get back here! I ain't done with you, fucker!"

"Parker! Shit, thank God!" He cried in relief, barely taking notice of the way her face twisted into complete panic. Her eyes were rounded and on the verge of tears, though her puffy eyelids suggested she'd been crying for some time already.

"'Ya gotta help 'ma!" He exclaimed upon realizing that she was stepping backward with a look in her eyes suggested that she was thinking about booking it; but when he mentioned his mom, the look immediately disappeared and she drew closer to him in alarm.

"Is she okay?" She yelled over the sirens. "Where is she?"

"Back in the apartment, she's gunna get eaten by the roaches! I dunno where they fuckin' came from!" Butch went running back toward the apartment with Winona quick at his side, matching his
speed to where they barreled past a shocked Dolly for a second time. "Woke up with all these alarms and shit an' when I got up t'go look around, they charged me and ran for 'ma! The hell's goin' on?"

"I'll explain everything in a minute!" Winona answered quickly, obviously distracted by her task at hand. She ducked into the apartment, dropping her duffle bag to the floor unceremoniously and pulled from it her old baseball bat, where the neck was sticking out of the bag. She then ran into his bedroom with a brave-hearted look on her face, disappearing from his and Dolly's sight.

Butch ran to the outside window that looked into his bedroom and saw his mother on his bed, huddled up against the wall and screaming as three roaches lunged and chittered at her hungrily. The bed was too tall for them to climb up onto but she still had no way around them to the door with how they cornered her, occasionally kicking one away when it jumped high enough to get to her. Winona was beating on them pretty savagely with her bat in downward swings, breaking from the motions to smack away mid-air a roach that tried to jump at her. It went sailing to hit the window with a loud thunk and Butch immediately recoiled in repulsion as it slowly slid down the glass, leaving a trail of mucousy entrails.

"We gotta call Security!" Dolly cried besides him. "They're lookin' for her!"

"What?" He snapped toward her. "What for? Parker didn't do shit!"

"Her dad's the one that opened the door! You don't think she helped him somehow—? She was in maintenance, she'd know more about the door than anyone!" She reasoned, scowling. A look of fiery hatred had encompassed her eyes as she watched Winona—Butch knew the animosity was motivated by the inventor being paired with him for marriage—and it looked like Dolly just found the perfect opportunity to get her payback.

"I'm gettin' Security!" She hotly announced before bolting down the hall before Butch could stop her.

"Wait—! You fuckin' idiot, get back here!" He yelled angrily after her, but she ignored him and kept running. "Dolly!"

God dammit, the Tunnel Snake seethed to himself before turning back toward the window, watching Winona finish off the last roach; stomping down on it's head with a war cry, crushing it under her boot heel where it popped messily like cherry bomb, leaving a shower of guts on his floor.

When he was sure they were all dead, he rushed into the apartment to come to his bedroom. Winona was beside his mattress, panting from the exertion in mass murdering the giant bugs, as she offered a hand to his mom to help her off the bed without stepping on any of the corpses. The whole room smelled musty like old socks.

He hated that smell.

"Shi- Shit—" He stammered before laughing in relief, now that the terror was over. He then threw his hands up triumphantly into the air, balled into pumping fists. "We did it! We saved my 'ma!"

"...Yeah, we did it." She commented bitingly as she shook off the roach guts that strung off her bat goopily. When his mother suddenly flung herself at Winona in a grateful hug, the little inventor was staggered by the drunken force behind it and would have fallen backwards if it wasn't for Butch taking her by the arm to lead her away.
"Check her for bites," Winona instructed after following them into the next room. "Make sure she doesn't have a single one."

Butch knew that those skittering little shits had more bacteria in their mouths than a toilet, and he witnessed it from personal experience when Wally fucked around with one when they were kids and got bit. He tried to hide it from his parents but it resulted in a bad infection that needed pretty strong antibiotics.

Wally still had the scar on the back of his hand, on the fleshiest part of the base of his thumb.

"You're okay—right, 'ma? C'mon, move it, lady—sit your ass down." Butch made her plop down onto the couch. "You ain't hurt?"

"M'fine—fine." She nodded, obviously still a little drunk from her bender the night before.

He forced her to lay back and rest so he could check her properly without her squirming about or trying to stand back up; he meticulously scanned her bare feet and up her legs as Winona came to help, using her free hand with her bat still in the other, to check his mom's hands, neck, and face for bites. They shook their heads at each other to confirm that she was completely unharmed, and she was back to sleeping again with sloppy snores. Butch got up to his feet from his knees, facing Winona.

"Thank God 'ya came when you did, Parker," He let out a mirthless little chuckle. "...Dunno what woulda happened to her if you didn't."

"What would you do without me, huh, King Snake?" She responded in kind with a small, fake smile before looking around his apartment for her bag. Going toward it and kneeling down, she unzipped it to pull out a bulky device that was about the shape and size of a dictionary, with one long, extendable antennae jutting out of one end of it. The top was a mess of tape holding down what looked like a big battery into the device by color coded wires, and there was a single toggle switch beside it.

Winona offered it to him.

"This is a roach repellent I was working on. You turn it on and it sends out a frequency only they can hear that'll paralyze them if they come within range. That's about 10-12 feet, which isn't much, but if you keep this on it'll keep the little buggers out of your apartment at least. Just make sure you have some batteries on hand because it drains through them pretty quickly when you leave it on for a while."

Butch nodded as he turned the device over in his hands to observe it, then set it on the couch arm besides his mother for later. When he turned back to Winona, she was picking through the littering of vodka bottles that were on his dining room table. She moved to the side a few empty ones she was examining before finding two that were unopened and turned back to him.

"Mind if I take a few?" He shook his head in the negative to say she could, and she knelt down beside her open duffle bag to stuff them inside. "Where'd Dorothy go?"

"She, uh—she went t'get Security." Winona's rounded eyes snapped back over her shoulder at him.

"What—?! Why didn't you tell me? I have to go! I have to go right now!" The inventor cried, working quicker to try and zip up her overstuffed duffle before hastily grabbing her bat, launching herself up to her feet. "If they corner me here—!

"Wait, wait—!" Butch scrambled to block the door to keep her from leaving. "Dolly said your old
man opened the door! That true?"

"No! Yes—!" She groaned in frustration. "Argh! I don't know! Amata thinks he got out, I don't know why he left or how he pulled it off, either! All I know is that if I stick around here, and Security finds me—! You have to let me go!"

"Wadda they even want with you?" He demanded to know, frowning. "I ain't lettin' you out until ya tell me what the hell's going on! Besides, Dolly probably can't find anyone if the roaches are still around out there."

"The Overseer thinks I helped dad escape, or that I know something about it or where he went! Butch, I'd rather not take the chance of Dorothy not finding an officer, so please—if you don't let me go and they find me, they might kill me like they killed Jonas!"

"What—!"

"Amata heard it all. She said Stevie Mack beat him to death!" Winona explained as she moved to the window to look outside for incoming Security. "The Overseer ordered him to in an 'interrogation', and Amata thinks that he'll order the same thing to happen to me if I'm caught!"

"Christ, you're serious, aren't'cha? He'd actually do it? Then where the hell are 'ya gunna go? The vault ain't big enough—" Butch's mouth clamped shut through his dubious response. Realization blanked the thoughts that were meant to follow, which was caused by Winona giving him a dreadful look back over her shoulder. He frowned, shaking his head as he came towards her.

"You're not goin' outside! Nuh-uh, no way!"

"I don't have a choice," She barked back, turning to face him. "If I stay, he'll find me!"

"And what if he follows 'ya out there, huh? What're you gunna do then, Professor?"

"It'll be damn easier to hide up there than down here, won't it?" Winona barked before glancing out the window again to ensure Security wasn't coming, then checked her Pip-Boy entities radar; the only blinkers on it were of Butch and his mom, named as such on the screen, along with some other residents who were farther away, hiding in their own homes.

Butch knew by the look on her face that she wasn't going to change her mind. She was actually leaving.

"...You still owe me a whisky night, Parker." He responded in a murmur and she actually smiled a little despite the frustration in her face, her eyes flickering up toward his.

"...I know. Sorry. Rain check—? If I'm ever back in the neighborhood."

"There's a time limit on those things, 'ya know."

"And here I thought you'd be glad to be rid of me." She chuckled blandly, unable to produce a genuine sound. Her eyes rounded out when Butch began tearing off his jacket, shucking his arms out of it. "What're you—?"

"Makin' sure you keep your promise 'bout the whisky! So I'm givin' you my jacket," He explained dishonestly as he shoved the garment into her possession. He then tucked his hands away into his jumpsuit pockets so she couldn't give it back. Truthfully, he just really wanted her to have it. "Consider yourself an honorary member of the Tunnel Snakes, Smartmouth."
Winona gazed down at the leather jacket in surprise with her hand running over the patched Tunnel Snakes embroidered emblem on the back. Her fingertip traced the fangs, the contours of the open snake mouth, trailing over a yellowed eye and down it's lithe neck with an intricately observing finger and she began to smile—a smile that, in a way, looked like he had just handed her some kind of amazing award and she couldn't believe it was hers.

"You sure about this? It's your jacket—too late, you can't stop me I'm already putting it on!" She questioned before just as quickly dismissing it, tying the arms of it around her waist for safekeeping.

Butch could've given her her own jacket since he had a handful of others, but those didn't have the emblem sewn on yet, and to give her his jacket had a desired allure to it. Knowing that she'd be out there with some piece of him was an exhilarating thought.

"Get on outta here, Parker." The smile disappeared from her face the moment he spoke. "Send a postcard my way or somethin', got it? Lemme know if people out there don't look all mutated and shit, or if there's anythin' cool to do. And don't wreck my damn jacket, 'ya hear me!"

Winona watched him with a saddened look, her eyes ducking away from his face as they shared the silence, and she looked out the window again for Security just so he wouldn't see the look in her eyes. When they met with his face again, her expression twisted into fearless fire as if she had resolved a matter in her thoughts, and she came towards him in a hurried stride with her hands latching onto the unzipped collar of his jumpsuit. In a fluid motion, she pulled him down to her height while also coming up to her toes to meet the distance quicker, and pressed a peck of a kiss to his mouth.

Her hands released his collar before he even had chance to respond in kind, as he was too busy with being shocked to properly reciprocate or even understand what the hell just happened.

"...Why?" He asked dumbly as they awkwardly stared at each other.

"...I- I—... to satisfy curiosity... say it was good while it lasted, us being friends. Because—... Because Butch, we both know I'm not coming ba—"

Butch didn't want to hear the end of that. He cut Winona off with the cupping of his hand under her chin and his lips went colliding into her own in the returning of her kiss—leaving the remainder of her admission to be swallowed back down her throat in a sharp inhale of surprise. While his other hand greedily felt for the subtle curve of her waist and the edge of her sharp hip, he gripped for the leather arm of his jacket as leverage to pull her closer. The gang leader's pulse was racing at a pace that was too fast to be rhythmic or even normal, only feeling the softness of her mouth and of her hands trying to anchor themselves to his shoulders just to steady herself on something, then pulling him in closer as well by pure instinct. He wasn't able to oblige her as she suddenly parted from the breath-taking kiss that sent a coil of passion to his stomach, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted as she looked up into his eyes, trying to catch her breath.

...Damn. Parker's got some kinda mouth on her, was the only thing his mind could eloquently piece together and he was so fucking relieved that his dumbass couldn't manage to say it out loud during that moment.

"I—... Butch, I need you to listen to me and listen to me closely. Do not trust a damn thing that comes out of the Overseer's lying fucking mouth. He can't be trusted. He'll do whatever it takes to keep us trapped down here, he'll go through whoever he has to to get it done. Don't get too close and don't do anything stupid. Got it? Because if I die out there, I'm coming back as a malevolent spirit and your scaly serpent ass is going to be the first one I haunt. " Winona spoke with a
protective firmness as her hands dropped from his shoulders to lay against his chest, and both of his hands made full contact around her waist just to hold her for a second longer.

"Don't even joke like that! 'Ya ain't gonna die!" He grimaced in warning. Great, that was exactly the goodbye he wanted from her—one attached with a mental image of her mangled carcass lying face down in a ditch somewhere with flies buzzing about it.

"...Stay safe Snake King." Winona replied quietly in a sorrowful voice before kissing him on the cheek—not close enough for him to sneak in another kiss like he wanted to, if this was their last time seeing each other—before she pried herself away from him and darted towards the door.

She was out in the hall, running away before he could think to stop her or pull her back into his arms. Was this really happening? Did she kiss him and then take off in the night to leave the vault, to leave his life, forever?

Inside of him a lot of things were shifting and grinding uncomfortably; like all his pieces that had once worked together in harmony were just thrown into complete chaos. He wanted to supply filler into the goodbye they exchanged, maybe actually give her a proper thank you for all the things she did for him, or a real apology for all the shitty things he did to her while they were growing up... but he was still too damn proud to say those things and he was too damn proud to admit that he was going to miss her.

Butch silently hoped that this wasn't the last time he would see her, because all too late he realized that if it was—he was going to live with these regrets, unspoken and alone, for the rest of his life, because he was too scared. He liked to think that giving her his jacket explained some fraction of all the things he wouldn't let himself say, and if he had apologized, that Winona would have forgiven him.

Winona was cool like that and didn't let petty bullshit get in her way. She wouldn't have agreed to just go through with the marriage if she hadn't forgiven him somehow, right?

So Butch DeLoria stood in his apartment, alone, and confused, and admittedly scared, with the lingering memory of Winona's lips on his.

Because it was undeniable that he knew she was right; she was never coming back.
Winona was crouched in the hallway outside the vault's prison hub, peering between the bars on the outer window to see the interrogation taking place inside; it was Amata, trapped in a chair between Stevie Mack, who had his baton extended at his side in a warning gesture, and her father, who stood with his arms folded into the curve of his back. Their backs were to the window, save for Amata in the chair, who spotted her best friend easily at the window. She was careful not to look back there again as her father drawled on in a voice that was too unnervingly calm for the situation.

The inventor couldn't pry her eyes away from Stevie's weapon. From where she hid outside, she could see the length of the extended baton flecked with dried blood—and she knew it was Jonas'. Stevie hadn't even bothered cleaning it after murdering him.

Winona hated them all... that whole fucking Mack family; Allen Mack, for creating monsters out of his adopted sons; Stevie Mack, for murdering Jonas; Wally Mack for assaulting her in her own home and getting her vilified within vault society; and Susie Mack for messing around with Freddie while knowing he was committed.

The whole Mack Madhouse could rot in Hell.

"Sweetheart, you are going to tell us where your little 'friend' is. This has gone on long enough, hasn't it? And I know that you're a good girl who wouldn't consider upsetting me... or wasting my time." The Overseer regarded his child in an elated voice. It gave Winona a clean chill right through her body.

"I already told you! I have no idea where she is," Amata spat hotly with her arms crossing in front of her body.

"Now, Chief Hannon Sr. Seems to be regaling a different story than that," He replied pointedly, but she didn't look away—her glare baring into his face in pure defiance. "He tells me he caught you in Winona's apartment attempting to help her escape. Honestly, did you even expect me to believe that? Amata, you're making this much more difficult than it has to be for everyone... me especially, and I'm starting to get a little testy. Tell us where she is so we can resolve where Dr. Parker has gone."

"And here I thought you already knew where he went," Amata glowered at him in challenge with her face twisted into one of furious disbelief, almost complete repulsion. "I heard what you said about him. You said he's in some place called 'Megaton' at this point, didn't you? After you were done making him," She pointed at Stevie, who only gave a sadistic smile that made even Amata uneasy, through all her determination. "Murder Jonas!"

"What happened with Jonas was an accident."

"Was it?" She responded cruelly with her eyes darkening hatefully. "Or are you only calling it an accident because I know the truth?"

"What a deplorable assumption!" He barked back unconvincingly.
"What is Megaton, anyway? Is that some kind of marker, or settlement or something from before the war? Why would Dr. Parker go there? How far is it from here?" She went on with her own interrogation, and Winona could see the tension building in his shoulders—his hands dropping from behind his back to rest at his sides, where they began to curl into tight fists. Stevie was looking to the Overseer as well to see how he would reply.

"Enough! Amata, you will tell me where Winona is!" He responded with his voice dropping to a tone that was unfamiliar and cold.

It was getting dangerous, and Winona's heart could feel it as it swelled in a rapid thumping beat.

"Or what? Are you going to hurt me like you did Jonas? Because he knew too much? Because he wouldn't comply? Because he wasn't 'one of us'?" Amata was out of her seat now, pointing an accusing finger in his face. "I heard what you said to him! Daddy how could you be so—! So cold?! So awful! You're a liar, and a traitor!"

Immediately, the Overseer raised a hand and smacked his daughter across the face with a firm backhand, his bony knuckles reddening her cheek as she toppled back into her chair, the metal legs screeching briefly on the floor. She gaped back at him with rounded eyes of shock, holding the side of her face he slapped with her eyes watering in pain and shock.

"I do what I must to protect the vault!" He boomed indignantly. "I did it to protect you! The things I've done, regardless of how I've felt about them, were done to ensure our survival! Shown in the way I've raised you, in how I have tried to lead this vault to the best of my abilities, invoking the Procreation Law—to open that door and let in such violence and depravity that has already taken so many of us—that's taken your mother—I did what I had to! I have lied, and I have cheated, but do not dare call me a traitor!"

Amata watched him fearfully with the tears in her eyes swelling to the point of overflowing, rolling slowly down her face as silence lingered between them. The Overseer finally sighed with the tension releasing his shoulders, and when he spoke again, it was almost too quiet for Winona to hear from where she was hiding outside.

"...If you will not willingly tell me what it is that I need to know, Amata—if you continue to choose her over our vault—then I have ways of making you talk."

With that, he nodded to Stevie, who smirked in satisfaction as he began to advance on the trembling Amata. She sprang back up from her chair so it knocked back from her legs as she backed away to the corner wall, scrambling to get away and looking more terrified when she realized she was cornered. Winona immediately went tearing through her duffle, her eyes snapping back to the window every once in a while to ensure Stevie wouldn't do anything as she frantically searched through her inventory; she knew full well that she might have to run in to protect her best friend, and she accepted the consequences of that fate.

Amata would have done the same without hesitation.

"Daddy, don't do this—!" She cried desperately, her eyes never leaving Stevie's baton with a paled face. "You have to focus on keeping us safe! There's roaches everywhere, the infestation needs to be put under control, we—! We have to gather food an- and medicine, and make sure everyone's okay! Daddy please!" She sobbed.

"James has committed many crimes against Vault 101 and he must pay in full... and if he won't suffice, Winona will certainly do. She hasn't been innocent in any of this since the day she
was born. You only have yourself to blame, Amata, as you've forced my hand—and in times like this I must, regrettably, be an Overseer first and a father second."

At his final few words, Amata's eyes reflected full awareness of the situation she was in; her father was going to let the same man that murdered Jonas beat her until she submitted. There was absolutely no way of talking him out of it when he was already too far gone to listen to reason, and once she also made realization of that, she shakily pulled for the pistol in her pocket and whipped it out to point it right back into Stevie's face. He immediately stumbled back in fear, nearly cowering with his baton dropped to the floor.

"Sir, she has a gun—!"

"Amata! Where—?! Where did you get that?!!" The Overseer cried with his own eyes wide. "Put that down at once!"

"No! You—! You're sick, daddy! You were going to let him hurt me—me!—I'm your daughter!"

She wheezed painfully through the flood of her tears nearly choking off her words.

"How could you?!"

Winona, for all her panicked searching through her bag, finally found one of her smoke bombs and the matchbox she needed to ignite it from her tool satchel as the situation inside the prison hub escalated. By the time Amata had the gun pointed back at Stevie, who was now standing helpless and riled between her and the Overseer, she lit the smoke bomb and hit her hand to the open button of the door—lobbing the ignited bomb in the moment it was open just enough. It lolled over toward the right side of the room, away from the altercation as the door completely rolled open, where the wick burned down and the canister rapidly released dense, milky white smoke.

As the inventor shoved her things back into her bag, Stevie used the sudden distraction to his advantage and lunged at Amata with his hands trying to grab for the pistol to twist it out of her hands. All Winona heard was the reverb of a deafening BANG! and Amata screaming in terror as the smoke quickly filled the room, leaving the last thing that could be seen, which was Stevie Mack, dropping limply to the ground with a pained noise and gasping raggedly. The Overseer was hacking on the smog alongside Amata between her own anguished sobs.

"It's Winona! Officer Mack, find her! Do you hear me—?! Officer Mack!" She heard him yell between his coughing fits as the smoke began spilling out into the hall, wafting about her ankles when she got back up to her feet with her duffle on her back.

"Amata! Amata, follow my voice!" Winona cried hurriedly.

Shortly after crying out, Amata came barreling out of the thick smoke right into her so both girls went colliding into the floor together. Amata was a trembling mess of wheezing and teary-eyed hacking into her inner arm, still clutching the gun in one hand, as the Overseer remained hopelessly lost inside, yelling for Security while trying to find the doorway. Winona thrust her foot into the door console to shut him inside.

"Get up!" She exclaimed as she scrambled up to her feet, yanking her best friend after her so they both when sprawling down the hall to find safety. "Go, go, go!"

The two ran together with their hands intertwined as their boots thundered across the metal floor, turning them blindly down corridors in their panic. Amata was still quivering and weak, being pulled along forcefully by Winona, but soon enough came into her own stride and was picking up speed so the girls were matched in their frightened sprinting up stairwells and around dark corners to their destination—in the meantime hurdling over dead roaches clustered in the halls and dodging
past confused vault residents that were chased out of their homes. As they came up the final hallway—leading them to the offices outside of the Overseer's—Amata stopped them just outside so they could finally catch their breath. She was hunched over onto her knees while Winona deposited herself against the wall, using the last of her strength to keep herself from sliding down to the floor.

"Wi- Winnie—" Amata panted through another wheezy cough and looked up to her with swollen and still tearful eyes. "I- I—... Jonas might still be in there... the last I saw him, he was on the floor outside the office. If they—... If they didn't move him yet—..."

Amata looked to the door leading into the secretary offices, unable to finish her sentence. Winona could only hear her blood pulsing in her ears, her lungs clinging for air—feel her insides tighten along with her chest and her thoughts were so disjointed. To think that Jonas was really dead was so surreal, and if his body was still on the floor on the other side, she didn't know if she would ever accept his death.

But if she wanted to get through to the Overseer's office, she had no choice but to look... and she wasn't going to ask Amata to move him just for her—although she was currently the braver one between the two of them. With a questioning glance back to Winona with her hand hovering over the door console, the inventor gave a shaky nod.

When the door opened, Jonas' mangled body was just ahead, sprawled across the floor on his back in a pool of his own blood drying in a halo around his battered head at the main secretary desk. His eyes were half-lidded into slits that framed dull blue irises and his glasses, ones that Winona helped him pick out just last month during a dinner out together, were broken and askew on his voice. When the two dared to come closer, Amata had to turn away to keep herself from vomiting and Winona could not pry her eyes away from Jonas' bloated face.

If she wasn't told it was Jonas, she wouldn't have recognized him at all. His once handsome looks were beyond recognition.

It was the first time she had ever seen a dead body. When Vault 101 held funerals, the body was already cremated and collected into an urn picked by the family for the ceremony. Winona couldn't look away from his broken face, unable to comprehend that it was really Jonas, and she felt her entire body grow weaker and weaker with every step closer she took to him. Finally falling to her knees at his side, marring her jumpsuit knee pads with his blood that still hadn't fully dried on the metal floor, her hands draped over his chest as she broke into a strangled sob.

This would be her final memory of him—cold and unrecognizable on the floor.

It was suddenly so hard to conjure up any other memories of him. When did they last talk? When did he last crack a joke that she rolled her eyes at with a smile? When did she last hug him and remind him that he was her favorite dorky big brother, and he'd respond jokingly that he didn't know she had any others? She tried to force the memories to come forward, clawing at them to pull them to the front of her mind through her sobbing, and she suddenly remembered; she saw him just last night in the infirmary when she came in to talk to her dad."

Winona wished that she knew then that it was going to be the last time she'd ever see him. She would've given him a hug that would've lasted for an uncomfortably long time and tell him how much he meant to her; she would've told him how much she really enjoyed their late night talks, or loved his goofy little laugh when she made raunchy jokes like they personally embarrassed him, or admitted that he could understand her better than her own flesh and blood father could at times. He wasn't her 'big brother' just because she knew him since childhood, he earned that title.
But now he was gone.

He was gone and he went on unaware of all the things Winona thought she had the time to, eventually, show him.

Winona didn't realize that those thoughts had been spilling incoherently from her trembling mouth from the moment she knelt beside him.

"Jonas, I'm so sorry." She sobbed as the words came as an incoherent spill from her trembling mouth. Wanting to brush his cheek in a final loving gesture she found that she was too afraid to touch him—as if his beaten face could still hurt him. Instead her hands dropped helplessly against his chest. "I'm sorry I wasn't here!... I'm so sorry!..."

Amata was quickly skirting around his body and Winona with her eyes averted to get to her apartment. She was coughing, either from the smoke or trying not to get sick, and then disappeared inside without a word back to her best friend. Winona remained knelt on the floor besides Jonas for several moments longer just to remain with him. She forced her mouth to remain clamped shut so she wouldn't spill out anything else as her trembling hand moved toward his face despite her concerns, brushing back a lock of blood-matted hair from his slitted eyes. She took one of his hands into both of hers, feeling some resistance in his arm as she brought the hand to her mouth and kissed the back of his bruised knuckles in goodbye before folding his hands over his stomach, brushing his swollen eyelids closed. Lastly, Winona took his broken glasses frames off his face and shut them, clutching them close to her chest in keepsake, her other hand laying over his joined ones in a silent and final goodbye before reluctantly rising to her feet. She wandered blankly towards Amata's apartment to find her sitting at the dining table drinking bottled water to flush out the smoke and vomit still in her mouth.

"...Winnie, I—... I think I—... I think I killed Stevie Mack..." Amata spoke after Winona stood beside her, still clutching Jonas' broken glasses in her hands. "Oh m- my God, I know I did! I shot Stevie! I shot him, and I saw him fall—my God, I killed him!..."

"Amata—..." She began uncertainly because she still felt that burning hatred for Stevie Mack and the whole of his family, but to voice how Stevie deserved to die wasn't something she had to hear. "You—... the gun went off, it was an accident. And your father didn't give you a choice. We all know how much Stevie's changed since he was accepted into the Security team. He would have killed you."

Silence came between them as Amata stared blankly down into her palms on her lap with tears dotting her fingers as she numbly cried with no emotion in her face. When she spoke up again, wiping her eyes of her tears, a new-found—yet exhausted—fortitude crossed her gaze.

"...We still have to get you out of here," She murmured as she pushed back her chair and stood up. "C'mon. Let's head through dad's office—maybe he has something about Megaton in there. I couldn't get anything from him before."

"...That's why you were asking about it." Winona realized aloud, watching her toss back the remainder of her water.

"I wanted to see what he knew—if Megaton's a settlement, or how far away it is or anything else since he thinks your dad's there." Amata explained. "I was hoping he'd give up something useful."

"If Megaton's a lead, it's enough." She spoke as she safely tucked Jonas' glasses into an outer pocket of her bag. "Let's go. The working day isn't over yet."
As they turned away to the front door to exit the apartment, the door opened immediately, but not for them—it revealed a lone figure on the opposite side, much to their collective horror.

"Father—!" Amata cried as he stepped into the apartment, moving past his too stunned to move daughter and on towards Winona with his eyes red and bleary from the smoke bomb, wheezing a little. She took a hefty few steps back in return, cornering herself against the back of their living room lounge chair. His glare was trained on her with such a hateful sharpness in it that she could feel it, and when she looked down into his hands, she couldn't take another step back.

It was Stevie's night stick.

Winona couldn't even speak when she saw it, her whole body feeling as if it was restrained to the point of being unmovable in the face of her terror—in the face of understanding just how much the Overseer hated her and everything her father had ever done to wrong him. He was crazed and quickly moving into territory that he could never return from.

"If you had come quietly—if your bastard father hadn't betrayed the vault and gone back out there!—now we're all doomed! I should never have let either of you in! You both fashioned yourself as visionaries, always snooping, always dreaming and putting ideas in peoples heads! Look around you! Look at Jonas! Look at what you and your fucking father have done!"

Her mouth dropped open to speak but no sound came on, her eyes wide and trained on his face now and she yelped out, as if hurt, when he suddenly seized her by one shoulder to shove her back against the living room chair she was cornered against. His hand on her shoulder bent her back over the back of the cushioned chair where something in her bag jabbed painfully into the small of her back, and she was clutching at one wrist to try and pry him off while the other came up to protect her face on instinct when she saw him arch the baton over his head.

"I will be damned if neither of you pay for ruining every sacrifice I have ever made for this vault!"

His eyes were large and crazed as his grip tightened on the handle, poising to strike down upon her—

Until he was stilled by a distinct metallic click behind him, leaving Winona shaking and heaving, bent back against the chair, in his grip. When he slowly turned back over his shoulder, he paled significantly when his eyes met with the mouth of the gun held in both of Amata's hands.

"Get your hands off of my friend," Amata warned rigidly. "Then drop your weapon and step back to the corner over there with your hands up above your head. If you move at all outside of what I told you to do, I will shoot you. Do you understand me, Overseer? I will shoot you."

The Overseer, unable to say anything in his shock over Amata's frighteningly commanding presence, slowly released Winona and stepped away with his hands held high over his head while dropping the extendable stick to the floor. Winona immediately fled to Amata's side, who released one of her hands from the gun to take her best friend's tightly in comfort as he went to stand in the corner like he was told.

Amata wasn't shaking at all, and Winona could see in her eyes that she meant what she said in shooting him.

"We need your computer password. What is it?" She demanded to know with the gun still trained on him from where he was pressed back against the wall, hands still above his head.

"Holding your father at gunpoint," He uttered heatedly rather than answer her. "With his own gun, no less."
"Now you know what it's like to feel so helpless... now you know what it's like to be betrayed by someone that you love—someone that you thought you could trust. If mom could only see you now... isn't that what you always told me, Overseer?" She swallowed thickly upon calling him that. "If mom could only see you now—she would hate you just as much as I do."

"If your plan is to use the escape tunnel under my desk, it won't work. Security will catch her."

"Give me your fucking password!" She shrieked warningly with a dangerous wave around of the gun, as if it would remind him that he was currently held at gunpoint.

"...If you want it you're really going to have to shoot me." He snarled back at her.

"Amata, we'll find some other way. We don't need him." Winona whispered to her as she tightened her hand upon her friend's. "He's right if we stay here any longer."

Amata lowered the weapon slightly, the hate somewhat draining from her face as she stared back at her father. She tried to find some way that he could be redeemed; that he wasn't the snarling, obsessive monster standing in front of her that almost personally assaulted her best friend, but it was in his eyes that she saw nothing. Nothing remained in him that would be worthy of salvation, that would gain her forgiveness, as the beast of the Overseer swallowed the man of her father a very long time ago. Long before now.

"...Let's go." Amata responded in agreement as she raised the gun to eye-level with him once again. "Lay on your stomach with your hands behind your head, cross your ankles. Now!"

The Overseer begrudgingly did as he was told, slowly lowering himself to the floor as the girls cautiously backed their way out of the apartment with their eyes and the gun still on him until they passed under the doorway. Amata waited until he was on his stomach in the position she directed him to lay in before nodding to Winona to shut the door, letting it sever the connected stare she shared with her father up until that very moment. The darker-haired girl inhaled weakly and bent forward onto her knees as Winona used a paperweight off of the head secretary's desk to bash the cover off the door control, tearing out wires from within beyond easy repair.

If they wanted to get the Overseer out, they would need to use door jaws to pry it open.

"Amata, let's go!" Winona exclaimed as she moved to go toward the office, forcing herself not to look back to Jonas' body on the floor. They went into the office together, immediately going to the computer terminal behind his desk after Amata locked the door.

"Winnie, I've got another plan but you need to get into the Overseer's terminal," Amata explained hurriedly as she went around the desk to begin pulling out drawers, digging through them for the password or anything else that would be useful to them. "Think you can work your magic?"

"On it!" She exclaimed as she skid around the desk as well to come to the terminal mainframe against the back wall, tacking away at the bulky keyboard that was built into the mainframe with the screen. "What's the plan?"

"We can't risk Security already waiting by the door for you, I have to lure them away. After we open the tunnel I need you to go on ahead while I send out a pager to the team, telling them that you're in the maintenance levels."

She turned back over her shoulder in surprise, stopping in her work. "Amata—"

"It's okay," Amata smiled back at her over her own shoulder with meek reassurance. 'I'll be fine on
my own. It's you I'm worried about if you're caught! So keep working and get us into that terminal, okay? We don't have much time left!

Winona bit into her bottom lip with her jaw clenching tautly as she turned back to the main computer, trying to keep from saying anything else so no more time would be wasted. Surely Amata would be fine, but it was the pit in the inventor's stomach that made her worry for otherwise.

Winona opened up the false wall that led out of the Overseer's secret tunnel, spitting her out into the entry hall of Vault 101. She'd only been in this very room once before—on the day her apprenticeship was over, because Stanley needed to test the pressure locks on the door to ensure they were in top shape and he didn't think Paul was ready to be that close to the door.

She had never wanted to get out of a room so fast in her life, and now here she was in that same room again—only a year later—and she still felt the same way.

Stepping out from the side wing and down the steps into the heart of the room, she looked to the giant steel door that loomed at her side, ominous in the near darkness, where her eyes could vaguely trace the big 101 that was laser engraved into the metal and painted over in yellow. Despite her fear, where she couldn't tell if every one of her nerves were screaming for her to turn back or for her to run forward, she continued walking onward to the dashboard controls. A single red light upon it illuminated her face in the dark, along with the lever that would open the door. Her hands remained clamped at her sides in fear.

Panic began to rise within her chest to rapidly expand, almost threatening to burst her from the inside-out. It caused her heart to retreat into her stomach for safety; any courage and determination she had before was being torn away in layers and before she knew it she was stepping away from the dashboard with her eyes upon the 101 again. This was it. Despite spending the morning trying to navigate through the halls with all the doors locking her in, and trying to sneak around officers, and trying to keep from getting bitten up by radroaches, it wasn't until now that her thoughts were penetrated by that finalizing thought.

The beginning of the end, and this is it. This is the end.

It really frightened her because her life would suddenly feel like nothing compared to what was going to happen to her outside—whatever was outside. She spent months wanting to open the door and now she was here, about to open it, and she did not know if she could go through with it. The instinct drilled into her since childhood of staying away from the door was surging through her now and she didn't know if she could ignore it.

"Winona!" A familiar voice called from her left. When she looked up, it was Freddie tagging alongside Amata.

"Freddie! What—? Why?" She exclaimed in alarm.

The last time they spoke wasn't a good one; she confronted him about his relations with Susie Mack and he tried to deny them at first, but when he saw how certain she was of the accusations he confessed. Winona then ejected him from her apartment and told him that they would no longer be in contact, and that he had to leave her alone completely. Needless to say, Freddie instead spent the next three days trying to stop her in the halls, or find out where community service placed her that day so he could corner her, or would send her chain messages through the Pip-Boy chat widget to explain how sorry he was, and how badly he wanted to talk it out, and have her forgiveness, and get another chance.
But there was nothing to go back to for them. Winona no longer loved him, and sometimes even regretted having gone out with him at all. It was hard to remember the good times when all she could think about was how Freddie denied being intimate with her 'for marriage' for years but then had sex with Her, to where he would then come to Winona's apartment, and acted like she was the only one, and held her, and kissed her, and told her that he loved her.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't the cheating that bothered her so much—it was that Freddie Gomez thought that he, for even a second, could get away with it.

"I told him he shouldn't have come," Amata explained sharply with a displeased stare trained on his back. She took the cheating scandal a lot harder than Winona did, almost as if he had personally slighted her as well with what he did. "But you know how he is."

"I overheard pops telling mom that the Overseer was looking for you—that Dr. Parker left the vault, and all this other crazy stuff!" Freddie cried worriedly. "I came to the Overseer's office thinking I could talk him into leaving you alone, and that's when I ran into Amata."

"You really shouldn't have come," Winona frowned more.

"I knew you wouldn't want to see me after all the crap I did, but I just—! I just had to see you!"

"Freddie, you have to go! It's too dangerous here, you don't know what you're walking into—"

"I want to come with you!" He interrupted desperately.

"Freddie," Amata groaned. "We don't know what's out there—"

"You need someone there with you, someone who could protect you—who's got your back! That someone could be me, if you'd let me!" Freddie went on despite Amata's glare, suggesting that he shut his mouth. "Let me come with you and prove to you that I can do good by you."

Winona went quiet, her eyes falling back toward the door as it seemed to almost quietly howl, groaning from whatever forces pressed against it from outside. She finally collected the words that tumbled about in her mouth and she stomached her fear, her resentment, her anguish—all of it because she had some choice words for Freddie that would be unforgivably scarring for him. He had to stay because for him to follow her out into almost certain death wasn't a testament to loyalty and love so much as stupidity and trying to alleviate his own remorse.

Besides, Winona couldn't trust that he'd have 'her back' after how he thought he could betray her. She knew if she still loved him, if she still felt anything when she found out about the cheating, she would have been devastated... but she wasn't.

Winona was, frankly, just tired of him.

"You're staying here." Winona replied in finality and forced herself to look into his face when she spoke, despite seeing the way he deflated. He couldn't muster anything else to say with a twinge of hurt and sadness behind his gentle eyes.

"We don't have anymore time for this," Amata interrupted scathingly as she pushed around Freddie to come to Winona. "We have to get you out of here!"

"I—… I'm scared, Amata…" Winona confessed. "I want to go out after dad—I want to make sure he's okay, but I—"

"Then go out after him," She urged. "I know you're scared. I am, too—we all are, but I know that
everything will be okay. Winnie, if there's anyone down here that can survive up there? It'd be you. You're gonna be alright, and you're gonna find your dad. I know it."

Amata's words of encouragement couldn't break through the complete terror that wormed inside her midsection.

"So come on... we'll do this like we've always done," Amata continued with a smile, taking one of Winona's hands to guide her towards the vault door's dashboard. "Together. We'll open the door together."

As she spoke, she placed Winona's hand upon the lever, and then laid her hand on top tenderly. The girls looked to each other with mirroring smiles of reassurance but eyes full of dread of what was to come. Freddie remained in the backdrop, understanding fully that he was unwelcome and not needed. Together, she and Amata yanked the lever downward with a swift tug. The red light that flashed on the dashboard shut off, and on the opposite side of the lever a green light turned on brightly.

Orange lights revolved above their heads, an accented alarm thoroughly punctuating the silence the three young adults had been in only moments before, and they watched in astonishment as above their heads a large arm spewed steam and shifted, moving forward to lock upon the door. A horrid noise of metal grinding upon metal was so shrilly piercing shrilly, it caused them to quickly cover their ears with slapping hands, and the giant vault door was pulled from its doorway and rolled out of the way with an earthy rush of air intruding upon the vault's main entrance. Past the vault's doorway was a gloomy fog of shadow, sparsely illuminated by a wane light source at the very end of the cavern, speckled with dust particles free floating through the space.

The silence echoed back to them eerily.

"Is that—... sunlight?..." Freddie murmured beside Amata in his mesmerized state.

"M- My God," Amata struggled to find the words as they walked down the steps going towards the door. Freddie stood back by the console, too afraid to go anywhere near it. "I can't believe we did it, we actually opened the door!"

"I can't believe it, either..." Winona tried to sound strong but she heard the waver in her voice as she followed Amata down the steps.

The girls only looked to each other for a moment before throwing themselves at the other, tightly embracing.

"I- I'm going to mi- miss you," Amata whispered into her hair, her arms tightening around her waist. Winona nodded in response, not trusting herself to speak out loud in fear of breaking down into tears again. "I hope you find him, Winnie... and tell him that I'm sorry. About my dad, a- and—... and about everything." She pulled back to look her in the eyes. "I know that none of this was his fault. I'll make sure my dad sees that, one way or another."

"...You're still going to try? After everything he did to you? To us?" Winona responded dubiously in a quiet voice.

"I have to—for the vault and everyone left in it." She nodded with a ferocity in her eyes that the inventor knew she would miss.

"...Please—... Amata please make sure Jonas gets the funeral he deserves. Make sure no one forgets about him." She replied darkly as her hands fell into both of Amata's, squeezing
immediately for the darker-haired girl to reciprocate in kind. "And take care of Mrs. Palmer."

"I will." Amata promised.

"I— … Winona?" Freddie called to her in a small voice in an effort to recapture her attention. "...I hope—... I hope you find your dad. I really do. Be careful out there."

"She's opened the door!" A muffled voice yelled in a panic from the other side of the locked door at their side before Winona could respond to him. "Somebody get this door open, now!"

"Winona, go!" Amata rushed, hopping up the steps easily to get to her as she removed her father's pistol from pocket, taking aim at the door. "We'll keep them busy, just go! Now!"

A handful of officers poured in, making a bee-line for her as she dashed away, swiftly flying down the stairs towards the enormous vault doorway before her. As she came to it, her feet so close to leaping over the threshold, she was suddenly yanked back forcefully. An officer, she couldn't make out who, had made it past Amata and latched onto her backpack. She let out an involuntary scream as Amata waved her gun and shot it wildly without much concentrated aim to scare the guards off, and Freddie was trying to fight back as they grabbed at him to restrain his limbs from throwing out half-hearted punches. With his father being an officer, he was taught not to resist but to respect.

Unsure of what to do, and disoriented by the sight of her goal just at the end of the cavern, Winona let her body take over and everything happened so quickly she hadn't even realized what it was doing on it's own; she braced a sharp elbow and slammed it back against the officer's unprotected face, hearing the crunch of his nose under her joint and he immediately released her, falling away to clutch his hands over his bleeding nose. Winona took off again immediately, passing over the doorway but she tripped and stumbled when her boots stomped down on skeletal remains and trapped her foot in a rib cage. Quickly trying to kick it off with multiple screams of horror, heavy panicked breaths being ripped forth from her mouth, the brittle bones fell apart and she struggled to get back to her feet as she watched Amata and Freddie being captured from over her shoulder.

Freddie was on his back on the floor, curled up with his arms trying to protect his head and face as submission was being beat into him with a baton. Amata was pushed up against a wall, Officer Wolfe's forearm shoved into her neck to restrain her as his other hand tried to pry the empty gun from her possession. She was screaming at the officer beating Freddie, pleading for him to stop hurting him when blood began pouring from his nose and a cut on his temple, coming down the side of his face. He cried out every time the weapon struck him again and again. The gun was finally pulled free from her grasp, thrown to the floor, and Wolfe's curled fist rounded back up to collide with her gut; cutting her off through another plea mid-scream. She collapsed to the floor before him on her knees, her arms curling up to her stomach as she struggled to get the wind back in her, wheezing harshly with her hair falling into her face.

Winona continued to watch as her friend was roughly yanked up to her feet by her arms and she no longer fought against Wolfe. One arm encircled her waist to pin her limbs against her sides as another arm hooked around her neck, her back to his front, restraining her. The other officer, with the help of two others, pulled a near unconscious Freddie up to his feet and carried him out of the room just as the Overseer came in. Amata's weak, breathless cries rang deaf on Winona's ears as she was being hauled away as well, leaving unintelligible pleas to her father to not do anything to Winona. Alphonse waved off Wolfe after a few words of where to put Amata until she learned to behave.

It was like everything was happening in slow motion and Winona just stood there, watching, terrified and unsure of what to do.
The Overseer went towards the dashboard of the door control, the green glow of the OPEN light coming across his hard-stared expression as he watched her on the other side of the door. He seemed to be contemplating something with a pursed mouth.

"You really don't know what's out there, do you? If your bastard father had ever told you, you'd be begging me to keep you inside. You haven't the slightest clue." He called to her in an airy tone of bravado, unable to keep the cruel smirk off his face.

"Overseer—" She began weakly as her ears rung.

"You can stay out there amongst the other infected vermin of your kind—bottom feeding Wastelanders, rapers, raiders, thieves—murderers and slavers. You can die out there with your father, and Anne Palmer, and Henry Park and everyone else that has betrayed this vault! Because whatever punishment I could have given you would be nothing compared to what the world will do to you out there. It will tear you apart. You wouldn't even have made it to the door on your own if it wasn't for Amata's help!"

Winona's body seized in terror upon the mentioning of Amata. Several officers were now looking on from where they stood near the door's mouth—barricading it was a man-fortified wall in case she tried to run back inside.

"Don't you fucking hurt her!" She boomed. "If you lay one God damn finger on her—!"

"I think this has gone on long enough, don't you think?" The Overseer's hand neared the lever as he interrupted her. "Goodbye, Winona Parker... I can't say that you'll be dearly missed."

His hand coaxed the level back up into it's upright position upon his final few words. As the light turned from green to red, playing upon his impassive expression save for his smirk, the door's siren played tauntingly back to her in a horrendous echo all around the cavern as she stumbled backward dizzily, running towards the wooden door at the opposite end of the tunnel faster than she ever thought her legs could carry her. Hot tears streaked her face, her white hair whipping about her eyes as the vault door slid itself into place at her back, and her forceful hands registered upon the rotted wooden door when she reached it, shoving it open with little resistance.

As Winona screamed, the sunlight bleaching her eyes in complete and burning white for the first time, all she could sense was the dusty wind caressing her; somewhere faraway an explosion carried its loud boom to her; dirt and dust and other foreign, earthy smells ringed her nostrils.

Winona collapsed to the sun-warmed ground, sobbing with her hands slapped over her blinded eyes.

Winona sat inside the rocky cavern with her knees drawn in towards her body, hugging them tightly for comfort. She'd been crying for the last hour or so—panting through her sobbing, barely able to breathe and choking on her tears. Once she could see from the sun bleaching her vision and frying her retinas, all that laid out at her feet was Wasteland for miles and miles; scorched earth, broken roads littered with cars, and the skeletons of buildings half in their graves on the horizon. She was reborn into a world she didn't know anything about, and the astonishment that overwhelmed her when she could see again was overshadowed by her suffocating terror and a barrage of questions... like why they were lied to if it was safe outside, why they didn't establish communications to outsiders for resources or allied with factions, and if the Overseer—Alphonse—had lied to them all about anything else.

A panic attack had taken over her as she stood on the ridge and she couldn't take the landscape
anymore, tears overcoming the fringes of her sensitive vision. She stumbled down from the scenic overlook and ran back into the safety of the cavern to recollect herself after collapsing on the ground. It was a long hour fluctuating between staring at the crumbling skeletons around her numbly, crying uncontrollably, and going into hysterical panicked fits. What scared her wasn't really about whether or not she'd find her father alive, but if she was strong enough to brave this foreign new world and come out of it unharmed. Why was Amata so sure she'd make it? Just because Winona was strong didn't mean she was strong enough, and the events of the morning had already drained her mentally as well as physically. She felt incapacitated on all fronts.

When she finally fell into another numbing spell, she dug a hand into her pocket and produced Widget, her bug bot companion. With a flick of her thumb against the power button under Widget's wing, she sprang to life in Winona's cupped hands and stared up at her quizzically with a trill.

"Da- Daddy's gone, Widget…" She sniffled as she wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. "Dad's gone and I'm too scared to go outside."

At that, Widget looked around the cavern and down to the left, seeing the large steel door of Vault 101. She then looked down the opposite way, seeing the wooden door built into the rocks and then took flight towards it. Settling on the handle, she peered out between the splintered boards to gaze outside. Winona got to her feet and picked up her bag from her side, slinging it onto her shoulders and followed after her invention reluctantly. The little robot turned back to her, and with another trill, flew up to the inventor's shoulder to perch. Obviously she wasn't as worried as her creator was, but she didn't know the dangers of the outside—it wasn't programmed into her.

When Winona didn't move to open the door, Widget emitted a playback noise of question and flew back to the door again; bumping against it in an effort to open it herself before looking back to her creator to see if her intentions were understood.

"I know you're scared. I am, too—we all are, but I know that everything will be okay."

How could Amata be so sure that everything would be okay? There was so much that could go horribly wrong with the threats out there that not even Winona could fathom, and she didn't doubt that upon first impression of the land that it was as awful as Alphonse described—so to be sure that she'd survive and find her father was almost laughably naive.

"Winnie, if there's anyone down here that can survive up there? It'd be you."

Or naively hopeful.

With a trembling hand, Winona bravely placed it over the handle of the wooden door.

"You're gonna be alright, and you're gonna find your dad."

She took a deep breath and pushed it open, immediately greeted by the Wasteland and a torrid, dusty breeze that whipped dirt against her tear-streaked face.

"I know it."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: WHOO! Wasteland Winona! A lot of you guys were asking about this between
the story being posted here, and my Inventor's Absolution post on my AO3 profile; and I'm happy to say that it's finally official!

From here on out, the POV in chapters will be alternating so we won't just be following Winona as the story progresses! Until the two meet again, every other chapter will be from Butch's point of few, and chapters will still be posted every Friday unless otherwise specified. So this upcoming Friday (02/02) we'll be seeing the first chapter of Butch's POV to mark the start of this alternating chain.

Special thank you to everyone who's stuck around this far in the story and I hope to bring you more excitement between Vault 101 troubles and Winona's trials of the Wasteland! I hope to do my readers proud~ otherwise, if you haven't checked this out already, I've started an ask Tumblr blog for the majority of my fanfiction OCs (whether they were written into a story already or otherwise still floating about in my head) under the name of 'thecooldkidsbasement'. There you can ask specific characters questions or even myself as the writer, you can submit posts to them, and even see some posts written BY them! It's a silly little thing I put together since I love my dorks so much, haha.

Anyways, thank you again for all the reads, comments, bookmarks, everything! Keep being you~

Happy reading, happy writing

~Faerie signing out
"Ma, 'ya gotta stay here, okay? I'm gunna go out and see what's what."

Ellen DeLoria nodded drunkenly at her son while nursing a bottle of vodka against her chest like a newborn baby. She slumped back into the couch cushions and took a deep swig, her eyelids fluttering tiredly shut when she was done. Butch came over and removed the bottle from her grasp before she had completely fallen asleep, lying her on her side with a blanket thrown over her and capping the alcohol. She had grabbed the last bottle of vodka she had in the apartment after Winona left with the others that didn't shatter, and began drinking it down as if it were holy water that would cleanse her.

It certainly was doing a fine job if it was meant to help her forget about everything that was happening around her. Butch didn't care as long as she stayed to their apartment, and he'd be back before she woke up, anyhow. He had to go out and see what was going on, and find his fellow Tunnel Snakes. Not only did they have to stick together in a time of crisis like this with the vault going to shit, but the two would have useful information of what was going on; Paul was an engineer alongside Winona, so he'd have some idea of how the vault was looking through all the radroaches nibbling on everything and the reactors freaking the fuck out. Wally, on the other hand, had his big brother Stevie in the Overseer's private Security force, so he'd surely know if Winona made it out or not.

That is, if Wally was willing to talk to him after everything that happened between them.

Once Butch was sure his mom was asleep, he turned on the roach paralyzer that Winona left with him and kissed her on the cheek before creeping out of the apartment. Once locking the door, he quickly jogged through the hallways and tried to navigate his way to Paul's apartment. The message about residents having to stay in their quarters stopped playing about half an hour ago, so he assumed it was okay to venture out.
Going up a flight of stairs, the heels of his boots resonating in loud thump after thump upon the metal, he flew out of the stairwell and skid to turn a hall—

"Woah!" He exclaimed, stumbling backward with his body hitting the wall as he narrowly missed a splash of large, hot flames. They licked at the walls, casting up smoke and claw marks of black, and radroaches set aflame came scurrying out from the fire while screeching in agony. He pressed closer to the wall, holding his breath until they passed and slid down the stairs to pile at the bottom, mostly unmoving.

He never thought anything could be scarier than a radroach, but a radroach on fire barreling right at you easily took the trophy.

Butch hurriedly slapped out a glimmer of smoldering flame that touched his pants leg from a roach that got a little too close to him.

"Ah, young Mr. DeLoria!" Andy chimed as he shifted around the corner, extinguishing his flamethrower upon seeing the frightened adult. "I was 'cleaning house', as you call it!"

"Ye- Yeah, sure, that's real cool and all, Andy," Butch muttered as he collected himself, pushing away from the wall. "I'm lookin' for Wally and Paul—'ya seen my boys around here?"

"Hmn... no, I suppose I can't say I have!" He replied in a robotic drawl after a moment of thought. "Perhaps you can speak to Officer Gomez about your hooligan friends?"

"DeLoria!"

"Ah, and here he comes now!"

The two glanced back to see the aforementioned officer striding towards them in full riot gear consisting of a bullet-proof vest and a helmet with a protective visor that obscured his face. Butch's gawking, however, found more interest in the unholstered firearm Gomez had drawn at his side in both hands. He'd never seen the officers use their guns, let alone unclip them off their belts, and it made Butch uneasy.

"What are you doing outside of your apartment?" He asked once he was amongst them, Andy hovering off a moment later when he saw another radroach ready for toasting at the other end of the hall. "You know what the orders by the Overseer are—"

"Like I give two shits 'bout anythin' the Overseer says!" Butch snapped back at him shortly. "I'm lookin' for my boys! We Tunnel Snakes gotta stick together!"

"Good gravy, not this gang business again," Gomez grumbled under his breath with a shake of his head, casually removing one hand from his gun at his hip to holster it back to his belt, and he flipped up the visor of his helmet. "Butch, I know that you're probably worried about them, but you don't realize how bad things are right now! It's dangerous to be out!"

"Enlighten me," He spat through clenched teeth, but the only response he was given was Gomez standing stiffly with his mouth shut. "Lemme guess, Overseer's orders? You shine his shoes, too?"

"Don't you back-sass me," The officer barked in a warning tone along with a dangerous finger point. "I could haul you off to The Hole for the night, so you'd have some time to yourself to rethink your attitude—but I'm not going to because we all have bigger things to worry about. I just need you to humor me for a minute, DeLoria, and listen."

"Well I don't feel like listening to what 'ya have to sa—"
"Just—" He quickly held up a gloved hand to stop Butch from speaking further. "Listen. That's all. Just listen. What's going on now—everything that's going to happen after today isn't going to be what you think it is. This gang business you have with Paul and Wally, it's only a kid's game, now. People are dying, people are going to get sick, and worst case scenario is that we'll completely run out of food, and fresh water will be harder and harder to get. You can't play these kid games anymore with your friends, Butch. This is a real fight, now, and if we want to survive, you're going to have to grow up."

For once, Butch actually kept quiet as demanded of him and listened to what the Security officer had to say. He heard some truth in what Gomez was saying, mostly because of his quick and final conversation with Winona earlier; everything was going to go to Shit Town faster than the train could get to the station, and it looked like every single resident had a ticket in the first class cabin.

But Winona had also said that the bastard Overseer couldn't be trusted—and as far as the Serpent King was concerned, anyone that was connected to him couldn't be trusted, either. Gomez was one of the Security guards who answered to Alphonse directly, and through Butch's reluctance to trust him, he didn't think about why Gomez was telling him such a brutally honest truth.

Plus, the guy just insulted him. Butch was a grown ass man! Who the hell did Gomez think he was, talking to him like that?

"Eat shit, Gomez." Butch spat acidly as he shoved past the guard, traversing down the hall away from him.

"Butch, you're not listening to me—!" He exclaimed, trying to grab the young DeLoria by his arm but all he caught was his jumpsuit sleeve. It was hardly enough to stop Butch and he yanked away, pulling free effortlessly.

"Parker said not to trust the Overseer, so I'm not trustin' you, either!" He retorted as he straightened his jumpsuit.

"What did you say? Did you say Parker—are you talking about Winona?" Officer Gomez responded, but Butch began walking away to dismiss him. "DeLoria, I mean it—did you see Winona Parker?" Then Gomez had him more firmly by the sleeve and pulled him back to turn him around.

"Get your hands off me!" He snarled and slapped the officer's grip off him, popping his collar.

"Yeah, I saw her on her way out! What's it matter t'you?"

"Please tell me she's alright," He frowned worriedly. "Do you know if she—… do you know if she made it out? Or where my son is? I haven't seen him all morning—"

"That's what I'm trynna find out!" Butch yelled back with an annoyed groan. "I dunno if she got out or where Freddie is, alright? I think Paulie might know, but if you're not gonna help me find my boys I'm gunna find 'em myself!" He yelled back over his shoulder as he took off in a sprint up the hall before he could be stopped again.

"DeLoria! Butch!" Officer Gomez yelled after him desperately. When Butch didn't return or even give an arrogant reply back, he spoke under a sigh; "Good lord, may he forgive us all…"
Paul didn't really know any more than he did. The engineer figured that he'd wait until Stanley paged him on the intercom; and Butch couldn't help but clarify that, maybe, everything had gone to shit downstairs so his boss wasn't able to contact him.

Paul bashfully admitted he hadn't thought of that since his clearance wasn't called.

They talked for a little while longer before Paul headed down to the lower levels, and Butch went on his own to continue looking for Wally.

The clicking hiss of radroaches echoed down empty hallways. The lights were still dimmed down to almost complete darkness, making way for the revolving emergency lights that replaced them. It was one of the few times he experienced anything like this in his 20 years of life down in Vault 101—the boom in radroaches, the emergency alarm, the guards running around with their guns out... how much longer would the fucking lights be out, anyways? He complained like a whiny bitch when they were on, but now that they were off, it made him uncomfortable.

Turning around the corner, just a few more yards away from Wally's apartment, he ran headlong into Wally himself coming down the hall. They slammed into each other with Butch's head bumping Wally's chin, and they each stumbled back in mutual surprise. Wally's collar was laid flat around the base of his neck over his leather jacket with his jumpsuit zipper pulled right down to his belt line. His hair was messy compared to his usual styling, like it was tousled from nervous hands and lacked its familiar flat top shape.

His brother in arms seemed noticeably less thrilled than Butch was about the reunion.

"Wally, there 'ya are!" He exclaimed as he rubbed his head, taking a moment to cuss under his breath. "God dammit, thought your ma' was kiddin' when she said you're thick-headed..."

"What do you want, Butch?" He bit back, straightening out his jumpsuit.

"I was lookin' for you, man!"

Wally let out a callous snort and shook his head, moving to walk past Butch without response. The Serpent King collared him as he walked by to stop him.

"'Ey, 'ey, 'ey! Where you goin', Wally?"

"I ain't got time for this shit right now," He answered tensely. "I got things to do.

"Don't walk away from me, Mack, you big chicken—"

"You shut the fuck up!" Wally rounded on him, fists tightly rolled and at half-level, implying that he was dangerously close to punching his once best friend. "Just leave me alone, you bastard!"

"Christ! What the hell's wrong with you?" He grimaced, refusing to back away when he saw his raised fists. "Have 'ya gone nuts?"

"My brother got shot," Wally answered so coldly it made Butch's skin creep over his flesh, and his friend finally dropped his hands to his sides. Tears were starting to dot his eyes and he quickly turned his face away to hide them. "...Stevie's dead..."

"Shit, man, I—… I'm sorry." He replied awkwardly, unsure of what else to say and he shook his head helplessly when no other words came. "Sorry."

"Whatever," He spoke dismissively, turning again to walk away. "I'm outta here, leave me alone."
"Stevie Mack killed him... the Overseer ordered him to in an 'interrogation', and Amata thinks that he'll order the same thing to happen to me if I'm caught." Winona's words rang through his memories as they were played alongside her devastated expression.

Was it possible that she got even with Stevie for Jonas' death? If Stevie was shot, there were only so many people who could've done it since those in Security were the only ones allowed to have firearms. That being said, if Winona did do it, how did she get a gun in the first place? Did she find one somewhere and went Open Season on Stevie?

"Who popped him?" Butch called after him without thinking and Wally stopped at the end of the hall.

"The fuck if I know," He replied, but shortly turned back on his heel with a hateful grimace on his face. "I was going to the Overseer's office, he said he'd tell us more. Why? You know something?"

He quickly strode to Wally's side. "I dunno shit 'bout Stevie, but I know that we Tunnel Snakes can't trust anything that comes outta the Overseer's mouth. Parker said—"

"Who the fuck cares what that cunt said?" He suddenly boomed. "The truth's out, now! Her bitch doctor daddy opened the door, he's the reason all this bad shit's happening! And last I heard, her scrawny ass was out there, too!"

"She got out?" He repeated with some measure of relief, and with the way Wally was acting all crazy right now, he was glad he didn't notice it.

"Yeah, no thanks to you, you two-faced bastard!"

"Wha—me? What the fuck, Mack—"

"Dolly told me everything," Wally replied with a frigid calmness as his eyes narrowed dangerously. "I should've fucking known in the first place—you betrayed the Tunnel Snakes, you betrayed me! For her! You even realize how fucked up that is? After all the shit she pulled on us, you went soft and you let her go! You helped her escape! You could've turned her in, but you didn't! You let her walk! What if she was the one that shot my brother?!"

"She wouldn't fuckin' shoot a roach if it was trynna bite her face off!" Butch scowled deeply as he tried to skirt around Wally's accusations of being friendly with Winona. Their kiss was replaying in his mind. "I'm warnin' ya—back off Mack."

"Or what? Ain't much else you can do to me, jackass! You already betrayed me and got my brother killed!"

"I didn't betray nothin'! You were actin' all damn psycho on Paulie and I! What I done doesn't make me any less of a Tunnel Snake!" He squared his shoulders out in challenge as his anger began to flare to insurmountable levels at an alarming rate.

"You're a cowardly piece of shit, and you always have been." Wally spat in reply with a hard one-handed shove to Butch's shoulder. "If you turned her in, Stevie wouldn't have been killed! This would've all been cleared up and Stevie wouldn't have been shot! This is all your fucking fault! It's your fault that my brother is dead!"

"Well your fucking murderin' brother deserved it, for beatin' the life outta Jonas!" Butch countered as he shoved Wally back, the nail of rage driven into his heart allowing him to say things he probably shouldn't have.
That realization arrived a little too late, however, when Wally's fist came rounding over and immediately connected to Butch's jaw in a painful amount of force. He staggered back, trying to register a grip on the wall to keep himself from collapsing as his head swam; he'd never been punched in the face before, and he certainly never expected that first to come from someone he considered to be a brother to him.

That relationship wasn't going to stop him, however.

Butch countered the sudden attack with a tight fist right into Wally's beak of a nose, causing his head to snap back with a grunt of surprise rather than pain. His hands immediately clapped over his nose as he staggered away just enough to put distance between the two of them. The only thing that kept him from getting punched again was that Butch wasn't in the mood for an all-out brawl with his supposed 'brother', although the fucker deserved it.

"Tunnel Snake or not, I'll punch your lights out! I ain't afraid to knock some sense into a brother!" Butch warned grimly, rolling his fist again despite his knuckles aching like hell.

At the mention of being a Tunnel Snake, Wally began angrily pulling his arms out from the sleeves of his leather jacket with his blood curling over his upper lip. Once he managed to hastily shrug off the article of clothing he whipped it right into Butch's face before bringing a hand back to his nose.

"Then fuck you, I'm out. Fuck you and fuck Paul! He was a gutless roach, anyways, with his stupid 'birth to earth, womb to tomb' bullshit! I'm enrolling in the Security team so I can get revenge for Stevie," He spoke after a while, smearing away the blood that poured from his left nostril. "And if I find out that cunt Parker was behind that bullet, you bet your cowardly ass I'm working the ranks—I'll work my way up until I can assemble a team to go out and find her. Then I'm coming after you."

"The hell, Mack!" Butch bellowed with shock as he rubbed his swelling jaw. "You're supposed to be a Tunnel Snake! Tunnel Snakes are for life! You're tellin' me with a straight face that you're gunna back out like a pussy and join the other side? You're crazy!"

"I don't care!" Wally turned away, dismissing Butch with a middle finger over his shoulder. "This is about honor—but it's not like you'd know a damn thing about honor, you spineless traitor!"

"Wally, you God damn roach! Get back here!" Butch yelled after him with his anger still on a roiling bubble. "Fine! Go fuck yourself, Mack!"

Wally walked on without a rebuttal with a hand to his nose to stop the bleeding. Butch was nursing his own wounds with a palm on his jaw, looking down the hall in the opposite direction while feeling completely unsure of what his next step would be. How could that bastard Wally abandon not only him, but everything the Tunnel Snakes stood for? Like Paul said, it was birth to earth and womb to tomb! There was honor in loyalty! If anything, Wally should have considered himself to be damn lucky that Butch decided to forgive him for everything he did with the residential records, and for storming into Winona's apartment and smacking the sense out of her, and for acting like his fucking abusive piece of shit father!

If he didn't want to be a member anymore that was fucking fine with Butch, he didn't want a traitor as a brother in arms, anyways!

...But when he looked down to Wally's discarded jacket in his other hand, he found himself shaking his head at the thought as he leaned against the wall to think.

Wally really was like a brother to him, how could he abandon the gang like that? It's not like he
didn't know something was happening to Stevie over the last few months; he even confided in Butch that he thought Stevie was acting crazy at home. The guy was becoming more and more mentally unhinged after he got his acceptance letter into vault Security. He was going off the deep end, doing stupid shit to certain people because he was in a position where he could, and he got satisfaction out of watching someone squirm helplessly under his boot. Random contraband checks weren't so random when Stevie hand-selected who he felt like aggressively harassing that day, and even their mother was now taking the brunt of his abuse alongside their father.

What a mess his family was.

When Winona got nailed by community service and Wally gloated in his triumph around him and Paul, Butch had thought that maybe he was getting Wally back. He started acting a little more normal again, being less secretive and angry all the time—he thought he was getting his brother back and then all this shit happened, showing that he really hadn't changed.

It was almost startling despite Butch knowing that he should have seen it coming. He remembered being 16 with Wally, where they were shooting pool in the recreation room as Paul went to get them some smokes, and Wally admitted to him that he'd rather be dead than turn into his father. He made Butch promise not to let it happen.

His worst fear seemed to have come to life, and Wally didn't even know it, and Butch had been too wrapped up in his own bullshit to protect his friend.

The Tunnel Snake finally began walking to the stairs in defeat to return to his apartment. What else could he do but wait for some other news about the situation? He'd go back to visit Paul later and see what was happening. He got what he needed from Wally, and he doubted that the two would have any civil conversation with one another any time soon, anyhow. His thoughts circled back onto Winona and not only in imagining her outside, but imagining all the new things she was probably experiencing now that she escaped.

What did the above world look like? Was it blue sky? Was the earth claiming back the wreckage of the war, with lush green foliage spreading over the remnants of collapsed buildings and through the cracks of pavement? Or was it all like what they were told—nothing but ruins and radiation so volatile that it would singe your skin right off your bones? Was she dead from the moment she stepped out the front door?

All the questions that were circling through his brain was giving him a headache as he tramped back into his apartment, locking the door behind him and walking into his bedroom to flop face-forward into his mattress. The radroach corpses had already been cleared out because the smell was too nauseating to let Butch nap. All that was left was cleaning the floor, but he was definitely too tired to do that right at that second, and his headache was too great at this point as well as his throbbing jaw.

So he went to sleep after setting an alarm on his Pip-Boy, and spent his nap dreaming about Winona climbing over rubble covered with overgrown brush, and staring up into an open blue sky like it was the most beautiful thing either of them had seen in their lives.

Chapter End Notes

PS A/N: I'd like to hear people's thoughts on what's happened in this chapter--like about Wally officially stating that he's leaving the Tunnel Snakes, and one of Butch's
fears finally coming true in losing one of his brothers and best friend's. Or anything else you guys thought about during the chapter!
Hacking into the restricted systems of her Pip-Boy was a definitely a way for Winona to distract herself; the flimsy security walls easily fell away and she quickly had full access to the blocked maps of the world above. Down in the vault, the only map they had access to were the vault blueprints, and that was because Vault 101 was the only place they ever had to be concerned with. Her main map was now switched over from Vault 101 to a Pre-War map of Washington D.C. that wouldn't serve her any good, being 200 years outdated. Even from where she stood on the scenic overlook, there was a large town registered on her map called Springvale that was now nothing more than a handful of ruined homes. Her Pip-Boy screen was too small to hold the entire D.C. map and the vastness of the terrain were equal parts impressive and overwhelming.

It'd surely be a task to catalogue the current land layout with 'tourist locales' either blocked off, dangerous, or no longer in existence... but at the same time the challenge thrilled her despite her lingering fear.

Once her map was open to begin cataloging, she felt a welt of petrified excitement as she followed the road towards the marked town of Springvale. Her Pip-Boy documented the ruined road she walked on, scanning onto her black screen as a bright green outline that seemed as small as a paper cut on the new map. The inventor zoomed in as close as she could, feeling a dreadful sense of smallness overcome her as she looked on ahead with Widget riding on her shoulder. Her eyes watched the horizon as the sun arched its way up towards the highest peak of the sky, and as she scanned the wasted land with her hands shielding her eyes, her excitement grew as much as her anxiety did.

It was like being a child in a massive playground—there was so much new things to see, explore, and experience. What kind of world was Washington D.C.? Did any people who didn't get a spot in a vault survive the bombs somehow, 200 years ago? She wondered how many vaults were in Washington D.C., as they weren't told in class how many others there were in the district and where they were located. She knew that there were a recorded 130 in total throughout America. She also knew that 130 vaults filled to capacity wouldn't properly house even a quarter of the population back in 2077—but if people had to pay to get in, it wasn't Vault-Tec's problem who could and couldn't afford a spot inside.

Winona continued to walk as she pulled up the Pre-War map of D.C. again, searching for tagged locations of other vaults. Her map highlighted six in total; Vault 87, Vault 92, Vault 101, Vault 106, Vault 108, and Vault 112. She expected there to be more, being Washington D.C. and all, but supposed that six out of 130 in an area the size of D.C. was more than enough. Were those vaults all unopened like Vault 101 was supposed to be? Were there still people inside, or did they figure...
out the outside world long before 101 did, and had survived in the Wasteland? There were so many 
questions Winona had about everything on the outside and she couldn't wait to have them 
answered.

But for now, she still had a dad to find.

Coming through the town of Springvale she was greeted by the broken remnants of Pre-War 
houses— and in her mind's eye, she could envision them as they probably once were; grandeur 
houses of fairy tale with white clapboards and picket fences, and comfy porches and windows 
shuttered in green or blue or yellow. It amazed her how some houses were still standing along the 
cracked streets and bent light posts—although whatever was left of Springvale currently were the 
skeletons of old homes.

That's when she heard a voice. A man's voice, crackling like it came over a radio transmission, 
carried up the street towards her and she couldn't find out where it was coming from. Was it 
between the houses? What was it saying?

"Hello—?" She called out, taking a few cautious steps forward before stilling, trying to find the 
source of the voice. The first person she was going to meet outside! Winona didn't think about 
readying her bat, in case they were hostile. "Is someone here? Hello!"

Rounding from a house further up the street was a small robot hovering through the air, playing the 
radio transmission Winona heard and she was even more excited, now! It wasn't a person, sure, but 
seeing a working robot? It had her passions as an inventor piqued. The robot (looking very much 
like an eye) began playing a patriotic tune as it hovered on towards the awestruck girl and onward, 
ignoring her as Widget took flight from her shoulder to follow it for examination. Her creator 
quickly caged her between her hands.

"We'll look at it later," She shook her head as she turned off her bug robot and tucked it into her 
jumpsuit pocket, continuing on the way she was walking. "We have to find dad."

Only another short walk up the road, she came into contact with a flimsy sheet of tin metal with the 
word MEGATON written messily in dripping yellow paint. An arrow below the name pointed up 
the street leading out of Springvale.

*MEGATON* was the place Amata talked about, Winona recognized as she quickly took off up the 
road, following the arrow as she pulled up her Pre-War map again. *It's not here on the map—it was 
built after the bombs dropped! It has to be a town!*

The road fell away to the dirt quickly with broken pieces of cement hidden in the earth, leaving no 
trace of where it continued on. She scanned the surrounding area until in the near distance she saw 
the peak of metal reaching to the sky and broke into a sprint towards it. Climbing up over the rocks 
and skidding down the other side, she landed on her front clumsily, and the heavy drop of her 
duffle on her back practically crushed the oxygen out of her lungs. Winona was barely recovered 
and back up on her feet when her eyes fell on the massive structure; a patchwork of various parts of 
Pre-War machinery and scavenged scrap, spearheading the afternoon sky where the sunlight 
reflected off the hot metal, creating a fortified wall strung with lights that completely surrounded 
the city. Standing at what looked to be a gate was a tall robot on two legs with a slim dome head 
and pincer hands. What looked like a cowboy hat sat atop it's head.

"How-dee, pardner." It greeted her monotonously as it took the brimmed hat off in a little tilt 
before replacing it. Winona scurried toward it with dirt smearing on her cheek with her sweat, 
stopping just short of the robot when she could hear on the other side of the tall walls the sounds of 
busying life.
There were people! Other people! People she's never met before!

"State your business or smile for the sniper, lady!" A stern voice demanded on the wind, causing her to jump and look around with her bat drawn cautiously. "Up!"

Winona turned her eyes upward as directed, shielding them with a hand to her brow to block out the sun's rays reflecting off the metal. A plank was perched high above her head, lined with a weak railing jutting out from the wall surrounding the town. Standing on the plank was a man staring back at her through the scope of a large rifle, and she immediately took a few steps back in alarm.

"Do- Don't shoot!" She cried with her hands instinctively flying above her head to show that they were empty. "I'm looking for someone! I was told he might be here—!"

"Who?" He called back.

"My dad! Mid-50's, probably wearing a blue jumpsuit with the number '101' on it like mine?"

The man lowered his rifle and looked back over his shoulder, making a quick gesture behind him before turning back to position. Immediately the plane turbine mounted on the front wall began to whirl to life, and the entrance to Megaton was revealed with the loud shriek and grind of metal on metal. She clapped her hands over her ears as the plane wings that covered the entryway parted back like open arms, inviting her inside with a flurry of dirt around her that whipped at her hair.

On the fringes of her hearing, the pincer-handed robot with the cowboy hat drawled on about a bomb being safe as she quickly dashed inside. The plane wings dropped back into place behind her, shutting out the Wasteland and severing the hot wind that pushed against her back, ushering her keenly into Megaton.

Winona pushed open the door to Moriarty's Saloon, peeking her head in with rounded eyes as she gazed around. She knew what a bar was—they frequented gangster films she and Amata liked to watch, but this one was nothing like the ones from the movies. A few people were already at the counter so early in the morning, clad in soiled clothes and grime, and her nostrils were immediately filled with the sour smells of body odor and sweat, stale alcohol, sun bleached metal, and something a little more potent and foul that nearly made her retch.

If a circle of Hell could smell like anything, it'd stink like this bar.

She stepped in and let the door swing shut behind her, standing awkwardly off towards the side while trying to ignore the several eyes that turned up to stare back at her. They scanned her from head to foot, and most patrons turned back to their drinks when they decided she wasn't worthy of attention or concern. A few male gazes lingered pervertedly, however.

A loud bang startled her into a skittish jump, and she whipped her attention towards the noise. It was a standing corpse behind the bar, with rotted skin clinging to exposed muscles and tufts of dry hair on it's craggy scalp that looked like dead reeds. The corpse's balled fist continuously whacked a radio on the bar counter with it's mottled face twisted into some degree of annoyance. It was hard to tell what it's expression was trying to convey without eyebrows... or lips... or skin.

She could feel her heart go still in her chest before loudly thumping on again in panic as she openly stared at this walking dead monster in fear. What was it? And why was no one else seemingly alarmed by it's horrifying presence? It looked like something out of a Pre-War sci-fi film that was contraband from vault residents under the age of 18, where people began to get sick, and die, and rot, and then would come back to life to terrorize the still living population in the dead of night.
Winona couldn't remember what the decrepit monsters were called, but they were zombies.

"Gob, would you knock it off? It's Galaxy News, their signal's been shit lately." A pretty woman in revealing clothing spoke at the counter, leaning a hip into it with a cigarette pinned between her painted lips. "Keep beating the damn thing and Moriarty'll beat you until you're black and blue again."

"Just wish the damn thing'd work," He muttered in response with a croaky voice as he withdrew behind the counter after turning off the radio. His milky eyes suddenly met with Winona's horrified face. "...Not like I'm one to judge, but are you even old enough to drink, kid?"

"I- I'm looking for Colin Moriarty—?" She stammered quietly, scared to come any closer to the living cadaver, and she realized what that unrecognizable odor was that made her want to vomit. "Mr. Simms said he'd be here."

The corpse and the pretty woman shared a quick glance as she leaned away from the bar.

"Wait here with Gob, sugar—he won't bite, I promise. He's as gentle as a defanged mole rat." 'Gob' graced her with a pointed look as if he wasn't trying to smile at her playful poke. Without another word, she rounded the bar to a back door, ducking her head into the adjoining room to speak in a hushed voice before disappearing inside. The door was shut behind her.

"You look like you needa drink," Gob spoke, waving a hand at her in a gesture to come and pull up a stool. "What'll it be, smoothskin? Got whisky here, bottled this morning."

"N- No, I'm fine."

"Wait here with Gob, sugar—he won't bite, I promise. He's as gentle as a defanged mole rat." 'Gob' graced her with a pointed look as if he wasn't trying to smile at her playful poke. Without another word, she rounded the bar to a back door, ducking her head into the adjoining room to speak in a hushed voice before disappearing inside. The door was shut behind her.

"You look like you needa drink," Gob spoke, waving a hand at her in a gesture to come and pull up a stool. "What'll it be, smoothskin? Got whisky here, bottled this morning."

"N- No, I'm fine." Winona responded as she kept near the door, but out of the way in case anyone was coming in or going out. If he smelled like that from this far away, she didn't want to get any closer. "Um—thank you... sir—?..."

The ushering of 'sir' caused his eyes to flit towards her face in a thoughtful stare, a small smile curling the line of his mouth as if he found it to be kind of silly, but he quickly turned away to wipe down some chipped glasses behind the bar. Soon enough, she could hear raised voices coming from the room in the back where the woman went, but no one came out yet. Two men sitting at the counter got up and stumbled past her, their eyes stopping on her in bewildered stares before pulling open the door and continuing on outside, whispering to each other about her strange hair color and vault jumpsuit. Looking back to Gob, she dared herself to come closer but held her breath at the base of her throat.

"You wouldn't have happened to see an older man?" Winona questioned as she shrugged off her duffle and set it on a stool to give her aching shoulders and back a break. "Probably wearing clothes just like mine? Gray hair, hazel eyes, has a stubbly beard, looks to be in his early fifties? Talks kind of funny? He's got an accent."

"Sorry, smoothskin." He shook his head dismissively as he began wiping down the bar again. "Can't talk to the customers unless I'm serving them drinks."

"I'm trying to get as much information as I can about my dad. If you know something about him—the sooner you help me, the sooner I'll get out of your hair." She tensed at her phrasing, her eyes immediately snapping towards what very little was left of his mentioned hair. "I mean—!"

When his eyes met with her face, the cracked corners of his mouth turned up more than they did before in a good-humored smile.

"Just wait until Mr. Moriarty can get to you." He responded gruffly as he shouldered his spoiled
cleaning rag. "Trust me. It'll be easier on both of us. Ask me 'bout something I can answer."

Winona watched him for a long moment before gathering her courage to speak. "...Why do you look like this?"

"Radiation, kid." Gob shook his head as he stacked the 'clean' glasses together in a tower and then tucked it under the counter. "Lots of it."

"That—... That's possible?" She trailed off in thought, seeming a little less frightened and a little more curious. She only took breaths in if she absolutely had to, and tried not to make it glaringly obvious. "How could radiation do that to someone? How are you even still alive?"

"I'd like to say it's because of my glowing personality," He teased with a fractured smile. It quickly disappeared. "...We don't really know—just happens. Looking ugly isn't the only thing it does. Mutants leave our kind alone and we heal pretty quickly so I guess it ain't so bad."

"We? So there's more people like you?"

Gob turned his eyes up to her again, his stare seeming rather thoughtful with some hint of gratitude. It made her wonder if he usually looked at people in such a way with puzzled appreciation. Winona had one hell of a scare the moment she saw him, and she knew coming any closer would definitely make her vomit from his decomposing stench—Gob was disgusting as whatever he was but at least he was nice and had a good sense of humor about his situation.

"There's lots of us." He finally answered as he put his weight onto his hands on the bar counter. "Whole place full of ghouls in the Mall—it's called Underworld."

"The Mall?" Winona pricked up. "You live in a mall?"

"Not a mall. The Mall. That's the center of Washington D.C.—never get out there if you can help it, kid. Full of nothing but mutants that'll tear you apart. Like I said, they leave us alone, though. You're the kinda small thing they'd like playing target practice with, or put up in a cage like a human piñata."

The combination of words, mall and mutants, brought forth the broken radio transmission she heard those years ago; but before she could ask further questions about mutants and other dangerous parts of D.C., the back door behind the counter slammed against the door from how it swung open. The first one to step out was an older man with shaggy gray hair, a beer gut, and eyes set in a naturally venomous stare. The pretty woman from earlier followed him out before moving to the corner where the bathroom seemed to be located, taking position there against the wall as she worked on the remainder of her cigarette. A menacing sneer came to the older man's face as he backhanded the side of poor Gob's head when he strode past, his beer gut jiggling from the strike.

"I bought 'ya so ye could attend to me loyal customers! Not shoot the shit with any young face that walks in here!" He barked in a thick Irish accent.

The mention of him being enslaved mortified Winona where she stood on the patron side of the counter, wide eyed and speechless. Gob had muttered a weak apology to his abuser before his attention turned toward her with a beady gaze; behind the man's muted blue and bloodshot eyes did an ominous interest lurk about. When he was close enough, she could smell the musk of his dusty leather vest, the cigarette smoke on his tongue, and the sweat off his body. There was no mistaking this man as Colin Moriarty—he smelled just like his bar looked, which was rough and dangerous.

"Now, wouja lookee here? Didn't expect another 101'er to me humble little waterin' hole!"
Moriarty crowed with a suspicious grin. "Followin' yer da, are 'ya? If I'd known you were comin', I woulda had Nova clean up the place a bit!"

"You kno- know who I am?" Winona sputtered, feeling mildly alarmed by the enigmatic barkeep.

"I sure do!" He nodded with a devilish grin. "Why don'cha come on back 'ere, lass? We kin talk in private."

She was extremely reluctant to be anywhere private with him, and the look Gob gave her from over Moriarty's shoulder only solidified the roiling in her gut. Against her better judgement, she nodded and picked up her duffle from the bar stool before following after him. He led them into the back room behind the bar and shut the door before moving towards the other side of the room to sit at a terminal mounted on the wall.

"So yer James' kid, hmn?" Moriarty asked as he reclined back in his chair with an arm hooked over the back.

"I'm Winona." She watched him cautiously while keeping towards the door in case she had to quickly escape. "Mr. Simms said my dad came here looking for you. Why's that?"

"T' talk to me, o' course!" He chuckled as he leaned back in his chair and settled his opposite hand on his belly. "Had a lotta questions 'bout the Wasteland—like what's changed from before."

"...Changed from before?"

"From the last time he's been through Megaton. Lotsa things 'ave changed in 20 years." Moriarty responded with a raised brow. A wolfish half-smirk leaked to his lips when he noticed her moderately stunned expression. "Dear da never told you? Well, I remember it like it was yesterday! You an' yer father with that Steel soldier, rollin' through town—but back then 'ya had hair black as night. I see how the vault changes people!"

So we are from outside... finally, some confirmation! Winona mentally breathed in relief. I wonder what else he knows...

"That's not true," Winona replied curtly. "I don't know what you're talking about. Dad and I were born in Vault 101."

"Ya sound a bit loony, lass." He replied with his half-smirk widening as he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, rolling a finger tip in a circle against his temple to symbolize 'crazy'. "Like that feller that escaped a few years back—prattlin' on about that 'we're born in the vault, we die in the vault' bullshit. Talked about yer Overseer a great deal. The man sounded like a right bastard t'me, an' I know a thing 'er two about bastards."

"What guy?" She asked pointedly, frowning now. "Do you know what his name was?"

"Ain't any business o' mine." Moriarty waved her off dismissively. Damn, she thought wistfully. "A ghost on the wind now, anyhow. Prolly died out there. Vaulties ain't meant for the Wastes, girlie… She ain't the most forgivin' mistress. So I assume yer gonna be here and gone to go after dear ole' da?"

"He told you where he was going?" Winona stepped towards him, momentarily forgetting any ounce of caution. "When did he leave Megaton? How far off would he be?"

"Far off that 'ya ain't gonna catch him 'less 'ya walk all day!" He exclaimed to her discouragement. "And yeh, he told me where he was goin'."
"Where?" She demanded.

"Now, see," He chuckled as he got up to his feet and came towards her. "I'm gonna teach 'ya a right valuable lesson of the Wasteland, lass. No one's out here t'help 'ya, or save 'ya, or be yer pal, and people die out here by trustin' the wrong kinda folk—but 'ya look like a quick wit so I think you'll pick up on this lesson quicker an' most. 'Ya don't get anythin' out here without a little caps, or a little firepower." He glanced her over, seeing only the baseball bat handle jutting out from her stuffed full duffle bag. "And from the looks o' things, 'ya ain't have any gunpowder to even blow yer nose with."

"I guess I don't have any caps either." Winona muttered, taking a discreet step back from him when he came too close. "What're those?"

"New World money, kid. Bottle caps—like from soda bottles." He waved her off as he took a seat back at his terminal again. "We don't use that paper money shit anymore, 'less we're wipin' our ass with it."

"So you're saying that you won't tell me where my father is unless I pay you." She responded in statement rather than question. "But I don't have any money! Caps, paper, or otherwise!"

"Nothin' at all in that bag o' yers?" Moriarty quipped coyly with a raised brow and another wolfish half-smirk. It seemed to be his trademark, and something about it reminded her of Overseer Alphonse when he was trying to look like he didn't find amusement in pompously berating residents over small infractions.

"Nothing that I can part with." She shook her head firmly.

"Another lesson for 'ya, lass—don't claim t'have anythin' of value to you unless 'ya got the means to protect it. Folk out here will kill 'ya just 'cause they can. Hell, 'cause they want ta.'" He turned away to his terminal and pulled forward the attached keyboard, beginning to type away on it. "Ya git the caps, and daddy's location is all yours. Let's call it 100 caps—I think that's about fair."

"Fair is just telling me where he is!" She cried. "This is extortion!"

"This is business," The barkeep replied back with some measure of boredom without looking up from his work, waving her off with a dismissive hand. "You ain't got the caps? Then yer shit outta luck. Ain't no one else in this town that knows where yer dad went, so the faster 'ya pay me the sooner you can find 'im."

Winona grimaced in disgust as she pulled open the door and walked out, tugging her bag behind her before shrugging it onto her shoulders. She walked around Gob as the door drew shut on its own behind her, unzipping her vault suit as much as she could without revealing too much of her under tank to cool her hot skin. How could one human being be so horrible? Knowing that she was desperate to find her father who could die out there somewhere, and he was using it as an opportunity to make money?

Colin Moriarty was right about one thing, however; certainly no one would be honest with her out here. It scared her to know that putting trust in someone could result in more than hurt feelings or mean words—it could literally get her killed.

"You outta here, smoothskin?" Gob called after her as she went towards the door. The bar was empty now, save for a troubled looking blonde woman nursing a beer and thumbing a crummy looking letter.
"And likely won't be back any time soon," She answered heatedly, stopping short to look back at him. "I—... have a nice day, Gob."

"Kid—" He beckoned her attention back to him as she pulled open the door to leave. Glancing over his left shoulder at the back door cautiously, he gestured for her to come to the counter.

"Gob—" The pretty sighed his name as she looked to the back door cautiously as well. Obviously whatever he was about to say to Winona would get him into a lot of trouble with Moriarty.

"You should find some new clothes." He spoke in a low voice as he looked back at her. His filmy eyes stared right back into her own, capturing her gaze. "Your jumpsuit'll get you killed faster than stealing an egg from a deathclaw nest."

Winona looked down to her jumpsuit, picking at the sweat-stained fabric before looking back at him in confusion. "What? I don't understa—"

"You should head over to Craterside Supply," Gob cut her off, his tone a little more pointed as his bare brow arched towards his flaky scalp. "Ask for Moira Brown. She can help you out."

The little inventor suddenly recognized that Gob was trying to discreetly relay something to her, and she found herself smiling wide at his advice. He gave a small smile in return, relieved that she understood what he was trying to convey as the woman perched by the bathroom shook her head and muttered a curse under her breath. Winona could have hugged him if it wasn't for his stench or his repulsive looks.

"I'll be sure to head that way," She replied to keep up appearances in case Moriarty could hear. "Thanks. I'll stop back in later for a drink or something."

"Best booze in town, smoothskin, and you better remember that." Gob responded as he waved her off towards the door hurriedly and turned back to his cleaning duties.

Winona was out on the deck sooner than he could grab the mop, on her way to find this place called Craterside Supply. It took her a little time to navigate through the mildly confusing town, going down one ramp and then up another, until she ran into Simms—the cowboy inspired sheriff—and went back up the ramp towards Craterside. She mentally kicked herself upon seeing how close it was to Moriarty's Saloon, if she had just gone up the ramp and around the bend.

Allowing herself into the shop, she was immediately greeted by the shopkeeper behind the counter trying to untangle what looked like a heap of wires. Brushing a lock of red hair out of her sweaty face, she looked up when Winona entered the store and immediately seemed to perk up.

"Welcome to Craterside Supply!" She cooed, wiping her forehead off on her jumpsuit sleeve. "Wow! Vault 101 must be going crazy with all these people escaping!"

"Did you meet another man from Vault 101?" Winona asked hopefully as she came up to the shop counter. "Middle-aged man with gray hair, hazel eyes—probably in a vault suit?"

"Sure did!" Winona immediately relaxed, finding herself grinning again and internally thanking Gob. "Early this morning, knocking on my door well after I closed the shop for the night!"

"Did he say where he was going? What he was doing?"

"Well." The woman rubbed her chin in thought as she tried to recollect the events of their meeting. "I interviewed him about Vault 101 and life down there in exchange for some clothes and a better weapon. Had a little old .32 pistol that was no better than a paperweight! He spent a few hours
resting upstairs and was gone before I woke up. Serge said he left right before sun up."

"Serge?" She parroted, to where the shopkeeper pointed past her. A man clad in leather-pieced armor was leaning against the wall, watching her with a fixated glare. For added effect, he gave a menacing little growl through a soiled cigarette that dangled from his lips, which was pluming smoke into his cutting eyes.

"I don't really know where he was going," The shopkeeper went on as she came from around her counter. "Maybe Rivet City? He asked how to get there from Megaton."

"Where's that? How can I get to it?" Winona's arm was settled on the counter now after she took her backpack off to rest her aching shoulders. "What's the fastest way?"

"Like I told him, either follow the Potomac or go underground through the metro! It's pretty dangerous either way, though!"

"Hold on, the Potomac—?" Winona repeated aloud, remembering her father's paperwork from months ago that she never saw again... mentioning the radiation in the Potomac river and the Jefferson Memorial. "There wouldn't happen to be a memorial along the waterway? Jefferson Memorial?"

"I think there might be," Moira scratched her head in thought. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure there is! By the way, that's a 3000A model, isn't it?" She smiled wide and pointed at Winona's arm on the counter, which was fitted with her Pip-Boy.

Winona blinked in surprise and looked down to her Pip-Boy as well. "Uh—yeah, it is. How'd you know—?"

"I bought a book series about Vault-Tec off a caravaneer years back. Very interesting read! Especially the part about Pip-Boys." Moira went back behind her counter to pick up what looked like a pretty banged up recording device. "In all my excitement last night with that other guy from Vault 101, I just plain forgot to ask him about his own Pip-Boy! I've seen his 2000 model before, but your 3000 is new to me! A bit clunky, but definitely sleeker than 2000. The 4000 has better controls and features, though..."

"Can you give me a map on how to get to Rivet City and the Memorial?" The little inventor asked to try and get back on track with things. "Or draw me one or something? I'm really on a time crunch trying to find my dad."

"I can do you one better and put one right into your Pip Boy!" The excitable shopkeep came to Winona's side and took hold of her Pip-Boy (along with her arm) and configured the map. "Another thing I learned from those books about Pip-Boys. Did you know it comes with a built-in system that will calculate the best route to take to your destination?"

"Will it reconfigure the best route to the marker in real time while it's updating its old maps? Including road blocks?" She asked as she watched the woman's fingers dancing across the three button interface of her Pip-Boy, trying to memorize how she was using this feature. "The only maps I have of the area are Pre-War, so I've been cataloging the new terrain as I've been walking."

"It definitely will!" The red-haired woman was looking at Winona now as if she had stars in her eyes, seeming in awe. "You know, you seem pretty smart! You wouldn't happen to be a technician, or an engineer of some kind?"

"I was actually a vault engineer... and I'm a bit of a hobbyist inventor."
"Oh, an inventor!" She stuck out a hand to her excitedly. "I'm Moira Brown! Also a hobbyist inventor!"

"Winona Parker. Nice to meet you."

"Same here! It's so nice to meet a fellow tinkerer, you have no idea. Megaton doesn't have a lot of tech-savvy people around here! Well, except for Walter, I guess. He's pretty good with a wrench."

"Moira, the map—?" The little inventor reminded her to get her back on track.

"Of course, of course!" Moira was quickly back to work, plugging in the requested destinations. "Say, how about we strike a deal?"

Winona found the eccentric Moira Brown to be sweet—if not a little excitable and flighty—but after her encounter with Colin Moriarty, she didn't know how she felt about making deals with anyone out here... even someone who was an inventor like herself, which was something Winona never thought she'd ever encounter. Moira may have been nice but Moriarty's words about trusting the wrong people out here came flooding back to her.

Moira seemed to recognize her hesitation.

"I already told you where your dad went, right?" She began. "But getting to Rivet City is dangerous. Jefferson Memorial especially, that's super mutant territory, you know! Well, maybe you don't really know... anyways, forget that—you're definitely new out here! So, tell you what, I'm still looking to do research about Vault-Tec and their work with the vaults, and you're the perfect person to talk to! You know all the ins and outs of a vault, being a vault engineer and an inventor—and I could always use more first-hand experience to write about. I couldn't possibly get a better opportunity for my book!"

"Just to be clear," Winona held up a hand, perpendicular to a stop sign she had seen on the way to Megaton. "You want to interview me about Vault 101... in exchange for—?"

"Whatever you need in order to find your dad!" With this, she picked up the bulky recorder she left on her shop counter moments before. "I gave him better clothes and a working weapon—I can do the same for you! Oh~! I even have this armored vault suit I could give you!

With a grand sweep of her arm, Moira gestured back to the Vault 101 jumpsuit that was tacked up on the wall behind the counter. It was fortified by plates of leather and thin metal in various places and seemed dusty with age, illuminated by a spotlight that was rigged above it. It looked like something of pride to Moira, which was mildly unsettling, and gave Winona a negative feeling. Why would she post it up like a revered animal pelt?

"It's better than what you're wearing now. Although, I'd suggest something that won't make you stick out like a feral in a ghoul line up. You'll camouflage better, too!"

"...I think I'll take some other clothes... is my interview even worth that much?"

"I'd say so! I'll even let you stay upstairs until you're ready to head out, aaand, if you talk to me I could give you some pointers about how to survive out there in the Wastes." Winona could feel the intimidating man referred to as Serge physically tighten in displeasure at another outsider being allowed to stay in the shop. "C'mon, please? It's actually a pretty good offer! You won't find a better one anywhere else, since I doubt you have any money—unless you've got something good to barter with. We do that out here, too!"

Winona preoccupied herself by looking down at her Pip-Boy to see the markers titled 'Rivet City'
and 'Jefferson Memorial' staring back at her on the banks of what looked like the Potomac River she read about. She pondered over the details of Moira's offer—anything she could possibly need, like weapons or clothes, and even a place to sleep just for a little interview was a good offer indeed. As much as the inventor was itching to go after her father (especially with so much time already wasted), she recognized that chasing him around when she didn't know exactly what was out there was an awful idea. Her interview with Moira could certainly open up a conversation about what threats she should be expecting, and this thought made the reality of the situation crash down on her.

"Alright." She nodded before she could hesitate a second longer, and Moira clapped her hands together in delight. "Where do you wanna start?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope this chapter wasn't too boring for you guys! Not much happened other than Winona running around town, but it was super fun being able to introduce some central characters to the life of Megaton like Moriarty, Gob, and Moira! They were all especially fun to write for and I hope I did them justice. Writing as Moriarty gave me needed practice with thicker accents while also keeping the dialogue legible so that was cool.

Next chapter we'll be checking back with Butch to see what he's up to! In the mean time I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter even though it wasn't action-packed, and I'll be seeing you all next Friday!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
"Ne- Need a doctor, man… I'm hurtin' all over. Hurtin' real good."

"Butch, tell me straight—"

"Am I gunna die?"

Butch opened his eyes from his nightmare, staring groggily up at the dark ceiling that loomed above him in a blurry haze, his sweat coating his hot skin in a damp sheen as he tried to level his laborious breathing. Before his vision could come into focus, the pads of his thumbs found his sore eyes and massaged them while he sat upright. He couldn't get any good sleep at all that night on Paul's couch—not after everything he saw, and how it replayed endlessly in his nightmares, further torturing him. Looking to his Pip-Boy screen, he activated it to find that it was barely 2 in the morning. The blinds in the front window were still drawn up to show that the lights hadn't come back on to full brightness yet.

He really hoped that everything would have been resolved while they slept. Guess there's some bitter truth behind that saying "you don't always get what you want."

Rubbing his lower back, his eyes roamed about the sparsely furnished living room of Paul's apartment. Paul was still living with his folks because he was a bit of a mama's boy, but Butch couldn't tease him that much about it given his own living situation. The Serpent King got up from the couch, his jumpsuit drawn down to his hips and his cold toes free of his socks, and went to the residential bathroom that was up the hall. He'd need a shower later. A little cold water was fine for now to wake himself up if the faucets worked at all.

Yesterday evening was suffocating. Butch couldn't stand pacing his apartment or trying to force himself to nap, so he decided to go down to the lower levels and see what the damage was with
Paul. Being seen by security at this point wasn't a concern of his at all—though he noticed not even the guards were out anymore. Butch didn't think about where they all ran off to.

Thinking about the night before on his walk to the bathroom sent an icy finger slithering up his spine; going to find Paul on the maintenance level, he was barely down the steps when he heard it… Paul's screams and the petrifying sound of radroaches.

**The Day Before**

Butch practically flew down the stairs into the reactor level the moment he heard Paul breathlessly yelling for help. Skidding around the corner and breaking into a sprint, the first thing he saw was a tired, flailing mass under a swarm of radroaches. A bitten up arm curtained by tatters of a leather jacket sleeve broke through the swarm, clawing weakly at the air before dropping to the floor limply. It was Paul—*his best friend*—under a feasting family of radroaches.

"Shit—! Fuck, shit—! Shit!" Was all Butch could manage upon being greeted with the hellish sight.

"B- Butch, help me—!" Paul weakly cried from under the radroaches when he heard Butch's voice, skittering and squirming on top of him like a moving mound of barbed legs and fluttering wings and twitching antennae.

Fear struck him in the gut like a blunt knife as Paul's quivering body reflected in his eyes, and soon he was rushing at them with a panicked war cry tearing straight out of his throat. He kicked the largest roach off of Paul's stomach, sending it flying through the air in an arch before it hit the floor on it's back with a sickening thick. Some of the others turned their attention onto him, charging in a cacophony of aggressive chitters. Butch stumbled away in fear, turning the other way to run and nearly tripping over an open toolbox. A large, gleaming wrench laid beside it—suggesting Paul was in the middle of doing maintenance when he was jumped, then swarmed, by the oversized bugs.

Butch quickly brandished it and sent it colliding downward on a radroach that was closest to him. The wrench squashed it's head and he couldn't help but groan in disgust when it flailed about uselessly as if still alive. The others continued to advance on him aggressively, chittering and pouncing at his legs. He easily kicked those off and barely got his balance back before swinging the wrench down on another.

With every hit, kick, stomp, and grind of his boot heel, his fear of the bugs ebbed away little by little until there was nothing but boiling, righteous fury left in him.

"I'll! Show! You!" Butch exclaimed wrathfully each time he sent his wrench swinging downward. "I'm the mother fuckin' King Snake! I chew up radroaches for breakfast and shit 'em out! Only way any of 'ya are gettin' away is if I say so!"

Straightening up from his bludgeoning with his exhaustion keeping him from yelling anymore threats, the final roaches were laid out at his feet as a mess. There were body parts, bug intestines, greasy juices, and the musty sock smell of their innards assaulting his senses. He finally dropped the wrench at his side and staggered over the slaughtered bugs to get to Paul, rubbing at some of the nibbles he had on his hands. It didn't look like any of them broke the skin but he'd definitely need to put ointment on them later, he wasn't risking an infection.

"Pa- Paul, my man—" Butch was definitely winded. "Paul—?"
Now being able to clearly see his best friend without the blanket of bugs on top of him, Paul was a sight he didn't have time to prepare himself for; his fellow gang member was covered in open pockets of chewed away flesh and spatters of blood that contrasted against his dark skin. Individual bites looked like dimples of aggravated skin clumped together, and his clothes were eaten through mainly along his legs and arms. The flesh on the right side of his face was almost completely gone save for his temple and eyelid, exposing bloody muscle from his jaw to his cheekbone as well as his teeth. Two fingers were missing from his left hand with the digits discarded near his head, nearly chewed down to the bone, and there was a deep gash on his thigh.

It was obvious he was at the mercy of the roaches for a while, now—too over encumbered by their numbers to get away.

"He- Help—"

"Fuck!" Was all Butch could sputter out as he ran for Paul and dropped to his knees at this side. "Paul, you still kickin', man?"

"Ne- Need a doctor, man... I'm hurtin' all over. Hurtin' real good..." The words came as a raspy whisper under Paul's breath, barely audible through his labored breathing.

"I gotcha, Paul—" He replied, much more confidently than he felt, as he tried to find a way to pick Paul up from the floor without hurting him more; constantly readjusting his limbs awkwardly over his body to try and figure out the best way to go about it.

Eventually he decided that nothing could be done to make the pain any better, and so he slung an arm under Paul and got him upright and then to his feet. Paul was trembling through choked sobs, and tears streaked down his face, cutting through the blood splattered on his cheeks.

"Butch, tell me straight—" Paul managed to wheeze as Butch slung one of his arms over the length of his shoulders to keep Paul upright.

"Shuddup, don't even say it, Paulie." He hissed and flicked his hand away with a shudder when his fingers accidently dug into exposed flesh above Paul's hip, causing him to whimper pathetically. Butch helped him stagger to the door to get to the stairs, but it was about two flights up to the sleeping quarters.

"Just tell me..." Paul tried again in a weak whisper just as they were climbing up the first step.

Don't say it, don't you fuckin' say it, Hannon, repeated like a song in Butch's alarmed mind.

"Am I gunna die?"

Butch was walking back to Paul's apartment with medical supplies from the clinic stuffed into his jumpsuit pockets and his arms full of boxed goods from the cafeteria. After his morning trip to the bathroom, he checked in on Paul (who was still deep asleep), and decided that a food and medicine run was a good idea. There was only one stimpak in the Hannon family's medical kit as well as a plunger of med-x, and he didn't exactly know how long either of those were meant to last. As well, Paul needed more bandages. The whole roll from the medical kit was used trying to cover up all of his pockmarks.

The med-x was actually a pretty good idea. Paul admitted, when he asked for it, that it wasn't his own idea.

"Winnie said it's good shit." Was how he worded it. Even now, the Professor was still
unknowingly giving a helping hand.

Butch realized that he still had to tell his fellow gang member that Wally flew the coop with a bang. Not only was he no longer a Tunnel Snake but he turned over to the dark side. Didn't he see after all their years of punishment from the Overseer that he was a two-timing asshole? Even through him siccing the Tunnel Snakes on various vault residents? If that wasn't a reason to distrust the shithead, than Wally was a bigger shmuck than Butch thought he was. There was no way the Overseer was going to let Wally into the Security program.

"Paul, you awake?" Butch called into the apartment once he arrived, setting the food on the living room table haphazardly once he shut the front door behind him. "Brought some more of that good shit, my man! Maybe we should just move you on up t'the clinic, be easier when you're 'round all the supplies and whatever."

Removing the medical supplies from his pockets, he went on towards Paul's bedroom and opened the door with an elbow to the console button.

"Ready t'get flyin' high, Hannon?"

But the moment his eyes laid upon Paul's form draped on the bed, in the darkened room, Butch knew something was wrong. Paul's face was heavily bandaged up, going diagonally from his right jaw to his left temple so only his left eye, nose, and mouth were visible; and the eye that looked back at him was open in a dead stare under hooded eyelids, his mouth slightly agape to show blood encrusted teeth.

The medical supplies went falling from Butch's limp hands.

The Present

Butch was back in his apartment after laying around Paul's place for a bit, if only to reminisce, before having gone to the bathroom for a face wash to clear his head. He sat upright on his own couch, staring ahead at the wall while his mother snored away in her bedroom. After finding Paul dead, it took him a few hours to get around to processing a ticket for body pick up from downstairs. Apparently the people down in the funeral parlor—Lance and Emile—had the furnaces clocked on overtime. They'd been burning bodies nonstop since the prior morning.

Butch hadn't realize how many people actually died in all the chaos of the last two days. He was told (chiefly by Lance) that they wouldn't be able to pick up Paul's body until after 10 PM at the soonest, and they'd let his remaining family know about the brief and informal funeral procession if they wanted to see him off at the incinerator.

Apparently they processed the body of Paul's mother, Vikki, just hours earlier. He didn't know if Paul's dad was still around. Did the guy even know his whole family was dead yet?

Butch turned his attention back to the hard couch, fluffing up pillows and shifting his body weight to try and make it more comfortable because he was still fucking exhausted despite himself,

God! Do these cushions have fuckin' rocks in 'em, er somethin'?  

He then sat up and held his head in his hands when his squirming about wasn't working, afraid to close his eyes because all he saw was Paul there, staring blankly back at him—

I coulda helped you, man!... I coulda saved 'ya!... I should've been there when you—... when 'ya
Nothing was helping. Nothing was working, nothing was distracting him—

"Just tell me... am I gunna die?"

Butch couldn't take it anymore!

With an angry roar, he lunged up from the couch with his hands tucked under the coffee table laid in front of him, and heaved it upward into a somersault. It flipped over onto its top in a loud clatter, sending his mom's empty vodka bottles showering to the floor to bounce or shatter.

This wasn't good enough. He needed to physically break something for himself—massacre, beat, fucking destroy something! Anything, anything at all! If it could keep anything about Paul's final moments without him from entering his mind—

Then Butch spotted it; the porcelain vase on the side table that held fake flowers for lively décor. He picked it up and hurled it at the nearest wall as hard as he could, watching as it shattered in jagged pieces of porcelain with a melodious sound. The plastic flowers hit the floor at his feet to be met with his bare heel, grinding them into misshapen wax petals, wires bent out of shape from their plastic stem casings and crummy paper leaves. His next victims were more of his mom's empty liquor bottles, lobbing them at the walls on all sides of him to shatter with more shards of glass sprinkling the floor. He then turned on the clock nailed high up on the wall, tearing it right off from the bracket that anchored it and pitched it at the floor. It smashed into multiple pieces of plastic, leaving the hands askew on the clock face with a loud mechanical *thromm* where it broke apart on the floor, belching out small gears, springs, and other inner pieces.

With his breathing heavy, coming in short inhales and long exhales as if he were borderline hyperventilating, his anger was quelled for the time being and reduced to a tortured simmer. Straightening up, he brought his hands to pop the collar on his leather jacket—

"You sure about this? It's your jacket—"

His hands dropped slowly back down to his sides with his breathing hitched in his tightening throat and he forced himself to swallow. He almost forgot that he gave his jacket to Winona. He gave it to her for rescuing his mom when he wasn't brave enough to do it. He took Wally's jacket after it was thrown at his head, but hadn't thought to keep it for himself with his own jacket gone. Instead it was tucked away into his dresser for safekeeping... but safekeeping for what, he hadn't a clue.

But now Paul's bitten up jacket joined it with his blood still on it. It felt like some sick joke; the final end to something that was glorious. The Tunnel Snakes were alive and well for 6 years, running the halls and frightening the masses, and once their deal with the Overseer was securely in place, it solidified the fact that they ruled Vault 101. During his mother's brief stints at sobriety when he was a teenager, she was more aware than ever of his behavior and told him that things like that weren't meant to last forever. She used herself as an example and said that she was somebody when she was his age, and now she was nothing more than an addict who couldn't keep herself together. Her words struck down to the heart of the wound deep inside him and he reviled its bitterness because it was more honest than he wanted it to be. It prodded his fear of losing everything good, everything he worked for, every day as the inevitable *End* crept closer.

The three of them were once at the top of the world and now it was just Butch without his member's jacket, standing amongst his ransacked apartment, as Wally's thoughts were plagued with revenge and Paul was up in Tunnel Snake heaven swinging it with Tunnel Snake babes.
It wasn't *God damned fair*. It wasn't fair that he failed the only two people in his life that relied on him the most; if Butch hadn't partnered up with Winona and made Wally think that he was a traitor, they'd still be friends. If Butch hadn't sent Paul downstairs, saying that Stanley needed him—... he would've been alive, still.

That was what stung the most.

*It was all his fucking fault.*

Butch found his fingers slowly curling into his palms to make tights fists, but had just as quickly unfurled to hang pathetically at his sides again. He wasn't angry anymore and he couldn't decipher why. The only life he ever knew was destroyed by radroaches, explosive fires, a batshit *insane* Overseer, and Dr. James Parker. Memories of past conversations in better days came blazing through Butch's thoughts, seeming to singe everything they touched in a peeling black crisp and all he could see was Wally's broken expression, and Paul crying for help and reaching out to him, of the three of them sitting in the diner and drinking beer and jostling each other, and Winona's mouth pressed to his in the only kiss he could ever want in life and how he could *never* betray her by turning her into the Overseer like Wally said he should have.

"You're a cowardly piece of shit, and you *always* have been. If you turned her in, Stevie wouldn't have been killed! This would've all been cleared up and Stevie wouldn't have been shot! This is all your fucking fault! It's your fault that my brother is dead!"

"I was askin' her 'bout Amata! I didn't wanna say nothin' because I figured you'd kick the shit outta me—*but I like her.*"

"Well your fucking murderin' brother *deserved* it, for beatin' the life outta Jonas!"

"A drink t'he best damn gang in this entire vault! The Tunnel Snakes, fuck yeah! Wadda we always say, Paulie?"

"*The Tunnel Snakes creed!* Birth to earth, womb to tomb!"

Butch's anger was coming back now, causing his fists to curl tightly when they couldn't earlier.

"Then *fuck you, I'm out*. Fuck you and *fuck* Paul!"

"Really? I thought it was hard... but I guess I did okay, since I'm gonna be an engineer!"

"Who woulda thought you had it in 'ya, Hannon!"

"The hours are mostly graveland shifts, but whatever."

"It's *graveyard* shifts, Paulie."

"He was a gutless roach, anyways, with his stupid 'birth to earth, womb to tomb' bullshit!"

His shoulders were trembling, his insides feeling like they were unraveling completely as a torrential wave of rage began to maul at his chest. It was too strong to control.

"I'm enrolling in the *Security* team so I can get revenge for Stevie,"

"Stevie's been weird lately, man... *real* weird... my own brother's been acting like Allen. They even have the same smile when they yell at my mom, now. Like he's itching to smack her."
"And if I find out that cunt Parker was behind that bullet—"

"Don't let me turn into my old man, Butch. I'd rather be dead than be like him, you feel me?"

"...You ain't like that rat bastard, man. Nothin' like him at all."

"—you bet your cowardly ass I'm working the ranks—I'll work my way up until I can assemble a team to go out and find her."

"I'm tired of looking at all the same damn faces. Tired of eatin' the same food, starin' at all the same walls, doin' the same old borin' shit like cutting hair and shootin' pool—for the rest of my life. I wanna get outta this dump. You ever think 'bout that kinda stuff, Parker?"

"Then I'm coming after you."

"I think about it a lot... more than I wish I did."

"Butch, tell me straight—"

"Shuddup, don't even say it, Paulie."

"Just tell me..."

"B- Butch, help me—!"

"Am I gunna die?"

With an animal-like howl he couldn't contain, Butch's fist went hurtling into the hanging mirror beside the front door. The glass smashed to pieces under the force of his knuckles, sending spider cracks to every edge of the frame it sat in and staring back at him was the dozens of broken reflections of his face in the splitting glass. His expression was contorted into bestial rage so intense that he barely recognized he was looking into himself.

Then the tears came from his cold eyes; the dam inside him that he kept bricked up for years was sweltering, bursting apart through the cracks and sending an unstoppable river from him.

Butch retreated his bleeding fist from the mirror to drop it back to his side as he staggered back over to the couch. Dropping onto the rock-hard cushions, he buried his teary face deeply into his hands. It just registered to him that he was really alone for the first time in his life. As a child, he could always fall back on Wally and Paul as his brothers in arms. He always felt better being around them and Butch hadn't realized how much he was using them and the Tunnel Snakes as a crutch for his own self-hatred.

But now there was no one.

No Paul.

No Wally.

No more Tunnel Snakes.

The dream was dead. The dream was lived, the dream was good, and then the dream was smothered out.

I am a fuckin' coward...
Winona nearly dropped to her knees when she came back into the safety of Megaton's walls, her forehead stained with sweat and sticking dirt as she leaned against a steel beam for support. Her breath was exchanging itself between heavy panting and shallow inhales that didn't fully reach her lungs. Moira fashioned her in Wastelander garb consisting of thick cargo pants with tons of pockets and a grimy shirt three sizes too big, with a handmade 'bullet-proof' vest over it and a cap and and cowl scarf to cover her white hair. The Tunnel Snakes jacket she got from Butch went over her clothes, as sun protection and some other form of armor—it was good quality leather after all—and she left Megaton, armed with a gun she didn't know how to use.

Only two hours outside in the blistering heat and she was already crawling back to safety.

She was traveling through Springvale with Widget riding her shoulder. It was quiet, save for the eyeball bot that was bobbing through the houses, which seemed to be playing some Pre-War radio show. Once the two hit the streets, they began scavenging through the debris of the collapsed houses for anything promising. Moira was willing to part with clothes and a gun, but caps didn't seem to be included in the deal they made the prior day. She, however, was willing to give Winona some good prices if she could barter anything of value... and Winona didn't have anything in her duffle bag that she was willing to part with. She thought about giving up her bat, but realized she needed a back up weapon if her gun didn't pan out. She'd need food, her supplies from the vault would only last her perhaps a week and a half if she rationed it carefully. Her water would last for much less time than that.

Unfortunately their two hour scavenge session came back with dismal results. With the old town being so close to Megaton, it was obviously picked clean decades ago. All she found was some black rubber tubing, a few dented food cans, empty Nuka bottles, and the remnants of a strange contraption she thought was a lawn mower. It was tucked behind the broken white picket fence of one of the very few intact houses, and she tried taking the machine apart to see if anything left on it was salvageable. The pull string was near disintegration, and although the handle was extremely rusty, perhaps it'd have some use. The blades almost cut her hands trying to remove them, and the
last thing she needed was a rust-tainted injury that might not have been treatable out in the Wasteland.

Her quiet scavenging was soon turned into a gunfight when bullets went torpedoing past her head, and she couldn't help but scream as she ducked around the side of the house she was scavenging for cover. Fumbling to load her gun, most of the bullets were dropped from her shaking hands into the dirt. Why didn't she think to load her weapon before leaving Megaton?

Unable to come out from the barrage of artillery crumpling the edge of the house, she sent Widget out to find a way for them to escape back to Megaton unharmed. However—... that didn't go according to plan, as she soon heard loud curses and more gunfire. With her hands clapped over her ears, she peeked out cautiously to see Widget harassing two filthy people (a man and woman) with brightly colored and wildly styled hair wielding large, automatic weapons. They were frantically shooting at Widget as she buzzed about them, failing at hitting a small target that was constantly moving. When the little robot finally came back to Winona, the inventor barely had time to duck back to safe cover when she saw several grenade pins in Widget's little feet; at that moment, the woman's grenade belt boomed into explosion after explosion that thundered the ground and rocked the foundation of the house she was hiding behind.

It definitely didn't help that Winona gave away her hiding place to any creature within a mile radius by screaming when a woman's shredded leg (minus the body) caught airtime and landed right beside her with a sickening noise. She never knew she could vomit so much after having eaten so little that morning.

When she was done emptying her stomach (and able to steady herself), she finally came out to survey the damage and found the remainder of the woman barely kept together by inches of skin and flesh. The man was still alive, however, with most of the shrapnel in his chest and side, and he sputtered violent curses at her with a mouth full of his blood, the remaining stump of his arm flailing weakly toward her. The gory, horrid sight caused her to vomit again (there was more?) until she was dry heaving, and over the ridge past Springvale she could hear several menacing voices coming up the road. It barely registered in her mind to start running again before more bullets were ripping through the air past her, as the friends of the man and woman came to find them.

Her new attackers had enough energy to chase her all the way back to Megaton. The first few were picked off by the welcoming sniper, up on the walkway above Megaton's front door step. The ones who had enough sense to turn tail and run barely escaped from the eye trained down the sniper scope.

Winona allowed herself a weak, panting chuckle of victory now that she was safe. She somehow escaped death not once, but twice, and the worst was over! Of course she wanted to vomit again, but she was uninjured and safe back in Megaton, which was all that mattered to her at the moment.

But as she straightened up from the steel beam she used for support, she could barely muster a step when her vision unexpectedly went hazy. She was suddenly falling, collapsed in the dirt with her hands slapped over her left side as searing pain blossomed there. When she looked down to one of her hands, she stared in horror at the blurry blob of warm crimson that dripped through her shaking fingers, and a shred parted through the side of Butch's jacket where she was hit.

**Blood. Oh my God, I was shot—? When did that happen? How didn't I notice until now?**

Widget clicked about her head in terror, unsure of what to do and not understanding what was wrong before she finally rested on Winona's jaw. Her vision was fading in and out of black, slowly
creeping in from the edges as her adrenaline was leaving her bloodstream, and the outline of someone coming up the walkway was getting closer. In a slow blink, this person was suddenly standing right in front of her, and they dropped a smoldering cigarette on the ground mere inches from her face. The toe of a pointed shoe came into her view, smothering it out.

The blackness that was curtaining the frays of her vision was stretching and tunneling to small pinpoints, and she felt like a terminal powering down. She barely felt her body being swept up from the ground into the strong arms of someone, being cradled against their chest as she was carried off. Widget was finally silent, hiding under the scarf she got from Moira.

"I am taking you to the town's clinic." A suave voice came as a faraway hum she could barely understand, sounding worriedly in her disoriented state. "You'll be very well taken care of there, I'll make sure of it."

"Please—..." Was all she managed to slur in response, her eyes nearly drawing shut. Winona couldn't make out the contours of the man's face—only the outline of his fedora. She didn't know what she meant to say, it was already lost from her mouth.

"Don't fret, my dear girl. You'll find that you're in very good hands."

Winona barely made out the man's few final words as she blacked out completely in his arms.

Winona awoke with a start, her whole body feeling leaden under the weight of the pain that riddled her body. A thick sweat coated her chilled skin, and a blinding white light fixated above her head caused her to close her eyes again to make it stop hurting. She brought her left hand up to shield her eyes when she opened them again, but immediately felt a shocking surge of pain. Looking downward, she saw Widget settled on her stomach in sleep mode, and her torso was wrapped completely in dingy bandages. It covered from her naval to below her breasts where her sweat-lined bra was flecked with blood.

A small floret of red tinted the bandages wrapped over her left side, where the throbbing was mainly originating from. Her shaking hands came to lay over it and she whimpered upon touching it, still too hazy to understand what happened to her or wonder where she currently was.

This was the worst pain she'd ever felt in her life; Winona was lucky enough to never have any serious injuries growing up, like broken bones from baseball practice or cut chins from tripping in the hallways, after just being told not to run. It sprang tears to her eyes that she didn't bother fighting back, but trying not to actively cry or scream was where she had to confine herself.

"Wi- Widget," She spoke hoarsely, her tongue sticking to the roof of her dry mouth. She needed water. "Widget?... W- Wake up..."

Upon picking up her little bug bot companion, she found Widget to be completely powered down—not in sleep mode. Her body was limp with all her limbs splayed out.

Her battery must've run dry while I was unconscious, Winona realized solemnly. Her senses were slowly coming back to her, enough to recognize that she was in an unfamiliar room, enough to consciously notice someone stripped her out of some of her clothes to treat her.

"Glad t'vee finally up," A voice spoke up from a corner opposite of her bed.

Her watering eyes panned over as she tried to stiffly sit up, still holding her side weakly but the sudden stinging intensity in her side dropped her back on the gurney with a pathetic yelp. She was in a small room, furnished with a tray of bloody tools in a rolling cart beside the gurney she was
sprawled out on—there was a rusted tin can holding bloodstained shrapnel and used up stimpaks. The walls of the room were made of metal sheets nailed together with a support structure of beams and everything smelled like it was weeping rust and expired cleaner. Past the doorway was a black man with grayed hair sitting at a desk near the front door, his eyes framed by subtle wrinkles, as he watched her with a look on his face that suggested boredom.

"You kin start paying me back for patching you up by cleanin' all the blood you got on my floor."
The man got up from the desk and came over to her, standing beside the gurney. "Don't move. Gotta hit you up with another stim'."

"Whа- Whа—…?” Winona barely managed to force out the dry words. She watched the gruff man take out a lower tray on his cart and pick up a stimpak plunger from it.

"You were shot. Well—more like grazed—but with the way you were acting, coming in and out of a black out, are cryin' for your daddy, you might as well've been shot. Not use to blood yet, are you?" The man deadpanned grumpily as he prepared the stimpak for use. "Name's Doc Church—you're in the Megaton clinic, kiddo."

"How di- did I—?"

"Get here?" He came around to her left side with the prepped stimpak. "You were brought in by some class act in a fedora, called hisself Mr. B. Now hold still, 'cause—I ain't gunna lie—this is gunna hurt like hell."

Before Winona could respond, Doc Church plunged the needle of the stimpak through her bandages and right into the wound in her side. She yelped out in pain and surprise, barely having the energy to push him away as he emptied the stimpak's contents and dropped the emptied plunger into the bent tin can that held the shrapnel and other used stimpaks.

"There—now you'll be right as radioactive rain in no time. Minus the radioactive part 'cause I don't wanna see you back in here anytime soon."

"F- Fuck," An elongated curse through a hiss was the only thing she could think to say and fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Dropping back on the gurney pitifully, her hands came around to protect her searing side. She squirmed about with her eyes clenched tightly shut, and Widget rolled off from her stomach onto the floor with a heavy thunk.

"Oh, stop being such a baby." Doc Church quipped with some amount of amusement in his voice upon watching her. Soon he was draping her clothes over her body. "I believe these are yours—dress when you're ready, but don't take too long, okay, vaultie?"

"Vau- Vaultie?" She spat, finally opening her bleary eyes to look back at him. How could people still know she was from the vault when she wasn't wearing the jumpsuit anymore?

"Yeah, you're a star around here. Heard you came in yesterday morning from that vault up the road. That hair of yours's a dead give away, and by 'dead', I mean it'll get yerself killed." He replied over his shoulder as he plopped back down into his seat at the front desk. "Most people out here can tell a vaultie from a real Wastelander, even without the vault dress up. Anyways, the suit that brought you in said he'd be up at Moriarty's whenever you woke up. He paid off the bill, so long as you don't make a mess on the way out, we're square."

Winona forced herself up from the gurney to begin dressing herself; luckily she was still in her pants, riddled with splotches of grime and her boots were still on. She found that as she was pulling her bloody and torn shirt back on with her one good arm, the pain in her side was slowly beginning
to decrease to the point that she could use her left arm as well, due to the stimpaks slowly stitching up her side under the bloodied bandages. It felt like she could breathe again. Once her top was back on, she buckled on her ‘bullet proof’ vest (fuck this thing, she thought bitterly) and slapped her cap on her head, then slid off the gurney a bit woozily before picking up Widget off the floor. She examined the tear in the lower side of Butch's jacket and deemed it easily fixable before pulling it back on, with a small smile in imagining the panic in Butch's face if he ever found out she wrecked his jacket... especially after he warned her not to ruin it.

She tried to keep her spirits up by saying when (saying if didn't help her morale) she got back to the vault, she would impress Butch with stories of how she lived through being shot at. He'd be jealous that her scars were cooler than his; his face would turn white when she described seeing the splattered bodies of those thugs (she was trying not to vomit at the memory of it, even now); she could almost imagine the look on his face, with the arch of his brow and a crooked smile, as if he thought she was making the story up to impress him.

But she wouldn't be. Looking back at it now that she was miraculously safe in Megaton, she couldn't believe it herself!

Soon the smile on her face was gone as she thought about this rescuer of hers—Mr. B. Who the hell is he?—she mused as she staggered stiffly out of the room, trying to loosen her aching joints.

"The stims I hit you with took care of most of the healing process for you." Doc Church explained as she passed by his desk. "It'll take another few days for the wound to fully heal, and then you can cut out the stitches. Keep your bandages clean, replace them twice a day, don't rip up your stitches and you'll be fine."

"Thanks," She replied a little half-heartedly as she shoved open the front door and was nearly knocked back by the evening breeze.

The sky was tainted orange with the waning sunset, and the lanterns strung around the town were powering up with a whirr of generators dotted around the settlement. The restaurant across the way, The Brass Lantern, already had a line of patrons at their outside bar for dinner. She left at around 8 AM that morning, returned at maybe 10 or 11 after the fight with those crazy people... had she been knocked out for almost 10 hours? How unbelievable!

Just as the door shut behind her, Doc Church called after her again.

"Don't get 'shot' again!"

"Believe me, I'll try not to..." She muttered under her breath in annoyance as she tottered down the clinic ramp, still holding her side.

Even with the help of the stimpak, it was a little tender but she was feeling much better than before and the pain was tolerable. Her body would have to get use to using so many stimpaks, however, as the few Doc Church probably gave her was making her head swim. Somewhere in the back of her mind was her dad's voice, droning about the side effects of using too many in such a short period of time; nausea, dizziness, stiffness in the joints coupled with body aches... usually around the application site.

Thinking of her father again, it brought on anxiety of how much time she wasted in today between her scavenging trip gone wrong in Springvale, and how long she was tied up in the clinic. The thought of being shot and the gruesome memories of the woman's mangled corpse still rattled her, but she tried to push them away and remain calm. She could grieve once she found her dad, though her 'little' injury and the waste of the day would definitely be a setback. She didn't think she could
leave Megaton until she was all healed up, and she wasn't wasting a stim from her already low supplies.

Winona didn't care what Doc Church said, this couldn't have been a bullet graze—she was definitely shot! She couldn't imagine just getting grazed would hurt so much!

Stopping to rest against the railing of the town's main ramp, her eyes wandered upward to Moriarty's Saloon. The large sign on the head of the building was illuminated by small flood lights as the evening light disappeared for the growing dark, and Moriarty was leaning against the railing, his eyes scanning over the town like a fat crow in it's roost admiring it's city, and she knew she had to go in there despite dreading to.

She had to know who this Mr. B was.

Winona trudged up the ramps to the Megaton bar with heavy feet, scouting out over the view of the town the higher up she went. If she was going to be spending a lot of time in Megaton until her injury healed, she'd have to find somewhere to stay, and would have to become more acquainted with the various services in town as well as the nicer locals (if there were any). She made her way to the front door of Moriarty's bar, and luckily the barman had already disappeared inside so she wouldn't have to talk to him, and made a noticeable entrance by accidentally letting the door slam shut behind her.

Several people looked up from their glasses, some seeming to half expect a fight or threat, but when they saw the little vault girl they scoffed and turned back to their drinks. It smelled worse than earlier with all the filthy people in it now, smelling like something a large monster would have vomitted up to be set aflame. In a garbage can. Full of more vomit. And raw sewage.

Gob, wiping down the bar counter with a filthy rag, was the only one who greeted her kindly in the form of a little nod before returning to his work. She briefly saw a little glimmer in his eyes of satisfaction, seeing her in dirty Wastelander clothes with a gun on her hip; his suggestion definitely saved her a lot of trouble with Moriarty in the long run. She hoped he—whatever Gob was, if he didn't call himself human—hadn't been caught by Moriarty and punished. Winona couldn't tell just from looking at him if he did, considering the fact that he looked like he tried to kiss a meat grinder.

Her eyes scanned the bar counter and the tables, trying to find anyone that resembled the Mr. B that saved her—Doc Church called him 'the suit'. The saloon was full of patrons now, shoulders hunched over drinks or ill-prepared bar food, drunkenly rambling in groups with stories of the Wastes. Two men were collected around the bar prostitute (she found out later on this pretty woman's name was Nova) like perverted moths to a bright flame, speaking quietly to her about something she was struggling to smile through, as the two men bounced suggestions off of each other of what they'd do to her together when they had the caps.

A few of the patrons wore hats, but none of them were donning the fedora she vaguely remembered, or the suit Doc Church mentioned.

Did I just miss him? Winona wondered as she strayed from the door to keep from being in anyone's way again. Suddenly, a hand clamped down onto her shoulder from behind, catching her in a surprised flinch that pulled slightly on her stitching. Looking to the hand, with masculine fingers, a slim palm, and clean cut fingernails, it was free of any imperfections; wrinkles, sun spots, even dirt, which struck her as unusual. The only thing that didn't seem to be dirty around this place was herself—however that was quickly changing, as she could smell the sweat and body odor coming off of her dirt and blood-streaked clothes. She wondered if there was a place around here
where she could shower, otherwise her deodorant would have to do until she could bathe or get a quick sponge bath.

Following the hand up to an arm, she looked back into the unmoving face of an older gentleman wearing shaded spectacles in tortoiseshell frames. His clothes, a white suit with navy pinstripes, was immaculately clean, save for the dust that cuffed the hem of his trouser pants, and he wore a dark blue tie tucked into his suit jacket. His obvious cleanliness seemed borderline obsessive.

"I apologize for startling you, my dear," He spoke in a lush drawl of a gentleman.

"You must be Mr. B." She replied with her statement sounding more like a question. It made him chuckle and she gently shrugged off his hand to make a point about touching her, since she didn't want to pull her stitching again.

"Of course, but you may call me Mister Burke."

"Mister Burke... alright. Well, I'm Winona Parker."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. It's a rarity to find anyone with a sense of manners or courtesy out in the Capital." He gestured to a corner of the bar where he was lurking in wait for her. A shot glass was settled next to a half-drunk bottle of bourbon, and between them was an ashtray holding a fresh cigar. From where she stood, the inventor hadn't even noticed the little side nook of the bar.

Winona obliged him and followed after to the dim corner, taking a seat beside the one he occupied. Mister Burke didn't sit until after she did out of politeness.

"Would you care for a drink?" Mister Burke offered politely. "My treat."

"No thank you," She shook her head. "I just wanted to ask you about what happened—?"

"Yes, of course." He responded smoothly as he plucked up the smoking cigar resting in the ashtray, bringing it to his mouth to take a quick drag before speaking again, blowing the smoke away from her. "I found you in quite a state—near unconscious and bleeding on Megaton's doorstep. A run in with raiders, I presume?"

"I'm a little more interested in why you paid for the bill." Winona responded with a cutting quickness. She was quickly learning a lesson of kindness out here; it wasn't real unless you had something to trade for a little leverage, and she didn't like being indebted to someone barely two days out the vault—especially when it had to do with possibly saving her life.

"Do you want something from me?"

"Clever girl," He chuckled. "If you wouldn't mind that I finish my cigar first, then we'll be well on our way. We can resume this exchange in more private quarters. I can assure you I have no intention of harming you."

The notion of being alone with him made her feel uneasy. However, as unusual as Mister Burke was, he did save her, and footed a probably very expensive medical bill. She didn't know why she felt this need to be compliant with him; it was dangerous, not knowing what this clean pressed man wanted with her. But some silly, vault dweller part of her that was taught not to be rude couldn't say no despite her instincts.

"Alright," The inventor agreed. "But let me stop at Craterside Supply first. There's someone I have to talk to."
The nod of agreement he gave made her feel a little easier about the situation. At least now she could get Widget hooked up to a battery, and have a chance to tell Moira that if she goes missing, it was by a man named Mister Burke.

The thought of him possibly being the last person she might ever see sent an unwelcomed shudder up her spine.

They arrived at Mister Burke's house shortly after she spoke with Moira and recharged Widget, who was now in her pocket; but it was already night time and the sun was gone from the now black sky. His house was a two-story narrow shack between The Brass Lantern and Megaton's church, almost shore side to the pool of water that Megaton's mascot (read as: the supposedly inactive bomb) resided in. The shack seemed extremely out of place considering the architecture of the rest of Megaton; it was quaint, and not a mash up of different sources of metal. As well, it looked like it was located in such an unusual spot deliberately with how set apart it was from the rest of the buildings.

However, Winona was distracted and barely noticed such things—her eyes were turned up towards the sky, flitting about from one impressive star to another, and it felt like a massive tapestry laid above her head. She only ever saw pictures of a night sky and thought it'd be a sight she would never have the chance to personally see. It was absolutely breathtaking and she wanted to dwell in the experience for as long as she could because she was never going to see the night sky for the first time ever again. The inventor was quickly realizing that she preferred the night to the day; the moon was enchanting while the sun felt like a great big ball of death that filled her shoes with sweat and she couldn't escape from it's heat, even when she was indoors. The night was still warm, of course, but she would rather be under the eye of the somber moon than the sweltering sun.

She wondered what the weather was like in the Wasteland. Was it always this hot? And how did people breathe out here with the thick, fetid air? Everything constantly smelled not quite mildewy or dusty and old, but rather like it was contaminated with something; she found herself wheezing just from walking around town.

"The things we take for granted," Mister Burke spoke to grab her attention. "You've never witnessed the beauty of the stars before."

"Mhm," She muttered quietly. "I didn't see it last night… went to bed early. I never realized—how far away they really look. They seem closer in the pictures."

"And they will still be here when we've finished inside. All night, in fact." He opened the door and gestured for her to enter first. "Make yourself comfortable, my dear."

Nervously, she obeyed and walked in first, and was stunned to find how surprisingly spacious his home was on the inside. A decorative rug was laid out on the floor, framed by two red cushion chairs with a coffee table between them. To her right was a curtain that obscured the kitchen doorway, and past the living room seating was a flight of stairs that led to the second floor. The inside of his home was definitely reminiscent of the man Mister Burke represented himself as; everything looked new and clean aside from the walls and floor, like he couldn't desire anything less than the best. It only heightened her curiosity… what could he possibly want from her when he looked like he had everything anyone would ever want in the Wasteland?

He must be rich, she thought.

"How can you live so close to the bomb?" Winona asked aloud as he shut the door behind them. "I know people say it's a dud, but I wouldn't go near it."
"I don't find myself bothered in the slightest by it—'dud' or otherwise." He replied smoothly as she took a seat in one of the cushioned chairs. "And it's the heart of town. Everything is easily within distance to me if I require anything."

Mister Burke smiled in a way that was discomfiting to her, and it was the first time he smiled all evening. He removed his fedora and hooked it on the wall beside the front door, revealing thinning hair amidst a bald spot, then his sunglasses were tucked into the breast pocket of his suit coat. The fluidity of his motions suggested that it was a common ritual of his upon entering his home. When he finally turned back to the inventor, taking the seat beside her, she was stunned in seeing how blue his eyes were—as well as stunned in seeing how old he actually was under his accessories.

The man before her, the one who made her anxious all evening just from being in his presence, was suddenly no longer very threatening to her... but her instincts weren't fooled. There was still a venom about him lurking underneath. Mister Burke made you feel like he could suddenly grow fangs and lunge at you, seizing upon your throat—but he wouldn't as it was highly improper and it would bloody his nice clothes. Winona realized that was the reason why he was so intimidating; any man could challenge you and try to kill you, but a man that already knew he could—and effortlessly, at that, as if it were a chore or inconvenience—was much more dangerous. The only reason why he didn't bother was because he didn't find you very threatening... or you were useful.

This man had power and he knew how to properly wield it. Oh God, why did she agree to go to his house with him? Why did dad never tell me not to talk to strangers?

"Now that we're comfortable, shall we get down to business?"

"Please," Winona tried to sound polite, but it was a little strained. "I have a lot of questions."

"Of course, of course—all in due time, my dear." Mister Burke sat with his back straight and one knee crossed over the other, fingers intertwined on his thigh. "You have rightly guessed by now that I've found interest in you. You are—... different, from these people. Would you care to take a guess at what the difference is?"

"I still have all of my teeth?" She responded dryly and was promptly struck by his unamused gaze. "...Well, I'm assuming it's because I'm not from around here. Do you have an interest in Vault 101 —? Because you don't seem to be the only one."

"My interest is not in the vault. Why you intrigue me has to do with the fact that you're an outsider with no connection or loyalty to this town. This appeals to a goal I am attempting to accomplish—and should it be my luck to find you. Winona, you are precisely the person I've been waiting for in this wretched eyesore of a settlement."

The sudden furious tone of voice that embodied his words made her nerves skyrocket, but he continued on before she could clear her throat and say she was leaving.

"You're obviously extremely intelligent, but I still advise that you ponder this carefully—I am about to offer you a business deal, and I believe that starting off on the right footing can go a long ways, don't you agree?"

"Uh—yes?" She replied uncomfortably. "...Yeah, sure."

"How would you like to have all the money you could ever ask for? A safe haven of class and grace away from the horrors of the Wasteland? Or an opportunity where you can climb your way up the proverbial ladder and make something truly great of yourself? Make no mistake that I can offer you all of the above, and more."
What exactly was he driving at? Out in a place like the Wasteland, to promise things like money and safety was obviously a big deal. The cloak-and-dagger employment opportunity threw her off a little, but that didn't matter. It was made clear to her since her conversation with Moriarty that she wouldn't be able to do anything in way of getting to her father without money… and with how tender her side still was, she definitely needed safety. The things that everyone in the Wasteland would literally kill for had fallen into her lap, and she was one of those awfully inexperienced people that probably needed it most.

_At what cost, though?_ She pondered. _A dangerous guy like him offering me all of this can't mean anything good in exchange._

"That's an awful lot." Winona stared at him with suspicion in her eyes.

"And I assure you, it will be _everything_ you could have possibly asked for, and _more_ if you please me. It's certainly not the home you had in the vault, but it's the best the Capital Wasteland can offer given the circumstances. The place I speak of has no danger within _miles_ of it—no raiders, slavers, mutants, or ravenous creatures… and for good measure, not only is it surrounded by an impenetrable wall, but we have a remarkable security team armed and outfitted with the _very_ best that money can procure. The only hardship you'll face here is the challenge of rising to the top, and my employer will certainly have a wonderful position waiting for you, should you accomplish my proposal."

She shook her head. "This is building up to sound like I'm under qualified, and I don't think I'm all that interested. I have more important things to do."

"What could be more important than money?"

"I'd rather not talk about that."

"I see... though, I would very much like to show you something—one moment is all I ask." Seeing the look on her face, he tacked on a self-entertained; "Oh, _humor_ me."

Mister Burke rose from his seat and walked about her to the stairs, climbing them up to the top floor. Winona listened to his footfalls above her, back and forth across the metal floor, thinking about using the opportunity to book it out the door and hobble her ass back up to Moira's shop where it was safe, but he just as quickly descended back down the stairwell with a bulky mechanism in his arms. Circling back around her, he set the mechanism on the coffee table between them before reclaiming his plush chair.

"What's this?" Winona probed curiously with her eyes never leaving the object. She reached out her hands to pick it up, but stopped short to look to him as if asking for permission. Mister Burke nodded in approval and the mechanism was immediately in her lap to study.

"What do you make of it?" He asked amidst her observing. "I have word around town that you're somewhat of an inventor. Is that correct?"

"Yeah—I like building things." She replied, taking no notice of how he knew that she was an _inventor_, with how captivated she was by the mysterious device. "This looks like it's meant to attach to something else, but it doesn't have the _feel_ of a component… it's its own device. Nothing to suggest a trigger _on_ the piece, so it's most likely controlled by a remote control of some kind. The plug here seems extremely specific—heavy grade… definitely not a homemade invention unless you had access to some good form presses... hmm..." Winona was rubbing her chin in thought now as she processed it all. "If you let me crack it open, I can get a better idea of what it's meant to do. Are you saying you want me to figure out what this is?"
"Oh, my dear girl, no." Mister Burke chuckled as he reclaimed the mechanism back from her, setting it on the coffee table between them again. "You see, I already know what this does… it can level several square miles of land in a massive, cleansing explosion. By the name—to you, at least—it might seem a little obvious. It's known as a fusion pulse charge, and is designed to motivate the detonation of a sleeping bomb. Namely, the one that resides right outside my door."

Winona sat near the entrance of Megaton, just out of the way of the gate and out of sight to anyone who came in or out, with her hands splayed over the fusion pulse charge in her lap. Dried tears stained her face as she felt her pocket for her robot companion that wasn't there, and even more tears were beginning to overrun her eyelids. The only words that replayed continuously in her mind were your fault your fault your fault until it was nothing but a numb chant to her.

"I'll just be holding onto this until you come to a final decision on how you wish for this business relationship to continue. You're very lucky I find some value in you, Miss Parker—otherwise you would have put me in very, very, bad sorts." Mister Burke spoke toothily from her memories, with a deactivated Widget clasped in his palm.

Winona slapped the tears off her face, trying not to give him the satisfaction of her crying even though he wasn't around to witness it. She was doomed from the moment he found her at Megaton's entrance but she had a hard time of convincing herself of that; the sealing of her fate was much more recent, particularly back in Moriarty's Saloon less than an hour ago when she agreed to go with him. She knew she should have said no but she went with him regardless, and she knew that she deserved this as punishment.

How many more stupid mistakes could she make in the course of a day? She was afraid to ask herself that personally, in case the universe wanted to put her through more turmoil for fun.

In her stupidity, Winona made the mistake of firstly trying to make an escape that was easily foiled by Mister Burke with a hand against the door. Secondly, in an effort to distract him, she powered on Widget in her pants pocket and thrust the active robot into his face. It felt like a long, slowed down scene of Widget hitting him square in the nose and then the robot was in his hands with a threatening amount of pressure. The inventor showed her weakness for Widget and pleaded he not break her. That was all the leverage he needed as he (a little too calmly) handed off to her the fusion pulse charge like it was meant to be a parting gift.

"I've waited weeks in this disintegrating, debaucherous excuse for a sewage dump of a town for the perfect person for the job... and if you think I'm a man that can be told no—well, you must have mistaken me for someone else. 24 hours, my dear. I will be so patiently waiting, and I do hope you won't think about disappointing me, or try and run away or tell anyone about this meeting. If you do? Well, I'll know."

Then she was shoved out of his house with the fusion pulse charge in her arms, and the last glint of Widget as Mister Burke turned her off and slammed the door shut.

Winona had to think of a way out of this quickly or else she wouldn't be around long enough to even begin her trek to Rivet City. She closed her eyes, clamped her hands tightly over ears to filter out most of the sounds of the city, and began concentrating.

The first idea that came to mind was simply telling Sheriff Simms. Of course he wouldn't stand for Mister Burke's plans to level Megaton, and she didn't want to underestimate his experience with a weapon, but he seemed to be getting along in his age. As well, if Mister Burke's intimidating countenance spoke to even an ounce of his devious character, she had no faith in surviving any
outcome if he really knew that she told anyone.

Earlier he mentioned his employer, which implied that his mission to blow up Megaton wasn't personal (though he still seemed to hate the town, and everyone in it all the same). This suggested that Burke's employer was just as dangerous, cunning, and well-stocked as his employee was; which also didn't work out for her concerning survival in any situation where Mister Burke would live or would be removed as the problem. Chancing being put up against someone worse than him wasn't appealing.

So her only option was finding a way to outfox Mr. Fox himself.

But... how to do that—? Winona thought glumly as her tears finally stopped and she opened her eyes.

Looking onward to the edge of inner Megaton she could see, she opened her eyes just in time to spot Mr. Simms returning home for the night from his patrol. Once his front door was open, he was greeted by a little boy with a beaming smile that mirrored his own. The sheriff embraced the boy in a tight hug before removing his telltale cowboy hat from his head, plopping it onto his son's head and then they disappeared inside together. By the time the door shut Winona was resolved on the matter of not telling Simms anything about Mister Burke; she couldn't risk his death and orphaning his son by overestimating the sheriff, or underestimating Burke.

She didn't know if that made it easier or much more difficult to plan. All she knew was that her chance of survival was better ensured in just doing what Mister Burke wanted.

So she waited for the members of the church to finish their sermons and turn into their church for the night. She waited for the last patron of the Brass Lantern to leave the bar, and for the flickering neon signs to turn off. She waited for the homeless Waster that sat beside his two-headed bovine outside Doc Church's clinic to nestle into his cow and sleep, comforted by an inhaler of some kind with a red tube.

She waited for the whole of Megaton to drift to sleep before walking down to the bomb.

Looking to her Pip-Boy screen, it was just past 1 AM and many hours later since she was last on Mister Burke's doorstep, as she was now, with the fusion pulse charge no longer in her possession. As she knocked on Mister Burke's door, she wondered how many more times she could throw up in a day as her midsection aggressively toiled, demanding to be fed while also reviling the thought of food.

In the framed window of his front door, there was a bleary little light that flicked on and she saw his silhouette nearing the door. He peered back at her through the window with a beady eye before opening the door to greet her—still in his suit and tie.

Did this man not need sleep?

"My, my… just when I began to think that leaving you to your own devices was a misstep on my part. I see you no longer have the charge."

"I did it," Winona breathed, shivering through another surge of tears that threatened to overwhelm her and the overwhelming need to vomit yet again even though there was nothing in her stomach. "I rigged the bomb."

"Ah, excellent!" He replied without a pause, seeming genuinely pleased as he gestured back into his house for her to come in. She didn't move. "Allow me a moment of time. Please, come in."
"I—what?" Winona hiccuped, her shoulders tensing. "I did what you asked, there's nothing more I can do for you!"

"On the contrary," A suspicious eye followed her. "We must leave Megaton… get as far away from the blast as we possibly can. I'm certain that you understand the effects of a nuclear bomb?"

Mister Burke was chuckling now as she remained stiff on his front porch. He replaced his fedora upon his head but kept his sunglasses tucked into his breast pocket, along with a satin handkerchief that was the same shade of pure blue as his tie.

"Gather your things from that shop up the ramp. I'm already packed, you see," He explained as he picked up a packed bag settled at the foot of the stairs. It seemed rather light compared to her own bulky duffel with Moira. "And then we'll be well on our way."

"We—?" She stammered fearfully. "Wh- Where are we going?"

Shutting off the lights in his home, he shouldered his bag and pulled the door closed, locking it.

"Where else but the most elite?" Mister Burke was watching her now with a well trained eye, as if he expected her to take off running at any moment, and a hand on a concealed weapon in a shoulder holster in his suit jacket threatened her not to try. "To Tenpenny Tower."
"Ma? Ma—you in here?" Butch called for her as he poked his head into the dimly lit clinic.

It was one of the last few places he needed to check for his mom, who was gone from the apartment when he returned from a food run. Of course he could only think of the absolute worst happening to her; falling drunkenly down a flight of stairs, being eaten by roaches, wandering into the lower levels and getting fried by a berserk reactor… so the clinic was one of the last few places he tried holding off on to look for her. Not only did being near it make him think of Paul, as he hadn't gone there since he died, but he dreaded walking in and possibly seeing her injured.

However, that was better than having to page the funeral parlor and ask if her body was waiting to be incinerated.

So his relief was indescribable when he saw his unharmed mom lying on a hospital bed on the floor of the far corner, snoring her way through being absolutely plastered. What he didn't expect was Old Lady Palmer sitting in a chair beside her with a watchful eye. When Butch popped in, she looked to him with a small smile.

"Ah, Butch. I was wondering when you'd find us." She spoke as she got up from her seat slowly to greet him. "Your mother's fine."

He said nothing to the elderly woman as he went to his mom's bedside and rested a hand on her shoulder, trying to wake her up. He could feel the heat of embarrassment in his cheeks, as through his life he struggled trying to keep his mother's addiction quiet. It was out in the open now, had been for years since that Vault Day years ago, but he kept trying to hide it.

It still shamed him... even now when there were more pressing things to worry about than people talking shit about his mother.

"Hey, 'ma—c'mon, time t'get up. It's safer back at the apartment."

"I found her wandering about outside the cafeteria," Old Lady Palmer went on to explain. "I thought it'd be best to bring her here until you found us... it's the safest place for the time being."

Looking to her for the first time since he came into the clinic, Butch thought she looked like death. He always knew she was old—fuck, they didn't call her Old Lady Palmer because she was still a young fox—but the way she looked now was different. There was a tangible exhaustion coming off of her body as she stiffly sat back down into her seat beside his mom. Her cheeks were sallow and leathery with wrinkles, extenuating her sharp cheekbones, and the hollows of her eyes were like sunken holes with her irises nothing but little twinkles in the shadows of the smile that didn't reach her eyes.

He finally realized why she looked this way.

"...Heard 'bout Jonas," Butch spoke quietly as he sat on the bed beside his still sleeping mother. "You, uh—… you okay, Old Lady Palmer?"

"No," She replied honestly through a now sad smile as she brushed back some of her baby hairs into the full wave of her gray hair. "I'm heartbroken... as anyone would be to lose someone they care about, but I'll work through it on my own—my grief isn't for the public to see. What's left of the public, anyway."
He didn't know how she could even bother to smile through it all. One of his den brothers was dead while the other was only dead to him—and for the last couple of days he found it hard to pull himself together. Focusing on keeping his mother safe was the only thing that effectively distracted him and made him feel like he was doing something right.

"...Sorry." Was all he could manage to say, because he knew whatever else he could try to respond with would come out wrong.

"Thank you, but that's alright, Butch." Her eyes went down to his sleeping mother. "One of my greatest discoveries in this life was the realization that it's okay to not be okay... oh, but I'm rambling, now. How are you doing? Are you doing alright?"

"Been better." He replied just as honestly as she had. "...Been loads better..."

The front door of the infirmary slid up as the two conversed, revealing Susie Mack struggling to hold up a limp figure at her side. Her rounded eyes were rimmed with near tears as she dragged the figure in with trembling arms and Old Lady Palmer bolted up to her feet in alarm. Butch remained at his mom's side, too startled by the blood covering the body Susie dragged in to think of getting up.

"Goodness! What's happened—?"

"Ple- Please, someone needs to help her!" Susie exclaimed through a choking cry.

The person she dragged in with her had a face beaten so severely that one of their eyes was completely swollen shut, framed by rings of bruising that made it look like they were wearing a purple eye mask. Their bottom lip was completely busted, nose streaming twin red rivers to pool on the collar of their ragged jumpsuit, and stringy black tresses were tacky with globs of drying blood in random places. With one arm slung over Susie's shoulders, the other hung flaccidly at the person's side with a rip that exposed a break in bone that pushed through bleeding skin.

The moment their one unswollen eye opened, revealing a rich brown iris, he knew exactly who it was.

"Fuck, that ain't—!" He stammered as he got up from his mom's bedside. "Shit, tell me that ain't Amata!"

"Oh, bring her here—" Old Lady Palmer exclaimed in a panic as she helped to carry Amata to a rolling gurney at the opposite side of the room. Butch closely followed them rather than helping.

"I found her in the hallway like this!" Susie cried as they unceremoniously hoisted Amata onto the gurney bed, making her whimper in a pained moan through her clearly unconscious state.

"What the hell happened t'her?" Butch asked, craning his neck over the shoulders of the women bustling about her. "Looks like she fuckin' lost a fight with an elevator shaft!"

"She said Wally did this!" Susie shrieked as she turned on her heel, punching him feebly in the chest. "We're weak alre- ready, how could you ask him to do something like this to her—!

"Me?!!" He yelled back, immediately slapping her curled fists off of him. "I haven't talked to that traitorous prick in two days! The fuck makes you think I had somethin' to do with this?! I wouldn't ask anyone t'do something this fucked up!"

"Amata told me Wally did this to her!" She was finally crying, having lost the battle in keeping her tears back. "Why would he do this? He'd never lay a hand on anyone!"
"I fuckin' beg to differ," he spat back under his breath, remembering their fist fight the other day. The mark he left on Butch was nothing but a yellowed spot now.

If Wally really did do something as violent as this to Amata, Butch couldn't speak to the reason why; he didn't think Wally would still hold onto his fucking grudge against her after everything that happened in recent days, unless the asshole thought this would be a good time to exact his revenge if he was on a spite bender because of Winona. Of course Butch hated Amata and found her to be the most annoying person he ever knew, with her self-righteous demeanor and bossy attitude, but he'd never do that to her. Even under the guise of his worst pranking daydreams, he'd never think about doing anything so unbelievably fucked up and vicious to even his worst and most hated enemy, let alone a woman that couldn't defend herself.

This wasn't bullying. It was a personal hit.

"Why would Wally do this?" Susie demanded to know, coming near him again with anger in her eyes as Old Lady Palmer busily tended to Amata. "You're his best friend, why would he do this to Amata?"

"I told you, I haven't talked t'the asshole in a few days, we're not exactly buddies anymore! I didn't think settlin' old scores would be on the top of his To-Do List with the vault goin' to Shit City!"

"Why aren't you two talking? You girlfriends get into a fight?" She spat in her anger.

"We're not talkin' because he's gone off the deep end! Said he's gunna join he security team 'cause Stevie fuckin' died!"

The mention of Stevie's death turned her eyes wide, gleaming with another wave of oncoming tears. Her hand was clapped over her mouth to hold back a shuddering gasp she couldn't contain, and with the expression of disbelieving grief in her eyes, Butch immediately knew that this was new to her.

She didn't know Stevie was gone.

"Ho- How—? I—" Susie choked on her words, unable to draw them out but she didn't know what to say, regardless. "I- I haven't seen him in a few da- days, but I didn't think—!"

"How could you not know?" Butch snapped, sounding a little harsher than he meant to be. "Wally said your family was called down t'the Overseer's office about it!"

"I was sleeping over at Chri- Christine's when all this craziness happened—I haven't seen my fa- family in three days because of the lockdown, I wasn't paged—and when I fi- finally came out I found Amata!" She loudly sobbed with her face in her hands. "Oh m- my God, Stevie—!"

"Shit, fuck—" Obviously he had a way with words in situations where he didn't know what to say, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut. "Susie, look—"

"She has a broken arm and I'll have to reset it before using a stimpak," Old Lady Palmer interrupted them as she examined Amata on the gurney. "I'll need you both to help me! Someone bring me a splint and someone bring the x-ray machine over here—I'll also need stimpaks, whatever you can find!"

Butch tried to do what he was told, first by trying to find stimpaks. Fuck if he knew how to make a splint, or where the x-ray machine was or what it looked like, so that was by far the easiest task to take on. He kicked around overturned medical carts about the disheveled room, picking up trays and boxes, and looking under toppled furniture before raiding any easily accessible medical kits.
The infirmary had been ransacked during the chaos of the last few days, so he doubted that he'd find anything within easy reach. His next option was to go into the clinic office and check the supply locker that was behind the desk.

But the office was a bigger mess than the main clinic floor was.

The desk and filing cabinets were overturned, computer terminal lying on its side with a smashed screen, and medical files were fanned out across the floor haphazardly. Someone also, apparently, took a blade to the cushions on the examination table because they were slashed to fucking hell. He barely noticed the safe nestled into the wall, which he vaguely recalled was once obscured by a picture or something framed, and otherwise made a mental reminder to check it out later, as he dove towards the supply cabinet. The metal around the lock was scratched and there were dents in the locker doors; showing signs that someone, unsuccessfully, tried to get into it at some point.

He didn't know how long it'd take him to open it with Toothpick, his switchblade—so he figured that brute force would be a *hell* of a lot faster. He kicked the supply locker doors, trying to put as much force as he could under the flat of his boot until he opted out for a Plan B. Winding himself this quickly wasn't going to do him any favors.

*Crowbar, crowbar! Find somethin' to pry the fuckin' thing open!*

Hurriedly yanking open drawers on the over turned desk, most of them were filled with more documents, some holotapes that spilled out at his feet, and what looked like a handful of pictures. He ignored those as he darted about the room to try and find some sort of slim tool—

And found a toolbox turned over in the room corner.

Butch opened it to find a long-necked screwdriver in the bottom and thought it was just as good as a crowbar in such short notice. Turning back to the locker, he jammed the screwdriver into the upper corner of the left locker door where the two doors met, using the leverage to bend the corner outward. The metal was surprisingly flimsy and once he got a good grip on it, he practically rolled it down to the lock and had his pick of the medical supplies that were within his immediate reach. He snatched a handful of stimpaks and some Med-x (*this is the good shit, right, Paulie?*) from one of the shelves and bolted back to the main floor.

Old Lady Palmer, with the help of a sniveling Susie, was trying to focus what was most likely the x-ray machine on Amata's broken arm. She seemed to be coming out of her unconscious state now, slurring through hoarse mutters to the two other women. Butch rushed over with the stimpaks in his arms.

"She alright? What's it look like?"

"I'm going to try and do what I can." Palmer replied as she focused the x-ray head over Amata's arm. A screen on the machine played back what it was picking up on; looking right through Amata's limb to the break.

It was freaky to look at, and surely looked like pure, earthly hell—however, seeing that was preferable to looking at the bone actually sticking out of Amata's arm... but Butch couldn't help looking at her. Both of her eyes were watery, tears beading through her swollen eyelids of her other eye, and then down her cheek. She stared about the room in a partially conscious gaze as she slowly came to, probably only vaguely aware of where she was or what was happening.

"Amata, if you can hear me, you need to know that you have a broken arm. Your radius—that's one of the two bones in your forearm—is broken." Old Lady Palmer came into Amata's vision so she
could see the older woman, and she gently pet Amata's dark hair in an effort to calm her but all she
did was whimper in pain. "I'll need to push the bone back under your skin and then reset it before I
can use a stimpak. I promise you're going to be fine, I won't let anything happen to you."

Amata seemed more conscious now as she parted her mouth, her split bottom lip trembling.
"Ok-kay..." She responded bravely through the fear that wavered her voice, and Butch suddenly
found respect for her. He didn't think he could stand getting his arm broken let alone having it reset
like how Old Lady Palmer described, and being awake during it, no less.

"Someone get me scissors, I need to cut off her jumpsuit sleeve." Old Lady Palmer was back to
business with the gentle voice she used to calm Amata gone.

"Here, I got it." Butch helpfully offered as he took Toothpick out of his back jumpsuit pocket with
his free hand and flicked it open, giving it to her. "You're not gunna find shit in this mess."

Carefully, she used the tip of the knife to slice through the arm of Amata's jumpsuit, butterflying it
open while trying to be careful of the break. Fully exposing it caused Butch's throat to hitch as he
gagged, threatening to throw up the food he managed to salvage from the lunch room this morning.

"Fuck, Susie—" He came around to her, practically thrusting the collected stimpaks into her hands
and rushed to the door. "I'm gonna puke, I can't watch this."

Butch couldn't get out into the hall fast enough, taking in deep inhales of air through his nose and
then back out through his mouth in hopes that it'd make his nausea quickly pass. Pacing up and
down the hall to keep himself occupied, distracting himself with pulling the zipper of his jumpsuit
up and down, he found that sticking around was an absolutely awful choice even though he wasn't
inside anymore. Amata's screams were soon emitting from inside the infirmary in such a tune of
agony, it sounded like she was being brutally tortured. He quickly dashed towards the stairs to go
down to the lower level and hoped that the distance would help to drown out her shrieks.

Even when he got far enough away that his ears couldn't hear it, Amata's screams wouldn't leave
his mind.

"She's resting now... the stimpaks really helped."

Butch returned to the clinic about half an hour later once the commotion seemed to have dissipated.
Amata was already in the head clinic office when he arrived with her broken arm secured in a
splint, and she was moved to the slashed examination table with a sheet over her. Susie was sitting
with her with a comb, trying to gently brush through the tangles of her hair as Old Lady Palmer
explained the situation.

"All we can do now is pray that I reset the bone correctly—the x-ray showed promise. If not, I'm
afraid we might have to rebreak her arm and reset it again." She went on.

"Wait, you don't even know if you did it right the first time?" He gawked.

"I've only heard about how to reset bones in passing. I've never exactly put it to the test myself."
She admitted with a solemn look in her eyes as she watched the two girls.

"How'd 'ya even know to—"

"Through my daughter." Looking to Butch, the expression on his face made her realize that her
response didn't exactly answer his question. "She broke her arm, once, and had to reset it herself."
"Herself? Shit, that's sick." He gagged with a hand rubbing his opposite, tingling arm as he swallowed audibly.

"Hopefully her recounting helped Amata here." Old Lady Palmer shook her head as she turned away and sat down at the bedside of his mother—who was still asleep through the whole ordeal. "I'll let her rest and check on her in a little bit."

Susie came from the back office visibly trembling. He hadn't seen anything shake that much since he was 13, and Andy's hardware was on the fritz and he was vibrating up and down the hallways until old Stanley managed to catch up to him. Her face was pale, and Butch noticed some blood staining her finger tips amidst loose strands of Amata's thick, black hair.

"Susie? Oh, dearie, Susie, what's wrong?" Palmer lamented as she got up from her chair again with stiff knees, coming to the younger girl.

"A- Amata," She whimpered as she clapped her quivering hands on her jumpsuit to get the blood and hair off her fingers. "Her hair's coming out."

"What." Butch spat in stunned disbelief, his eyes wide and jaw unhinged.

"The blood in her hair is from her scalp." Susie went on after a hard swallow that could be visibly seen going down her throat. "I- It was the only thing keeping some of her hair on her head. I think—... God, I think she was dragged around by her hair."

Butch felt incredibly sick again. He'd been friends with Wally since they were toddlers and he never thought the guy had the same sick fuck streak in him like Stevie, or his adopted father, Allen; even after their altercation just the other day, if someone told him Wally did something like what he did to Amata, Butch wouldn't have believed it... but seeing the state the Overseer's daughter was in, and compiling the puzzle pieces in the back of his mind—Stevie was dead, Winona most likely killed him, but she wasn't here anymore and her best friend Amata was—it started becoming a little clearer to him. Amata was an acceptable choice as second in line with his main target unavailable to be his punching bag, especially with their past history and Wally's grudge against the Overseer's daughter.

She might have even known something about Stevie's death if Winona really was involved... and maybe Wally thought she'd give something up if he hurt her enough.

*But fuck, dragging her around by her God damn hair?*

That was a whole other level of Mack Madhouse insanity that not even Allen Mack himself could have hit with a convincing try; and it was currently unbelievably easy to think that Wally really brutalized Amata this way.

"The poor dear... I can't even imagine what she went through." Old Lady Palmer mumbled behind a hand clapped over her mouth in horror, her eyes filled with sorrow. "Do we really know for sure that your brother did this? Now, he wasn't the sweetest boy, but—"

"I have no doubt in my mind that Wally did it." Susie replied numbly as she hugged herself with arms tightly folded over her stomach. Her face was still white. "Not a single doubt anymore... I just —... I just don't know why... I didn't know he hated Amata so much... he never talked about her to me. I thought he hated Winona Parker more."

"He hates 'em both, but he hated Amata more than Parker for a while," Butch admitted against his better judgement. They both immediately turned to him. "He asked Amata out, once, and she
turned 'im down. He's been pissed 'bout it for years now—and if it ain't 'cause of settlin' old scores, it's 'cause Parker ain't around no more. Wally still had a bone t'pick with her."

"Jesus..." Susie muttered under her breath as Old Lady Palmer turned away, going about the room as if looking for something.

He knew telling her that Winona possibly murdered Stevie was definitely something he couldn't share right now. It'd open the door as to why, and then he'd have to drop right in front of Old Lady Palmer that it was because Stevie murdered her grandson in cold blood. It was like this never-ending circle of violence, death, and bloodshed and everyone was lassoed up into it. With the vault going to shit it was like all the bad was coming out of the worst people around the block, and anyone who didn't do a thing wrong to anybody was the first to go.

Security seemed to be M.I.A. for the last couple of days, but he really fucking hoped that Wally was in holding right now. He couldn't imagine Wally getting into security now after his violent attack on Amata... he couldn't imagine the Overseer not catching the assault on one of his hundreds of cameras.

*But he's smart enough t'know that,* Butch realized while thinking about the incident with Winona being framed for the database break-in. *He'd only do it if he knew he could get away with it.*

So how could he get away with it?

Butch's gut told him something was screwy. Really, really screwy about this whole thing... like Wally's bloodbath wasn't going to end anytime soon as long as he still had an ongoing list.

Would Butch be next?

"Susie, how about we go to the showers?" Old Lady Palmer returned with an empty bucket from the clinic office, finally finding what she had been looking for. "We'll get fresh clothes for Amata on the way. I'm sure she'd appreciate being cleaned up before she comes to."

Susie, completely devoid of emotion now, nodded and followed Palmer to the door. The older woman stopped to look back to Butch as she handed Susie the bucket to carry.

"Watch over her until we get back? Hopefully she'll remain asleep until we're finished with her."

Butch nodded silently, and the women were well on their way to the residential barracks where the nearest showers were. He looked back to the office where Amata resided, unsure of whether or not he should join her just so she had someone at her side. The whole situation was so messed up he didn't even know what to do with himself until further notice.

But he went into the office anyways, just to distract himself. It looked like it was going to be her temporary room until she was back on her feet, so he might as well not be a complete dick and clean it up so it was a little nicer for her. He unzipped his jumpsuit down to his waist, shrugging the arms off to tie around his midsection before he got to work; first picking up the desk to get it onto its legs, he carried the terminal out of the office to be scrapped for later, depositing it just outside the office doorway before ducking back inside. He then focused on tidying up the floor, gathering all the medical files up into his arms just to throw them out.

Of course, he skimmed through a few with headers that caught his interest... there were a bunch of papers on Stanley—that wasn't surprising, the infirmary was like the guy's second home. There was one on Monica, Christine Kendall's baby sister, who had a reoccurring cough. A couple on Beatrice but most of the information was blacked out with a marker (which struck him
as extremely curious). When he crouched down to gather up more papers, he was greeted by the few pictures and holotapes that came pouring out of the desk earlier from when he was looking for stimpaks. The holotapes didn't interest him so much as they were titled with weird number combinations, making him assume that they were recorded patient files...

So it was the pictures that he turned his attention on.

The first one he picked up was a photo of an older black woman asleep on top of a desk with a lantern barely illuminating the contours of her slumbering face. Paperwork and folders were scattered under her head, and a wooden pencil was struck upright through her limp fingers—suggesting she was in the middle of writing when she fell asleep. Bizarre equipment could be seen in the dark backdrop and they looked like something out of a tacky sci-fi movie.

*Who the hell's this broad?* Butch wondered as he flipped the picture over to see if there was any scribbles about the memory on it. There was nothing, and so he flipped it back to the front. There was something about the sleeping woman that was familiar to him. *Why was Dr. Parker keepin' pictures in his desk—?*

A thought suddenly struck him; *was this Winona's mom?*

The picture was a little too grainy to tell, and was printed out on low grade photo paper from the looks of it… so his best guess was that this woman being Winona's mother was a possibility.

It was weird for him to poke through such a private part of Winona's life. Of course, he knew little about her family life aside from what she willingly revealed—a dead mom and an obviously loving but deeply troubled father was the driving force for at least a third of his bullying attacks against her. Butch admitted to himself a long time ago that he was more than a little jealous that she had a father like Dr. Parker. He was a patronizing dick when he was on the clock, but when he saw him walking the halls with Winona, you wouldn't have guessed it.

*Wonder if she ever wanted her 'ma.* He wondered in a melancholy question. *Probably did,* and it made him glad he never made a jab about her dead mother.

From the picture he could kind of see where she got her nose from... and her dimples.

Thinking about her dimpled smile made *him* smile a little with a weak chuckle.

Butch picked up the next photo from the floor and was stunned by what he saw, his smile immediately disappearing; it was a collective group of people he didn't recognize, men and women, in lab coats standing all together like a mismatched family. None of them were smiling in the picture, seeming very professional like, in front of what looked like a large tank of murky water. Like the last picture, he couldn't make out very many details of the background, but it *certainly* didn't resemble anything in Vault 101. It made him wonder why Dr. Parker had a picture of these people.

*They all look like doctors, though... picture looks hella old.*

Before he discarded the picture, his attention was immediately recaptured upon spotting a familiar face. Taking a second glance over the team of people, the same black woman from the prior photo was standing at the right end of the line up with her hands in her lab coat pockets. However, she wasn't looking back at the camera—she was the only one with a delighted smile as she gazed up at the gentle-faced man standing beside her.

What stunned him was that he recognized the man to be a *much* younger Dr. Parker.
What the fuck is this—? Butch thought in astonishment as he turned the photo over and found messy handwriting scrawled on the back. Luckily, he could make out what it said;

Project Purity Team
Jefferson Memorial, 2256

Catherine, James, Madison, Daniel
Anna, Janice, Alex
(and cameraman Garza)
A/N: What's this? A surprise chapter? Yes indeed, because I forgot to mention in the A/N of the last chapter that this week there was going to be a two parter! Sorry about that, it was 3 AM when I posted the prior chapter... but I guess this nice little surprise makes up for it!

So without further ado, the chapter most of you have probably been anxiously waiting for—what happened with Winona and Megaton's bomb?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Winona braced a forearm against the rocky overhang, vomiting the breakfast she had only just consumed with her Geiger counter clicking timidly for her attention. She never ate anything as stale, tongue-tingling, and unsatisfying for a meal as pre-war powdered mashed potatoes mixed with water (the water was probably the only good thing about it, since it was from the vault), and a bit of shriveled deviled eggs that looked more like 200 year old rocks than edible food. Mister Burke promised from behind her, as she remained bent over the rocks, that Tenpenny Tower would offer better food for her vault dweller stomach... although, she'd have to get use to eating such 'Wastelander meals' if she wanted to survive where food was, undoubtedly, scarce—and fresh food was even scarcer.

Her body wasn't any more ready for the packaged food of the Wasteland than it was for the trek to their destination, especially with her still healing injury in thanks to the Springvale Yahoos; the walks were long, hot, and taxing when she was expected to carry a pack that weighed nearly 100 pounds. Her calves burned, her feet felt like they were lead-weighted, and her thighs were solid from the contracted muscles when she massaged them at the end of each night. Mister Burke gave them very little breaks to rest, only doing so when it was time to eat or sleep or hide from a threat that he deemed to be too close to them.

Crouching was another torture in itself in those moments. Otherwise, he would constantly complain about how slow she was walking, and they'd have to pick up the pace to make it to the tower in good time. She couldn't understand how someone who was a frequent smoker and nearing 50 could out pace her.

"You'll have to learn to hold down your food. Walking burns carbohydrates and protein, and you need to take in more than what you burn." Mister Burke commented in a surly voice as she returned to their snuffed out campsite, wiping her mouth. He handed off the remainder of the half-used bottle of clean water to her, more in demand than suggestion, that she drink something. "If you continue to allow your body to purge, you'll lose more energy than you're consuming, you'll become dehydrated, you'll become slow, and then you become dead."

"Thanks, broken record." Winona responded grudgingly under her breath as he looked on with some hint of amusement in his set expression, though a raise of his brow clearly said; "don't push your luck". She forced herself to drink the water but knew that she'd need to hold something better
down. The only thing she had left that could be remotely consumable for her delicate stomach was half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from her vault food supplies, but that looked about ready to turn in thanks to the sweltering heat.

Damn, how she'd miss grape jelly... but she currently couldn't be bothered to think about food. It'd only nauseate her more.

"Clean yourself up and we'll continue on. We should arrive just before night fall if we keep a good pace."

"Is there anything fresh out here?" She asked, trying not to gag with how her body wanted to reject the drink. "Fruits? Vegetables? Are crops even a thing—?"

"If you want 'fresh' you'll have to be willing to kill something, or have the money to buy it from somewhere... and that level of commodity is a luxury in comparison to the alternative." He responded as he unfolded the boxes of their breakfast and tucked them into his pack. Apparently, his employer was fond of recycling materials for alternative resources and fuel. "Otherwise—no—crops are not a 'thing' here in the Capital Wastes. The land is hard to work and is filled with radiation run off. Nothing unmutated grows here. Anything fresh comes from the west if it's fortunate enough to make it this far through Arizona territory, or from Rivet City if you make a sizable—... contribution to the endeavors of their scientists."

"They always say nature finds a way," Winona remarked stubbornly as she tucked her water bottle back into her own duffle. She'd refill it if they could find a clean water source.

"Nature hasn't had several tons of atomic fire dropped on it before in such a force that it's ruined the entirety of the planet. It's worked elsewhere, but the Capital is not elsewhere. This place has more concentrated nuclear waste than some other blast sites." Mister Burke responded as he looked ahead, the sunlight glinting off the rim of his sunglasses. "We should move out." Then started walking up the hill without her, his pack easily slung onto his back. "Now."

The inventor found herself grimacing at the back of the hardened man before her, and reluctantly followed with heavy, dragging feet. The hill was steep and she barely made it to the crest without toppling over, ass over head, back down the slope. Burke offered her a hand but she avoided it, pretending that the gesture wasn't seen at all.

It was about two days since they left Megaton for this Tenpenny Tower, and most of that time—even in sleep, when she could sleep at all without her conscience shrieking for appeasement—Winona thought of nothing but ending him. She found his sadistic desire to destroy a whole town of people abhorrent... and she couldn't figure out his reasoning other than him being a well-mannered psychopath. Mister Burke was keeping his cards fanned close to his chest for safe guarding, unwilling to display his hand yet, all the while insisting that she wait a few minutes more until his employer could join their poker table.

She was terrified to meet someone that could possibly be even worse than Burke himself.

Winona vehemently insisted that she catch up with him at a later date for this Tenpeny Tower but he refused—claiming that she had no choice but to go with him. He doubted she could survive another second by herself outside of Megaton's walls, after what happened with the Springvale bastards... but she knew better. She knew he wanted to make certain that she wouldn't run away, and that there was full dedication on her part to his mission.

She wished she never met Mister Burke. She wished she never stepped outside, where she was injured and he found her. The inventor hated him almost as much as she was terrified by his
commanding presence, the poison in his eyes, and the cool, indifferent collectiveness in his voice when he talked about blowing up Megaton—as if he were talking about the taste of irradiated ramen noodles or the dull color of the poisoned sky. She wished she never had to leave the vault, and that she had the chance to finish her community service and go back to work, where she mattered... even if it didn't matter to the entirety of the vault, until they realized that everything was going to Hell faster than the radroaches could multiply—faster than she could look at Butch DeLoria and decide that she'd rather marry him than be outside if it only meant she wouldn't have to constantly be afraid anymore.

Winona wished, more than anything, that she had the courage to take her gun from her holster, line it with the back of Burke's head, and pull the trigger until the clip clicked empty.

"Your room will be here," Mister Burke spoke as he unlocked the first door to the right of the elevator. It was the first time she ever traveled in one because the vault didn't have them (stairs kept the residents active throughout the day)—and it wasn't a fun first experience to be trapped in a small box attached to a 200 year old pulley system going 12 stories up. She was glad to be on solid ground again.

If she didn't think about the bomb-weakened stability of the said 'solid ground' beneath her feet, that is.

*It'd be just my luck to find out I might be afraid of heights*, she grumbled sarcastically in her thoughts.

"Gustavo, if you'd be so kind?" Mister Burke turned to the guard that accompanied them from the front gate. He was severely dressed in slim armor with a 'TT' logo on the breast, and he had an austere kind of face; gruff and tight around the eyebrows where they curled over small, stern eyes. From the moment he welcomed them past the gate and into the elevator, Winona could *feel* the guard's—Gustavo's—eyes following her hands. It was probably to ensure she wouldn't grab for the gun on her thigh, or cause trouble otherwise.

Gustavo gave a short glance to Mister Burke before stepping to the door, producing a key ring from a pocket on the belt of his armor and unlocked it. The door swung open silently to reveal to Winona, with a sweeping gesture of welcoming into the apartment by Burke, a beautiful room; a spacious, accommodating bed stayed to the nearest wall, a large empty book case with a reading chair sat across from it, and beside the bed, in a small nook broken up by a railing, was a hovering three-eyed robot that waited dutifully beside it's command post. There was also a small bathroom with a tub-shower and sink with an unbroken mirror hanging above it.

The most important thing about this place was that it was in *pristine* condition, and the cleanest room Winona had seen since her first step outside—even the bed sheets looked crisp and free of any blemishes. The room also had a ghost of an aroma, smelling sickly sweet that suggested it was trying to hide a too obvious mustiness, and she couldn't place where the fragrance was coming from, or what it was scented with.

"You will be staying here for the time being. It's already rather late, and you'll certainly need your rest and a good bath after the last three days. We have to look presentable for Mr. Tenpenny, don't we? Ah, but I shouldn't worry of such things for you, I'm positive you're *dying* for a shower." Mister Burke drawled as he freed his wrist from his suit sleeve and looked to the watch there. "You'll be expected to be ready at 8 AM-sharp tomorrow morning where I will fetch you. Breakfast will be served to you at 7:30 AM, and as soon as I depart here I'll call for a dinner meal to be delivered to you, as well as some medicine to finish the healing on your injury."
"Alright..." Winona replied glumly, not very enticed by the sight of the clean room for long as she looked back at him. "8 AM. Got it."

"And you will remove that—... device, from your wrist for the meeting in the morning, won't you?" He asked as he pointed at it with a raised eyebrow rather than a finger.

"I can't," She deadpanned, waving the arm with her Pip-Boy on it around a little. "Biometric lock, can't take it off even if I wanted to. I don't have the tools for it anymore."

"I see. Well, I suppose Mr. Tenpenny will just have to oversee it for the time being." He responded in a barely audible sigh, folding his arms behind him. "Very well. Goodnight, Miss Parker."

"G'night," She responded halfheartedly as she shut the door and turned back to look around the room. Shrugging off her duffle bag with some pain, due to her stiff shoulders and aching back, she deposited it beside her bed where she took a seat on the edge of it, despondently holding her head between her hands.

*What're you doing, Parker?* Winona shut her eyes, her hands finding fistfuls of her greasy, dirt-gritted hair. *What're you doing—?... You're in too deep now to leave. Even if you do, he'll find you. He'll find you when he figures out—*

She took in a deep breath and shook away the thought, looking around the room one more time to take in her surroundings. When the hovering robot, that looked *identical* to Andy, noticed her distraught demeanor, he hovered over.

"Oh, young miss, why the long face? Perhaps you're lonely! I've noticed that you humans need constant attention and praise. You need'n't be lonely, as you have me for company! There, there," He consolingly pat her shoulder with his pincers. "I am *Godfrey*, your humble robotic butler! Gladly devoted to your every command!" He then tacked on in a quieter voice; "*At least, that's what I'm programmed to say...*"

"Godfrey... that's definitely a name." Winona looked up at him to see a pair of double doors at the furthest wall, obscured by his figure. She went around him and opened the doors to be almost knocked over by a strong, hot night wind. Despite the force of nature trying to push her back inside, she dared to go toward the banister edge and look down to the ground, which seemed to grow further and further away from her the longer she stared. The apartment was above what looked like the side walk of the lit up courtyard, where the night guards were nothing but busied specks with dancing beams of flashlights below on an unseen track that they followed.

"It *is* a name, miss. And what might I call you?" He asked from behind her, rocketing himself to the balcony to stand with her.

"Doesn't matter—I don't plan on being here long." She looked back up at him. "Could you tell me how far it is to the ground floor from this balcony?"

"Certainly, young miss! It's approximately 156.5 feet. That would be 47.70 meters, or 52.16666 yards." The robot responded cheerily. "But if you wish to return to ground level, might I suggest taking the *elevator* or *stairs* rather than the one-step-exit? Mr. Tenpenny wouldn't appreciate you causing such a ruckus! *Or* such a mess!"

Winona was chilled by Godfrey's final remarks and quickly retreated from the balcony to return back inside.

Good news? She wasn't afraid of heights.
Bad news? She was afraid of falling from a height.

I don't have anything in here to help me climb down, it's too damn far. she mused as she looked around the room, gauging the things at her disposal, and as nice as the apartment was, there was very little to utilize and she was too exhausted physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically, to kick into Inventor Mode.

"Miss, would you care for me to unpack your things for your stay at Tenpenny Tower?"

"No, that's alright—"

"Fear not if you have fragile things amongst your belongings, I have the pincers of a baby! And by that, I mean I'll be gentle with your most prized of possessions." He accentuated this with a grand display of his mentioned pincers in a merry little pinch-pinch.

"Godfrey, do you happen to know why I'm here? Why Mister Burke brought me to Tenpenny Tower?"

"Hmn," The robot tutted, hovering in place as she sat down on the bed again. He gave a few electronic sounding clicks before responding. "I haven't the slightest clue, young miss. Perhaps Mister Burke is lonely, as you are, and requires companionship? I've seen the residents of Tenpenny Tower attempt to inquire about said companionship, but he seemed rather —...mnn, aloof. He's also rather busy tending to Mr. Tenpenny. You'll turn him right around, I think! Otherwise you wouldn't have received such a lovely room!"

"Would you happen to know anything about Megaton or the bomb there—?" She asked hopefully.

"No, miss! I've never even heard of this 'Megaton'. All I've been programmed to know are matters involving Tenpenny Tower, and whomever occupies this very room."

"Matters involving Tenpenny, huh?..." Winona rubbed her chin in thought with her eyes trained on the floor. "...Godfrey, what's the security like? Shifts and the like."

"Our security team is the best in all the Wasteland! It consists of 12 guards and is led by Security Chief Gustavo. In the day, two officers guard the front gate while four others patrol the Tenpenny grounds, courtyard, and the Tower itself, from 8 AM to 8 PM, where a shift switch relieves the day team—then the night team patrols the courtyard and lobby from 8 PM to 8 AM. Security Chief Gustavo handles all matters of security here in Tenpenny Towers, and thus, any further questions you have about his team or security protocols in case of civilian-led riot or protest, mole rat infestation, or infamous Hawthorne Incidents will need to be directed to him."

"Is there a back door out of the Tower? Maybe some other exit beside the front gate, that isn't patrolled? Or another way past the wall?"

"Certainly miss, but I'm programmed to say it's only accessible to authorized users such as maintenance or security! Otherwise, no, a 'back door' does not exist, and no, it does not lead through a generator room where an escape tunnel can be found."

"...Thanks, Godfrey." Winona replied awkwardly. "Where's Mister Burke located currently?"

"I apologize, ma'am, but that is not in my knowledge."

"You have a camera on you? Can anyone watch me through you?"

"Heavens no, ma'am! How inconceivable!"
He's not hooked up to some sort of mainframe—he's not like Andy, he can't track where residents are... means no cameras anywhere else, either. That could be useful.

The thought of Andy struck her with a sharp pang of homesickness. She hoped Amata and Freddie were alright after the way Security treated them—Winona could still feel the drop in her stomach when she replayed those memories of Amata screaming for the officers to stop hurting Freddie, and the way her eyes bulged when she was punched in the stomach and dropped unceremoniously to her knees. Winona tried not to think about Jonas and his bloated and bruised face, struggling to erase the memory and remember only the good of him, like his laugh and when she last hugged him.

But once she thought about him, she tucked a hand into a pocket of her bag and gingerly pulled out his broken glasses to hold them against her chest.

Winona also thought about her dad a lot, being flipped and flopped between missing him and struggling to understand the why in him leaving, and being angry that he left at all.

Even to the end, he was determined to hide things from me. She thought bitterly, remembering the surprise in Amata's face upon admitting that she thought Winona would know what he was doing. Even Amata thought he was more open with me than that.

The inventor never told anyone aside from Amata the truth about herself—she came close to telling Butch, once, and looking back on it now she couldn't remember why she decided against it... like he'd smile at her or crack a smartass joke and she would forget the thought. Winona knew that so many other people knew the truth about her before she even did; Beatrice, who tried to help her father care for and raise her until she was a toddler; Mrs. Palmer, who was always sweet and told her stories, passed down through her family, of what the world was like before the Great War; Jonas obviously knew, based on his reaction when she confronted her dad the night she broke into his office; the Overseer, who was sworn in on the duty of doing everything to protect the masses; Mr. Brotch, who was her teacher; Stanley, who was her mentor and friend.

It wasn't just her dad and the Overseer, almost everyone lied—but he was the only one who had the obligation to tell her the truth.

And now I know why he didn't... why the Overseer tried keeping it quiet. This place is fucking awful. She lamented sadly as Godfrey finally moved away from her side with puffs of his little propelling rockets, returning to his corner when it looked like she had nothing else to say. Everything's trying to kill you. You can't trust anyone but yourself... you're more alone and miserable up here than you ever were down there. I'd take Wally Mack over a gun-toting raider again.

She thought about Paul and hoped that the big lug was doing fine.

She thought about Butch DeLoria, and wondered how he was doing, and thought about their kiss... something about it hurt to think about—the exchange reminded her that she'd never see him, or home, ever again.

She thought about Mrs. DeLoria and wondered if she was safe, as the inventor found part of herself invested in the well-being of Ellen DeLoria since she first found out about her alcoholism.

Winona remembered the few conversations she and Butch had about what it'd be like outside, and they spent weeks trying to get a reliable source to divulge such truths. They wondered together if the world was rebuilding itself, reclaimed by foliage that disregarded the destruction of the bombs, and if people were compassionate and giving. Unfortunately, the truth hit her and it hit her hard in
a world that was from her worst of nightmares, and she was thrown into it without knowing what she was up against, and without knowing how to survive. Every step she took outside made her more terrified than the last one did and it was *exhausting* to be afraid and paranoid all the time.

_The Overseer made it look easy._ She thought bitterly.

But she didn't have time anymore to reminisce on old memories of her friends, of Butch, and Paul, and Wally, of her dad and Jonas and the life she use to have; there were problems of the present she had to deal with and if she didn't find a way out of them, she'd be awake by 8 AM and possibly _dead_ before 9.

"Godfrey, I'm meeting with Mr. Tenpenny tomorrow morning. What can you tell me about him?" Winona asked with a renewed determination as she set Jonas' cracked glasses on the nightstand beside the bed.

"Mr. Tenpenny is the proprietor of Tenpenny Towers—he discovered it upon coming to America from his homeland of Great Britain, and saw it as a humbling opportunity to make his mark on the Capital Wasteland by refurbishing and reopening the Tower only to the rich and well-educated who believe they deserve a _finer taste_ in this dismal life."

_Great Britain—? Were other places hit during the war? Though radiation can travel far through air, would it really have reached Europe?_

"Do you know anything else about him?"

"I know that he very rarely leaves his room, I'm afraid. I've narrowed it down to him either being a _germaphobe_, unsociable, or a paranoid _hermit!_ Mr. Tenpenny has gotten along in his age, I suppose... and I know he's rather fond of fine cigars, a good game of chess, and his Wasteland Safari."

"_Wasteland Safari—? What is that, a game?_

"Oh, yes, but it's not very _fun_ for those who unknowingly participate! Perhaps he can explain the rules of his little safari more when you meet with him tomorrow? It's rather _morbid_ and I can't say I understand the rules very well. Humans seem to work better when they still have their _heads_, don't they?"

Winona closed her eyes, thinking over the information she received for anything that she could use to her advantage. She certainly couldn't escape, it'd be suspicious if she was looking around for this escape route through a generator room, _especially_ if she wasn't allowed to be in there; she reasoned that the door in would most likely be in the lobby, where the night guards patrol, and it'd probably be locked. She couldn't scale down the window without anything useful to create a makeshift ladder—and if she left in the night without a word, the only way out would be where _more_ guards were patrolling. They'd certainly tell Mister Burke if she left, as he seemed rather friendly with Gustavo like they'd known each other for some time, and she'd be hunted down like a sick dog.

Besides, Burke still had his hands on Widget. Something like that would be unimportant to anyone else but her, but it was like leaving your beloved pet with a _mad man._

The inventor opened her eyes and crawled across her bed to grab her duffle, pulling it to her with a weak heave of strength and tore it open to search through her supplies. There were pieces of Gizmo, her belt of tools, a few scraps of electronics and wires, metal, some bulky batteries, and a few other unnamed parts... plus her handful of smoke bombs and a high-precision laser pen. It was strong enough to hurt but not incapacitate, as she hadn't found a way yet to strengthen the beam to
lethal levels. The best she could do was blind her opponent with it. The more she searched through her things for anything useful, she was feeling more and more grim about her chances of survival.

But then her eyes fell upon her Pip-Boy... and she had a spark of an idea as she traced the edge of the screen with a slow thumb.

"Godfrey, I'm going to shower and get to work on something, I don't want to be bothered but let me know when my food's here. Don't let anyone in."

"Certainly, ma'am."

"And one last thing—?"

"Yes, miss?"

"Is it alright if I call you 'Andy', instead?"

Winona looked outward and below from every corner of the Tenpenny Tower balcony where she could get a clear view. The Capital Wasteland unfurled below her in a blanket flecked with the black of dead trees, shades of brown for the decrepit, broken down buildings and rocky reaches of the landscape, and gray for broken concrete roads—looking like severed bits of ribbon in this dead world. On the rising and dipping horizon of the Wasteland, Megaton was so far off it was nothing but a wink as the sun began to arch it's way to the high point of the dreary Wasteland sky.

The only thing that could have made the sight from up this high more mesmerizing was if the inventor wasn't so clamped with fear, making her hands tremble on the railing.

"Mr. Tenpenny will be with us shortly." Mister Burke spoke as he stepped out onto the balcony of Mr. Tenpenny's quarters, joining her near the railing when the door was shut and he fixed the buttons on his brown suit jacket. "It's a shame you weren't able to take off that device of yours. You look exquisite in that dress."

Winona awoke this morning from an alarm set by Godfrey (he refused to be called Andy and she was too determined with other plans to reprogram him to accept it) and had a dress handed off to her that she was requested to wear for the meeting; it was a deep royal navy shade, with a sleeveless top printed with small white flowers and the skirt was a knee-length flared bell shape. Accompanying it was a short black heel and a belt that cinched her waist. She was sure the dress was sent so she looked 'more presentable', as Mister Burke called it, but also to ensure she didn't have any places to hide weapons. Those thoughts were confirmed when she was pat down and her shoes and hair were checked for anything hiding in them, before she was allowed past the door.

"I'm not here because I want to be." She replied a little irately while refusing to look at him.

"Oh? You make the mistake that I'm not well aware of that, Winona." He chuckled low. "I assumed you only did what I asked and remained because you're trying to find your father."

Her eyes finally snapped up towards his face. "...How—... How did you—?"

"I had the caps for it when you didn't when it came to Moriarty's business dealings. This work will get you the kind of money the average Wastelander can only dream of—you'll have a safe place, the cleanest in all the Wasteland, with enough money left over to do with what you wish. Form your own security team, maybe, or even have them go after your father for you, while you remain safely here. The possibilities would be endless... and if anything stood in your way of your goal, then you're not very serious about finding him in the first place, perhaps?"
Winona grimaced, in disgust by his response and also from biting her tongue; she's never told someone to go fuck themselves before, and Mister Burke wasn't the right man to change that. "I call it having my priorities in order! Why'd you make me come here? Why make me do this at all?"

"Because I saved your life, and I dare say that would mean you owe it to me as your savior." Mister Burke looked at her over the rim of his glasses, his eyes glinting under the brim of his fedora. "And because you were the one best suited for the work. Not just any Wasteland simpleton could rig such a precise detonator to a several ton atomic bomb without setting it off in the process."

"You're a bastard," Winona spat hatefully as she glared back at him, hoping there was enough venom in her eyes to paralyze him there on the spot. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!" "You're lying! I bet you could've done it yourself! You only forced me because you're sick and you find this amusing!"

"As I've said, very few would have the knowledge of doing such work. You happened to be the right person for the job and I trapped you under the unfortunate circumstance of 'wrong place, wrong time' when I saved your life... so I greatly suggest that you watch your tone." There was a hint of a smile that came to his lips when she insulted him, and it caused her to make a small noise of repulsion as she turned away from the railing to get away from him. "This is the last step to ensure that you've done what you were supposed to."

"How could anyone be as revolting as you?"

"Revolting is how those people carry on about their lives, praising this false God of Atom as if it were a golden calf that could lead them to enlightenment—their religion ruins all it touches and that town is festering in the putrid waters of it." He replied coldly. There was only a small measure of ferocity in his tone, but it was enough to chill her. "An example must be made of them, much like when Moses came down the mountain and found his wards celebrating their new deity, and punished them by melting the gold and forcing them to drink it. They will be taught the error of their ways dearly."

"It'll be hard for Megaton to take a lesson from bible study when they're dead, don't you think?" Winona's mouth tightened over her teeth in a sneer. "That's it, isn't it? It's not the town, it's about the bomb for you and how they treat it. You could've just disarmed it instead of blowing it up!"

"On the contrary, Mr. Tenpenny has his plans for Megaton and that's how I decided they would be carried out, which he agreed to. Detonating the bomb also happens to coincide with plans of my own, but what's the technicalities in the details, hmn?" Mister Burke responded calmly with a hand set on the barrier of the railing and he looked out over the landscape idly.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you so bent on punishing Megaton?"

"It will teach those not to idolize golden calves... and other icons that bring nothing but destruction, death, and a repeat of history. Religion is dangerous in that matter." Mister Burke made a slow turn of his chin back over his shoulder at her. "You hang yourself with the politics of being a good person, but that goodness means nothing if there is always some greater force in play... not the textbook evil but general forces like the nature of history and how it repeats itself. Nazi Germany's Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide of Turkey—Alexander the Great, the Mongols, and Britain all failing in occupying Afghanistan with nearly identical troubles in terrain and the strengths of their opposition—the R.M.S. Titanic and South China's Tek Sing, both striking an iceberg and reef respectively, both ships were over encumbered, overpopulated, and poorly constructed, resulting in the drowning of 1,500 people in both cases—there is a lesson in learning your history that I don't
"You're trying to make a point over facts no one out here would understand—" Winona frowned, opening her mouth to speak further when the door opened behind her. Turning about to face the intruder, she was greeted by an elderly man with hair as stark white as her own peeking through the opening before stepping out onto the balcony.

With a shut of the door behind him, he grinned with a shark's row of pearly teeth, and his blue eyes, milky with cataracts, were almost hidden by the heavy sags of his wrinkled skin. Winona regarded his dapper clothing, a red velvet suit jacket with gold accents and buttons, matching ascot and scarf pin, and pristinely white slacks, with some distaste. It reminded her of the mention of Wasteland Safari from Godfrey as the elderly man neared her with an unexpectedly energetic kink in his gait due to his age.

"Why, hel-lo, my dear girl! You must be Miss Winona, Mister Burke's new hand! From what he's told me, you've been a very valuable asset to my goals! But my, aren't you a funny looking one —hah!—what hair you have!" He responded in a rosy laugh as he took her hand in his, uninvitingly, and kissed her knuckles in a small bow. "I am Allistair Tenpenny, but you may refer to me as Mr. Tenpenny."

"Do you feel the same about Megaton as Mister Burke does?" She replied coolly while discreetly wiping her hand off on an inner fold of her dress skirt. An unpleasant shudder went up her arms and spine.

"The type to come down to brass tacks, aren't you? How refreshing! To answer your question, I feel nothing of it one way or the other." He gestured with an outward flourish of his hand to the horizon where Megaton glinted like an off-black bump on the brown and gray horizon. "Isn't it just a sordid sight on my horizon? I've wished to see it gone! Mister Burke assures me that to simply blow it up would be the fastest convenience... as well as a brilliant display of fireworks!"

"What about the people that live there?"

"What about them?" He asked with an innocuous tone and a feeble blink of his pale eyes.

Winona didn't think she could hate any man more than she did Mister Burke, but Allistair Tenpenny managed to win that award in a matter of a single sentence. She could envision herself easily flipping his fragile old body over the railing. At least Mister Burke had reason, as repugnant as it was, in comparison to Mr. Tenpenny's spoiled cries of "I just don't like how it looks!"

She wanted to vomit, which was saying a lot when she'd been vomiting at almost every meal for the past few days.

"Now, why don't you take a seat? Would you like some coffee, or tea, perhaps a little morning whisky? I'm having Margaret send some up momentarily." Mr. Tenpenny went on to speak as he gestured to a chair sitting across a lawn table decorated with a chess board and scattered chess pieces.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? Mister Burke, won't you partake, in the least?"

"I'd be delighted to have a cup of coffee this morning."

"Oh, Charles, this is a morning of celebration! Certainly you can have a drink with me if she won't!" He gave a hiccupsing cackle.
"Very well, Tenpenny."

"Excellent, excellent! Now, tell me, my dear—Burke here tells me you're an inventor! Would you happen to do any tinkering with weapons and the like? I'm always looking for someone to clean and modify some of my favorite toys for me!" Tenpenny spoke as he began setting up the chess board when Winona reluctantly sat down. "Though there's nothing more prideful in the work a man does with his weapons... surely you could find ways to modify it to make them even better?"

"No, I don't work with weapons." She swallowed as she watched his wrinkled, veiny hands dance across the board to set the pieces in place. The inventor was keenly aware of Burke's eyes on her back.

"We can change that, certainly." He sniffled idly once the pieces were arranged. "Do you play chess? I wouldn't mind a quick game with my drink before we get down to business."

"We should attend to business as soon as possible, Mr. Tenpenny." Mister Burke insisted in a voice that sounded more like a request than a demand.

"That one, always with his nose to the old grindstone!" Tenpenny laughed and pulled a gold plated pocket watch from his inner coat pocket, glancing over the hands. "Hmn. Well, I suppose we should get to business, we have some time before drinks!" Then tucked the watch away and stood up from his seat again. "Mister Burke, if you'd be so kind?"

"Of course," His hireling responded dutifully with a bowing nod of his head and turned away inside, leaving the door open behind him.

"Come with me—to the railing, that's it." Tenpenny ushered Winona up and out of her seat to guide her to the railing with his hands on her shoulders, taking in a heaping breath of the morning air. "Do you smell that, Winona? The dawn of a new morning—a new day—and when you're at Tenpenny Towers, that day is yours! Especially if you manage to impress Allistair Tenpenny himself, and you have.""

"Have I?" She tried to shrug his cold hands off of her bare shoulders but he didn't notice, leaving them where they were. Her stomach heaved in disgust and she didn't realize one could vomit from pure hatred.

"Ah, yes, you have! I'm positively ecstatic about acquiring some 'new blood' into the Towers, and Mister Burke assures me that you'll do quite nicely. You can carve your place here amongst our people—you're not rich, of course, but what's splitting hairs over an intelligent young mind with the determination to do what needs be done?" His hands were finally dropped from her shoulders as his gaze regarded the horizon, aside from Megaton, with an animated liveliness in his foggy eyes.

Winona heard a sharp whining scream on the air, and when she looked around she couldn't find the sound, unsure if she was actually hearing it or not. Mr. Tenpenny was suddenly laughing beside her with a long crooked finger pointing over the balcony to the ground below.

"I believe that filthy water beggar at the gate seems to be fending off a feral with a rock! Oh, how marvelous!"

"I believe that filthy water beggar at the gate seems to be fending off a feral with a rock! Oh, how marvelous!"

Charles Burke could hear Tenpenny outside, his laughter obscuring the screams of the beggar that
carried as an echo on the air. He stood inside Tenpenny's apartment with the gleaming metal briefcase, the remote switch of the bomb's fusion pulse charge, and checked over it's contents for the third time. They'd done practice runs in the past to test the strength of the control the further away the charge was, and it still worked just as perfectly as if the two devices were in the same room together; the only matter to be dealt with before the detonation was ensuring that the control would work flawlessly, now that it was coming down to the proverbial show time.

*How long have I waited for this moment, Elizabeta? 20 years, almost down to the very day... the timing seems so perfect. Too perfect.* Charles glanced over his shoulder and saw Winona's back, feeling a glare coming off of her unseen face in Tenpenny's direction as he yelled down to the beggar—if he *could* be heard by the beggar—to use 'the good old one, two, you nancy!' as if he were ringside at a boxing match with a monetary bet on the line.

Charles recalled his brief time in Megaton recently... much had changed since he last lived there; the enclosed wall around the crater hadn't been completed, yet, and the wall that was erected already wasn't quite structurally sound. The sniper's nest was a new addition as well, since their security team was being picked off like flies on a brahmin's carcass by gun-toting hostiles that camped nearby. There weren't many shops open outside of a general trader and a hack of a physician, and he recalled there being an imbalance of power over who'd protect the people of Megaton; it was some young do-gooder with about as much brains as balls, meaning *none at all* in either sense, and the Church of Atom. The town was still growing well enough, even back then, and when Burke was young the townspeople surmised that within the next 5 years it would have been just as big and busy and important as Rivet City.

The Church of Atom was there back then, too, as one of the players in the power struggle over Megaton. He hadn't seen Walter Cromwell in just as long—he was Confessor Cromwell now, and was the leader of the church—and he was carrying on the message of his predecessor despite knowing the hurt it caused. Cromwell was there 20 years ago and had seen what Charles lost, the young confessor *knew* it was wrong, yet he was still in town and still teaching the rituals of the church as an inflated, spiritual prophet of Atom.

Cromwell didn't recognize Charles at all, even though he walked by that bomb daily—even though Charles had purchased the house *right beside* it, and would get his meals from the Brass Lantern three times a day. Either Cromwell truly didn't recognize him, either through time and the radiation he absorbed over the years, or he did and chose to ignore this presence of his past that was Charles Burke. Charles was sure he was just another passing face, seeming like another unnamed settler that kept an ever-weary eye on Megaton's bomb to the Confessor... but little does Cromwell *know* —

Little does Cromwell know his end will come swiftly on the wings of his idol. Or would it be the talons? Charles wondered with some amusement. *Would this be considered divine intervention, or justice, given his desire to be welcomed into the arms of Atom's glow? I would call it rightful retribution acquainting every molecule in his body with these thousands of universes he speaks of in his communes... and in a rather violent manner, at that.*

Elizabeta's little face flashed within his mind, grasping for his hands as she tottered about their old home. The amused smile on his face turned sour at the memory and he tried to mentally wave it away. He didn't want to think about his little girl like that; glassy eyes, rotted teeth, and nothing of her hair left but tufts that looked like dry reeds.

*It doesn't matter the moralities called into question. Would she hate me for this? Absolutely. But she's gone, now... she wouldn't understand why—why I must do this. It'll kill two birds with one stone. That chapter of Atom's church will be gone, and what wrath will be incurred by the Tower*
residents when they discover their beloved Allistair Tenpenny behind it? I will melt their own 'golden calf' down into golden bullets and plant them in Tenpenny's hide, he doesn't deserve to have the golden waters plating the insides of his stomach.

But something inside him didn't feel—... united. There was some higher instinct in him, the kind that surpassed all reasonable conclusion, telling him to proceed with caution. He could smell it on the winds that a change in fate was occurring. Elizabeta inside him told him so, and he knew she was right. The timing really was too perfect and Winona was an unexpected, unpredictable variable that was too smart for her own good; too smart for him to underestimate as he's already done.

Today wasn't the day that Cromwell was going to meet with Atom, Charles realized, when he became acquainted with disappointment... and sudden panic telling him to go back outside.

Charles snapped the briefcase shut with a click of the clasps and left it on the table, turning back to the ajar door where he heard a wheezing, jittery hacking. The sound immediately alarmed him and he flew through the balcony doors with a hard shove of his forearm. He was met with the sight of Winona, clutching her Pip-Boy close to her chest, as the soles of black riding boots were the last thing he saw of Tenpenny as his jerking body went plummeting over the edge of the railing to the courtyard below.

Winona turned back on Charles with widened hazel-green eyes of shock, her mouth sputtering to come up with some sort of explanation. He shoved her out of the way to come to the banister, peering over to see down below the splattered remains of Tenpenny scrawled across the craggy, splitting cement of the courtyard. Specks of residents were scattering in all directions, trying to run inside and escape the sight with wailing shrieks. There were matching brown specks of alarmed guards that were swiftly investigating the spattering of Tenpenny's red against the gray of the sidewalk, before running in a composed line into the lobby with weapons drawn and Gustavo barking orders.

"What have you done?" He asked when his body revolved around to the young, white-haired woman.

His question was met with the answer of a thin, metal rod being jabbed against his chest. The pen-like rod was connected by a metal clip and curling wire back into the casing of her wrist device, the one she said she couldn't remove. Charles felt a searing shock paralyzing his entire body before he heard the violent buzzing of cracking electricity, with his muscles locking up all at once in electrified currents until he surrendered to them and dropped to his knees, seizing. When he collapsed to his side with a heavy blanket of black curtaining his vision, his body so numb he felt completely detached from himself, the last he saw was Winona's retreating feet as she ran back inside hurriedly on clicking heeled shoes.

She stopped at the door with the muttered words of; "You deserve to die," before disappearing inside, with the door left open to swing with the blow of the hot afternoon breeze behind her.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: WELL THAT WAS A FUN CHAPTER! Burke is a super fun character to write for and I think he could have had more development in the game—I highly consider him to be an extremely intelligent man and I'm sure that more than shows here, aside from his trademark evil cackling and background lightning strikes. I wanted him to
feel like a force to be reckoned with.

Anyways, a lot happened this chapter, neh? I’d love to hear everyone's thoughts about it before P2 comes out!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Konfessionist signing out
"I'd say you're lucky to be alive, Mister Burke!" Dr. Bannfield crowed in marvel as he tended to the wounds on Charles' chest, which seared through the fabric of his shirt in a little circle like someone had taken a lit cigarette to him.

Charles was laid down upon the examination table in Bannfield's office, shirtless and without his shoes, fedora, or sunglasses as he was examined. After he regained consciousness, and enough body control to stagger out of Tenpenny's apartment, he came across a security guard who helped him down to the Towers' infirmary. He was told that he probably wasn't unconscious for very long, but it was still long enough that the security team had already captured and arrested Winona—and that was in part to the help of Margaret Primrose, who came across Winona fleeing when she came to deliver Tenpenny's morning drink and alarmed nearby security by saying she looked suspicious, rushing off as she did without a proper 'good morning'.

 Apparently there was a switch in Tenpenny's door guard as he went out for a short smoke break, which would explain why Winona got so far as her room without being apprehended... the guard better hope that his cigarette was worth it because Gustavo was going to severely punish him for failing to meet the expectations of his duties; it warranted firing him and throwing him out into the Wasteland with a dull knife and only a day's worth of food rations.

Charles could hear the panicked clamor of Tenpenny residents outside the small infirmary, calling out Gustavo's name and demanding answers concerning the crime; Tenpenny was murdered, Charles was injured, and the security chief hadn't already delivered Wasteland justice upon the criminal. The whole of Tenpenny Tower was in an upheaval and he knew why—Gustavo was waiting on final word from Charles Burke himself now that Tenpenny was dead... especially if he wanted to place said Wasteland justice on Winona himself for what she did. The tower had a 'no tolerance' policy put into effect by security, but this wasn't a typical matter of crime. There hadn't been a murder in Tenpenny Tower for 15 years.

"Everything sounds good in there! No abnormal heart rhythm or murmurs... no dislocations or bone breaks, neither. I said it once, and I'll say it again, you're one damn lucky son of a gun, haha! Now touch your thumbs to each of your fingers for me, would you?" Bannfield asked politely after withdrawing the bell of the stethoscope from his chest, once he was done checking his heart and lungs.

Charles did as he was told, his thumb meeting each of the pad's of his fingers from pointer to pinky and then back to his pointer. Bannfield nodded in satisfaction, scribbled something on a clipboard, and then returned to gurney side.

"I know you're in good health, but we can never be too sure. Do you have any chest pains, or shortness of breath? Dizziness, maybe? Nausea? Numbness anywhere?"

"Muscle pain." He answered quietly.

"That's expected, you basically had a full body charley horse!" Dr. Bannfield continued to meticulously check him over and scribbled extensive notes onto the clipboard. Charles knew he was a good doctor, but the tests all felt like they were just for show—they both knew he was fine, even if it was by some miracle—and Bannfield wanted bragging rights to personally bringing him
'back from the dead'.

He pondered it being about three or four days before he heard those rumors circulating through the tower, praising Bannfield for his exemplary services.

"Not just anyone could easily walk away from that kind of shock, Mister Burke, I hope you realize this. I must still insist on keeping you over night for observation, just in case!"

"There are other matters I have to attend to—" Charles countered shortly, leaving the doctor sighing.

"I reckon Mr. Tenpenny isn't going to be anymore alive when you get out of here." The older man shook his head as he turned away to his medical supplies and brought a kit of sterilizing alcohol, gauze, and medical tape. "Then we'll just get you cleaned up and out of here, those burns you received aren't deep enough that a stimpak didn't fix, and the remainder is superficial, which I'll clean up right now. It's a real shame about Mr. Tenpenny... we're glad Gustavo and his men caught the person who did this! Right shame, right shame it is..."

Charles remained willfully silent as Dr. Bannfield began cleaning and dressing the small burn wound on his chest. He wondered how Winona managed to bring that little invention (no doubt she invented it) of hers into the apartment for the meeting, as the security team could find something as little as a toothpick on your person if it was contraband and you were hiding it. They closely pat her down, checked her shoes, her hair, her belt, the folds of her dress—

He vaguely remembered a wire connecting that little pen device to her Pip-Boy and he had some inkling of understanding as to what occurred.

That explains it... she must have tucked the pen into the wristband. It'd certainly fit there. No one thought to check it if she couldn't take it off, anyhow... smart. Charles almost chuckled. I should have known.

"Aaand—done," Dr. Bannfield concluded as he taped over the burn with a band-aid and offered him his dress shirt, tie, and suit jacket. "Would you like a complimentary stimpak? It'll help with the muscle pain."

"I think I'd much prefer to walk it off." Charles responded as he got up to his feet and began redressing himself, a little stiffly. "But thank you."

"You wouldn't happen to have any idea of what's going to happen to Tenpenny Tower now, do you?" Bannfield asked nervously as he gathered the supplies he used on Charles, tidying around his small office.

"It won't close, I assure you. We'll simply find a new owner. Gustavo will temporarily be in charge."

"Gustavo? Are—are you sure? Why not you? We all know how closely you worked with Mr. Tenpenny, I think you'd do a pretty good job. You'd properly meet his vision, I think!"

"I will take your insight into consideration." He responded with an impact upon his voice that said the matter was firmly closed.

"Well—... alright," The doctor responded cautiously. "If you won't maybe we can take a vote..."

Charles stepped into his shoes, retying them tightly in a knot with skillful hands before drawing up to his full height to tuck the tail of his done tie back into his jacket, buttoning up the front. With
another thank you and a goodbye, he stepped out of the office to find Susan Lancaster loitering outside. A cigarette dangled between her painted nails, and a smooth wisp of ashen smoke curled from her plump, smiling mouth.

"Ah, Charles! There you are!"

"Good afternoon. Miss Lancaster, I believe I've insisted beforehand for you to call me properly."

"Mister Burke," Her mouth curled the way her smoke did, and she tapped off her cigarette with a flick of a manicured thumb, her eyes set on him with a coy gaze. "Can never get you to drop the whole 'professional' act... I'm glad to see you're doing well, after everything that happened this morning—"

"I'm aware." He interrupted plainly.

She continued to talk over him. "—How're you doing? I heard that outsider got you good... though you look just fine to me."

"I best be on my way, Miss Lancaster." Charles responded indifferently as he strode past her with a hand fixing his fedora upon his head. "Excuse me."

"We have to get together and converse over a drink one of these days, Charles! You can't run from me forever, you know, especially now with Tenpenny gone! You'll have to take me to dinner soon, I insist." The resident courtesan shamelessly called after him, her cigarette meeting with her lips again.

"It's Monday, isn't it? Give Mr. Wellington my regards when you see him tonight." He replied back over his shoulder and was slightly delighted to hear the promiscuous Suan Lancaster choke on a drag of her cigarette. His appetite wasn't whetted by common whores and ex-slavers, not in the slightest, and this one had been trying to get him since she first came to the tower. He wasn't having the leftovers of five other men, and one of them was his now dead employer.

As Charles entered the Tenpenny lobby, he was greeted with the mobbing of various Tenpenny residents at the front desk. He could immediately recognize Lydia Montenegro, Irving Cheng and his wife Tiffany (he was hollering about Tenpenny's murderer being a communist), Anthony Ling, and Millicent Wellington with her gaggle of sewing circle companions looking frightened—her spoiled and pudgy young boy was clutching her dress skirt and shrieking with a snotty nose. Gustavo stood behind the front desk with a peeved expression on his face, calling over the crowd's questions and insistence on answers with demands for silence so he could speak. The frightened rabble quieted themselves very little, and from it Charles caught the tail end of someone threatening to leave if not even Allistair Tenpenny was safe in his own abode 12 stories up. This notion began spreading through the entirety of the mob like a plague, causing almost each and every member of the crowd to cry out the same threat if security couldn't be more serious about their jobs. He saw more children clutching their parents, looking around to other children in the crowd with them, as if asking for understanding over why their mothers were crying and why their fathers looked just about ready to combust in the middle of the lobby.

Charles had quite enough of the whole spectacle, and so pushed through the crowd with a commanding presence to easily come to Gustavo's side.

"Glad to see you're up and walking around." He remarked as the crowd began to roar with a new vigor, now directing their concerns at him. "Maybe you can get them to shut the hell up. Being diplomatic isn't part of my job, and I don't think it'd be appreciated if I used my usual tactics to get them to comply."
"Fellow residents of Tenpenny Tower, your attention, please!" Charles called in a booming voice over the panicking stupor and the entire lobby fell silent. "Thank you. I understand your fears—the question of 'is Tenpenny Tower really safe?' and the answer is, yes, it is, but of course, if you have your doubts you're free to leave. We won't have any parasites or free-loaders here, and if you have your doubts in our diligent security team than you must think the Wasteland may offer you better restitution than the Tower."

If it were possible, the crowd had grown even quieter at this, shifting nervously as their threats were uncovered as obvious bluffs. Every person that filled the lobby knew they wouldn't survive a day out there. Their comfort in their luxuries made them soft, and the only place they mattered was within the walls of Tenpenny Tower. A raider wouldn't care about your new silk dress, a feral of how much money you were worth, the torrid Wastes would strip you of your skin in a sandstorm the same as it would a beggar or a vagabond.

"The details of this morning's events cannot be revealed to the public until further notice, where a thorough investigation will be done. I assure you all that this matter will be handled by the best Tenpenny Tower has to offer. In the mean time, Security Chief Gustavo will be a temporary handler until a new owner will be chosen, so all questions and concerns must be directed properly to him. That's all, thank you for your patience, and please, refrain from loitering in the lobby for much longer—this is a respectable place of living... not a common watering hole."

The crowd was shushed for the time being, speaking quietly to one another at normal volume in comparison to the loud display they put on earlier. With a hand clapped on Gustavo's shoulder, Charles turned the security head away to depart from the muttering masses where they spoke in whispers to each other.

"Where is she?"

"Generator room. The suspect is being questioned by two of my men."

"Who?"

"Davies and Wang."

"Ah, your best interrogators, of course." That could mean Winona was still barely alive. "Color me surprised that you didn't immediately deal with the problem in a more permanent manner."

"Would've, but then she started talking some nonsense that was pretty alarming." Gustavo shook his head as they neared the maintenance exit door in the furthest hidden corner back from the lobby where they departed from the Tower masses and could speak again at idle conversation volume. The guard stopped to produce the appropriate key from his packed key ring.

"Oh?" He feigned genuine interest, as he knew what 'outrageous' things Winona was claiming, and watched the shorter man flip through his key ring. "And what did she have to say?"

The security head turned a probing eye back over his shoulder, as if curious, or perhaps suspicious, or accusatory. Charles knew Gustavo was on guard.

"She said you and Mr. Tenpenny were planning on blowing up Megaton."

"I've told you a million times, it's the tru—!" Winona cried out as she was slapped again across the face, smearing her tears down her cheeks and she trembled in the seat she was bound to. Her arms were zip-tied to each back leg of the chair under her, effectively limiting her mobility and her
pulling power to snap them apart, unless she wanted the tension to cut through her wrists.

"Let's try this again," The guard warned viciously as another stood off to a corner of the room, watching leisurely with a bored yawn and cup of coffee. "Why did you kill Allistair Tenpenny?"

"*It was an accident!* I was just trying to leave! He wanted to destroy Megaton, Mister Burke tried to *force* me to rig the bomb!" She wheezed through fresh tears, afraid to look back at the guard. She was punched in the gut once for just *staring* at him before the 'interrogation' had even started. God, she was so terrified, being helpless and seeing the readying of his fist in the corner of her blurring vision; never in her life, up until this point, had she ever wished so badly that she was somewhere else.

"And you think we believe you just *willingly* came here with the man that *forced you* to detonate a bomb? Across dozens of miles of Wasteland? With no one else holding you hostage?" He replied skeptically and kicked the edge of her chair, making it skid slightly under her and her building fear caused her to whimper pathetically at the uninjuring gesture. "Mister Burke was your one way ticket into here for Allistair Tenpenny, wasn't he?"

"No, that's not—!"

"Tell us who you're *workin' for,*" He hit a closed fist over her head and she saw black speckled by fireworks of colors for a second before coming back to clear vision and a painful throbbing that sent her blood rushing about her ears. He then grabbed her tightly by the jaw with his fingers digging in so brutally that she couldn't help but let her jaw go slack to alleviate some of the pain. "Before we start playing knife games with your face... and we always start from the chin up."

"Aren't we gunna just *kill her?* The hell does it matter who she works for? We know she's lying, Megaton's bomb s'a dud and has been since the Great War." The guard in the corner quipped.

"No- Not a dud," She hissed through the pain filling her head from where she was hit, her speaking slurred from how her jaw was being held. "The charge's still active, with the right kind of kick it *could* blow up—even all this time later! The explosion wouldn't be as devastating as the first bombs, but it'd *still* swallow up Megaton in a giant sinkhole—it might even reach Springvale! I'm *telling* you, Mister Burke and Tenpenny wanted Megaton *gone!* I have proof! Go to Tenpenny's suite, there's a silver briefcase with a- all these buttons and switches in it—!"

The door opened at the far end of the generator room and the first she saw was Gustavo with Mister Burke trailing in behind him. She went rigid in her seat upon seeing him, her heart plummeting into her lurching stomach, and when the light of the dim lamp above her head shadowed everything in his face but his curled mouth, her fear skyrocketed to the point that she wondered if she could die of fright right then and there, zip-tied to a chair in some grimy and loud generator room.

Winona meant it when she said he deserved to die—and she knew she should've plunged her tasing pen against Burke's neck or temple rather than his chest. It would've surely killed him as it accidentally did Tenpenny... even *if* he hadn't flipped over the railing.

If Burke was still alive, she now had *no* hope of getting out of this room unscathed. At least Gustavo had been listening to her story as a precaution in case she *was* telling the truth—she couldn't imagine what Burke could say, or may have said *already,* that could seal her fate.

"She say anything useful?" Gustavo asked as Mister Burke shut the door behind them, turning over the lock and then the bolt before joining the three guards.
"Songbird's still tweeting the same tune." The one clutching her jaw answered as he aggressively shoved her head away, making her neck crack.

"You think she's from the East?" The other asked, looking to Gustavo over the rim of his mug as he sipped his coffee.

"You mean from Britain?" The first guard replied dubiously rather than the security chief, while shaking his head and clapping off his hands. "No way, man—scrawny thing like this would've been swallowed up by Queen's Country long ago. She's from somewhere else."

The guard was circling around her chair now and Winona turned her head slightly, her heart beat slamming itself around between her ears, fearfully watching and waiting—anticipating—another punch, another grab, another hit—

She cried out painfully when his gloved fist bundled itself in her hair and yanked hard, causing her to fold over the back of her chair at the curve of her neck to her shoulders. Her back arched in her chair, trying to overcompensate for the rough angle she was being pulled into while her stomach still hurt from being punched.

"You see she's got barely a mark on her? No scars, radiation damage... got every single one of her teeth, too, all clean and straight. She's a scrawny twig, sure, but she's still gotta be the damn healthiest lookin' person I've ever seen 'round here, even compared to Mourey in 9B."

"Maybe if we start pulling those pretty little teeth of hers, she'll start telling us what we wanna hear." The second one replied with a bantering tone. "After all, she only needs her tongue t'talk."

"I think that's enough of that." Mister Burke responded as he stepped forward in their circle, parting them down the middle to stand mere inches from Winona. His eyes skimmed over the edge of his spectacles in silent demand and the hand in her hair was immediately released, dropping her back in the chair when he cut the young guard with a warning look. "I'd like a moment to speak with her. Alone."

"You know I can't allow that, Burke." Gustavo warned with his arms folding tightly over his chest. "It's against security protocol... especially with the thing's she's said against you."

"I only humbly ask that I may speak with her privately. Do you think I'm idiotic enough to do something to her when you know full well it's only her and I in this room?" He insisted in a bemused voice with his eyes trained down upon her again. "Besides, as I understand, you still have peace to maintain with the masses, correct? And if that doesn't strike your fancy, I have the obligation of reminding you that you owe me that favor still."

"...God dammit, fine," He answered begrudgingly after a moment of contemplation twisting his usually cool expression, and added on sternly; "You have five minutes, Burke. Her claims about Megaton better not have any merit, or else you'll be taking her place in that chair. We go back a ways but I still have a job to do."

"I would be disappointed if you provided anything less then doing your job." He responded with a sharpened eye pinned on Winona, and she was too terrified to counter him in the lingering presence of Gustavo. The three security guards left without another word, and some moments of silence passed after the door lock clicked before he spoke again. "How, exactly, did you do it? Kill Tenpenny? Explain it to me, if you'd be so kind."

Winona's mouth was too tight to move, being locked by her fear and it opened silently before shutting again.
"...Ta- Taser... I had a high-precision la- laser pen that I took apart and turned into a taser, from some parts I had with me... a- and a fe- few I took from Godfrey that he didn't need to keep functioning properly." She swallowed. "Plugged it into the power core of my Pip-Boy and it was as easy as pressing a button."

"Was there intent to kill?" He inquired. "Did you create it with the intent of critically injuring or killing someone?"

Winona had no way of properly measuring the ampage her makeshift taser could produce... but she knew in some cases one milliamp could be lethal, it all depended on different variables such as person's health, age, weight, her precision in where she put the sparking end of her invention... even unexpected variables such as skin moisture. It was the only thing she could pressure her exhausted brain into producing as a last minute resort to protect herself. She didn't know if she made it with the intent of using it to just incapacitate someone or to actually kill them.

At least, not until she heard Tenpenny's jovial laughter as a water beggar below, too far for her to visibly make out, was being torn into by some awkwardly moving dot of a creature, or person, or whatever it was; she gave that man one of the last bottles of clean water she had, despite Burke's warnings to think of her own survival above others, and looked away pitifully when the beggar sucked down every last drop just to vomit it back up. He hadn't eaten anything in days and couldn't keep the water down... and it was one of the most heartbreaking things she had ever seen in her life.

She didn't know if her intentions were to debilitate or to kill when she used it on the wickedly heartless Allistair Tenpenny... but then she was certain when she used it on Burke—this man that she loathed as much as she feared.

"I've only ever made one invention in my life that was meant to hurt someone and he deserved it," Winona responded in a low mutter of admission as she thought of Wally Mack, speaking as if she were only talking to herself. "...I don't build things with the intention of hurting someone. Not before him. Not before Tenpenny. That isn't the kind of inventor I wanted to be, but I didn't have any choice... I—... I couldn't rig the bomb in Megaton... I didn't have a plan, I didn't—... I didn't know what to do."

She lifted her head to show the gaining hate in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter anymore. I disabled the bomb and I got rid of the charge, so no matter what happens to me right now—no matter what you'll do to me or what they will—the bomb's nothing but a several ton paperweight."

"I suspected as much." Mister Burke replied, causing her expression to still and her eyes to go wide in shock.

"I—...wait, you—? What?"

"Not until later, of course—when it was too late to change the course of history. I had my doubts but I considered that with the odds against you—no one to tell that was formidable enough to challenge me, I had one of your most prized possessions, and apparently, finding your father is a very important task to you—I surmised that you'd have no choice but to do as I instructed if you wanted to survive the night. But when I went inside to retrieve the remote for the charge... something in me had changed. I knew. The timing was too perfect, the air too still, something was off. Coupled with how regrettably sloppy my follow up was, I should have surmised that this was all bound to happen."

"...The timing. After that grand speech of 'politics' and false idols and the harm religion causes and
the repeating of history, you're resigned to timing? After the way you talked about Megaton, wanting to blow it up, saying they deserved it because they were the perfect example to use—?" She retorted with a steadily increasing anger and her fear quickly forgotten and she issued a laugh of utter disbelief. "Oh my God, you're insane! You really are!"

"That town—that breeding ground of lies they called a 'church'—took away one of the most important people I had ever loved." Mister Burke explained with an acidic calmness. "Have you ever had the only good thing in your life taken from you? It rips something out of you so violently, nothing will ever hope to regrow in its place. You become as barren and hostile as the Capital Herself because that's the only way you could survive."

Winona was drawn quiet at his passionate and pained words with her eyes unable to meet his. When she finally did, there was an indescribable sadness in the blue pools of his eyes where they sat in the strict, emotionless frame of his expression.

She was angry that she pitied him.

"I lived in Megaton a long time ago, when the Church of Atom was one of the first few official settlers around that bomb. I knew Confessor Cromwell, the man who runs the Church of Atom, from back then—he became a valuable ally in the building of Megaton and was given permission to stay because he befriended Confessor Momsen, who ran the church at the time. Cromwell was brainwashed shortly after being admitted... and Momsen needed unquestioning sheep in his loyalists to spread the word of their prophet. That's how they found Angelica and convinced her to drink of their waters and pray in the radiation."

Mister Burke paused in his speaking to lean against the wall nearest to her with his arms crossed tightly over his chest, looking down at the points of his shoes in idleness as we went on.

"Sadly, she fell victim to the backwater spittle those acolytes claimed was scripture. She was constantly trying to make sense of this life... of why we were here and why these things happened to us, and in her weakness she became their prey. When we found out she was pregnant, Confessor Momsen convinced her that to conceive in the church would be the highest honor she could receive—that she could birth Atom Himself. The flock of Atom knowingly jeopardized my wife and my child. They refused to let me see Angelica until she was already gone."

...That's why he hates Megaton. It's because of the church—blowing up this thing they worshiped would've been poetic justice. Winona realized solemnly.

"If it wasn't for Cromwell, my wife wouldn't have been in the church that day. He followed Momsen's orders and took her there, even though he later on admitted that he knew he shouldn't have. His cowardice cost me Angelica. And when she died, what did Megaton do? How did the town respond? By doing nothing. Called it unfortunate circumstance and allowed the church to stay." Burke's eyes turned up to her, removing the fedora from his head to clasp it in a wide palm. "They almost cost me my daughter, as well."

Is he saying that his kid survived? Winona wondered, staring at him with an expression that was clear parts stunned and utterly confused. I saw the bomb, I couldn't get anywhere near it without my Pip-Boy clicking and feeling my toes tingling... and she was around it while pregnant. She was drinking the bomb water. How'd she not lose their baby?

"I can see you're confused. We all were when Elizabeta was given a bill of strangely good health... it was nothing short of a miracle—until it became a calamity. She was plagued with ungodly amounts of radiation and yet she didn't die. She didn't get sick, she wasn't affected by it in any
manner and we couldn't figure out how this was possible. We even had a radiation specialist come and see her when she was 8 months old—some ghoul from Underworld—and he'd never seen anything like Elizabeta's case... until she turned one, and then she began to 'ghoulify', as Wastelanders crudely call it. By the time she was 6, she had fully turned. That's when I left Megaton. Ghouls, as you may have noticed, aren't particularly welcomed in very many settlements."

Winona was pale now as Burke straightened up from the wall and came to her side, dropping to one knee beside the chair. His hands tended to the zip-ties that kept her bound to her chair with a small flick knife he produced from his pants pocket. He cut them away and then offered a hand to her to help her out of the chair when he was up on his own feet. Reluctant at first, she took it after a moment's consideration. Her midsection was sore and queasy, and she still felt a little dizzy from the abuse she took to the head, otherwise.

"...What happened to her? Your daughter?" She finally asked as she tended to her wrists, refusing to look up at him. She didn't want to feel sorry for him, he didn't deserve the pity after everything he did to her within the last few days.

"Tenpenny shot her." He responded in a voice that was so matter-of-factly it sent a distinguishable chill down her arms and her eyes snapped back to his own. "We were traveling to the west border, taking the main road that intersected with the Tower. He has—had—a fascination with ghouls in particular in that 'Wasteland Safari' of his."

"You worked for the man that killed your daughter?" She asked, frowning. "Why?"

"Because it was the only way I could get Allistair Tenpenny to trust me." He replied with a morbid kind of simpleness. "I had to get him to trust me if I wanted to have access to all he held dear in his life. For over 20 years I watched, and I waited, collecting what information I could that would help me... I discovered the whereabouts of his last remaining family in the United Kingdom, a son here in the Capital that followed him overseas, delicate business dealings that would have turned every last cap in his bank to ash... but in the end, I had gotten too close. I suppose the better word to use is 'comfortable'. It's the type of comfort that makes you think that you can forget about the past, wanting to forget it for the better... and I might have, if you hadn't come along and, gladly, done the deed for me."

"I wouldn't say I was happy about it." She could feel her abhorrent disgust rising in her again. "And it was an accident, I didn't mean to kill him!"

"What's done is done, my dear, and for the better... though I suppose in thanks to you, Megaton's safe for another day for another bored Allistair Tenpenny." Mister Burke mused with the upward tilt of his chin and a glance toward the door. A solemn thought seemed to be fabricating itself in his eyes right before her. "...I was honest when I said I had no knowledge of rigging the fusion pulse charge to the bomb, it was something beyond my level of expertise. When I relayed this back to Tenpenny, it was agreed that we'd need to find someone who could attach the charge without prematurely setting it off, and so the work was left to me to find that person. That's when I happened to find you and your expertise with technology made you a prime candidate. Right place, wrong time, my dear."

"You're a bastard," Winona was horribly grimacing now, wanting to do nothing more than punch him in the face and make him swallow his teeth. "None of this had to be this way! If you had killed Tenpenny when you should have—if you let yourself move on instead of letting this turn to—turn to obsession—you were going to kill so many innocent people by detonating the bomb just to level the church!"
"When you've lost everything as I have, when you've failed your loved ones by allowing yourself to be complacent, you'll understand." Mister Burke answered while turning to the door, and he gestured for her to follow. "The politics of the world up here are much different from the politics of your world down there... many of us wholly believe in the 'eye for an eye' ideology, and you'd do well to remember that. Mercy is for those who don't have the courage to do what they need to to survive."

"I would've believed you if destroying Megaton had anything to do with survival." She argued with a hand holding her bruised stomach. He said nothing in response. "...I don't care about this anymore. I assume you're not going to kill me if you're letting me go."

"Indeed." He stopped at the door, hand upon the handle, to open it. "You're free to leave the tower. However, if you decide to stay, I'll help you locate your father."

"And why should I trust you after everything that happened? After everything you did to me? What even makes you think I can stay after what happened to Tenpenny?" She exclaimed.

"You've done me a service in dispatching Tenpenny—and there'll always be another day for Megaton's demise."

"You can't possibly think that this'll work out. I told the guards you were a part of it. No one can look at me and not see a—..."

"A murderer?"

"I didn't murder him!"

"On the contrary, it's simpler than you're making it out to be. You'll change your statement to Gustavo and I'll hand over the evidence of Tenpenny's plans concerning Megaton and claim that I hadn't a clue as to what he was up to. In return, our initial deal will remain," He turned away but stopped when she didn't follow, and gestured again for her to come after him. She reluctantly did so as she was still unsure. What if this was a trick? "You'll have a permanent place here in Tenpenny Tower. You'll be compensated for killing Tenpenny for me—and you deny killing him, but that is exactly what you did."

"It was an accident." Winona claimed tersely as she turned her eyes away as they began to tear up along with a rising panic inflating in her chest. She couldn't think that she actually killed a man—she wasn't capable of doing something like that! That wasn't the type of person that she was, or could be!

"Then explain this to me, Winona. What did you expect to come of electrocuting a man of nearly 90 with a tasing device that incapacitated a man in top shape and health like myself for, what I was told, nearly an hour?" Mister Burke eyed her curiously over the rim of his tortoiseshell frames. "You can't think that you used your invention of him with the intent of only to put him to sleep... and I am under the impression that you actually tried to kill me, correct?"

The inventor refused to look back at him with her hands limp at either of her sides. Tears were surging in her eyes as she stared blankly at the floor, trying to rush accusatory thoughts out of her mind because she didn't want to think—to actually believe—that she killed someone. She felt such contempt for Wally Mack in assaulting her and the laser pen had been made with the intention of protection, but then she evolved it and utilized it on someone with the intent of injuring them to the possible point of fatality.

Telling herself that Allistair deserved it quelled her turmoil very little. She thought of Megaton—of
Moira Brown, of poor sweet Gob, of the children she saw chasing each other about the catwalks and dirt paths, playing in the water sprays of pipe leaks on the particularly hot day, of Sherriff Simms with his son—and realized that Allistair surviving could have meant the deaths of all of them.

She didn't want to think about it anymore.

"Know that whatever happens after today, I still won't trust you." She replied instead of answering his question.

"You'd do well to remember that I certainly can't be trusted. After all, I'm mainly allowing you place here because you've proven that you could surprise me. You have potential, Miss Parker, and consider me excited to see what the future has in store for you." He responded on a chuckle, as if he found her bite to be endearing. "We'll consider this an equal partnership of opportunity. Expect nothing from me and I expect nothing from you outside of what we've outlined."

She followed him back in to the lobby where Gustavo sat at the desk with the two guards from earlier. The one with the coffee, who was still nursing it while listening to a debrief from his superior, was the first to see her. His mug was dropped to the floor in shock upon seeing her on the heels of Mister Burke... and she would've smiled if it wasn't for her sore face from where she was smacked around.

"Trust me, that works just fine." Winona concluded in finality.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew! Did anyone expect that ending? I hope not, haha!

Next week Friday we'll be checking back in with Butch's side of things, of course. To give you all a heads up, there's a possibility (not for sure!) that I'll be taking a short hiatus after chapter 32. I wanted to hit 200k words (HOLY CRAP) and told myself I'd take a short break to power through writing more chapters and then I'll be back. If this hiatus is for certain, you'll be notified in the author's notes of next Friday's chapter of when the break will start and when to expect seeing me back.

It'll be a short break, promise! Until then, hope to see your comments, I so enjoy reading them~ c:

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
Butch sat on the bedroom floor of his apartment, the Pip-Boy on his wrist playing the vault's music on a low volume for some calming background noise as he sharpened his switchblade with steady hands. He'd been using his Toothpick a lot lately between the clinic, stabbing roaches, and just goofing with it to ease his troubled mind... so his baby was getting real dull real quick. She'd need a little tune up soon to make sure she'd keep running just as smoothly as the day he got her.

Leaning his head back to hold the blade up to the dim light, he ran the flat of his thumb along the edge to feel the biting sharpness. When he was satisfied with the work done so far, he set Toothpick down along with the sharpener to unzip his suit down to his navel and shucked off the sleeves. The torso of his jumpsuit lazily pooled around his waist so he was in his under tank, and he kicked off his boots before leaning back against his bed frame to stare up at the lit ceiling in thought.

It felt like so long ago since Winona left... and perhaps a month was short to some people, but to him it wasn't, and things for the dwellers didn't look like they were going to get better anytime soon. Stanley was downstairs clocking on overtime without Winona, Paul, and even Floyd (overrun by radroaches, rest in peace you squirrelly bastard) around to ease the work load. The old maintenance worker couldn't be in 15 places at the same time and was constantly being run ragged by all the work and repairs that needed to be done, that were critical in keeping the vault afloat for a little while longer... but for what purpose, he didn't know. Three reactors fried, radroaches were chewing through everything and using the scrap to make their nests, sections of the vault (even ones in frequent use) were being shut down on a revolving time table to help conserve what little energy they had and it was just a big fucking mess. Old Lady Palmer reasoned that it wouldn't be long before the purifier finally buckled, or the last greenhouse would dry up, leaving them with very little food and no renewable resources for nourishment.

Of course, the vault population dwindled significantly in the last almost two weeks, so Butch hoped that meant they could stretch out supplies longer unless roaches or some hungry asshole got
to most of it.

The crematorium was probably clocking on overtime, too. Butch heard there were still bodies lying around that they were too busy to pick up—but it distracted the radroaches from the population that were still alive. Just last week, he had gone down there for Paul's funeral. Despite their time constraints, Lance and Emile let him have a moment of silence for his fellow Tunnel Snake before putting him in the oven. He was burned with his Tunnel Snakes jacket draped over his body and it was the only thing he'd think Paul would want with him in the afterlife (other than some good liquor but shit that wouldn't burn well), and he didn't feel right about keeping it with him. Butch didn't want that constant reminder of Paul's bitten up and bloody leather jacket with him; after the brief ceremony was over, he struggled with the tears until he was home and could freely cry there without anyone judging and claiming him to be weak because real men don't cry, even when their best friend and den brother die. They pour a drink, take a sip, and move on.

So why couldn't he?

'Cause it's all my fuckin' fault. Butch's mental voice hissed tiredly at him as he turned and picked up Toothpick off his bed, thumbing the blade rather than going back to sharpening her again. If I didn't tell Paulie t'go downstairs, he wouldn't've died. I'm sorry, Paulie... sorry, man... sorry I got'cha into this mess and didn't bail 'ya back out. Sorry I wasn't there when 'ya kicked the bucket, man.

Butch's bedroom was suddenly feeling pretty cramped and he got to his feet, where he tied the sleeves of his jumpsuit tightly around his waist. Closing up Toothpick, he tucked the clip onto his arm-knotted belt and idly smoothed his hands back over his hair. It didn't have the a fresh coat of pomade combed into it, as the last time he styled it was about two days ago, so the front curl was partially hanging in his face, and keeping up a polished appearance hadn't been on his To-Do List as of late. After stepping into his boots, he walked out of his bedroom and glanced to his mother's open bedroom door, debating on whether or not to go in and say he was going out or just leaving without a word.

With the vault's alcohol supply down (Butch sneakily suggested the infirmary take whatever was left that they could use, like Dr. Parker once tried to do), his mother was jonesing and she was jonesing bad; she was constantly shaking like someone hooked up a fission battery to her, sweating so much she soaked through two of her jumpsuits and throwing her into cold and quick showers didn't help. When she was awake, which was definitely more often than ever before, she suffered from nausea or headaches or both and became generally pissy about everything... even barking at him for things like 'breathing too loudly' or 'making a dumb face' at something.

It was only Day 3.

Against his better judgment, he went into his mother's dark room to see her starfished on her stomach and sleeping deeply. It was the only thing she could do to ride out her one long, perpetual hangover, but not being able to go to sleep and stay asleep would typically add to her already irritable mood. He came to the dresser to check the Roach Repellent Remote (as he coined it) to make sure the battery wasn't dry and then kissed his mother's sweaty forehead.

"Love 'ya... be back in a bit, okay? Won't be far." He muttered, ensuring he didn't wake her up though she stirred momentarily before he went to the door.

"Ro- Robbie—?" A small, parched voice called behind him when he took a single step out of the room. Returning his gaze back to his mother, she could barely lift her head to turn an eye over her shoulder to look at him. His heart was sunk into a deep place that he couldn't reach at being called by his old man's nickname. His mom would remind him constantly in less than ideal situations that...
he reminded her so much of his dad... but this was the first time she actually confused the both of them.

He couldn't blame her, though. She wasn't doing too hot.

"Just me, 'ma." Butch replied as he came back to her side and fixed the covers over her. "It's your Butchie. Go back t'sleep, alright?"

"Mnmm—... how you doin', baby?" She slurred with sleep and rested her head on the damp pillow again. "You doin' okay?... You're eating, aren't you? Taking care of yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm eatin' fine. Want me t'bring 'ya somethin'?" He asked as he brushed a gentle hand over her hair and she closed her eyes, cooing softly from the calming attention.

"No. I'd just throw it back up." His mother gave a pained chuckle and shifted her trembling body slightly under her heavy covers. "You going out?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna check on everyone at the clinic."

"That's real nice of you, baby. You're a good kid." Her small hand peeked out from under the edge of the covers to weakly reach for him and he gladly took it into his palm. "Say hi to everyone for me."

"Will do, 'ma. Trash can's on the floor here if you needa throw up again. I'll bring 'ya more water and some crackers, alright? 'Ya gotta eat something." Butch leaned over and kissed the top of her head again before detaching, leaving her to sleep.

That was the nicest she'd been to him since her withdrawals started and it was the closest sliver he had of his mother in forever. When he got to the clinic, he'd dig around for some Fixer and hope it'd help make the withdrawals easier to cope with.

Shutting her bedroom door behind him for added protection, and then the front door after that when he exited into the hall, he started walking. The trek to the clinic felt shorter and shorter each time he walked the same exact path, coupled with his constantly distracted thoughts. There were so many things he struggled with and was trying to reason in his mind, like what Wally did to Amata and the death of the Tunnel Snakes, and what going outside would be like, and, from time to time, wondering what Winona was doing. He hoped outside was treating her okay, but he wasn't too worried; out of most everyone down in the vault, she was one of the few people that he expected to be able to get shit done because she was fierce as hell and was twice as stubborn when she needed to be.

*Maybe Palmer knows what it's like up there,* he reasoned. *She's the oldest fossil 'round here. She'd know if Parker'd be okay or not.*

When Butch entered the main walkway leading to the infirmary, there was a sharp pitch of a scream that kept him from taking another step. The shriek was followed by uncontrollable sobbing and he immediately thought of Amata and her injuries. He quickened his pace and rounded the corner to find Dolly standing outside of the infirmary, leaning a shoulder into the doorway with her head peering in.

"What're you doin' here?" Butch grimaced upon seeing his ex.

"Well, I ain't here for your no good ass, if that's what you're asking." She retorted with her red painted lips curling under flaring nostrils. "I was in the neighborhood, what's it to you?"
"Didn't realize the neighborhood was that damn small." He snapped as he looked in to see Susie and Old Lady Palmer busying about someone sitting on a gurney. He disregarded Dolly for the time being and went in. "What's goin' on in here?"

On the gurney between them sat a writhing Christine Kendall, alternating between mournful wailing and screams of agonizing pain. Susie was comforting her while Old Lady Palmer was pouring water over her wounds and dabbing at them with sterilized bandages. From the fingertips to the middle of her right forearm was burned, and on her left the damage went all the way up to her elbow joint. Her afflicted limbs looked like Hell personified, with patches of missing skin where they sloughed off from the flesh and muscle, and whatever remained was riddled with red and white skin bubbles and blisters, like she'd been roasted. A brown-red hardened looking crust cuffed the end of each burn on her arms, and three of her five fingernails were missing from her left hand. Butch could make out singed parts of her eyebrows and ends of her hair where it was fried black and frayed or misshapen looking, and parts of her jumpsuit had smoldering holes burned through the industrial fabric.

It made his own arms feel squeamish and he had to shake the feeling off or else he was going to vomit. He averted his eyes.

"Jesus Christ—..." Was all he could say, and even then he tried not to speak too loudly.

"I co- couldn't save th- the- them—!" Christine wailed through her screams at Old Lady Palmer tried to clean the sizzling wounds as best as she could. "It was t- too hot—oh m- my God, they died r- ri- right in front of m- me—! I could hear little Monica screaming!"

"...Christine's apartment caught fire," Susie explained solemnly to Butch as she kept trying to comfort her hysterical cousin, her own eyes dappled with tears from more of her family dying. "Her mom and little sister were still inside..."

"I'm s- so sorry, mom!" Christine sobbed. "Moni- nica! Oh my God!"

"She has severe second degree burns." Old Lady Palmer gave a fretful sigh. "There's nothing I can do but clean her up and inject her with a few stims and some Med-X for the pain... but it'll still take a while to fully heal, and she'll be left with the scars."

"There's really nothing you can do—?" Susie asked worriedly, rubbing Christine's back slowly through her sobbing.

"My knowledge of medicine's limited—and what I do know is just from what I remember. My daughter was better at these sorts of things than I am." Old Lady Palmer admitted morosely as she poured more cool water over Christine's wounds, making her cry out loudly again and try to writhe away, forcing Susie to firmly hold her in place.

Shit, man... Paul's dead, Kendall got burned, and Amata got the nag kicked right outta her. The fuck's next? Hope Wally gets his, the bastard, or the Overseer. Butch lamented with some anger as he turned away to go back outside, shutting the door once he was out in the hall. He couldn't stand hearing Christine's screams anymore or seeing the state of her hands—it was too much.

"Didn't think that old bat'd still be flappin' around," Dolly commented when she heard Old Lady Palmer's voice and leaned against the window outside the clinic, watching him. Her hands were tucked into her Tunnel Snakes jacket pockets with framing thumbs.

"Watch it, Dolly." He snapped defensively with a weak glare.
"Geeze, what's your problem?" She grumbled and leaned away from the window to come to his side. "Where you been hiding, Butchie? Haven't seen Wally or Paul 'round, either."

"Wally's gone psycho. He's joinin' up with the bastard Overseer." Butch grimaced as he idly kicked at a piece of debris on the floor, watching it bounce off the wall before skittering away.

"Wally's doin' what now?" Dolly frowned with paper thin eyebrows. "That fucking rat! What the hell's he think he's doing? When I get my hands on him—!"

"Don't go near him." Butch firmly warned. Wally was worse than a lose cannon right now, he was a loose fucking nuke—and though he hated Dolly and found her childish, annoying, manipulative, and possessive, he didn't want the same thing happening to her that happened to Amata. Wally wouldn't listen to reason anymore and the only people who deserved that kind of abuse were folks that were unforgivable.

"Well, then what's gunna happen to the Tunnel Snakes, huh? What's that big dummy Paul gotta say 'bout all this?"

"There ain't any more Tunnel Snakes, you stupid broad!" He boomed angrily at her at the mention of Paul and she flinched away more in surprise than insult. "It's God damn over! Wally's kissin' Overseer ass and Paul's dead!"

Dolly's face softened at his exclamation and he could feel his shoulders trembling, fists clutched so tightly at his sides his knuckles were grinding under the skin, leaving it thin and white. God damn he wasn't going to do this in front of Dolly of all people—he wasn't going to bend and show just how broken up he was about Paul's death, especially after all the things he said to her the last time they saw each other. Paul was the better man of the three of them. He had a good heart, a genuinely good heart and he was a truly good person, and he didn't deserve to die; he was a loyal brother that did nothing but what he could to make the Tunnel Snakes proud and Butch was gone when he needed to be there most. In the night when he'd try to go to sleep, he'd wonder if Paul was scared and in pain in his final moments, or if he slept on into that final peace.

Butch hoped it was peaceful because it was the only thing that relieved a very miniscule measure of his guilt from his soul; he caused Paul's death and then let him down, he knew he did, and he felt worse in knowing that Paul would never have blamed him for any of it. He would've smiled and said it was fine and asked if Butch wanted to get a drink the next time they met up again.

He missed his best friend more than he could say... a significant piece of him was taken so suddenly that it left a gaping hole that he didn't know how to fill or fix. He felt like he lost family.

Dolly's arms were suddenly flung around his shoulders and she was tightly embracing him, her own shoulders shaking slightly. Butch couldn't push her away, he didn't have the strength in him as his arms went slack at his sides defeatedly, and that only caused her to pull him in tighter. The last Tunnel Snake still despised her with every part of himself but God dammit he needed someone—anyone—to comfort him, and show him it was okay to not be okay... and Dolly was convenient enough. She was always convenient enough, as if that was her only place in life.

"I'm sorry, Butchie. That knucklehead was a good guy. We didn't deserve him." She muttered into his shoulder, tightening her hold on him a moment longer before withdrawing and looking up into his face. "...This scene fucking bites. Wanna get fucking plastered? My treat. Got some bourbon and Nuka-Cola back at my place with your name on it, if ya want me to bring it over."

"...Sure. But later, Dolly. Maybe. Got some shit I gotta do 'round here, first."
"Well—don't keep me waiting on 'ya, then." She responded tersely with her hands back in her pockets after they recoiled from him. "...Gotta get goin', anyway. Don't be a stranger alright? The Tunnel Snakes ain't dead 'cause there's still you and me. We'll run this vault again one day."

"Not much of a vault left t'run." He retorted. Was she that stupid, or was she just trying to be hopeful and sincere? To him, it didn't matter anymore because too much had changed for the Tunnel Snakes to get a proper foothold in 101 again; now there were worse things to be than getting harassed by a few greaser nobodies snapping their way out of the shadows. You could be alone with all your loved ones dead, you could be injured, or constantly terrified, or dying, or you could just be fucking dead already.

Yeah, there were worse things to be than being pushed around by some snotty leather-clad vault brats.

Butch was looking through the infirmary window to see Old Lady Palmer finally hitting up Christine with a few well placed stimpaks along her arms. She was still crying into Susie's neck about her mother and sister, and he heard some muffled words about not knowing where her father was and if he was okay. Amata was still in the back office resting with the door shut, and the majority of them (actually, just Butch) kept from visiting her while she healed. Considering Wally was the one who played kick the can with her as the unwilling tin can, he didn't think his presence would be much appreciated around her, especially coupled with Susie's reaction in just thinking Butch had something to do with the assault. However, after Susie told them that Amata's hair was literally yanked out of her scalp, Butch wanted to do something to help—maybe try and get her looking okay again, since he was trained as a barber after all. Back in the hair salon he watched his mentor, Gina, tend to a lot of female dwellers that obviously came from abusive households; he remembered one instance of Gloria Mack coming in asking for her hair to be cut as short as it could be without looking like a boy. When Gina tried to convince her to get pin curls done instead and keep the length so she looked 'more youthful', Gloria broke down into tears and demanded that it be short so her husband couldn't get a good hold on it anymore.

That day made a mark in his memory that could never be removed... and Butch now understood how Susie could have possibly known that Amata had been dragged around by her hair. She must've seen it happen to her own mom a countless amount of times.

"I'll see you around, Butchie." Dolly spoke quietly when he said nothing else to her, and she kissed his cheek close to his mouth before walking past him to return to the living quarters. "You know where to find me when 'ya change your mind about that drink."

But Butch DeLoria had already checked out of the conversation and barely noticed Dolly leaving—he was still looking through the infirmary window to the closed office door, thinking about Amata and how he'd try and talk to her.

Butch walked back into the clinic some two hours later, after doing a diner run to get food and water supplies for himself and his mother—just enough to last them about two weeks, along with a few extra water bottles to take up to the women at the infirmary. After delivering the food to his mother, making sure she ate what she could and was able to keep it down, he was now passing out the collected water to Old Lady Palmer, Susie, and Christine back at the infirmary.

"Thank you, Butch. This was very sweet of you." Old Lady Palmer commented with kind gratitude and a tired smile she could barely conjure. He always had a hard time taking thanks since he rarely heard it directed at him. Instead he silently shrugged a shoulder.

"Amata awake?"
"Off and on," Susie answered as she sipped her water, sitting on the floor next to Christine, where she rested on a floored mattress with her arms and fingers all bandaged up. "We check on her once in a while. Why?"

"I dunno. Thought I'd give her a haircut or something." He mused aloud.

"Is that some kind of sick joke?" Susie frowned in response as she got up to her feet. "She barely has any hair left, jackass!"

"Christ, Mack, I wasn't tryna be an asshole!" He countered defensively. "Just thought—shit, forget it, you wouldn't get it."

"What even makes you think Amata would want to be around you after what Wally did? I don't care if you say you're not friends with him anymore, I don't believe you. You've been a liar since we were kids." She crossed her arms over her chest with a hateful glare locked on his face. "Why are you even here? You keep coming by the clinic when you have no business around here. Are you working for the Overseer?"

"What? You did not just fuckin' say that—" He grimaced with a readied middle finger salute. "Fuck you, Susie! I ain't gotta explain shit to you, I do what I want and go where I want! And I don't answer t'nobody, not the Overseer, and not you!'Sides, I don't think 'ya gotta leg t'stand on, homewrecker!"

"That's enough, you two!" Old Lady Palmer cried as she took a bracing stance between the two of them just as Susie's face turned an angry, flaming red and a wary frown came to the older woman's heavily wrinkled face. "Stop it! We don't have the luxury of bickering with one another anymore."

She then turned to Butch with a hand tucking her hair back out of her small, glinting eyes. "Butch, I think it's sweet of you to want to help Amata... but not right now. Perhaps when she's healed better—"

"I wouldn't've let Wally do somethin' like that!" He barked angrily but it was directed mainly at Susie. He was not going to be the bad guy here! Not again! "Butch DeLoria ain't the type a'guy that thinks it's okay t'smack around girls—I've seen this kinda shit, it's fucked up. I'd never want that to happen to anyone, even to Amata!"

"And here you had everyone thinking that you hated her! Her and Winona the Weirdo!" Susie exclaimed. "You picked on the both of them for years, don't even try and deny it."

"Don't you fuckin' talk about Parker like that," He growled and Susie was immediately stunned to silence. "Amata was Wally's target anyway, not mine. He was all fuckin' pissy 'cause he couldn't boink her, and then all the shit with Stevie happened, and—and shit Tunnel Snakes don't run like that. We shoved people around, we didn't drag them by their hair and beat the livin' hell outta them!"

"It's not Butch's fault." A hoarse voice muttered from the office, and the three—he, Susie, and Old Lady Palmer—looked over in surprise to see Amata slumped against the open office door, barely able to keep herself upright. To Butch, she actually looked worse than before when she was brought in by Susie. She was blue and purple almost all over with her arm in a sling and splint, her face bloated, skin almost translucent looking with red splotches and her eyelids were still so swollen she could only partially open one of her eyes. Some of her remaining hair fell around her face in thin black tendrils, and a clean jumpsuit that was too big for her hung off at her hips as she took a stumbling step forward in only socked feet. He was amazed at how she was able to even stand let alone move.
"Dearie, you shouldn't be up and around!" Old Lady Palmer insisted as she rushed over to the injured young woman, guiding her back to her own floor mattress. "Come on, now—lay back down, that's it..."

Butch watched the two women whispering quietly back and forth to one another, unable to make out what either of them were mumbling to each other with Palmer shaking her head as if telling Amata 'no' to something. He had enough today—seeing Christine roasted up, seeing Dolly, being forced to emotionally confront Paul's death yet again—and then Susie accusing him of having some part in Amata's brutalization? He wasn't a psychopath, he was just a schoolyard bully avoiding his own crippling insecurities. Wally was in a league all his own with almost every man that the Mack Madhouse spat out over the years.

"Whatever. I'm outta here." Butch grrouchily spoke aloud to himself and turned to the door to leave, wishing to depart with some barbed remark at Susie, because she had the gall to call him the liar? Now that's a case of the slut calling the bully black. Sure as hell, he wouldn't be back any time soon if that's what they thought of him.

"Butch! Bu- Butch, wait—" The voice behind him was Old Lady Palmer, and he probably wouldn't have stopped for anyone else that asked him to stay. "Amata wants to talk to you."

"...She does?" He responded in a slightly surprised deadpan and turned back to the elderly woman. "Why?"

"You'll just have to go see, now, won't you?" She smiled lightly before going to Susie. "Susie, why don't you and I go for a run down to the cafeteria? See if we can bring back some dinner for everyone."

Susie, who gave Butch a stinging look, nodded reluctantly and followed Old Lady Palmer out of the infirmary. She waved goodbye to Christine on her way out and promised to be back quickly before shutting the door behind them. Butch, who stood in the middle of the clinic, mentally pulling himself between going to Amata and just leaving because damn was he annoyed now—but then he went right into the back clinic office to talk to her when his curiosity got the best of him. The lights were off, as the whole infirmary and hospitality sector had been turned off for the next several hours for power conservation.

"What's up?" He asked as he leaned a shoulder into the doorway and kicked one leg back behind him, all his weight going into one leg and his leaning arm.

"Close the door." Amata ordered, and with a grumbling breath, he did so. "...Have you talked to Wally at all?"

"Who's askin'?"

"I'm asking. It's about Stevie." She turned her head slightly as if trying to look at him, but with her swollen eyes he couldn't quite tell. "...I heard he passed away."

"Yeah. He's a goner. Sounds like he deserved it, too, for beatin' the crap outta Jonas."

"How's Susie taking it?"

"I dunno. Always trynna pick fights with me and shit, so I guess she's doin' okay. Otherwise she wouldn't be actin' like her normal bitchy self." He idly scratched his chin as he slumped back against the wall with his arms folded over his chest, his eyes rolling around the darkened room in observation. It was still a trashed dump, but after he picked everything up off the floor and
rearranged the furniture, there was a lot of room and it looked better than before.

*Forgot 'bout that safe in the wall...* Butch mused to himself when he saw it again. *Gotta see about gettin' in there, somehow.*

"And you haven't seen Wally?" Amata asked quietly.

"Look, Amata, the bastard could trip over a fuckin' knife and I wouldn't give a shit. That answer your question for 'ya?"

"Butch, the last thing I need right now is your lip." Her physical weakness made the acid in her voice sound almost pathetic and Butch felt a little bad for being a sarcastic dick just because of his bad mood. Amata, out of anyone else in that moment, didn't deserve it. *Please just answer my question?"

"...He's been actin' like a roach for months now, okay? Even before everythin' even went t'hell. Then Parker popped Stevie, and—"

"Wait, you think—" She began to sit up, groaning in pain under a breath behind clenched teeth. "Is that what Wally told you? That Winnie murdered Stevie?"

"Shit, would'ja lay down?" Butch responded as he came over and knelt beside her bed with a hand against her shoulder, pushing her back onto the mattress as gently as he could. "Even when you're a mess 'ya don't know when t'quit."

"Butch, please—"

"I dunno, alright?" He sighed as he plopped down beside her with his back aligned with the wall. He strung his legs out in front of him where they crossed at the ankle and his arms folded tightly over his stomach. "He told me Stevie got shot and I figured Parker did it... she told me 'bout Jonas."

"I—... I can't believe she told you that..." Amata shuddered through a breath that sounded like she was trying not to cry. Her eyelids fluttered slightly as if she were closing them. "...It was awful... it was awful having to see him like that."

"...You saw Jonas?..."

She nodded once silently and her left eye opened a fraction as best it could. He saw tears beginning to form through the indistinguishable crease of her eyelids and her bottom lip was trembling, one tear finally rolling over to disappear into her hairline.

"I heard the whole thing. My father let Stevie murder him... Freddie's dad was there. So was Officer Hannon Sr. and a few others I couldn't make out. Maybe Wolfe? But it could've been Officer Richards, I don't know." Her eye closed again and her bottom lip trembled more, her head twisting away just enough from him to hide her tears even though he wasn't looking at her. She sniffled before continuing. "I saw his bo- body. Jonas'. Winona did, too."

"Shit... that's heavy. *Real* heavy. Lotsa people are gone, now, too—more than before 'ya got here."

Butch responded with a quiet sorrow and swallowed hard. "Paul's dead. So's his 'ma. Christine's mom and sister are dead, too, but I dunno 'bout her old man. Floyd Lewis, Mrs. Taylor—I heard the Holdens tried makin' a run for the door and got turned t'swiss cheese by a couple officers but no one's sayin' names. Haven't heard 'bout anybody in the Security team other than Stevie. I think Freddie's still 'round, somewhere."

"...Winona didn't kill Stevie, Butch." Amata admitted in a broken voice and released a wheezing,
slow exhale as she turned her chin upward so she was facing the ceiling again. "It was me."

"You're jokin'—right?" Butch wanted to chuckle, thinking that maybe Amata was just trying to cover for Winona, but the broken look in her face—the way she was holding back tears, coupled with the haunted look in the one eye he could visibly see—he knew she wasn't covering for anybody. She actually did it. "Crap, what the hell! Why?"

"*It was an accident—!*" She replied with a mournful calmness and she didn't turn to look at him. "I stole a gun from the Overseer's office to give Winona, but she—... she refused to take it from me and I never got the chance to ask her why... why she didn't—... if she had just taken it, I wouldn't have—... I stil- still had it when he attacked me. I was only trying to scare Stevie off!..." She inhaled a steadying breath so her voice wouldn't crack as she fought through the tears. "Bu- But then he tried grabbing the gun from m- me and it went off."

"...Look, this probably ain't what 'ya wanna hear right now, but Stevie was a real fucked up guy, okay? Don't feel bad 'bout it. Besides, 'ya said it was an accident, right? You didn't mean t'shoot him, sooo—... it probably doesn't count." He tried to reassure her but she was silent. "Okay, Wally was like a brother to me, and even *that* fucker knew Stevie had a screw loose. And it got worse when he got into Security. If there were neighborhood dogs an' cats around here, Stevie woulda tortured every one of 'em and saved the bones or somethin', 'ya feel me?"

"It doesn't excuse the fact that I murdered him." Amata whispered dejectedly. "I—... I took a brother away from Susie."

"She doesn't look like she's losin' a lotta sleep over it." He responded ungracefully in a flat tone. "If 'ya don't buy that, he deserved t'get popped for what he did to Jonas. With the way shit's goin' down hill faster than a go-kart without any brakes, I'd say we got other stuff t'worry about without you getting weep- worry about killin' Stevie in self-defense."

"...I feel like this is all one long, awful joke." She turned her chin slightly to look at him and her arm in the sling shifted slightly beside her as she did. "A joke with a punchline that hasn't been delivered yet."

"Waddya mean?"

"Things around here are pretty crap already, but it's going to get worse. I know it is." Amata stared up at the ceiling again. "Not even the roaches are gone, are they? That means my father's putting all his energy into other things. He probably doesn't know any more than *we* do about how bad things really are right now."

"Then what're we doin'?"

"...What do you mean—?"

"'Ya said so yourself, things're pretty shit right now and they're gonna get worse. So what're we gunna do? We leavin' or what?"

"Leaving? You can't be serious, Butch DeLoria."

"I ain't laughin', am I?" Butch grumbled with agitation. "S'not even my idea. Parker said we gotta open the door."

"...I know. I tried to convince the Overseer of that, but he—... wasn't in a listening mood. She's right, though, isn't she?" She sighed in a cumbersome tone. "We're not going to last down here. Before all this chaos, we maybe had the chance at another generation or two with that awful
Procreation Law—*but now*? We've got about a snowball's chance in hell. We have got to get out of here."

"Not with you and Christine the way 'ya are, we can't. We gotta get out, sure, but like this? We wouldn't stand a chance out there, neither." Butch vigorously shook his head, the knuckle of his pointer finger and thumb plucking at his nose as he sniffed. "Gotta get all our ducks on the same page an' whatever before we can do that."

"You're right." Amata agreed simply. "...I just told you you were right. Now there's a first."

The Serpent King snorted loudly as he rocked his weight into the heels of his feet and launched himself up off the floor, using the wall against his back for support with both hands.

"Get ready t'be tellin' me that more ofteeen," He responded in a sing song voice as he looked down at her. "I'll be around."

"Butch—?" Amata called behind him as he opened the door. He could hear her shifting to sit up. "If you—... if you see Wally around—?"

"He ain't gotta know about Stevie, okay? Susie doesn't need t'know, neither." Butch nodded in understanding and slicked a hand back over the side of his head against his hair before glancing back at her over a shoulder. "Better for you if they both think Parker did it."

"I gu- guess." She nodded once weakly before settling on her side on the mattress, her slung arm laying over her stomach limply. "He tried to get me to tell him exactly where Winona was going, outside... I didn't. I couldn't. Do you think he'd try to come back?"

"Wally won't show his coward pigeon-beaked face around here. Not with me around. Hell, not with *Susie* around. He wouldn't do nothin' to his twin sister."

A phantom of a small smile came to Amata's face and Butch was surprised to see both of her eyes peel open—just enough to see the dark brown of her irises. Her smile was an ironic one, without any humor or good feeling, and they didn't reach the dread in her eyes.

"From here on out?... We can't say we're sure about what people are *really* capable of doing anymore."
A flurry of bright shooting sparks of splintered metal plinked off of Winona's welding mask harmlessly as she worked, wielding her welding torch in one hand with her other acting as a brace as she made a slow bead between the two plates of clamped down steel. The generator of her
welder whirred methodically beside her as the liquefied metal was drawn and she released the trigger on her torch, bumping the 'OFF' switch on the welder with a gloved knuckle to carefully set the torch into its holder. Lifting the shield of her mask with a hooked thumb, she reviewed her work with a scrutinizing gaze.

Since coming to Tenpenny Tower, with funds from Burke and all the luxury she could ask for from the well-stocked stores, she made a considerable amount of progress on Gizmo; the skeleton of his body was completed back in Vault 101 along with his basic wiring and AI, and now she was forming and welding the last few pieces of his exterior casing. Afterward she'd only need to ensure the coding was properly written for his personality chip (she was still waiting on that functioning computer from the general goods store downstairs) and to run a few tests on all the pieces to ensure they were in working order.

At least, those were the bigger projects that she needed to tackle to even consider him to be a prototype; but the end was in sight and her mounting excitement threatened to crash down on her at a moment's notice of her project being completed.

Godfrey, who now decided to go by Andy(2.0) with a little incentive from herself (read that as, she forcibly shut him down and reprogrammed his coded referral title), hovered duteously beside her as designated spotter.

"Wonderful work as always, Miss Parker! I didn't need to fetch the extinguisher this time!" He drawled cheerfully before quietly adding on; "Though I do love using it..."

"Funny—Andy loved setting things on fire, not putting them out." She commented with a small smile formed by nostalgia and fond memories.

"Oh, Heavens, no! Why would I enjoy such a thing?" His middle sensor of the three lowered itself to her face quizzically and she could feel him almost squinting suspiciously at her. "...Perhaps you speak of the other Andy, ma'am?"

"Yeah, the other Andy. Andy #1." Winona teased as she turned to the gas tank hooked up to her welder, twisting the nozzle atop it to cease the flow.

"I humbly request to be referred to as Andy #1." He replied more in demand than 'humbly requested' of her.

"And yet a few days ago you didn't want to be called Andy at all." She mopped away the sweat collecting on her forehead with the back of her forearm and then pat dry the rest of her face. Even with the balcony door open for ventilation, letting in the evening breeze, under two layers of clothing—with one of them being a protective layer of thick brahmin leather—she was sweltering over her welding.

"Yes, by forcible persuasion. Or, as you like to call it, Miss Parker—voluntold." Godfrey-turned-Andy scolded diplomatically before revolving toward the door when there came a heavy-handed knock. "A visitor! Shall I answer the door, young miss?"

"See who it is, first." She commanded as she pulled off the protective gloves on her hands, leaving them beside her welding torch on the welding bench—which was really just her normal work bench fitted with a grounding plate for the welding machine. Soon enough, when she had the proper materials and time, she'd build her own welding bench for convenience... and for more work space to litter with her mess of parts, scraps, and inventions. Honestly, she didn't expect a working welder at all when she requested one from the vendor at some pompous 'boutique' downstairs—and though Lydia Montenegro was reluctant to work with Tenpenny's murderer, she
wasn't prideful enough to turn down the money. Winona's request for a working computer and the specific electronics she requested was a pretty shiny cap.

After the occurrences of last week—with Tenpenny's death, Burke's release of her, and the mess with the Towers' security forces doing a civil interrogation of her story—things still hadn't evened themselves out amongst her new neighbors, but she couldn't expect them to like her enough to leave her alone over night. More than half of the Tenpenny Towers' population were sour that Tenpenny was gone, even after Burke's evidence about him wanting to blow up Megaton was established, and thought that she was a security risk against the 'good, hardworking folks' in the building. They were all terrified of Winona's presence amongst them, as if she were some common lunatic that they were forced to coexist with. The other less than half of the population were grateful for the service she did in stopping Tenpenny, labeling him a homeland terrorist on his epitaph and saying they wouldn't want anyone on the outside to think they were trying to start a fight with another settlement. There was a constant argument brewing in the downstairs lobby because of her permanent status in Tenpenny Towers, and so she was more than happy to remain as an awkward recluse in her new apartment to keep from getting involved.

The last time she ended up in the middle of an argument like that, Michael Hawthorne, the resident drunk, nearly bashed her in the face with a bottle. And she was the security risk?

*But I'll have to leave eventually,* she determined anxiously as she busied herself by checking over her work on Gizmo atop the makeshift welding table, as Andy 2.0 greeted whoever was at the door. *I'm terrified to go back out there on my own—but I can't keep distracting myself here. The longer I spend being alone and scared, the farther away dad gets.*

"Miss Parker, Mister Burke is at the door! Shall I invite him in?" Andy 2.0 called from the door and she turned towards the Mr. Handy, seeing just behind him the form of Burke's trademark fedora. His dapper suits changed, but not that damn hat.

"What does he want?" She demanded shortly.

"A moment with you," He explained before the robot butler could.

"I shall take that as a yes!" The robot decided cheerfully as he departed from the open door, gesturing with a polite pincher for Mister Burke to come in. "Come in, come in! You and your companions, feel free to make yourself at home. I'll be taking your hats and coats, of course. *Gladly.*" He tacked on with sarcastic enthusiasm under his voice.

"Wait, wait, wait—who else is here?" Winona frowned as she came to the door to meet with Mister Burke before he could enter further into her room. Trailing behind him were three other people—a woman and two men.

The first to enter was the young Asian woman who didn't look any older than Winona, with a pinched sort of face like she smelled something foul and was trying to hide her disgust, and she took a confidently braced stance as a cigarette burned down between her chapped, thin lips. She was dressed in a poncho-like scarf that draped about her shoulders and hooded her head, a gas mask hung from her neck, and an eye patch covered one of her dark brown eyes. Her clothing was a mess of hand-crafted armor plates strapped over her clothes and combat boots, her belt was lined with pouches of easy access supplies, ammo clips, and a grenade bunch, and on the breast of her chest plate Winona noticed tally marks scored into the metal; there were 7 grouped together.

The elderly man that came in after was the tallest man Winona had ever seen; the sunbleached crown of his wide-brimmed hat nearly brushed the top of the door when he walked in. When it was removed from his head to be given to Andy 2.0, it revealed a bald spot ringed by nearly shoulder
length hair, which was the same ashen color as his trimmed mustache and beard patch below his bottom lip. He was outfitted in a long, resistant trench coat lined with several outside pockets, along with a cinched belt of pouches that sheathed a several inches long knife at his hip. Under the collar of his buttoned up trench coat she could see the high neck of what looked like a black skin-tight suit. He politely handed off his hat and gloves to Andy 2.0 with a gracious 'thank you'.

The final man in Mister Burke's company strode into the room and ignored Andy 2.0's offer to take his filthy and ragged duster, which was barely held together by safety pins and duct tape. He wore ripped cargos done up with more duct tape that were tucked into spiked pre-war military boots, and a splotchy black t-shirt, bandanna tied around the crown of his head, and aviators over his eyes made him look like the least protected of the three of them. However, he was definitely the most well-armed; holstered guns were strapped to both thighs, ammo bandoliers crossed each other over his chest, and a brass knuckles-handled blade was tucked into the calf of his boot. Radiation burns pockmarked the left side of his jaw and neck, from what she could immediately make of its trail that disappeared into the neckline of his shirt, and everything about his face from brow to chin was sharp. His head was shaved on one side and the remainder of his mane, with dreaded Brunet roots washed out to a faded shade of noxious lime green, snaking over his shoulder.

When his gaze fell upon Winona, a subtle smirk slowly came to his mouth below a double nostril piercing. Something about the way his lips curled made his expression readable through the sunglasses over his eyes—suggesting that he was looking at something he wouldn't mind sinking his teeth into—and that coy little smile made her absolutely melt on the inside. The metaphorical legs of her heart were buckling at the knees more and more the longer she openly stared back at him.

...Damn if that isn't a mouth I wouldn't mind sitting on. The primal part of the inventor's mind purred as she quickly removed the welder's mask and leather cap from her head, smoothing back her heat-frizzed curls with swift fingers behind each ear. If was in part to look more presentable, as well as forcing herself to avert her eyes when the man's smirk only widened in amusement upon noticing that she was, unabashedly, gawking.

"Winona, might I introduce you to some acquaintances of mine?" Mister Burke greeted her with an open palm, and she stepped to his side in refusal of taking his hand. "This is Harriet Zhāng, Tobias Sumner, and Glasgow."

"...Glasgow. Like—a Glasgow smile?" Winona glanced to the referred man—the one with the handsome face and a lingering thought of good God he was sculpted by angels—and he nodded excitedly.

"Sounds like 'ya know yer shit. Guess my namesake proceeds me." He responded cheekily in some accent (more like a way of speaking) she didn't recognize. It was rough sounding, almost callous, accentuated upon some of his broken words.

"Precedes, Winona thought. Not proceeds."

"Yeah, like your body odor." The Asian woman, whom Burke referred to as Harriet, deadpanned as she doused her cigarette butt on the shoulder of his duster. Glasgow shot her with an eyebrow raise over the frames of his sunglasses.

"It's a pleasure meeting you," Tobias addressed her kindly with an outward hand to take hers, which she politely dropped into his and shook firmly. He was clean cut for a Wastelander, and she felt almost inappropriate in calling him by his first name—she decided then and there to only refer to him as Sumner.
"Nice to meet you, too." She awkwardly replied and looked to Burke again when her hand was released, continuing on in a dry tone. "Color me impressed, Burke—I didn't know you had friends."

"They're employees, for the sake of specifics." Mister Burke corrected, unamused by her sarcasm as he folded his arms into the curve of his back and turned on his heel to face his three hires. "They work for me as mercenaries."

"I feel like there's more 'specifics' there." Winona responded.

"We're hitmen, kid." Harriet clarified as she pulled back the hood of her baggy scarf to reveal an angular bob cut of glistening black hair—shaved in the back to cascade down to a longer length in the front. "Burke found us in the Talon outfit and hired us on as freelance."

Talon outfit? She wondered, unable to voice the question as Mister Burke continued to talk.

"These employees of mine each possess their own individual assembly of invaluable skills, making them a perfect combination of protection, experience, and survival." He gestured to the three with an upturned palm before his thumb hooked into the exterior pocket on his suit jacket. "Not only are they some of the most hardened and seasoned of Wastelanders in all aspects of the Capital's lifestyle, but they are the best in some of their trades. Sumner, would you like to begin and officially introduce yourself?"

"Naturally," He bowed his head respectfully, and his arrogant tone generated obnoxious snorting from his cohorts. "I've mastered a wide array of weaponry in my life, including—but not limited to—explosives, small firearms, and more austere heavy-grade weapons, though my background is mainly in energized weapons. I also happen to know my way around altercations in close quarters, and have extensive experience with advanced technology and medicine. These reasons best highlight why I'm, ultimately, better equipped in protecting your life than these other two here."

"We're doin' this whole 'show 'n tell' thing again? Dammit, fine." Harriet huffed in annoyance as she looked to Winona. "Lemme just cut to the chase—I'm good at blowing shit up. Really good at blowin' shit up. Wrinkly kiss-ass over here wants t'talk explosives? He doesn't know a feral's ass from it's face about explosives when he's in the same room as me," She hooked a thumb proudly to herself. "It's my specialty. And I ain't half bad with a shotgun, either, but my real baby's Samantha here."

At the mention of 'Samantha', her left arm, which was completely concealed by her scarf, brushed the cloth away to reveal a hulking metal fist that gloved her hand; pneumatic chambers ran lengthwise down the forearm brace to link itself to a piston and ramming brick at the hilt of her knuckles. When Harriet flexed her hand as if she were readying a punch, the ram was launched forward with a hiss of steam from it's exhaust jets at the base of the brace. Winona watched as the piece of machinery worked with her eyes raking over every detail and harmoniously moving part as it was operated, her inventor's mind deliriously alight as it fantasized about 'Samantha's' inner workings.

"Why's that her name, you ask? 'Cause it sounds hilarious when 'ya try and pronounce 's' and 'th' sounds after she makes you swallow your teeth." Harriet declared gleefully as 'Samantha' was recoiled behind her scarf curtain.

Winona wasn't unnerved by that in the slightest; she was too busy in thinking about any possibility of having the chance to tinker with 'Samantha' some time, feeling dreamy as if the stars were in her eyes with how mesmerized she still was, but such daydreaming was interrupted by Glasgow beside her.
"'Ey, dun lose yerself on me, baby." He chuckled with a show of snapping fingers near her face and she was abruptly at attention.

"'Baby'? That's cute, but I'm not your baby." She responded with a cutting confidence she hadn't expected. Her mind went reeling after that, wondering where the hell did that come from? But Glasgow only laughed in response with a lopsided grin, which mostly showed sharp canines, suggesting that he found her reply to be equally amusing and respected.

"Damn, alright—'ya cut me deep, doll. I like that. Now, listen up, 'cause these two got all their fancy toys an' their 'can do!' attitude—well, the old boy scout over there does," Sumner snorted in amusement at that. "But'cha know what I got? Got charm. Got pure survival instinct, and the experience t'back it up after runnin' with sum of the most fucked up sons-of-bitches this Wasteland custom made. I got stories 'ya wouldn't even believe, an' kin show 'ya a thing 'er two 'bout livin' out here. Top that off with a mouth that'll git 'ya outta any shitshow, an' eye for a scope, an' hands that'll git any lock open this side of the Wastes, yer 'bout as gold as it gets." He spread his hands in front of himself as if her were presenting a prize she couldn't see with a smug look on his face. "'Ya ain't gunna git it better anywhere else. Plus, 'tween the three of us, I ain't half bad t'look at so consider it a bonus."

"As you can see, Glasgow has all the tact and control of a gambling virgin seeing the New Vegas Strip for the first time." Sir Sumner criticized.

"'When in Rome' old timer—'ya git drunk an' stab a guy. Well, I dunno wut Romans actually did, buh' I heard they got up t'some wild shit, yeh?"

Winona's eyes alternated between the three mercenaries before her—though her gaze fell most noticeably upon Sumner. His age spoke volumes about how impressive his skills were (his mysterious countenance kept her from thinking his survival was in part to dumb luck) if he was still around and intact to talk about them. There was also some bemused curiosity as to how a man who looked as straight-laced as he became a hitman for hire.

"...Sooo—" The inventor finally looked back to Mister Burke, who remained silent all that time. "Wanna explain what's going on here? Because I think I missed something."

He removed his tortoiseshell sunglasses from his face to tuck them into the breast pocket of his suit jacket as he explained himself. "As I told you, if you decided to stay in the Tower I'd help you find your father—so I'm providing you with the choice of one of my three best associates. You seem rather resolved in going out again, so these three are the best money can buy in protecting your life. Sir Sumner, Harriet, Glasgow—any one of them."

"If it's tracking you require, I'd say with 100% certainty that I'd be your best bet in finding your father." Sir Sumner clarified.

"Yeah, if you don't die before 'ya get there, old man." Harriet teased sarcastically, imitating the hobble of an elderly person as she spoke and Glasgow snorted through his obnoxious laughter.

"...I won't dignify your school yard insults by responding to that." He returned in a simple tone without looking to her.

"I can say from personal experience that these three are very capable in aiding you, and I'd recommend any one of them." Mister Burke reassured. "Many unspeakable things can happen to just about anyone out here in the Capital, Winona—even someone as untouchable as Allistair Tenpenny could provide the mortar between Hell's bricks when an unseen player comes into play."
He looked down at her pointedly when he said this, and in her mind she again replayed Tenpenny's boots flinging over the railing as he clutched his chest, moaning. Whoever profiled his death said it was from the height of the fall, but it's hard to do a proper autopsy when you have to scrape up the remains with a shovel. The inventor had nightmares every night of what his body must have looked like when it splattered on the courtyard pavement, in the middle of residents having afternoon tea and chatting idly about the weather. She had nightmares that the guards forced her onto her hands and knees to scrape up Tenpenny's remains with her fingernails all while Tenpenny's squashed face laughed at how she sobbed while picking up his pieces.

It was haunting... all of it. She wrung her hands together behind her back as if scrubbing off the blood and entrails of her nightmares, and through these nightmares, fully understood why some of the residents were afraid of her.

"I'll allow you, of course, some time to think it over. How soon were you hoping to adventure out into the Capital again?" Mister Burke questioned when she got quiet.

"As soon as possible." She frowned as she continued wringing her hands until they were raw, digging under her fingernails. "I wanna get out of here."

"Fair enough," Burke nodded in agreement as he turned to his employees while replacing his sunglasses over his face. "We'll take our leave so you may contemplate your choices."

"Always a pleasure, Mister Burke!" Andy 2.0 chortled as his exit was made, followed in the same order as they entered by Harriet, Sumner, and then Glasgow. Sir Sumner collected his hat and gloves from the robot and replaced them on his person before they were out in the hall and the door was shut.

"...Andy, have you seen those people before?" Winona asked as she stared at the closed door for some time before turning to her robotic butler.

"Afraid not, ma'am. Mister Burke is rather private about his affairs, isn't he?" Andy 2.0 hummed as he came on towards her workbench to begin tidying up her work area for her. One of his eye sensors flipped back to look at her. "I am sensing high levels of distress from you, Miss Parker. Shall I draw a soothing bath with those scented oils you love so much? Or shall I depart for the time being, perhaps to take 'Widget' on a walk about the Tower?"

"I'll just grab a shower." She replied in simple tone with her thoughts elsewhere, lugging the overcoat of heavy brahmin leather off of her to hang it up with the rest of her protective welding gear. Her gloves went with it, and then her welding mask—spray painted black with the words 'LOOK ALIVE' hand-painted in white above the viewing window.

"Would you like for me to call up a bit of supper for you?"

"A sandwich and some fresh fruit would be great." The last time she had a meal, those were some of the very few menu items that she could stomach. It was pricier than ordering something out of a can or box, but now that she had all the money she could ask for from Burke, she didn't have to worry about such things.

"Of course, Miss Parker! Right away!" He turned out of the room with an electric whistling of a tune of 'Hush, Hush, Hush' by Henry Hall. It wasn't the most ideal song to hear in the Wasteland, especially from a robot, but she wasn't going to say so as the door was shut behind the Mr. Handy as he rocketed away.

Winona meandered on over to her spacious bed and flopped back onto it to stare up at the ceiling,
her white curls haloing about her head. Now she had the matter of deciding on who would escort her to find her dad, but the question was...

**Who to choose? They all look more than capable.**

All three of them would be invaluable teachers in showing her about surviving the world outside; she felt no better than a radroach in comparison to their collective experience. The tinkerer thought her and Sir Sumner would make a good team—he was kindly and well-mannered with an old charm about him, and looked like the most experienced, but a young woman and an old man traveling together could make them targets. Harriet looked pretty abrasive and didn't seem practiced in ranged weapons outside of lobbing explosives, and Winona thought that the woman looked like she had a temper issue. She could get them both killed by charging head-on into unsafe circumstances, although she liked the thought of traveling with another woman; there was something comforting in the feminine companionship, even if it was with someone like Harriet.

...Then there was Glasgow.

Winona knew they'd get along well (maybe **too** well she considered), but there was something undoubtedly **dangerous** about him. She didn't know how to gauge that particular mercenary in comparison to the other two by way of skills, and in that way he was probably more mysterious than Sumner himself, but his promise of getting her out of any life threatening situation unharmed was appealing... *if* he could deliver on it, as promised.

*They all have their strengths individually, how am I gunna choose? When I don't know the kinds of things I'm up against?* She grumbled mentally as she pulled a pillow to her and clasped it against her face, closing her eyes. *I wish I had someone to talk to—someone to give me advice. Urgh! Why can't I just have all of them?*

Winona clasped the pillow tighter to her face and let out a frustrated yelp into it. Then it was momentarily flung off of her as she snapped up on the bed in realization.

...**Why can't I have all of them?**

"So if I'm understanding this correctly," Sir Sumner began after a sip of his drink—which was a mix of bourbon and whisky, topped by some other sweet smelling liquor Winona never heard of. "Thank you for the drink by the way—you're interested in hiring **all** of us?"

"Yeah, I talked it over with Burke and he's willing to loan out the three of you for the time being if I chip in a little extra." She responded with her eyes panning across the round table where they sat together in the Federalist's Lounge. "I know it probably seems like **overkill** but I don't know what to expect out there, or the things my dad was involved in. I also don't know how long this'll go on for, or where we'll end up or what'll happen between now and then—but you'll all receive equal payment to each other. Half of which will be delivered to you beforehand, so you can buy the gear and supplies you need before we set out. As well, if this extends past 6 months, then your pay will be increased by a third of the original agreed upon amount."

"We gettin' any other compensation or bonuses?" Harriet inquired blandly as she tossed back a shot of gin. She had two other ones lined up in front of her along with the bottle, which Winona paid for as she did with all of their drinks. If they all agreed to travel with her, she wanted to get off on the proverbial right foot.

"If we find my dad and bring him back to Tenpenny unharmed, you'll get an extra bonus of 250 caps. Each." Winona answered.
Harriet's brows were launched to the peak of her hairline, and she tossed back the remaining two shots of gin in rapid succession before slamming the shot glasses down on the table. The other patrons of the Federalist's Lounge, namely Hawthorne, who shot Winona unwelcomed glares as always, and some other unnamed patrons, all jumped at the loud noises.

"Fuck it, I'm in!" She exclaimed gleefully as she wiped her mouth.

"Hell yeah, now that's the kinda caps'll set 'ya up nice!" Glasgow laughed as he toasted his fifth beer to Winona, who raised her Nuka-Cola in response to clink with his with a meek smile.

"It'll be a pleasure to offer my services to you, Miss Parker." Sir Sumner agreed simply.

"To preface this mission with some explanation—and I probably should've led with this so you three know what you're getting into..." Winona sighed as she set down her Nuka-Cola, rolling it idly between her palms on the table. "I grew up in Vault 101 where I was told that the outside basically didn't exist. That it was nothing but a land filled with radiation and no one and nothing was alive out here since the bombs fell. You guys are gunna have to teach me about living out here, I'm flying blind."

"Shit, you're greener than raw mirelurk meat." Harriet sighed defeatedly with a hand ruffling her short hair and some of it fell into her patched eye.

"101? That bunker's famous 'round the Capital." Glasgow stated. "Well—sorta, I guess. People try knockin' on that big door all the time."

"Wait—really?" Her brow crinkled in bewilderment. "I—... never knew that."

"That's how Megaton was formed in the first place, I believe, from survivors Vault 101 wouldn't let in." Sir Sumner clarified. "You hear rumors of people escaping from there every once in a while, but not very many of them last out here. A lot of factions believe your vault has technology untouched from before the war along with valuable other supplies and weaponry, but it's proven to be an impenetrable fortress to some formidable factions."

"Honestly? It kinda sucked down there. Better than out here, but still pretty sucky..." She awkwardly added with a sip of her flat soda. "Everything was falling apart before I left—the vault, the people, the rules. I was only a few weeks away from actually being forced to marry a friend of mine because we were told we were compatible."

"...I'm not sure I quite understand you," Sir Sumner admitted with an arch of his brow curiously.

"Population's low in 101 and needed a quick pick-me-up, so they threw a bunch of us together that were socially compatible and genetically desired, and told us to get married and make babies." Winona shook her head. "Like I said, it was kind of a nightmare. We could barely keep everything held together in maintenance with duct tape and sealant. I can't even imagine everything that happened after dad and I left, that whole morning was—..." Winona went quiet, looking down at her lap. "...It was bad."

"Do you know anything about where he could've gone? If he knew anyone out here, or if he mentioned somewhere he'd go?"

"I think he might be going to a settlement called Rivet City," She picked her head up to regard each of them with a curious look. "You three know anything about it? I was told there's mutants out there."

"Deffo as close as 'ya ever wanna get t'super mutie territory outside DC, kiddo." Glasgow
responded with a gulping swig of his beer and then set the suddenly empty bottle on the table. "They like playin' boy scouts 'round the river an' the metro... set up camp, hide 'round the broken buildin's and ruins an' ambush travelers dumb 'nough t'follow the road."

"...Okay, question one—what's a 'super mutie'? I keep hearing it but no one's told me what it is, is it like a really evolved mutant or something?" Winona squinted and then looked to Harriet in reference. "And question two, what's a 'mirelurk'? You mentioned one earlier."

Glasgow, Harriet, and Sir Sumner all looked back and forth at each other with mirroring looks of dreaded anticipation for their future travels with Winona. Harriet gave a slight shake of her head as she poured herself another shot, grumbling to herself in what the inventor thought was possibly Chinese, as Sir Sumner thoughtfully nursed his drink before speaking.

"We'll worry about those things at a later date. For now we should focus on what you know of your father." He answered with a pointer finger tracing the lip of his glass. "Rivet City's almost clear on the other side of the Capital. It's a beached ship on the Anacostia River and it's the second safest settlement in the Wastes—if they allow passage inside. Their security's almost as tight as it is in Tenpenny Tower here, but twice as paranoid."

"'Cause of all the science brains holed up in that ship." Harriet nodded sagely after knocking back the shot and didn't look ready to slow down any time soon.

"Science brains—?" Winona questioned.

"Ah, yes, there's always stories circulating about Rivet City. It's the only place in the Wastes that fresh produce comes out of—however that's not a luxury they seem to be willing to share with the Capital settlers aside from the Tower, because Allistair Tenpenny use to fund their experiments in exchange for produce shipments." Sir Sumner shook his head. "They're very dedicated to a multitude of scientific endeavors outside of hydroponics, so I've heard."

"Then dad would definitely be there. He was the Vault's physician—and in his desk I found things about Jefferson Memorial and the Potomac River, and I think some kinda project he was on before we got to Vault 101. I was told Jefferson and the Potomac's close to Rivet City." She insisted with some excitement.

"Yeh, Potomac crosses Anacostia," Glasgow muttered with a hand scratching his stubbly chin. "'S'more mutie territory than 'round Rivet City. Better than Downtown 'n' the Mall, but still."

*There it is again—talking about mutants and a Mall.* She thought to herself with a crinkled brow and a conjured memory of that late night with the malfunctioned radio; she didn't know if she'd recognize the voice again if she heard it, though it was pretty unique, but she knew the channel was probably some kind of news report station. Sadly, her Pip-Boy didn't seem to pick up on anything other than bland music, static on various channels, and a frequency from a termed American President, **John Henry Eden**. Winona knew he wasn't any president she learned about in class.

"We goin' through the metro, or followin' the river?" Harriet inquired with a finger jabbed into the table top as if drawing on an invisible map. "Underground puts us in close quarters. Lots of collapsed tunnels, raider encampments—probably crawlin' with everythin' else like mole rats, roaches, ferals—and the muties."

"Yeh, pro'ly. Gives lottsa places t'hide, though. Damn dark down 'ere." Glasgow nodded in agreement as he looked over her invisible map with a critical eye and rubbed his chin in thought.
"But we can also follow the waterway on the east bank an' cross north from the Citadel, go the rest of the way there and hope we don't get bothered by Steel Shitheads. We'd pass Jefferson, too. Got raiders out there but nothin' we couldn't handle or blow t'high hell." Harriet concluded as she slumped back into her chair while folding her arms over her chest. "Would rather tangle with them than a mutie scout party."

"That sounds like our best bet." Sir Sumner accepted with a lingering eye on Winona. "And what does your father look like?"

"Dad? Well, uh—he's Caucasian, about another 6, maybe 7 inches taller than me... so 5'11", average weight and build. Grey hair and hazel eyes, talks with an accent. Oh, and he's middle-aged—he's turning 52 in September."

"And he was a doctor?"

"Yeah, vault physician."

"He's gotta be travelin' with someone." Harriet explained, looking between Sumner and Glasgow. "Doctor's don't know the shootin' end of the gun any better than a junked up raider would... and bein' down in a vault for a long time would make anyone squishy. Think he met up with someone in Megaton—?"

"Doctor's ain't chancin' having t'hoof it alone." Glasgow supplied.

"I talked to some people that spoke with him, and the last person to see him said he left early and alone." Winona offered.

"Caravan?" Harriet looked to Glasgow again.

"Das' likely." He nodded.

"Moira didn't tell me anything else about him, so I'm sure he didn't give her much to go off of, either." Winona sighed as she slumped back into her chair dejectedly and fingered along the edge of the table, tracing all the aging dips and dings in it. "He's keeping tight-lipped about whatever he's out here for."

"So why'd he book it?" Glasgow glanced at her. His shades were still low over his eyes, obscuring whatever was behind them even though it was almost 10 at night and they were inside.

"Best I know? I think he's meeting up with someone. He had a lot of pictures of this woman named Madison, and I found files mentioning some kinda team he was part of back in 2256. I also saw photos of the rest of the team. Dammit, I wish I had them with me..."

"Ya know their names a'tall, doll?"

"No one beside Madison, and I'm about 75% sure if I saw her face again I'd recognize her. I only remember her outta everyone in those photos because dad had a lot of pictures of her aside from my mom. She was on this team with them and I think she might've been important to him." Winona shook her had as she sat up again. "I think they were called 'Project Purity'? A lot of his files talked about water—"

"I apologize," Sir Sumner interrupted with a held up hand, perpendicular to a stop sign in gesture and nature. "Did you say 'Project Purity'?"

"You know what she's talkin' about?" Harriet questioned as she glanced her good eye at him, a shot
nearing her mouth and then forgotten when he spoke.

"...Not very well," He answered gruffly before tossing back the remainder of his own drink and then set down his glass with a quiet *clink* on the table. "But I've heard of some rumors of it. Gossip from a long time ago."

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Winona frowned, her tone making it sound more like a demanding suggestion than an innocuous question. She found his reaction interesting—if Project Purity was just a bunch of hot air from 'a long time ago', what was with the sudden change in demeanor? She regarded him with suspicion inflating an anxious rise in her chest, and she stared at him over the bottom rim of the bottle as she sipped her soda in wait.

"As far as I was made aware—? Scientists had taken refuge in some part of D.C. about 20, 25 years ago, and were trying to find a better method of purifying large amounts of clean water in an instant." Sumner responded, though there seemed to be some reluctance in his voice as he spoke. "I haven't heard anything about it since. Most people try not to take rumors such as those too seriously in case they're untrue."

"But what you said *proves* it, doesn't it?" She questioned. "Project Purity was *real* and my parents were apart of it! I found his notes where they were testing the Potomac water... but then something must have happened to the project, or the team, or *something* because we ended up in Vault 101."

"You ain't know what happened?" Glasgow asked and she shook her head in response.

"I could never get him to tell me. This was when everyone was trying to keep us from talking about outside *at all*, so they could keep pretending it was just us, and the vault, and nothing and no one else. Whenever I tried getting him to tell me more—about outside, about his work, about my mom, *anything*—he'd just—... he'd just push me away. I wish he told me more before he disappeared."

"We'll sort that shit out later." Harriet spoke with her one-eyed gaze trained on the clock behind the robot barman's, Shakes', glowing dome head. She then got up from her seat with the empty shot glasses and gin bottle wobbling slightly from the jostling as she tried to even out her footing. "Callin' it quits. Tap out."

"*Pussy,*" Glasgow teased crudely with a sharp toothed grin and Harriet punched him unapologetically in the shoulder.

"Burke said you'll be getting your first half of the payment tomorrow."

"Then we set out in about 4 days. Maybe 5. Gotta get locked and loaded if we're headed out t'the Big Irradiated Mutfuit of the Wasteland." Harriet stood with her arms arched above her head in a stretch, which cracked her back and shoulders. Without her scarf wrapped about her body Winona was able to see just how toned and scarred the woman's arms were; tight with well formed muscles and dappled with welts of old injuries. She also saw a scar on her upper bicep, on the very joint of her shoulder, that wasn't an old injury but what looked like an intentionally scarred on symbol—an outline of a 9-pointed star.

"...Should I ask what a mutfruit is, or—?" Winona trailed off as she glanced to Sir Sumner.

"It's a Wasteland crop. Bulbous and purple in color, about the size of your fist. Completely safe to eat though messy." He explained with an eye on the door before looking back down on her. "We'll
keep you updated on when we're stocked and ready to leave, we won't have you waiting too long."

"Yeah, and before we get outta Smug Asshole Central here—" Harriet made a general point at Winona with a sharp finger, shaping a circle around her head. "All that? It's gotta go. Whatever thing you got goin' on'll get you killed, only place you'll blend in is if we got piled by snow some time."

The inventor pulled at a lock of her stark white curls, examining it with morose eyes before letting it fall back to her shoulder.

"My hair isn't like this because I want it to be." She grumbled.

"...Wait, that ain't your natural hair color, is it?" Harriet inquired in frank disbelief to which she nodded. "Bullshit it is."

"Believe what you want, but it's the truth." Winona replied as she rolled up the sleeve of her sweater to show the white body hair stippling her arm. "When I turned 14 it turned from black to white. Dad told me it was a mutation."

"Aw, 'ya ain't gotta look so sad, baby—yer breakin' my heart over here!" Glasgow chuckled as he lowered his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose to peer over the frames at her. Her breath was stolen from her at seeing his mismatched eyes. "Half of us ain't all human no more... other half're 'bout as wrong as you."

One of his eyes was a rich brown speckled with sea green, while his other—on the same half of his face with radiation burns—was bloodshot, with a splotch of foggy gray as if it were a lens settled over the dappled brown of his iris. His eyelids also drooped from the eye, as if they lost their framework. It was unnerving to look at the obvious color difference before he replaced his sunglasses over his eyes and Winona understood why he wore them all the time now, even indoors, and even if it was dark out. It'd creep anyone out.

"Gotta color it somethin' else, Princess—something that'll blend in better. Cut it short, too, you don't want someone usin' it as leverage against you and pullin' it out." Harriet advised with a dismissive wave of her hand over her shoulder as she walked out of the bar with the uncoordinated stumbling sourced from several strong drinks. Glasgow followed her out, laughing and making fun of how she was hobbling, and she made the threat of punching him in the crotch if he wanted to walk the same way so badly.

"Would you like me to walk you up?" Sumner asked beside her as he gathered up his hat and leather gloves from beside his empty glass.

"No, no—that's okay. I think I'll look around the shops if they're not closed yet before heading up. I'm waiting on something to be delivered." Winona insisted with a meek smile.

"If you insist. Goodnight, Miss Parker." He spoke in a kind parting and followed after his companions with his hat replaced on his head.

Winona was left in the Federalist's Lounge with the lukewarm Nuka-Cola still in her possession and some pairs of Tenpenny residents' eyes following her back. Picking at another lock of her hair to observe it, she drank down the rest of her soda and dropped it into the recycling bin near the door. Harriet's advice brought forth a memory she hadn't thought about in a long time; about Butch DeLoria standing in front of her, mixing up charcoal black hair dye with a sapphire eye upon her and a few fumbled words as she neared the bar to talk to Shakes.
"Ya know, if you're gonna dye your hair, why do it black? Wouldn't look half bad with coffee brown. Or burgundy. Put in some highlights, too—that adds dimension."

The silliness of that one sentence made her smile. She felt like she hadn't genuinely smiled in days and realized that, God, she missed that slithery creep. Winona wondered if he was doing okay, back down in Vault 101, trying to stay out of trouble (unlikely, she laughed) and if his mother was safe. The Tunnel Snake was on her mind a lot since leaving the vault, and that was because the two of them had so many conversations about the outside world; they constantly speculated about there being other people, if whole civilizations were building themselves up again with the broken pieces of the old world, if everything was lush and green... they mostly wondered if they would ever get outside to see it all together.

Now she wished she had the power to telepathically tell him to stay down there. Where he would be safe.

"Care to wet your whistle?" The robot barkeep droned as he slowly turned at the joint of his hips to face her, with his legs still front-facing the bar.

"Just had a question... is there a hairdresser's around here, by chance?"
"Son of a bitch!" Butch barked through his clenched teeth so it came out as a seething hiss, looking down to the cut that slashed across two of his fingers. Blood was quickly welling up and he sucked on one cut finger, then the other, to apply quick pressure. "What kinda dingus leaves a God damn unpackaged scalpel in a supply locker, anyways?!"

"M'what're 'ya looken' for?" Amata asked in a tired slur. She just received her dose of Med-X for the next handful of hours, and apparently it made her sleepier than sitting through one of Mr. Brotch's monotonous lectures about the founders of the 13 Colonies.

"Nothin'." He lied as he shook off his stinging hand. "Checkin' supplies." He quickly replaced instead.

Butch was still trying to find some tins of Fixer for his mom but there wasn't a single one left—so either whatever asshole raided the infirmary took the last ones, or Vault 101 didn't have any left. It didn't matter much to him either way because, crap, how was he supposed to help his mother through her withdrawals now? He didn't know about any other way he could help make the crashes easier for her to handle, as they were making her more aggressive or desperate by the day. Last night she was flipping between sobbing to him or screaming at him, claiming that the need to drink was literally killing her.

It made him remember a textbook he read about addiction, once, during a health class back when he was in school... it talked about how your body would try to convince you that it needed it's fix to keep functioning properly if you were a reoccurring addict though it all sounded like the mental part of the withdrawal to him. The trials of the experience was tearing him apart in having to see her like that, seeing her writhing and crying for 'just one drink, that's all I need!' and he just wanted his mom back—it was the only goodness that could come from all the chaos of the last month. It was the only thing he could want after everything and everyone else that he lost.

"Do it later," Amata slurred again in a voice that suggested she was falling asleep even as she spoke aloud. "M'trynna sleep."

"Fine." He replied grumpily and turned to the door to take his leave. "Get some rest, princass."

"Mmn'fuggoff." She rejoined and he sniggered delightfully. Amata hadn't been so bad in the last few days—and they were actually getting along pretty well. Even when she wasn't doped up.

Butch walked out of the office and popped the collar on his leather jacket after shutting the door behind him. It was one of his extras, of course, since Winona had his old one and Paul had his up in the Great Unknown. Wally's was still making friends with dust bunnies and old socks with holes in them in his bottom dresser drawer, and he was more than okay with that. He'd rather go without a 'Tunnel Snakes' jacket than wear His.

There was something mildly comforting about having a jacket back on him... it returned a little normalcy to his life.
When he entered the infirmary, he was surprised to see Mr. Gomez—rather, Officer Gomez, since he was fashioned in his patrol outfit—standing in the middle of the room with a dour but firm expression on his face, his arms folded across his shielded chest. Butch didn't like that he was in riot gear with a gun on his hip, even though it was clipped in and Gomez was the most courteous of the officers on the Security force. The Tunnel Snake still didn't trust any of them, even if it was friendly neighborhood Officer Gomez, and this was because of Winona's words of warning against the Overseer and anyone connected to him; they still rang on a true note in his mind all these weeks later as he recalled the last time he spoke with Gomez.

He'd tell him to eat shit again if he had to.

"I'm sorry, Lucy, I'm only making the rounds and delivering orders." Officer Gomez insisted apologetically when Butch entered the conversation. "The Overseer says—"

"Herman, you can't tell us to leave," The old woman pleaded. "We have two people injured in here, and one of them is too hurt to comfortably transport. I want to stay close to all the medical supplies and medicine for her, just in case—and I know there's still radroaches out there and people looking to cause harm, or rob and steal!"

"Which is why I personally think everyone here should return to their housing immediately, you'll all be much safer there in the mean time until the Overseer can get this all sorted out."

"Some of us don't have homes anymore, Officer Gomez." Susie insisted. "Christine's apartment was destroyed."

"Is my daddy okay?" Christine asked from where she sat on her mattress on the floor, trying to awkwardly maneuver herself to get to a standing position with her burned hands. Susie had to help her cousin up to her feet.

"He's fine, Christine." Gomez reassured, and the sullen look in his face deepened when he saw her bandaged arms and fingers. "...He's just been doing a lot of work downstairs—personally guarding your grandpa Stanley while he works. I'm so sorry about your mother and sister, kiddo."

"It's okay," She responded in a slightly weepy voice and bowed her head to hide the oncoming tears. "D- Do you know when dad'll be around again—? Can I go downstairs and see him?"

"I'm sorry but I can't allow that, it's too dangerous but I'll let him know you're wanting to see him, okay? I promise."

"Alright... thanks..." Her gratitude sounded less than half-hearted and Susie helped her sit back down with an arm hooked under Christine's, easing her down onto her mattress.

"The rest of her family's gone and 'ya won't let her see the last one she's got left?" Butch grimaced as he stormed forward, standing beside Old Lady Palmer—who recently insisted that they all call her by her first name because they were all adults. "Can't you take her downstairs or somethin' yourself? That's such roach shit!"

"You stay out of this, DeLoria! I'm aware it's a sensitive matter but especially with Christine's current condition, downstairs wouldn't be a safe place for her." He retorted in warning.

"That's what she's got you for, t'take her down!" He replied in a cool voice. "C'mon, Gomez—don't be like this."

"I'm not being like anything—"
"You're bein' a pussy." Butch snapped with an aggravated scoff and the officer bristled.

"—you watch your language, there's ladies present! I'm only taking demands and doling out the Overseer's orders. I'm just doing my job."

"Officer Gomez—?" Christine piped up in a weak voice, looking up at the security guard with large, teary eyes of hope. "I miss daddy—I n- need to see him. My—... My mom and baby sister just died, and I've lost my home and everything I've ever owned. It's all gone and I haven't seen anyone else in my family but Susie. Please, let me see him—please?"

Officer Gomez's face fell to a sorrowed expression as he looked down upon her. With a slow nod, reluctant because he knew it was going against orders, he agreed.

"Alright, kiddo—... alright. I'll take you downstairs later on this afternoon, when he's on a lunch break."

Christine smiled through her spilling tears and hugged Susie tightly with joy, and the honey-haired girl gently hugged her back to make sure she wasn't hurting her.

"Please, Herman, just let us stay here a little bit longer." Old Lady Palmer—Lucy—insisted helplessly.

"I want to, believe me, I want to—but I can't. The Overseer's trying to reclaim important parts of the vault and this place is one of them."

"And that's more important than them?" Butch snapped with a finger down at Christine. "More important than Christine and Amata? His own kid?"

"Amata—? What happened to Amata?" Officer Gomez frowned. "Is she alright?"

"She'll recover well in time, but if you make us leave it'll be harder to help her." Lucy answered dreadfully.

"Mack cracked her egg good," Butch affirmed.

The frown on his face deepened gravely. "Mack? How— How did that—? Isn't he—?"

"Wally Mack. Not Stevie." The Tunnel Snake clarified. If Gomez didn't know about that, then it meant that the Overseer didn't even know about what happened to Amata; if he had, Wally would've been imprisoned by now.

How's the guy not know his daughter got the sense kicked outta her? Ain't he got his damn cameras everywhere? Butch frowned in thought.

"Wally Mack did this?" He replied in disbelief. "What have you Tunnel Snakes done—?"

"Why's everyone think I had somethin' t'do with it?" Butch barked back, insulted. "Wally did it himself! I dunno if it 'cause he hates Amata, or 'cause Parker ain't 'round no more, or both, but he did it and I didn't tell him to!"

"When the Overseer hears about this, Wally's never going to see the outside of his prison cell for a very long time," Gomez sighed deplorably with a hand finding the back of his neck. "Criminy Christmas, what a mess."

"He's signin' up for Security." He ventured. "You see his application?"
"I was there when he requested it, I'll ensure the Overseer denies him for the records." Gomez nodded, understanding exactly what Butch was implying.

"I don't mean to interrupt here," Lucy interjected. "But Herman, I need to ask you something. We aren't getting kicked out because the Overseer wants to 'reclaim his territory', are we?"

Gomez revolved back on her, looking a little shocked but Butch could see the concern growing in his eyes; like his true intentions had been exposed and he was trying to save face. "I don't know what you mean, Lucy."

Tell me the truth, Herman Gomez." She responded bitingly with a hint of suspicion in her eyes, pinning him in place.

Butch could tell, she knew something was wrong from the moment Officer Gomez walked in. He noticed her face would always look more wrinkled than normal when she was thinking... and the fossil always seemed to know when something was going on. She made him believe that there was some truth behind the whole 'elderly wisdom' shtick.

"...I'm afraid not, Lucy." He sighed hesitantly. "I could get into a lot of trouble with Alphonse for sharing this with you—but a holotape was uncovered from your grandson's apartment some days ago. It was hidden in a ventilation duct."

"A holotape? A holotape of what?" She questioned fervently. "Was it from Jonas?"

"I'm afraid not—it was a recording Dr. James Parker made prior to his exit from the vault. From it's contents, we believe it was meant to be delivered to Winona at a later time... Dr Parker didn't seem to think all this destruction would happen in him leaving." Officer Gomez went on to explain somberly, then shook his head. "Unfortunately, the existence of this holotape implicates Jonas as an accomplice in James' escape, since it was found in his apartment. His voice can be heard in the background of the recording quite clearly. James also called him by name."

"Oh dear," She muttered in a crushed voice with her hand coming to her mouth. "I knew it. I knew it!"

"Lucy, I—"

"I know the truth, Herman. I don't care what Alphonse says about my grandson—he's not a real Overseer and he's not my Overseer, ever since Overseer Mayhue supposedly 'disappeared'!" She snapped with more heat in her voice than Butch knew she could have; you fuckin' rip 'im, Old Lady Palmer! He thought gleefully, but knew better than to say anything, for once. "I know how Jonas really died and this proves it... this proves I'm right. You let Alphonse know that I'm on to him and I've got the sense of a mad dog, to sink my teeth in and not let myself get shaken off!"

She knew our overlordin' prick of an Overseer got Jonas killed? She knew it, all this time? Butch thought with some amazement but he didn't look at her. He kept his eyes trained on Gomez's rapidly paling face in a brazen stare of hardened eyes.

"I—... I'm so sorry, Lucy." He apologized remorsefully. "I'm so sorry about Jonas, but think about what you're doing here! You don't want to do this."

"I don't, but not every good thing that had to be done was easy to do. We're staying and I won't hear another word on the matter." She stated fiercely. "You tell that poor excuse of an Overseer that I'll tell the whole vault about what he's done—about everything he's done—if he tries to force us to leave here! And he better not think for a minute that no one will listen to me! Between the
two of us, I'm the more trustworthy one. He hasn't a leg to stand on with how he's failed us all!"

Officer Gomez's mouth was pursed shut and Butch could see in the older man's eyes that he knew he didn't have much left to say, even if he was allowed. There was a lingering of regret in his ashen face that was too apparent, making it impossible to go unnoticed, even by the Tunnel Snake, and he nodded with complete acceptance of the terms.

"I'll let the Overseer know where you stand on this, Lucy."

"Wait a second—before you go, Officer Gomez?" Susie stopped him before he could head to the door. "That holotape you mentioned... what'd that have to do with us leaving the clinic—?"

"Well, if we're already in this deep..." He sighed. "At the end of the holotape, Dr. Parker mentions a place that we think could have answers for us... well, answers that were meant for Winona to hear about his leaving, like the whys and wheres. The problem is we didn't really know what he was talking about—he was intentionally vague throughout the whole recording. All he mentioned was that she'd know where to look, and she'd know the code to get into it."

"Does he think this place is the clinic?" Christine asked curiously, looking up at them from where she was on the floor.

"By code, the specific word he used was combination. That probably means this evidence is in a safe or maybe a locker of some sort. Everything in Dr. Parker's apartment has been cleaned out and a safe wasn't found, and blueprints of the vault state there's a small one located here in the infirmary's office."

So that's what's in the damn thing, Butch pondered silently with a glance back over his shoulder to the closed office door, where Amata slept her pain away. There's somethin' in there for Winona...

"I want to hear this holotape," Lucy demanded with her hands sternly planted on her hips.

"Aw, Lucy, I've already said too much—" Gomez pleaded.

"The last words of my grandson are on that recording. I don't care if he's singing Yankee Doodle Dandy in the background, I think I deserve to hear his voice one last time!" She cut in unwaveringly. "James Parker's words also deserve to be heard by someone besides that bastard Alphonse. If that sweet girl doesn't get to hear them, then we'll hear them for her."

"Fork it over, Gomez." Butch ordered with the outward reach of his hand and a come forth gesture of his fingers demanding that the holotape be handed over to him. With a huff of a reluctant sigh, Officer Gomez opened up his Pip-Boy's holotape player and handed off the small cartridge to Butch, where he deposited it into his own Pip-Boy.

"This is my copy. I guess I'll just say that I lost it. You make sure you get rid of it, you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah." Butch dismissed. Once the recording was rendered and prepared for use, the Tunnel Snake keenly pressed 'PLAY' and turned up the volume so they could all hear it.

"Hold on, Jonas! I need to record this, first!" Dr. Parker's voice came on over the Pip-Boy speakers clearly, and everyone—even Susie and Christine, who rose up from the floor—clustered around Butch to hear it better. He would've preferred that Susie not be around to hear it, as the homewrecker didn't deserve it, but now wasn't the time to start a fight when a solemn spell had been cast over the whole infirmary.

"I don't really know how to tell you this... and I hope you'll understand, despite everything I've
done... despite all the things I've kept secret from you and have still kept secret from you. I was wrong that night you found out about everything, and yelled at me. You have every right to be angry with me, to treat me the way you feel. I've thought about this for a long time—a long, long time—and in the end—... in the end, I decided it would be better that you not know. It was better that I never told you. This was a choice I made regardless of the Overseer, and the vault, and the rules. I made this choice as your father."

Butch couldn't peel his eyes away from the screen as the seconds ticked on and the sound waves of Dr. Parker's exhausted voice filtered through his Pip-Boy. There was something surreal in hearing the possible final words of Winona's father, and knowing that she was never going to hear something that was only meant for her. It made Butch feel a little squeamish—like she'd barge in at any second with that fucking robot of hers and berate him for having something so intimate of hers.

He found himself wishing it'd actually happen, and he couldn't help but look to the door in pointless wait.

"I know that this is another betrayal in a long string of them from me, but there were a lot of things that could've gone wrong if you knew what I was doing, Nona... and frankly, there's no telling what could happen now that I'm gone. But everything's going to be alright in the end as long as you stay here, in the vault. This is something I have to do, and you're an adult now that's already on her own. You're independent, and responsible, and you're strong. You don't need your old man anymore to hold your hand. I've always known you were strong, but after our conversation last night, I've come to realize that you're even stronger than I've ever given you credit for... and I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

Butch saw in his peripheral vision Christine and Susie glancing at each other solemnly—Susie with a shocked hand nearing her mouth—and Christine shaking her head sadly. Lucy was still listening intently with her eyes closed as Dr. Parker's voice struggled through a choke of what sounded like a near-tearful break in his voice that was surprising. The guy was always so clean cut and put together with a doctorly smile, walking the halls with a welcoming air to anyone who would be polite in return. He never struck Butch as the emotional type.

"Ma- Maybe things will be different someday—and the situation will change and we'll see one another again... I can't tell you why I left or where I'm going, and I have the expectation that you're not going to bother Jonas about it, either. Life in Vault 101 can feel predictable and stifling at times, and I know it's not perfect, and neither is anyone in it, but what matters is that it's safe. It's safer than whatever you can imagine would be on the other side of that door... and believe me when I say that's not an over exaggeration. The world out there is not meant for everyone, and it's claimed many good people."

"I should go." Officer Gomez whispered over the tail end of Dr. Parker's words of the outside being dangerous, but no one said anything to him as he went to the door. "I'll be back later to take you down, Christine."

Christine barely nodded after him in confirmation as she whispered to Susie; "I told you Butch was right that day in the meeting! There's something outside!"

"You'll be safe, and that's enough. That's enough to keep me on my way. Just know that none of this is your fault, my dear—this was something dadd—..." James swallowed down the tightening of his throat. "This was something your father had to do... and if we meet again, I'll explain everything to you, then. I promise."

"Doc?"
At the sound of her grandson's voice in the background of the recording, a strangled noise came from Lucy as her eyes were screwed tighter shut. Butch finally looked at her and saw the pain in her face as she tried to hide it, and he remembered her frail words of her mourning being meant for her and her only. Susie settled a hand against the elderly woman's back and rubbed soothingly, whispering consoling words.

"I know, Jonas—"

"I'd just feel better if we got this over with. We don't know how much time we have for this."

"We're going. When things have calmed down here, you know where to look for the answers. You know the combination. Goodbye, Nona... I love you. I love you more than I could ever make you understand."

The recording clicked off in finality as the counter rolled down to 0:00 on Butch's Pip-Boy and the sound waves of Dr. Parker's voice ceased, leaving his dimly glowing screen blank for the time being.

"It's okay, Lucy. It's okay." Susie cooed to her as Christine came around to Lucy's other side to hold her with more tears in her swollen eyes.

Butch looked on at the three women with a sobering feeling that made him feel like he was drowning. It was almost disorienting to think of all the things they lost in the last handful of weeks; not in just the loved ones that died suddenly or violently or without proper goodbye, but in the injustice of some of those deaths (like Jonas), and for the safety everyone took for granted and the comfort they'd never have ever again. They didn't have the luxury of a basic necessity like free use of clean water anymore—it was under rigorous control by the Overseer, and it was so strictly enforced that the showers were officially shut off yesterday morning, and drinking water couldn't be acquired through the cafeteria, either. Personal requests now had to be written in to the Overseer for something as small as a two minute shower. Then, just two days ago, they heard rumors from downstairs that the purifier was on its last chip, which explained why the vicious rationing was put into effect.

There was so much lost to them to grieve over, that not many people had the time or the comfort of being able to do the grieving.

Butch shut off his Pip-Boy and lowered it to his side, glancing toward the closed office door with his hands bundled into tight fists in the pockets of his Tunnel Snakes jacket. The sobering feeling was slowly waning as a smoldering frustration began to roar to life in his chest—it was an anger he hadn't felt since Paul died, a tenacious anger that felt like determination. It was the kind that told him he had to get his ass back up off the floor and do something stupid like only Butch DeLoria could do. It was like he was, momentarily, his old self again.

God he forgot that feeling, had he changed so much?

"'Ya know what? Fuck it," He growled in a scathing voice. "Fuck it! The bitch Overseer's gotten every damn thing he's wanted outta us—he's not gettin' shit no more!"

"What're you talking about?" Susie inquired from where both her and Christine still huddled with Lucy, who was looking much calmer than before, as she took in deep breaths.

"Gomez says he wants whatever's in that safe, right? Well let's make sure he never gets it!"

"That seems easy enough if he doesn't know the combination to open it." Christine quipped.
"You think that's gunna stop him?" Butch shook his head. "No way. I remember Paul tellin' me once 'bout this fancy doo-dad maintenance's got downstairs—was meant to open up safes in case people forgot their combos or whatever. The Overseer wants us outta here so he can go diggin' around without anyone watchin'. There's something in there he doesn't want anyone else seein' and he doesn't wanna raise any red flags 'bout it, either."

"That—... makes sense," She agreed with some confused acceptance and looked at Susie.

"What does it matter to us what's in that safe?" Susie shook her head. "I'm all for messin' up the Overseer's day a little after everything that's happened—he deserves it for failin' to protect us, and leaving us completely helpless, but what's the point?"

"Whatever's in that safe might explain why the doctor left. It was meant for Parker, yeah? What if it's about outside? Withouta doubt, whatever he has in there's bad if only Parker was supposed t' see it." He thought of the conversations he and Winona had about outside—about her confirmations that her parents were from outside and Dr. Parker wouldn't tell her anything more about it. "Trust me."

"It most certainly would be." Lucy confirmed with a sure nod. "If that safe has anything that could prove the state of the outside world, Alphonse would want those in his possession or destroyed. He's currently trying to retain an illusion that we're better off cooped up in here than spreading out. If we can get into that safe and find a way to distribute the truth, it could be too overbearing for him to argue any longer. It could convince people to reopen the door."

"Great! Awesome plan! Well, except for the part that we don't know the code, either." Susie interjected after a moment of enthusiastic sarcasm.

"Yes, but we have a few guesses, don't we?" She smiled in return. "We'll try something like Winona's birthday, for starters, along with some other important dates I have in mind. When Amata wakes up we'll ask her if she has any idea what it could be."

"I guess that wouldn't hurt anything," She shrugged as Lucy turned in towards the office and she followed, then momentarily stopped to look back at Christine. "You coming, cuz?"

"Oh, yeah! Sure!" Christine responded merrily as the two other women went into the shaded office where Amata slept. She took a step to follow them, but stopped in thought before rounding back on Butch. "Hey, um—... Butch?"

"What?" He grumbled.

"What you did earlier—I mean, with telling Officer Gomez I should see my dad—?" She gave him a small grateful smile. "I wanted to say something, but I was too scared to, like—... oh, it seems so damn silly now that I say it out loud, I was scared that I'd be bothering Gomez with it. It's so strange that I thought that, isn't it?"

Butch regarded her with a softened stare and shook his head once. "...Nah. Don't think it is."

"Well, anyways, if you hadn't said anything—... if you didn't speak up for me, I still would've been too scared, and it might've been another long time before I got to see my dad again, if at all. So—... thanks. Thank you."

"...Oh. Uh," Butch responded awkwardly with a hand cupping the back of his neck, and his eyes diverted away from her face as he shrugged. "Sure, whatever. It ain't a big deal. Just thought it was shitty. You should get t' see your old man."
"You know, you're really not as bad as I thought you were... and personally, I never thought you had anything to do with what happened to Amata. Susie thinks otherwise, but I think deep down she knows Wally did it on his own... she just doesn't want to admit it because those two have been thick as thieves since we were all kids, being twins and all." Christine added on as she turned away to the back office's open door. "Anyway, we'll let you know if we can get this thing open! Don't go anywhere!"

The King Serpent watched the bandaged girl quickly rush in after Susie and Lucy with her words rattling around in his head. Some piece of them, whether it was her gracious tone or the use of her disarming words, was—... he didn't want to use the word touching, but it was nice. Something in him felt free in being liberated of this asshole umbrella he'd been standing under since Susie accused him of working with Wally to mess up Amata. He knew that she and Lucy were keeping their eyes on him just in case, because yeah it was a little weird that he was hanging around the infirmary for seemingly no reason; he wasn't about to tell them his mom was going through withdrawals and he needed meds to get her to sleep through it... and he wasn't going to admit, either, that he was around to keep an eye on Amata in case Wally wanted to finish the job. He couldn't assume that his ex-brother wouldn't go that far when he had already committed so much violence.

'Ya know what? Yeah, I am pretty damn awesome!' Butch concluded proudly so he wouldn't get too thoughtful or sappy on himself up in his head space. With a glance out of the clinic and through the window that overlooked the hall, he thought about the safe, and Winona, and what these 'answers' were that Dr. Parker mentioned in his last recorded words.

_Wonder if she'd have the combination lyin' 'round in her apartment somewheres..._

Butch's boots crunched over splintered glass as he walked deeper into the living quarters, leading himself toward Winona's apartment. He knew where it was, _everyone_ knew where everyone else lived amidst all the abandoned housing. As he sauntered up to the front door, which was jammed open with the open control disemboweled with sparking wires yanked out of it, he was greeted with the dark insides of her apartment. He could only make out the vague outlines of overturned or wrecked furniture and felt his determination actively being drained from his body at the thought of radroaches hiding in the dark. He reached an uncertain hand in to flick on the lights but nothing came on, and he looked up and down the hallway to make sure no one was watching him. With a stabilizing inhale and then slow exhale, he turned on the flashlight on his Pip-Boy, flicked open Toothpick's blade at his side, and cautiously stepped into the living room.

The only other light source he had were the busted out windows around the outer wall of the apartment. The pleated shades that once covered them were either ripped apart or pulled out through the window hallway side, prickled with teeth of more broken glass. On his far right was her small dinner table, where it was upturned on it's side and a splintered leg was broken off and missing. Remains of chairs were smashed around the room and he remembered seeing one out in the hallway, as if it had been thrown through one of the windows.

More glass crunched under his boots with every step he took, and he made a cautionary glance at his Pip-Boy screen every couple of seconds to make sure no radroaches were skittering around, waiting to ambush him. Nothing registered on the screen but he wasn't going to take his chances and get nibbled on.

The sickly glow of his flashlight skimmed back and forth slowly across the room to take in the rest of the sights, and Winona's apartment was a _complete_ disaster; her couch was broken apart with the cushions ripped into and all it's cotton yanked out in handfuls; broken paintings splintered the
ground; some random parts of what looked like electronic scraps, tools, and other things that were—no doubt—once apart of her collection of inventions were busted apart and thrown around like confetti. The walls were littered with a disarray of vicious writings that scowled down at him in sharp, accusing letters in marker, in paint, in whatever it was written in across her living room wall. He stepped closer to read them.

    good riddance!

    F R E A K !

    you should have DIED downstairs

    should never

    have let you in

    hope your bastard father dies out there he deserves it

    M O N S T E R

    why did we let you in

    should've been a G A R B A G E B U R N E R

    

    A T E Y O U ! ! !

    CUNT

    H

    WINONA THE W E I R D

    O

People down here are fucked up. Butch thought as he took a step back from the wall with his eyes gleaning every hateful remark. Shit, that's rough. Who the hell wrote this kinda stuff—should kick their asses if they wanna talk shit 'bout her, like she didn't have it bad, too—

He staggered with something clipping under his boot heel, sending him in a scramble to catch his
balance and when he looked down, he found what looked to be a picture frame under his foot. Repositioning his stance so he could crouch down, he picked up the plastic remnants of the frame that split under his heel and turned it over.

It was an old photo of Dr. Parker and Winona at a young age—and he knew exactly how old she was, down to the very day. It was her 10th birthday party. In the photo she was wearing the dress Dolly gave her all those years ago and in her small hands she clapsed a BB gun that looked too big for her. A tiny, shy smile was on her face, barely able to properly display her dimples, and Dr. Parker had an arm around her shoulders to pull her in close to him. He had a much more prominent smile on his face than his daughter did.

Butch never knew she had a gun. How the hell did she get something like that?

The photo brought back memories of that day that were so clean it was like it only happened yesterday; how she looked when she walked into the diner wearing that dress, he remembered the exact shade of sky blue it was, her offering to split her sweet roll with him even though he was acting like a huge jackass, him punching her Pip-Boy when he meant to punch her face... oh, how much he hated her back then before it fell away to a confused and painful crush that lasted for so many years.

Part of him would have done just about anything to get those days back—the days before they all knew better—the days when things sucked but not as much as they did now.

He looked around the apartment again in light of the memory and was amazed at how much had changed between them. They became friends, they were supposed to get married, she willingly kissed him first and even let him kiss her again and hold her. Now she was gone for good and he kept looking around corners expecting her to be coming up with her ladybug robot on her shoulder, or knocking on the infirmary door with a toolbox in her hands and a smile on her face, or showing up at his apartment to see how his mom was doing. He wanted to turn around and have her be right behind him, smirking with a cocked eyebrow and balancing a sarcastic joke on the curl of her mouth, while he waited with anticipation for her to speak.

"Because if I die out there, I'm coming back as a malevolent spirit and your scaly serpent ass is going to be the first one I haunt." Was one of the last things she said to him before rushing out the door, and Butch was coming to find that someone didn't have to be dead for them to haunt you, as his finger traced along Winona's young smile in the photo.

When he wasn't thinking about her miraculously appearing like nothing ever changed, he constantly wondered about what she was doing, or where she was going, or who she was talking to and what she was seeing. Butch wanted to know so fucking badly what awaited for him outside that his stomach was nauseated from the excitement and he could only imagine the new kinds of things she was seeing. He was almost jealous and definitely scared.

But most of all, he was thinking about whether or not she was okay.

Hope you're doin' better up there than we are down here, Professor Snowflake. Butch thought morosely as he turned to the door that led into her bedroom with the old picture of Winona still in his possession.

The door to the bedroom looked like it had been jammed open with the bottom of the sliding panel—too deformed to fully recline up into the door frame—looking crushed and dipped. He saw maintenance use their door openers before, heard Paul call them the 'jaws of life' for whatever reason, back when Butch was 16 and the Franklin's boy, who was two, had locked himself in their apartment. They couldn't get the door open by manual override, and Butch recalled it taking three
guys from downstairs to operate the massive pair of industrial clamps that forcibly pried the door open, as the apartment didn't have windows to smash through. The apartment was then abandoned, as the door couldn't be fixed and was just simply removed and used as excess storage space when necessary.

Stepping into Winona's bedroom, it was a worse mess than it was in the living room as he stopped in the room's center and swept his flashlight beam over everything; the bed was overturned and sticking halfway out the broken window; a couple of dressers had all its drawers pulled out and their empty skeletons were disregarded; a metal work table was flipped on its side at the far wall, while random odds and ends and other things scattered around the floor and he assumed it was more scraps of broken gadgets of Winona's; a stand up floor lamp was on the floor as well by the far wall, its shade knocked off and cracked in the corner next to a dented and empty black toolbox.

The room carried a very faint smell of what Butch thought was body wash—he thought it was white lily, since the only three girly scents processed in the healthcare department were that and lavender or 'fresh linen' and those two made him feel ill. There was also the smell of what he thought was metal, maybe, and something a little more pungent and... tangy smelling?

The Tunnel Snake found the source of that particular odor when he turned around and saw another message written across the wall in what looked like runny black grease or oil of some sort. He didn't want to get any closer to examine the liquid, instead finding a pried open can of something at the base of the wall below the large, finger-painted letters that dripped excess black sludge:

DADDY'S GOOD LITTLE BITCH

Chapter End Notes

A/N: First of all, Lucy Palmer is my favorite underrated and feisty old lady and if she isn't yours I'll tell you why you're missing out.

Second of all, that break I mentioned for the past couple of weeks is in effect the moment this chapter is posted. Regular posting will resume on 04/13 (Friday the 13th, how fitting for the twists in the upcoming Chapter 33!), with the posting schedule going as such:

04/13, Friday - CHP 33 - Custom of the Wasteland (P1)
04/16, Monday - CHP 34 - Custom of the Wasteland (P2)
04/20, Friday - CHP 35 - Custom of the Wasteland (P3)
04/23, Monday - CHP 36 - Custom of the Wasteland (P4)
04/27, Friday - CHP 37 - (Butch chapter, title redacted)

That's some kinda schedule, innit? There's going to be A LOT happening in chapters 33 - 36, and I probably could've split them up in a way that looked more manageable than that but it was the best I could do where it still looked right to me. So for about two, two and a half weeks you guys'll be getting pretty constant updates in chapters to make up for my two week absence! Make no mistake, even though I'm taking a break for my birthday and visiting family, I'll still be working and writing. I want to ensure
that I write the "Custom of the Wasteland" chapters exactly the way I want them, I still have that chapter of "Lovers Lament" that I said would be out soon but then I never posted it (I chickened out in the end right before posting because I didn't think it was good enough LOL), AAAND I'm also trying to rewrite a very old fanfic of mine, "Back in the Black Bayou".

Please don't read it to avoid spoilers for the rewrite! If you don't care, you can go ahead and read it, but it's rather old and needs sprucing up. The rewrite will also have a completely new 'Emmy' (my OC starring beside Charon) so it'll change the story, her history, and the relationship between her and Charon quite a bit.

The last thing I'll mention in this unnecessarily long author's note is my birthday! I mentioned in the last chapter that I'd love to see some creations dedicated to Inventor's Absolution and it's characters (Winona, Butch, my newly introduced OCs of Harriet Zhang, Sir Tobias Sumner, and Glasgow). This is still an open request and I wanted to clarify that no one has to make anything for the bubbas (I'd be more than happy with just a sweet birthday wish~), but if you do, it doesn't just have to be drawings or artwork! It could be short stories, poetry, photomanips, anything conjured by your lovely imagination! Whatever you make, be sure to link it to me either through here or my tumblr (thecoolkidsbasement) so I can see it, and it'll be reblogged on my mentioned tumblr for everyone to see c: (unless I'm otherwise asked not to post it publicly).

Whew, I think I covered everything... sorry for the long update. I probably would've put it on my tumblr but this is easier for you guys to access, me thinks. If you got any questions about anything at all, you can comment/review (since I don't think that Ao3 has a PM feature?????) or you can talk to me on tumblr! My inbox and ask is always open, lovelies c:

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
A/N: Nothing like coming back from a much needed vacation with a long ass chapter, amiright?

Just a quick shout out and immense thank you to everyone who wished me a happy birthday, commented, and made gifts dedicated to Inventor's Absolution! My heart's all fuzzy with the gratuitous amount of love I received from you guys and I couldn't ask for better readers, honestly. For those of you who'd like to see these wonderful gifts, go and check out my tumblr (thecoolkidsbasement) to see them all! That blog is for my fanfiction writing, asks you can submit to my OCs, and a place for me to keep in touch with you guys so I don't have to rely on new chapter postings to give you guys updates on what's going on with me-so please consider following me there for the latter reason alone!

Anyways, glad to be back, and I hope you'll all consider shooting me a message on tumblr, or commenting here on the story, or dropping a favorite/follow to keep up to date on it. You won't regret it~ c:

Without further ado, and once again, happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out

Winona sat on the bed in her Tenpenny apartment, biting her already too short nails and staring ahead at the wall. Beside her feet, like an unmoving hound, sat her bag—an old hiker's backpack she bought downstairs—packed with all the essentials she'd need from a list Sir Sumner supplied her with; at over 60 pounds it carried a sleeping mat, first aid (that came with a separate list on it's own for supplies) with a sewing kit, a pack of weapon maintenance tools for her gun, matches, a survival knife as well as a multi-tool pocket knife, blandly colored clothes with extra underwear and socks, enough food and water until they reached the next town, a small metal cooking pot and dining plate with a fork, a proper gas mask, several feet of rope and a handful of rags, and, of course, money—just enough for supplies in the future, but not enough that she'd be a worthwhile target to rob.

Those were the minimum requirements necessary for her pack, and she was explicitly told that she would be held responsible for anything she did (or didn't) bring. The final touches that she added to her inventory included a basic hygiene kit of her toothbrush, a pack of wet wipes she made herself as a 'sponge shower' alternative, tampons, a shovel and a full book (she was aware of the 'bathroom situation' in the Wastes), some more of her homemade smoke bombs, and a couple rolls of duct tape. Glasgow warned her that it was a constant pain to have to sew up holes or rips in clothes, and duct tape was an easy fix for that when you were out in the Wasteland. To keep some semblance of her hygiene as well, she also packed a razor; not that anyone cared if her legs and underarms were unshaven or not, but the rest of her body hair was as white as her hair, and something about her preening ritual of intimate self-care kept a semblance of normalcy from her old life back in the vault.

Otherwise, her pack also had batteries for Widget and her satchel of tools. She thought about
bringing her recently completed Gizmo along as well, coupled with replacement pieces and wiring in case he got banged up on the road, but had ultimately decided that it was still too early for her latest invention to be taken through those extremes.

Winona looked to the wolf-inspired robot that sat in the corner beside her workbench, with tall ears that stood pointed as if on alert, with his jaw slack and long, sleek tail curled about his front paws. He was powered down for the time being, and had been since officially finishing him two days ago in thanks to very little sleep and a lot of coffee and soda. The inventor took him out for test walks after dark during that time, when only Tenpenny security was awake to watch them in unnerved awe with distrustful stares, so she could study his movement, his AI's interaction with his environment, and to ensure that he understood basic commands. A personality currently wasn't uploaded to his coding as something about the chip she bought was buggy, so Gizmo's operations were very basic in comparison to Godfrey-turned-Andy 2.0 or even Widget (for all her bugs, that being said).

I've dreamt of the day he'd be completed since my first blueprint of him as a four-legged pudding dispenser, she thought with a loving smile as she observed her deactivated invention from her bed. Now he's gotta flamethrower, instead. Talk about growing up, huh, Gizmo? At least I can say it was for the better.

A polite knock came at her door and she got to her feet to answer it—since Andy 2.0 was still in pieces from when she pried open his casing to peruse his inner workings, as reference to Gizmo's own wiring, for the last week Winona had to fetch her own meals and answer her own door. She had trouble putting back together all his internal components but was certain she could fix it when she returned with her dad!

Upon opening the door, she was greeted by Sir Sumner, who only he gaped at her with a small hint of shock in his face before it fell away to a kindly expression. He removed his hat under one palm and clasped it to his chest as he made a small bow in greeting. The overhead light glinted off of the bald spot atop the crown of his head.

"Good morning, Miss Parker." He addressed her. "I could say that I hardly recognized you!"

"Guess that's the point," She replied with a dry smile and brushed a hand over her now incredibly short hair.

It was buzzed short on all sides except for the top, which was a choppy mess of tight curls, and then dyed a deep burgundy color that Andy 2.0 excitably referred to as "Cinnamon Sangria!" as he dumped it on her head, then colored her eyebrows and lashes in the same shade of red. It was liberating to see the difference in the person she saw in the mirror, even if the change was for survival's sake, and she felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders; for years she let her hair remain white as a bold stance in the face of her bullies (not just the Tunnel Snakes from childhood, but anyone in Vault 101 that shunned her because of it), showing that she wasn't going to hide her insecurities despite it being caused by a mutation outside of her control.

However, now that she did change it, she was delightfully ecstatic and wished she had done it sooner. It was a serious matter, of course, but there was something undeniably fun in changing her look. Winona felt more serious just by a change of hairstyle, almost like she was more rebellious or distinguished, and she could see something inside her was metamorphosing as she watched Andy 2.0's many arms work in a blurred flurry in the reflection of her bathroom mirror, leaving nothing but her curls collected in a ring of white around her chair as they were sheared off.

Butch was right all those years ago—burgundy was a great color on her.
"The others are downstairs. Are you packed?" Sir Sumner inquired.

Winona nodded as she moved out of the way to let him into her apartment, gesturing over to the backpack that leaned on her bed frame in wait to be checked. Sumner knelt down in front of it and carefully pried through its contents as she shuffled over to Gizmo with new boots that weighed down her feet. She learned a valuable lesson about traveling the Wasteland on the walk from Megaton to Tenpenny Tower—proper shoes were an absolute necessity—so she bought a durable pair of hiking boots to trade in for her vault-issued shoes. The new boots were a size too big and damn were they bulky, but with an extra pair of socks on her feet to deter any blistering, she adjusted fine.

"Excellent choice on the knife, Miss Parker." Sumner remarked as he withdrew her survival knife from her pack and unsheathed it for further examination. "Good length—6.5 inches, durable... certainly easy to sharpen, and good in a wide array of uses. This'll make an excellent spearhead for hunting."

"...Hunting? I'm gonna be hunting?" She asked with crinkled brow as she fussed over Gizmo, checking over his outer casing for the 27th time because on their last walk his back leg kept locking up, leaving him to fall over helplessly.

"Hunting's an undoubtedly valuable skill to have, as well as knowing how to properly clean your kills, so I highly recommend learning." He explained while glancing back into her bag for a final look over. "Well done—a properly packed bag is the first vital step in braving the Wasteland. Are you ready?"

"Is anybody, living out here?" Winona questioned genuinely as she moved back toward Sumner to pick up her backpack, using the momentum to sling it onto her shoulders easily. She could carry 60 pounds of equipment easily, but to carry it over dozens of miles of craggy terrain would be a challenge.

"There's only so much you can prepare for. Come, let me see your armor." He settled his hands on her shoulders as he said this to keep her still, with his eyes scanning over her protection in critical observation. He knocked against the spray painted metal that was her chest plate with a brute knuckle, pulling on the straps to ensure it was secure, then checked a few other things like where she strapped her weapons and easy-reach supplies on her person before nodding in satisfaction.

"Excellent. The materials you use in your armor will be a matter of life and death when you're outside, and sometimes you'll be pushed to be creative in how you armor yourself if sound protection isn't at your immediate disposal. Hardened leather or metal scrap is all well and good, but properly made armor is preferable if you can get your hands on it. Now, a word to the wise," He clapped a single hand on her shoulder again while his other pointed a warning finger into her face, holding her stare. "Your weapon's holstered but never leave it clipped in when we're traveling. Especially in known enemy territory. When your gun's drawn don't hover your finger over the trigger, either—we can't have you accidentally pulling it and shooting us or yourself."

Winona nodded in understanding as she looked back into his hardened face, her brows lowering over her eyes as she viewed him with an apprehensive look. "...I've never used an actual gun before. The best I had was a BB gun when I was 10."

"A gun's a loathsome responsibility to have. That's something you'll come to understand when we teach you how to use it. Your 10mm there is good to start. Reload and maintenance are easy, ammunition for it is easy and cheap to come by, and the kickback won't rear the butt back into your face." Sumner released her and went back to the door, opening it for them to leave as he replaced his brimmed hat on his head. "Shall we?"
The inventor nodded as she shifted her backpack a little for comfort, checked quickly over herself for any other changes that needed to be made, and then followed him to the door. Her heart began to pound as she locked her apartment and they waited for the elevator to come up—it was anxiety surging through every chamber of her heart and it betrayed the last inch of bravery she had left within her. She could only think about calling off the whole mission, retiring back to her apartment, and hiding pathetically under the covers since waking up that morning... if it weren't for the promise she made. Winona didn't know if she made it to herself, or to her father who wasn't near, or to some other cosmic being that watched over the world, but she promised that she would lead the team that would return him safely to her. Her fear of staying back to be told he was unreachable or dead terrified her more than going outside with her newly employed protectors did.

To turn back inside meant never being able to forgive herself if something happened.

The elevator soon arrived and Sumner politely gestured for her to enter first before calling for the lobby floor. During the long and rickety journey down, Winona clutched the nearest support handle with whitened knuckles and a stare that lingered for an obnoxious amount of time on her eldest guard; she noted that his eyes were a deep and calming shade of green, and he had a long nose framed by deep smile lines and other wrinkles. She noted that he didn't smile much around his cohorts, which probably made such lines a juxtaposition to how draconian the rest of his features were. He had a soldier's face—the kind that was handsome in youth with a tight mouth and strict eyes that could make one uncomfortable when looked at... but no, musing over the looks of a much younger Tobias Sumner wasn't the reason why she had been staring.

His earlier mention of weapons being a 'loathsome responsibility' reminded her of the talk her dad gave her when she was 9; the day he caught her trying to make a rubber band gun to shoot Butch and his friends with in Hunt the Mutant, at Wally's birthday party. She clearly recalled almost every word of his speech—especially the part of her understanding what he really meant about fighting when she was older—and he was right. Now that she was out in the Wasteland, seeing the bomb-torn landscape for the first time and at the mercy of the trials and enemies she'd face in the Capital, she understood more than she thought she ever would about what her father was trying to say about war, and about how fighting didn't always have to be the answer to everything.

That last part, she was still trying to work out if he was right about or not.

"Yes, Miss Parker?" Sumner addressed her without having to return her gaze to know that she was staring.

"N- Nothing—" She began, her quick and sheepish response betraying her. "Sorry. It's just what you said about guns... about them being a responsibility? What'd you mean by that?"

"Guns aren't men for people who can't dedicate themselves to having to murder someone, to having to use a gun, with a strict and non-biased conviction."

"Murder? Now there's a strong word."

"I suppose I use that terminology too liberally for most people, but to be frank it doesn't matter to me a bit whether a killing is justified or not, or if the person was innocent or guilty. It's still murder. Ending someone's life with judgement's a chore meant for God." He finally turned his chin to look back over his shoulder at her. "You'll eventually find yourself in a situation where you'll have to shoot someone, so you best decide now if you'll have that conviction for when the time comes."

"Wait, isn't that why I hired you guys? To—... To do that for me? To kill the people who try and hurt me?"
"You've paid us to protect you, yes, but you've also paid us to teach you how to survive. That is how you survive. If you rely on someone else to ensure that you don't die, your remaining existence could be a very short one."

Winona glanced away and watched, with some alarm as result of their conversation, as the arrow above the elevator doors ticked erratically back and forth, unable to determine what floor they were currently on. "...I really don't understand anything out here."

"You will." Sumner nodded with extreme conviction. "Eventually."

"It's frustrating feeling like I don't know anything. Down in the vault I was told I was smart. Really smart... and what good is that if it doesn't make me bulletproof?"

"Being the right kind of smart is the next best thing. Sometimes it isn't the raiders or the mutants or the wildlife that kills someone out here... it's something unforeseen that you should've been better equipped for. Something moronic. I've seen good men nick themselves shaving to die some days later from sepsis." He answered. "The Capital will be a very unforgiving teacher. You'll find out soon enough if you're willing to heed Her lessons."

"...Would've preferred a more charismatic pep-talk, but thanks." Winona replied with flat humor and he chuckled darkly.

"More charismatic 'pep-talks' in the future. I'll file that tid-bit away for later usage." Sumner promised teasingly as the elevator doors parted and he allowed her to step out before following. "After you."

With her in the lead, she steered them through the lobby to the front doors, where Harriet and Glasgow stood in the midst of a quiet, serious conversation. Glasgow was definitely better armored now than he was when she first met him, with a speckled helmet on his head that had scored sayings she couldn't make out, along with bullet grazings and dingy stickers that were half-peeled off from the years. A pair of wide lensed goggles wrapped around the helmet and he was armored up with a black spray-painted breastplate marked with a taloned claw insignia, and jarring plates of metal were bound over his legs from ankle to thigh. A heavy rifle with a long and narrow barrel was slung around his torso by the strap to rest on his back alongside his small pack. Harriet stood with her body scarf cowling her head and a massive black firearm was settled in her two small hands, with Samantha on one of them. Winona assumed it was the shotgun she mentioned she had during the meeting with Mister Burke, and as far as the inventor was aware, it didn't have a name.

Winona was surprised to find that the mentioned bespectacled bastard wasn't waiting amongst them—the dedication he had in compiling a team of guards for her made her think he'd show up to see her off in the very least (but she wasn't disappointed by his absence). The two were in better relations than before, but she still made it clear that she hated him while he made her aware that he didn't care, and in fact, found it almost amusing.

Mister Burke could have smiled all he wanted in that smarmy way of his, but he forgot that he was just one homemade tasing away from filling a time slot for the Tenpenny Tower's incinerator.

"Baby doll, ye-ooow." Glasgow catcalled upon seeing the inventor. "Diggin' the new look."

"Fun tip 'bout human anatomy—stab a man in the kidneys and he'll bleed out in less than a minute," Harriet commented in an impassive voice as she sent a jarring elbow into Glasgow's ribs for added effect. "Wanna play volunteer, Glas'?"

"I'm good," He hissed out through a mirthless chuckle as he held his afflicted side. "Shit, Zhāng..."
"I'd say the weather's appropriate for a walk, wouldn't you agree?" Sir Sumner inquired briskly, sounding nearly sunny, as he walked toward the front doors. It was then that Winona noticed several Tower residents loitering in the lobby with prying eyes, watching her specifically with relief in their faces in seeing her leave. "Miss Parker, stay close within the formation we showed you—and do exactly as we say, when we say it."

"Except whatever Glasgow says," Harriet asserted as she followed out after Sumner with her shotgun resting against her shoulder. "He'll probably just tell 'ya to drop your pants."

"Think I'd ask widd'a lil' more class than that." He countered only to the inventor with a cheeky wink, and she smiled with a blush and an amused chuckle in return.

This is it... we're off to find dad. Winona thought with a bountiful bubbling of nerves clamoring for her to go back inside. A vague recollection of the Madison woman's face sprouted in her mind, and it was the final kick of determination she needed to walk past the gates of the Tower. If that woman was out there somewhere, she was the only hope Winona had in finding him quickly.

Don't you go anywhere, daddy—I'm coming to find you.

"Made a'lotta progress but shit it got dark fast." Glasgow commented with an impressed whistle and his eyes turned up toward the sky.

The group had stopped for the last break of the day before having to find somewhere to camp and it couldn't have come sooner; it was only Day One of their journey and Winona already felt like she was dying in the first two hours, as she lacked the remarkable endurance of her three guards, even with all the walking she did with Mister Burke the couple of weeks prior. She practically collapsed onto a squat rock to rest with her bones feeling as if they went out of her legs, panting with exhaustion, and she pulled for her canteen to take a few measured sips of clean water from it—wishing she had the gumption to dump her only water supply on herself to cool down.

The Wasteland sky was a massive painter's palette of dingy saffrons streaked with muddy pinks through the dismally brown sky, but the colors were quickly waning to pitch blackness at an alarming rate. Even as they sat on the cropping of rocks for their break, shadows were stretching past them like tall monsters clawing for their feet, and a welcomed, chilled breeze began to rise on the landscape as they neared mid-September weather. They were out in the flat open without anywhere to set up protection under cover and Sir Sumner was studying a map loosely sketched with the surrounding topography for natural shelter. It had been retrieved from a long and narrow pouch clipped onto his belt, where Winona saw several others in his possession from where she sat; the names of a few faraway places that the maps corresponded to were scrawled in neat writing in black marker, reading locations like California Road Maps, Chicago, Virginia, and Texas/New Mexico Border. She wondered if he had really gone to all those places to accumulate such distant maps.

"Nothing 'round here for another fuck ton of walking," Harriet speculated with a grumble as she dropped her backpack unceremoniously on the ground, rolling both of her muscled shoulders to release the tension. "We build a fire here and we're a flashin' buffet sign for miles."

"What's yer map say, old man? Where're we goin'?" Glasgow asked as he played with his blade—it revolved skillfully around his fingers as they rotated within the brass knuckled handle. Unintelligible tattoos marked his fingers between some of his knuckles and a mottled, tongue-out face leered at Winona under the strap of his fingerless gloves on his right hand when it was held still.
How could anyone safely get tattooed out here—? Her mind trailed off in question as her eyes raked over whatever other modded details of his body she could see. There was a position for tattoo artist back in the vault, but Winona was told the job was vacant long before she was born (though people speculated that the Overseer officially closed the career choice due to personal opinion on body modification). How can people get pierced, too? She added on upon inspecting his double nose piercing and the rings that lined both of his ears, though the upper shell of his left ear was disfigured so it wasn't as decorated as his right ear. When they stopped for lunch, she noticed that he had a tongue stud as well, and he liked playing with it when he seemed to be thinking by rolling the stud between his teeth from one edge of his mouth to the other.

"I have a marker here for a nearby settlement," Sumner replied with his eyes flitting between his tattered map and a small compass he held between the gloved pads of his thumb and pointer finger. "Very little notes on reconnaissance, but it's labeled as a small population settlement or housing of some sort. Low threat and defenseless—labeled as Spoon."

"...Spoon?" Winona repeated dubiously as she was pulled from her idle daydreaming of Glasgow and what other tattoos, piercings, or scars would decorate the rest of his naked body. Her hat was off her sweaty head now, and she was using it to fan the sweltering heat from her face—with her now short hair, her scalp and ears felt vulnerable to the heat of the sun, and Harriet commented that her face at least could possibly be sunburned.

"The scout that compiled this map named it so but I doubt that's actually it's name. Scouts in my old cavalry would name settlements, shelters, or other landmarks by whatever first came to mind if a proper name wasn't immediately known, or if it couldn't be attributed to an obvious moniker based on location. Apparently whoever scouted here wasn't very clever or found themselves to be funny." He admitted frankly with some minor embarrassment as he cleared his throat and silently turned back to his maps, but added on quietly to only himself; "Probably Marco... cheeky bastard..."

Great. If I end up dying near that town, my gravestone will read; "Here lies Winona Hope Parker, who died by Spoon." The inventor deadpanned in her own mind, to very little self amusement.

"You never scouted there?" Harriet asked as she stood at his side to observe the map as well, continuing to stretch out her tense limbs as she did. She didn't sound happy at all. "If you didn't scout it I don't damn well trust it."

"It wouldn't matter, this map's several years outdated. The town could be abandoned by now or otherwise."

"Great. So you're sayin' we dunno what's out that way, anyhow?"

"For the time being, Spoon's our best option." Sir Sumner concluded firmly as he began folding up the map in his possession. "The map highlights a vantage point on the south side of the settlement, perfect for scouting. We'll perform reconnaissance when we get there."

"Gotcha covered," Glasgow grinned as he pat his shouldered sniper rifle proudly.

"Let's get outta here before we're jumped, especially with raider bait here." Harriet warned as she shucked off the hood of her scarf from her head.

"...I'm gunna assume by 'raider bait' you mean me?" Winona responded a little hotly and a biting voice roiled in her mind; Wow, if I knew we were pulling nicknames, I would've asked for first pick.

"Alright, let's not start anything we don't have the time to finish." Sumner supplied Harriet with a
warning look as she slung her gun onto her shoulder and picked up her backpack. "We're moving out before it gets any darker—let's go."

As Winona got up from the rock where she sat, she brushed dirt off the back of her pants and picked up her backpack to begrudgingly sling it back on. A heavy arm was suddenly hooked around her shoulders and when she looked up, Glasgow was leaning into her to guide her back towards the road after the other two with a devilishness in his smile that was made her melt all over again. She knew he was dangerous and that she would need to keep her distance, but there was something enticing about danger being that handsome; and he wasn't anything like the boys back in Vault 101, which made him deliciously foreign and it came part and parcel with his wildly unbridled and somewhat seductive masculinity.

Glasgow was a man hardened by an unforgiving world that he fought daily, and he was still here and still standing, stronger—proud and unweathered. She wanted him to bare every scar to her for her hands to map so she could see how the teeth of the Wasteland dug into him... to see what made him into the man that he was, and what exactly he faced in life that made her know right upon meeting him that he was perilous to her well being if she got too close.

Or maybe it was less poetic than that, and Winona had been sexually starved for years now to only be further tormented by being in the company of a man that was that rougishly handsome... especially one that flirted unabashedly with her, despite her shortcomings of average looks and a scrawny body.

"Dun' worry 'bout Zhāng, doll. She's like a toothless, clawless deathclaw—scary t'be 'round, but ain't much she's gunna do t'ya." He chuckled. "You'll always be in good hands with us."

She's not the one I'm worried about, Winona thought with some amount of caution to herself, but she remained silent and only nodded in agreement.

Glasgow's arm around her didn't move away for almost the entire walk down the broken road to 'Spoon'—and she enjoyed the musk of his leather, sweat, and cigarette smoke more than she cared to admit.

Glasgow was laid on his stomach in the hot dirt where they hid on a ridge spearheading towards Spoon, residing on the opposite side of the oncoming road that laid broken from weathering and time. His sunglasses were perched atop his head so he could clearly peer down the scope of his rifle, scanning across the quiet little town below with just enough daylight to interpret the outlines he saw. Winona heard him quietly detailing to Sumner two little figures, which he said were children, hobbling quickly about the town's center in game of Tag that took them up and down the streets and around the only buildings that were still standing.

"Anything, Glasgow?" Sumner asked as he was knelt beside the younger man, keeping just as low to the ridge as Glasgow was.

"Well, no one's watchin' the kiddies." He answered as a small cloud of dust billowed in front of his face when he slowly exhaled. "'Bout four standin' houses that look open—three pre-war, one looks like a tin shack 'er somethin' on the far edge. Man-made. Others're caved in or junked. Red Rocket on the north-east road. Porch lights jus' came on fer the two biggest houses, so they got power at least."

"Children typically indicate there's armed parents around." Sir Sumner reasoned. "No adults at all?"
"Not that've seen, an' they got nothin' for defenses. No gates, walls, barriers, nothin'. Don't see traps, either, goin' up the road that runs right through the settlement from our side—wait—gotta walkin' fossil. Male. He's comin' up the street... talkin' t' the kids... they're goin' inside either house. Old guy's still standin' out in the open."

"Armored?"

"Neg'. Sweatervest. No armor 'n no weapons, far as I kin tell from 'ere. There's a bald guy comin' outta the left house... ooh, looks like they're arguin'. Baldie's not wearin' armor, either, all pre-war clothing. Fossil's pointin' off at somethin' between the houses."

"They got anythin' that'll blow our asses into the pavement if we go down there?" Harriet asked from where she sat on the ground beside Winona, taking the few minutes of the men doing reconnaissance to check her gun.

"Not that I see... but they gotta be packin' somethin'." Glasgow shook his head a little. "Bet you 20 one's gotta 9mm."

"Bet'cha 50 one of them's gotta .44." Harriet challenged with a grin that he returned back over his shoulder after replacing his sunglasses over his eyes, if only to hide his deformed one.

"Yer on, greedy bitch."

"It looks like everyone's gone inside," Sir Sumner observed as he got up from the ridge and skid down towards where Harriet and Winona sat in the dirt. "Unarmed and unarmed adults with children around—the town's completely defenseless, although they seem to have power and reliable shelter in the very least."

"Won't be so welcomin' with the brats around," Harriet shook her head.

"Could they be faking it?" Winona questioned. "I mean—faking being this defenseless little town? Is it unheard of that people could walk around without guns strapped or armor on?"

"It's not all uncommon in large and well-protected settlements... but in a place like an unfortified town with children, it's rather odd."

"Maybe they think being so far out of the way is defense enough," She speculated as she sat up straighter with her backpack draped across her lap, hugging it against her stomach if only to hold her up. "It's not near any main roads or other settlements. If they're so lax in these parts, that probably means it's safe, right?"

"Sometimes it means the opposite," Harriet disagreed darkly. "Means people know t'stay away."

"They didn't seem to have anything in way of resources for food, for what we immediately saw. It could mean they possibly rely on people who pass through to trade with but that's not a reliable means of survival." Sumner reasoned.

"We goin' down 'er not?" Glasgow asked as he stepped down from the ridge to join them. "I think we should chance it—we've a'ready wasted 'nough time out 'ere."

"I agree with Glasgow." Winona agreed as she looked up between the two men standing over her. "It looks safe enough."

"Something isn't right 'bout that place." Harriet bluntly opposed with a small grimace and a firm shake of her head.
"Well m'dead-ass tired so's either there or out in the open—you'd rather risk it fer a yao guai 'stead of two unarmed guys, and one of 'em looks 'bout as old as the Capital does? Doubt they got much a'anyone else that'd be a threat." Glasgow shook his head. "I think we should go."

"I'm telling you, somethin' ain't right at all about that town. I'm not turning a blind eye on my instincts—" Harriet began to argue.

"Well 'ya only got one eye t'spare, don'cha?" Glasgow snapped.

"Wanna match 'ya weasel-faced shit-eatin' fuck—"

"...Hey, Sumner? Not like I wanna tell you what to do, but as squad leader, maybe you should—? You know—?" Winona muttered, suggesting awkwardly with a discreet finger pointing between Harriet and Glasgow as they continued to bicker heatedly with each other. "Before they give each other matching lumps from beating the crap outta each other—?"

Sumner silently responded with a disappointed shake of his head before calling out over the two in a commanding tone, which immediately caused them to draw quiet from their wrathful slew of insults at the other, as he began to unbutton the front of his trench coat.

"Everone redress and move out to Spoon! And I mean everyone!"

"Stay behind me, doll."

Winona promptly did as she was directed by Glasgow. Her feet stepped upon every footprint he left behind in the dirt as they neared the town, directly tracing his long-legged trail. Sir Sumner was a few steps ahead of him, eyes scanning the horizon line with cautionary glances and Harriet walked beside her while adjusting the pieces of her disguise. The inventor glanced up toward the night sky where little wisps of mangy clouds drifted through the cooled evening air amongst flecks of stars that shone against the dark tarmac of the sky. Only on her third day out of Vault 101 she looked up to the night sky and no longer held a mesmerized wonder for it; she decided she didn't like the stars, as beautiful as they were, because they made her feel consciously insignificant. She didn't think she could ever be use to the feeling of being unconfined by metal walls and bolted ceilings—comfortably suffocated in bunker hallways dozens of feet underground—where she could never be lost because she knew every walkway, and never alone because there was always someone else that was familiar there, just around a corner.

Maybe one day she could learn to appreciate the stars.

_Homesickness_, something that was so foreign to her that she almost didn't know what to call it, twisted her heart into a knot so tight she felt like she'd have to plunge her own hands into her chest to undo it. It wasn't just homesickness for Vault 101, it was a longing for her friends, and dad, and Jonas and for the old life she had long before that morning when she was woken up by Amata... long before being told she would be forced to marry... long before she was told the truth about herself and her father, when she was still speculating that she was being lied to but was content enough not to find out the truth.

Winona was dwelling in memories that would gladly hold her hostage, because running from the vault and after her dad kept her too busy to properly grieve for the people and home that she loved, and lost, and would never see again. She never lost someone or something before aside from her mother, who she was never attached to, so this was all completely new emotional territory and she didn't think she was ready to _properly_ address Jonas' death.
It's been almost a month since he was murdered, the tinkerer realized with some saddened realization. Why doesn't it feel like it? Why's it feel like a lifetime's already gone by and I'll never stop hurting from it?

Winona hadn't realized how lost she was in her thoughts until she grabbed for the back of Glasgow's duster to catch herself when the toe of her boot caught on a rock hiding in the dirt. The merc checked back on her momentarily before turning his eyes back forward, and she forced herself to shove away those memories of grievances and anger into some conjured mental closet for later perusing.

Don't let yourself be taken hostage, she told herself with firm resolution, you've got shit to do and not a lot of time to do it.

They were much closer to Spoon now than they had been earlier, before she was distracted by her thoughts. At the last resting spot the four had redressed, per Sir Sumner's orders, so when they entered the town they would be able to realistically present themselves as unimpressive civilian Wastelanders.

Sumner shed his coat and pulled on a raggedy sweater and trousers, which seemed more like crops on him due to his long legs, over his bodysuit (Winona found it to be a rather odd garment, as it was all black and made of a quality sheen material she'd never seen before); Harriet rearranged her scarf so it draped over her like a poncho dress that reached her knees, and she tied Glasgow's helmet to her midsection under it so she looked pregnant; and Glasgow tucked away his larger weapons and ammunition belts but left on his chest plate, with the barrel of his sniper rifle sticking out of his pack. Winona took her own armor off and remained in her cargo pants and tank top, but pulled on Butch's torn leather jacket. Her 10mm was left strapped to her thigh just in case, though having it while not knowing how to use it made her incredibly edgy. Coupled with clapping dirt onto themselves for added grit, it was the closest the four could look to harmless, exhausted Wasters.

"Who the hell'd willingly live out here?" Harriet declared in a mutter under her breath with a tense expression as they walked the road leading into Spoon. "Doubt any caravans would come out this way unless they feel like takin' the long way t'the Tower."

"...You should waddle a little and curve your back more, it'll make you look more convincing." Winona instructed helpfully with a hand gesturing to the woman's helmet belly, but was met with a gruesome one-eyed stare. "...Ooor not... your walk's convincing enough, I guess..."

They were entering the town border now and immediately put on the characters of their backstory; a family of four with an old man and pregnant woman, trying to find somewhere to spend the night. Sumner used an extremely credible old man's walk, taking shuffling steps and hunching his shoulders to make his height and build seem less impressive. Winona marveled at his good health in lieu of his age, as the trek thus far proved that not only could he keep up with the rest of them, but he was typically leading their pack with an endurance that was almost inhuman; Harriet hurried to his side to take his forearm in her stabilizing hands, pretending that she was the only thing that kept him up on his feet and walking onward, and Winona came around to his other side to take his other arm to help in the facade—instead slinging it around her shoulders for him to lean on due to their immense height difference. Glasgow led them onward in a short stride with a large one-handed pistol (apparently it was a magnum, he was very clear on that) that he called a Desert Eagle.

"Baldie on 10," Glasgow muttered to the others over his shoulder.

Ahead of them, on what looked like the remnants of a once grand porch pinned with fairy lights, was the bald man in pre-war clothing that Glasgow described from his gun's scope. He looked like
he was very enthralled with sweeping his porch with a mangy broom, brushing the dirt of the day back onto the street in meticulous fashion. He merrily whistled a tune while he worked, a song that Winona found herself being familiar with somehow, and when he finally took notice of the four nearing his home, the broom went still in his hands.

An unnaturally wide smile came to his face and he propped the broom against the wall beside the front door, coming down the steps of the porch to greet them while clapping off his hands.

"Looks like Andale's got some new visitors, here!" He exclaimed rosily. "My, my, we never get visitors!"

As he moved to shake hands with Glasgow and worked his way down the line through Harriet, and then Sumner, Winona observed him. Sumner once told her it was good form to examine possible threats further and see what you could gather about them, based simply on their appearance; his red button down and slacks were impeccably unsoiled, hands washed and grayed beard primly cut, and she thought that he looked too much like the fathers she saw in pre-war advertisements littered about Springvale, Megaton, and Tenpenny Towers; fathers like the ones walking to the grocery store with their rosy-cheeked wives to buy TV dinners, washing a fancy red sports car on a driveway leading to white picket fence house, or out on a delicious afternoon picnic with their great, big, happy family.

What could Winona gather from his clean attire, his exceptionally manicured appearance, and lack of a visible weapon?

*They've got to have running water,* she pondered as her thoughts pressed onward to reach for further observation; *but his clothes wouldn't protect him from a butter knife, at best. Why would someone dress this way? To seem non-threatening, like we're trying to do? He's got to have a weapon on him, somewhere... a small hand gun, a blade of some sort? A basic knife's as much a commodity as clean water is out here.*

When he stopped on Winona to gleefully shake her hand, she saw his eyes and was immediately clamped into startled silence. They were cutting, looking through her as if she were small, and unprotected—as if she were morsel and he were predator. His grin broadened a fraction just as his eyes did, revealing more white in both eyes and teeth, and the inventor knew that she wasn't imagining how he watched her.

She wasn't imagining the fear that was stuffing itself into her chest, either, which kept her from politely greeting him.

"Well, now—are *n't* you a small thing?" He crowed, laughing. "What's your name, little lady?"

"Winona. M'niece," Glasgow responded for her when she wouldn't speak for herself, still stunned by the horrible look the bald man trained upon her. "...She's shy." He further supplied.

"Aw, there's no need for that here! I promise, we don't *bite!* Welcome, strangers, to the *best* town in all of Virginia!" He proudly flourished an arm out to the remainder of town—which wasn't much, upon closer inspection. The ferocious expression that touched his face was gone but Winona still felt like she couldn't breathe correctly as her fear gripped and wrung her lungs into knots.

"Picked a heck of a good day to visit. Had some great weather, didn't we? Yeah, we sure did... oh! But where's my manners! Name's Smith—Jack Smith—and y'all are—?"

"You've already been introduced to little Winnie, here," Sumner replied with a geriatric smile as his hand found his lower back, feigning body aches. Harriet spared him a worried look and gently pulled him more upright when he leaned one way a little too far and looked pained. "Name's
Tobias but you can call me 'Toby'. Here's my daughter-in-law, Harriet, and my boy, John."

"Good to meet 'ya! What brings you on by Andale? Ain't another town for miles around, in or out!" Jack inquired and Sumner let out a small, pathetic groan followed by 'oooh, my back!...'

"We gotta get him outta this heat, John." Harriet spoke up with unconvincing worry in her face. It would've seemed more genuine if she wasn't targeting Jack with a biting one-eyed, and quite obviously, distrustful stare.

"Nona, scoot—" Glasgow instructed as he brushed her hurriedly away from Sumner's side, opposite of Harriet, to hook the older man's arm around his shoulders instead. "Tried the wrong road out this mornin'. Said we shoulda gone north, but 'ya know how old guys kin be."

"I hear that!" Jack's head was thrown back in boisterous laughter. "My old man was a hard-headed one, sure. Meant well but was about as stubborn as a tree stump—wasn't any moving him when he got his mind made up. But heck, he taught me to mind my manners, so why don'cha stay here in town for the night?"

"We wouldn't want to impose that much," Sir Sumner tried to insist.

"Oh, malarkey! Y'all can stay at Old Man Harris'-he wouldn't mind it none. Can put your feet up, take a walk around our glorious little slice of heaven... perhaps come over for dinner? We'll set out the nice place mats for 'ya, and bring out the big table! Waddya say?"

"Tha- That sounds lovely." Winona stammered quietly when Harriet startled her to respond with a sharp elbow into her back that Jack didn't catch.

"Wonderful! My wife Linda just loves company—loves having them over just as much as she loves cooking them, so she'd be right mad at me if I let your family slip out from our grubby little paws! Come on over this way and we'll get you settled right in." His laugh was more of a chuckle now, and he bent over on his porch to pick up a large, wind-up flashlight and turned it on to light the way down the dark street. With a hand over his shoulder, he signaled for them to follow him onward to the smallest house on the block, just across the way from his own home.

To Winona, the little house looked sorely out of place when compared to the grand estate that was Jack's home, and the twin house that sat parallel to his on the street, with working lights and busy windows. When they neared the little bungalow she could hear the weak whirring of a struggling generator somewhere on the property. So they got water, power... what about food? Burke says people don't usually set up farms out here. Maybe they rely on traders—but Spoon—Andale—man, that name was actually growing on me—but do they even come out this far? Doesn't look like they do. They try to keep to trading routes that hit main towns, and this is only one of two roads leading out of Tenpenny toward Megaton, the next main stop.

"Who else lives out 'ere?" Glasgow asked as they followed Jack. Winona walked on ahead of them, as they were forced to go at the pace Sumner set to keep up his old man deception. Harriet was looking more and more impatient at how slow they were moving.

"Oh, well—there's my wife, Linda, and my boy Junior. Across the way in that beautiful house there are the Wilson's—that's Willy, his missus, Martha, and their little girl, Jenny." He responded as they came to the door of the small house and he took a key from a ring in his back pocket, which carried four other keys. "And Old Man Harris lives here."

...Why does he have a key for this guy's house? Winona wondered to herself as she eyed the few other keys he was in possession of. Is he "Overseer" of this town? What do they call it again—... a
"mayor, maybe? Wouldn't explain why he has keys to this guy's house, though... unless they're good friends.

"I hope we wouldn't be disturbing anyone?" Sir Sumner questioned as Jack utilized the token key to unlock the front door, allowing it to swing open with a gentle push.

"Nonsense! He's gone along to play with Jenny, that girl just adores her grandpa. Besides, he loves having company almost as much as my Linda does. Why don't 'ya go on in? Take a look around, don't be shy!" He turned his eyes back to Winona and the smile that never seemed to leave his face curled at the corners, ringing a pressing shiver down her spine that she couldn't shake off. It felt like it was clinging to her very bones, gnawing down to the marrow.

It vaguely reminded her of Old George—a maintenance man in 101 that died a few years back. Jonas always warned her and Amata to stay away from him as they grew up, and she didn't understand why until she was older. He and Jack shared the same smile that revolted her but Jack's was more—... unsettling. It concealed thoughts darker than what Old George would think about when he'd walk by the classroom when lessons were in session, or the gym during fitness hour for the young girls to 'clean up a spill' he saw out in the hall, or to check on some wiring near the women's residential showers.

Winona didn't dare take another step closer to Jack, but braved it if only to go inside and get away from him. She stepped into the living room of the house and was met with a Burberry plaid dressed couch, a small chipping coffee table crowned with a soiled crochet doily, and a TV in the corner—which seemed rather silly to her, since the inventor couldn't imagine it being functional. A doorway ahead gave her a small glimpse into a sparsely furnished bedroom and a doorway at the right wall lead into, what looked like, a quaintly decorated kitchen with a buzzing ceiling light that flickered stubbornly to stay on. The home would feel more comfortable if it didn't smell absolutely awful on the inside; trying to describe the odor wouldn't do the true nature of the gag-inducing stench any justice, and sadly Winona was an inventor, not a writer.

The remainder of the conversation the three adults had outside about the town and the possibility of joining the Smiths for dinner trailed on away from Winona's hearing. She dropped her backpack onto the ugly couch and went to investigate the kitchen; there was a squat refrigerator next to a surprisingly clean counter, and she opened the fridge in amazement to feel the coolness radiating from inside. She sighed happily, wanting to yank out all the shelving and food to hibernate inside to cool herself off from the day's depleting walk. She was sure her face was a little sunburned now as it felt hot to the touch and she pressed her forehead to the broken ice box, laughing in her own head at the humorless thought of this being her first ever sunburn—it was just another thing she never had to worry about in Vault 101 that felt almost normal. A sunburn was normal.

After some moments of cold solace, Winona shut the fridge door and was alarmed by a bony hand clamping down onto her arm—startling her into a shrill yelp. She was jerked backward into an equally alarmed expression of an elderly man, and the force of his sudden grab made her back collide with the counter edge. His face was heavy with wrinkles behind thick bifocals, and the smell of stale beer came off his sweater vest.

"What're you doing here—!" He cried rather than asked, his trembling hand tightening on her arm almost painfully. "How'd you get in here? Doesn't matter!" He cut off when she opened her mouth and tried to pull her arm free, but the man wouldn't release it.

"Let g- go of me," She demanded in a loud and firm voice. Her trembling hand clapped around on the counter behind her for something to grab to hit him with, but at the same time she didn't want to hurt someone who looked so old and frail. He advanced on her despite her warning and he had her
by the shoulders, yanking her one way and then the other, as if unsure of what to do with the small tinkerer. She braced a forearm on his chest to try and shove him away.

"I said let go—!" She repeated in a higher pitched voice that began showing her panic.

"You've got to get out of this town—get out while you still can!" The old man cried fearfully, and behind the thick lenses of his glasses that made his eyes look bigger, they were wild and carried overwhelming distress. "Listen to me," He pleaded hoarsely and his hands loosened from her shoulders slightly but he was still shaking. "Leave. If you stay, they'll want you for dinner—whatever you do, don't—!"

"Hey!" Glasgow yelled fiercely as he came bounding in from the living room. Before the old man could usher another petrified word, he was suddenly yanked off of Winona with the guard's hand using the collar of his sweater vest as leverage. The force of Glasgow's aggression nearly flung him against the wall, rattling a small dining table that sat there, as he put himself protectively in front of Winona. She was mortified by his use of force on someone who was so fragile with age. The Desert Eagle in his hand was held in a menacing manner, but not completely upright, as if he was gauging whether or not wasting a bullet would really be such a waste.

Winona grasped Glasgow's wrist in warning to lower the gun completely as Jack rushed in with Sumner and Harriet on his heels. Jack frowned upon seeing the old man cowering near the kitchen table and his eyes were unable to hide his surprise under thick, crooked brows.

"Gra- Grandpa Harris—! I—! I thought you were on over at Willy's!"

Harris' face was blanched white as he looked upon Jack, shrinking himself smaller against the little two-person dining table. His mouth parted weakly and only strangled sounds of uncertain half responses spilled from him. His eyes, past the glasses that were askew on his face, in thanks to Glasgow, carried a look of pure dread that rivaled the one he had when he was frantically trying to warn Winona away.

"I'm so, so sorry about all this, friends." Jack apologized in impressive time as he took the elderly man by his arm, turning on him with a severely scolding voice. "Look what you've done, scaring the day lights out of these fine people! Now, I want you to go on to Linda and I'll be there shortly."

Jack turned Harris to the door—Winona noted, forcibly—when the older man seemed held in the same spot by fear. Enough sense came to his body where he finally walked on to the open front door past Harriet and Sumner and he left without having made another word. She was the only one who saw him stop in the open doorway to gaze defeatedly at the four, as if he knew something awful would fate them, before finally exiting the house.

"Harris has gone soft in his years, I'm afraid." Jack tutted with a shake of his head and looked to Winona. "You alright there, little lady? I hope he didn't scare you too bad with any of his crazy talk. What'd he tell you?"

"N- Nothing. Really, nothing—at least nothing I could understand, he was kinda rambling."

Winona insisted through her lie as Sumner silently came to her side, nearly forgetting to hunch his shoulders and walk with a little gimp in his leg as he regarded her with a pressing look.

"I'm fine, Su—papa. Promise. He just—... startled me a little."

"I hope that won't scare your family off none from dinner tonight! He's just a harmless old man, and Linda makes the best beef casserole you'll ever taste! I promise you won't regret coming over!" He laughed in such a way that was unnaturally loud and untroubled, and it was almost difficult to listen to because of how obviously forced it sounded. "Well, I'll let y'all settle in and
see you on by tonight. Go ahead and help yourself to anything 'ya need! First aid should be in the kitchen, and the fridge's stocked with plenty of water. I'll be seeing myself out."

The four watched after the chipper man until he walked out the front door and politely shut it behind him, whistling the same tune as he was earlier when the group found him on his porch—it was "America the Beautiful", Winona finally recognized. Harriet held up a hand the moment the door shut to signal that they needed to be silent. Winona counted 10 long seconds in her head as Harriet peeked out through the dingy curtains covering the front window, her hand finally dropping to say it was fine to talk.

"Alright, Smiley McGee's gone." She spoke.

"You sure you're alright?" Sir Sumner asked as he straightened himself out, looking back to Winona.

"Yeah, yeah—" She insisted with a certain nod and her eyes still on the front door. "...Just—... didn't hear him come up behind me."

"You need to learn to be more aware of your surroundings, Miss Parker. He could've hurt you or worse." He shook his head as he chided her. "Don't be afraid to hurt an old man. You don't have the luxury of taking the chance, and from personal experience, they got to live until they were old for very good reason."

"Fuck this place," Harriet hissed from behind them as her hand went under her poncho to undo the straps that held Glasgow's helmet against her stomach. "Guy was outta his God damn gourd."

"S'that the kinda language 'ya wanna teach our child?" Glasgow grinned teasingly as Sumner stalked off to tour the house, quietly mentioning that he wanted to see if there was running water available.

With an annoyed growl, Harriet finally got the helmet free (by ripping it off of her, snapping all the straps that kept it in place) and pulled it out from under her top, aiming to whip it at Glasgow's head. Winona, quickly and without thinking, grabbed her arm to pry the helmet out of her readied throw.

"Calm down, pookie," His grin didn't falter when the guard abrasively shrugged off Winona, letting her have the helmet as she lanced Glasgow with a condemning look. "Ya might go int'a early labor."

"Shut the hell up, shithead." She elbowed him away and walked off into the kitchen, prying open various cabinets to look around for supplies they could take. "Could use a smoke..."

"Smokin' ain't good for the bay-beeeee," Glasgow chimed in song.

"And I'm sure my foot up your ass won't be good for your ego!" Harriet barked back warningly but he waved her off dismissively and turned back to Winona. Apparently, those two had a penchant for getting into obscene arguments with each other... great.

"Jack's one fuckin' creepy card, ain't he?"

Winona nodded vigorously in agreement. "He kept looking at me weird... like—... I dunno how to describe it, but he reminded me of someone back in the vault that I was told to stay away from. This creepy maintenance guy, George? He liked watching little girls."

"Vice of the Wasteland, doll. People do all kinds'a fucked up shit out 'ere 'cause they can. Slavin',
kidnappin', raping, torturin', *cannibalism*—"Glasgow shook his head.

She swallowed hard as her head swam with the nausea from her stomach. The thought of *cannibalism* made her chest tighten uncomfortably as an oncoming wave of *taboo* hit her. "...People actually—...?"

"People do what they gotta t'survive. Either them 'er you. Someone's body or starvin' t'death... most people pick starvin'. Eatin' people makes 'ya all shaky if you eat it long 'nough and 'ya don't know what kinda shit an' piss people marinade themselves in. Builds up yer immunity somethin' fierce, though, if it don't damn well kill 'ya first."

"The people you said you use to run with—the psychopaths? Did they *eat* people?"

"Ya *really* wanna know, angel?" Winona paled significantly, taking it as all the answer she needed, and vigorously shook her head. "Thought so. Most people dun'."

"...I think Harriet was right about coming here." She admitted faintly with her arms folding securely over her stomach as Sumner returned from the small bathroom in the master bedroom. He must've found running water because his face was free of the dirt he rubbed onto himself earlier.

"*Told you!* Harriet exclaimed as she sat on the floor in front of the kitchen sink, buried up to her waist in the cabinets, looking for supplies to take. "*I God damn told you, but no one fuckin' listens t'me!*"

"That old guy—Harris?—he said not to go to dinner," Winona warned. Sumner and Glasgow looked between each other with speculative glances. "You should've seen the look he had on his face when he saw Jack, the guy was absolutely *terrified*. And did anyone notice Jack had a key to his house? That's weird, right?"

"Bout as weird as a one-headed brahmin," Glasgow replied cryptically.

"...Sooo, yes—?" She responded in a dry tone before looking to Sumner solely. "Another thing, too, he readily just plopped us into that old guy's house like it was no big deal, and Harris *let* him. You'd think people out here would be more territorial about things they consider theirs."

"Even if he was considered the token mayor of this town, to kick an old man out of his house like that for a family of strangers is *odd,*" Sir Sumner agreed. "And Smith was rather adamant about having us over this evening... I think it'd be wise for us to take Harris' warning. No one tells anyone in this town of our plans, when we're leaving, or where we're heading. We watch the exits tonight." Sumner concluded.

"What if Jack comes over?" Winona asked.

"Dun worry yer pretty head 'bout it, doll. We've got it covered 10 ways t'Atom's Rapture."

"Why don't you go on ahead and use the shower first? There's running water in the bathtub and sink, but I suggest keeping it quick, the water isn't as clean as you'd probably prefer." Sumner gestured back into the bedroom. It felt like the two were just trying to distract her now. "I trust you brought that rad-x I mentioned? Good, take half a tablet before you step in."

Winona nodded uneasily and moved to the living room to take her backpack, dragging it with her to the bathroom to shut and lock the door. As she began to undress, she couldn't shrug off that uneasy feeling that made her stomach churn about Jack; his lingering eyes entrapped her thoughts all through her quick sponge shower as she sat on the edge of the old claw-footed bathtub, soaping herself down with a barely sudsy washcloth; the way he grinned as if he wanted to devour her as
she scrubbed the sweat and Wasteland dust out of her cropped hair and from her face.

The way the old man, Harris, fearfully cried "they'll want you for dinner!" as she stood under the flowing water of the shower spigot to rinse off the soap and tried to shut the growing alarm out of her head.
Winona sat in the dimly lit living room amongst the guards, drowsily folding her food over with her fork with a reluctance of actually eating it. The evening's meal was a salvaged TV dinner consisting of a soggy brick of pot roast, spindly sticks that probably once passed as buttered carrots, and a dry mound of mashed potatoes smothered in tar-like, greasy brown gravy. It looked much more appetizing on the box, where the advertisement was hand-painted with a blonde woman smiling quaintly as she upheld the metal tray, though the inventor didn't have any disillusions of the food looking the exact same—or tasting as it once did before the bombs, either.

She never thought she'd miss carrots... real carrots. She loved vegetables but she hated carrots. They always tasted like soap no matter how they were prepared, and the only reason why Winona was forcing herself to eat them was because she was starving. All the walking under the hot sun made her ravenous by the time Sumner gave the okay for them to stop and eat.

The inventor made a slightly pathetic chew and swallow of the mentioned spindly 'carrot' sticks and shivered from the horrible taste and texture. She was reluctant to eat the meat as well, and it was odd to think that the dry hunk was cut from an animal over 200 years ago, but more so her body was trying to painfully adjust to meat eating after living a mostly produce-fueled diet. After all, where would they have animals to get fresh meat from? Their protein came from stuff freezer dried and packed before the war but those supplies had dwindled considerably from even before she was in Vault 101 (according to Mrs. Palmer, who said she use to order a hamburger every Tuesday and Thursday for lunch, and could now only order it once a month if she was lucky, and the patties were more of a veggie-blend than actual meat).

Looking around to her companions, they ate their meals comfortably in silence with their eyes on their own food; Sumner, of the three of them, was the only one using silverware to carve his way through a bowl of mac and cheese re-hydrated only with water and doused with an off-red sauce. Harriet was picking apart with her fingers an MRE that read 'Chicken Enchilada' that was accompanied by spicy cheese and crackers from metal bags. Glasgow was eating straight out of a rusted can of fruit salad with his head tossed back so the contents slushed into his awaiting mouth, topping off every few bites of his congealed meal with a sip of water so it passed easier. A package of dried meats for protein sat beside him.

It amazed Winona to see the type of starvation that she witnessed out in the Wasteland... like with the water beggar outside of Tenpenny Tower, who was never seen again after Tenpenny's remarks of a 'feral' (whatever that was) that had attacked the beggar. There was only a smear of a bloodied hand print and a shred of ruined flesh in the dirt where he once sat, begging Winona for water when she first entered the Tower with Mister Burke. She remembered how upset he was when he threw up the water he drank down, with his stomach unable to hold it with how long he had gone without food.

People starved to the point that they couldn't even hold down food when they finally had some—they starved to the point that they'd eat anything if it just meant eating—they starved to the point of dying. It was such an alien concept to her little vault dweller mind; the cafeteria was open all day until 11 PM, and when it wasn't there was a food dispenser in every main hallway (there was one outside the classroom that she and Amata raided from time to time), there were greenhouses constantly sprouting fresh crops of produce, and not a single person ever went hungry.

It was almost guilt inducing now to think of the privileges she had back in the vault; to have something that was considered to be a basic human right, that in the wasteland was a matter of
whether or not you'd wake up the next morning. She feared ever having to experience that kind of starvation because she had money, of course, but what good would that do if she wasn't in a city where she could buy the food?

Right now her only problem with eating seemed to be keeping the food down. Her body was getting better with holding her stomach, but it still got a little dodgy at some meals.

"Is something wrong?" Sir Sumner inquired after swallowing his drink. She noticed that he had a tendency to swish it through his mouth whenever he was done eating—he did so at every meal, as if he were cleaning his teeth.

"No—nothing." Winona timidly shook her head.

"Princess here's just not used to Wasteland eating," Harriet remarked with a mouthful of rubbery cheese and squelching tortilla. Some red sauce dripped from the corner of her mouth and she hastily licked it away. "Thinks she's too good for it after all her fancy vault food."

"It's because I vomit whenever I eat, you saw that at lunch."

"Princess here's just not used to Wasteland eating," Harriet remarked with a mouthful of rubbery cheese and squelching tortilla. Some red sauce dripped from the corner of her mouth and she hastily licked it away. "Thinks she's too good for it after all her fancy vault food."

"Where's 'ya rad-x?" Glasgow asked as he set down his food can and his bottle of water, gesturing to her with his hand rapidly opening and shutting in a 'gimme' gesture. "Bring 'ere."

Winona set down the metal dinner tray that held her meal and got up from the couch that she shared with Sir Sumner, stepping around Glasgow who sat on the floor at her feet. Harriet watched after her from across the coffee table, where she also sat on the floor, with a look of distaste in her eye as the inventor rifled through her backpack to get the requested rad-x. She brought it back over to Glasgow's awaiting hand and he popped it open.

"Pro'rrly the radiation in the food, yeh?" He supplied as he shook a single tab of rad-x out of the container and set it on the table, grinding it under the base of the bottle until it was dust. He brushed the contents into his hand and then sprinkled it over her meal. "This guy I ran with'd do shit like this 'cause he was whack paranoid 'bout rads. Didn't wanna turn in'ta a rottin' shuffler."

"It'll keep me from getting sick—?" She asked as she stepped over him and plopped back down on the couch in her appointed spot. He offered her tray back to her after recapping the bottle of rad-x.

"Only one way t'find out, girl." Glasgow winked at her and turned on his own food, tearing into his last piece of dried meat with his sharpest teeth.

"Your clean eating up until now leaves you at a disadvantage, but you'll adjust eventually." Sumner explained. "Would you like some ketchup?"

Winona perked up immediately with her eyes snapping over to the old mercenary. Holding up a single finger that supplied the message of 'one moment, please', he went into his knapsack that sat at his feet and produced from it a small, filthy glass jar. Unscrewing the metal lid, she peered into it in fascination to find a slightly off-red (it was actually more brown than red) goop inside. It was what she saw him spoon onto his mac and cheese at the start of their meal.

"Is that really ketchup—? How'd you find it?" Winona inquired, stunned.

"During a promising raid. Oh, must have been years ago, now. I have other seasonings in my pack as well. Basic table salt and pepper, some dried herbs, ground mustard—"

"Ya got any hot sauce in there?" Glasgow asked hopefully.
"No."

"Shit."

"...What're you going to put it on? Your fruit salad?" Winona stifled a laugh upon seeing that the canned fruit was the only food he had left in front of him.

"Where the hell d'ya even get jalapenos from?" Harriet asked, her earlier look of distaste for Winona waning from her curiosity. "The Big Star?"

"Knew a young lady out there for a short time. She had a lovely jalapeno farm, would put these in practically everything. When I left I had a jar of dried jalapenos the size of my head!" He chuckled in the type of adoring way that sounded like he was thinking about fond memories. "Now I have nothing left but a few slices. I could never get her to give me the recipe... should head back out that way sometime soon and pay her a visit, but it's been nearly 8 years."

"'The Big Star'? Where's that?" Winona questioned as she punctured her pot roast with her fork. The sound it made was sickeningly dry as it resisted her cutlery trying to chip off a piece to eat. It was like trying to break apart a vaguely meat-shaped rock.

"Texas, kid." Glasgow nodded. "Way down south—biggest state in the US."

That's Alaska, actually, the little inventor thought, but didn't say so out loud as she recalled her 5th grade social studies with Mr. Broetch. She had the feeling the correction would only make Harriet dislike her more, and the inventor couldn't understand what she'd done in the first place to be in the guard's ill thoughts other than just being herself.

"Ah, what the hell," Sir Sumner spoke up offhandedly, handing the ketchup jar off to Winona if she wanted to use it and his hands dove back into his backpack. She happily smelled it's vinegary contents. "Consider it a celebratory evening to a new adventure. These are my last few to share, everyone take one." He offered a small container of shriveled green things to Winona first, after popping the lid open.

The vault dweller curiously took one with polite thanks, balancing her meal tray on her lap with the ketchup in one hand and the dried out thing called a 'jalapeno' in the other. Glasgow took the container and claimed the biggest pepper in it before handing it off to Harriet to take a piece, and then returned it to Sir Sumner's hands with the very last jalapeno. The container was left alone on the coffee table amidst their other dinnerware and rationed water.

"Wanna make it a toast?" Harriet teased with a little smirk at Sumner. Before he could decline, Glasgow was loudly whooping for him to go on, causing the older man to laugh heartily. He raised the final jalapeno pepper in his possession to the three of them in a mock toast.

"To the onward trail! We sacrifice only blessings and a bullet for those that darken the roads we have yet to traverse. To the onward trail—prayers for us as the marked bastards the Devil hasn't caught dead yet. To the onward trail, and cheers to James Parker, wherever he may roam that we will surely follow."

Glasgow was borderline snickering like a devious little boy by the end of Sumner's dramatically delivered commemoration and Harriet was rolling her good eye, but the grin on her face exposed the elation she really felt. Winona was happy and laughing, a rare reaction for her as of the latter month, as she playfully 'clinked' her pepper to Sumner's outstretched one, heartened by his speech. In unison, the four tucked the dried jalapenos into their mouths and chewed. She never had something so spicy before, as 'vault cooking' involved things of a more savory or sweet nature, and
hot condiments were run out from the mass stock of their supplies a very long time ago. Her tongue prickle with the hot flavor and she savored such an unusual taste despite it making her eyes water and her lips prickle.

There was silence amidst their eating until Glasgow was the first to cough from the spiciness—throwing them all into unexpected laughter.

Winona Parker didn't know the obstacles that would lie ahead of them, especially as they grew closer to the Capital where limb-ripping violence concentrated. At this moment there were no thoughts of an amalgamation of what her mind thought a 'super mutant' looked like, as a mess of grotesque horror; there weren't any thoughts of what would happen once they reached Rivet City, if her dad would be there, or the Madison woman if he wasn't; she didn't even think about what the walk out of Andale would be like when they were, inevitably, shaken awake at a very prompt 6 AM by Sir Sumner to get an early morning start (while her legs nearly buckled from the muscle aches of the walk today, and she was unsure if she could go on another day under such strenuous conditions).

She only focused on the right now—of how she enjoyed her current company of protectors, wanting to become a part of their inside jokes and sharp-tongued banter; she enjoyed the remainder of her jalapeno, playfully slapping off Glasgow who tried to steal it from her; she enjoyed the small tastes of ketchup from Sumner's supplies; she listened to Harriet's stories of the time she startled off a group of dirty mercs by shrieking curses in Chinese with her eyes rolled back and mouth salivating profusely as if she were possessed, and Glasgow confirmed such an occurrence with laughing tears in his eyes, speaking of how the last thing they saw was the naked ass of the mercs' commander taking off through the tall reeds—having been startled in the middle of a bathroom break.

What Winona found in the right now was that she was as close to truly happy as she had been for a very long time.

Winona rolled over in her sleeping bag to face the wall where her eyes traced the spider cracks in the old mustard yellow wall paper. She picked at a few pieces idly if only to have something to do, because apparently staying asleep wasn't what her body wanted to do despite her fatigue. She knew that she only had so many hours to properly rest before the dreaded 6 AM wake up call but every time she closed her eyes such deep sleep would evade her—leaving her to wake up at what felt like every half hour. She brought her Pip-Boy up towards her face and turned it on, having her eyes assaulted by the glowing interface and she blinked to adjust to it quickly before reading the time.

1:37 AM.

God dammit, she released a frustrated sigh through her nose and sat up on her sleeping bag, unzipping the edge to bring her legs out. Sitting on the floor with her legs crossed in front of her, she reached for her bag to drag it toward her and carefully took Widget from an outer pocket, brushing her hands lovingly over the little bug robot. Shortly after, her utility flick-tool came from the key chain hanging outside her knapsack and she used the knife head to pop off Widget's casing, tenderly brushing out the Wasteland dust that collected inside, and ensuring that the wiring and delicate insides weren't degrading from the grit. The light that came from her Pip-Boy, a calming soft blue glow that dimly bobbed about the bedroom, cascaded over Glasgow who was sleeping in the far corner.

When it was time to turn in after dinner, the group was divided between the bedroom and the living room—Glasgow with her, and Sumner and Harriet in the living room to guard the locked front and back door. He was awake and proudly working on his rifle, a 12-pounder with hand-crafted
modifications, taking it apart to clean the individual pieces, before she had turned over to try and sleep. Now he was propped upright by said reconstructed sniper rifle, head lolled back to the wall with one knee pulled in towards his chest to support most of his body weight, while the other remained strung out across the floor. Her arm stilled immediately when the blue light washed over his features, and she took notice of the fact that he wasn't wearing his sunglasses for once; the frames were slung into the loose collar of the mottled tank shirt he wore, and his dreads were pulled up into a twisting bun as tendrils of baby hair at his hairline fell loosely into his face.

Ever since their first meeting, Winona tried not to stare too long out of fear that he'd catch her sheepish gawking. That quick glance into his face, and her internal remark about his mouth, was all she had in memory of him... aside from the brief moment where he removed his sunglasses to show her his eye. He must've had old wounds all over that she hadn't seen before now, even tattoos and maybe more piercings, and what fascinated her so much about each and every modification that was bestowed upon his body was a marker of moments in his life; no one in the vault was as decorated as the man slumbering before her and it was all too alluring to ignore.

Perhaps anyone else would've been unnerved by such things—the way his eyelid dipped as if it didn't properly fit his eyeball, the scars that marred his left jaw and neck, the chaotic canvas of hand drawn tattoos that littered his body, how dangerous he felt let alone looked—but to find something so new and different and handsome just kept pulling her in closer despite knowing that she was being led astray.

This left her helplessly torn between turning back over and trying to sleep again, and wanting to crawl towards the roguish guard to inspect him closer.

"Just one little look," she told herself as she fit Widget back together and stuck the robot back into her backpack. Then go back to bed.

Her eyes raked feverishly over his chiseled body with complete abandon—finding intrigue in imagining the tales that laid in scars she couldn't see and the modifications on his body of self-inked tattoos (he called them stick-and-pokes, scarifications, and some pre-war method called "prison tats"). She wanted to take in every mottled and mutated part of him in quick observation but with devoted memory in case she'd never get to look this long again. Winona's eyes went lower, skimming over the soiled flecks at the bottom hem of his dirtied tank shirt; even lower, to his baggy, unbuttoned jeans; lower still, to where the zipper parted slightly and showed not the waistband of boxers but the starting trail of a patch of brunet hair that made her bite her lower lip, and the watery light of her Pip-Boy illuminated, through the fabric of his pants, the undeniable outline of his—

"'Ya gotta starin' problem, doll?"

The inventor jerked back in surprise at the husky from sleep voice that interrupted her lecherous thoughts. Her eyes snapped back up into Glasgow's face to see a drowsy half-smirk encapsulating his mouth, and his heavy lidded stare carried a foreboding shine to them—as if something predatory inside him had been awakened.

"Shit—" Was all Winona could hiss from being startled, feeling her face grow hot from her embarrassment.

Was she really just caught eyeballing his dick?

Really?

"Gettin' shy on me, aren'cha? Caught'cha lookin', didn't I?" Glasgow's rifle came away from his
shoulder to drape long ways across the knees of his now strung out legs. He looked upon her with that half smirk still on his face, and his tongue stud protruded from the crest of his lips to be twisted between his teeth. Glasgow was thinking, she knew that much, but what he was thinking about, she couldn't tell—he was almost unreadable save for the predatory look in his eyes.

Her eyes couldn't seem to tear away from his own, her body feeling as leaden as stone as she was unable to move in her shame. "I di- didn't— I'm not— I thought you were asleep—"

"'Ya ain't gotta wait fer me t'be asleep if you wanted t'look at it so bad..." Glasgow gave a low rumbling chuckle, still hoarse and deep from sleep and it sent a thrill right down her spine. She shouldn't have found it sexy through how mortified she was! "Wanna touch it?"

...Is this seriously happening? Winona thought as a different kind of bubbling anxiety overcame her entire being. Was he inviting her over? Was this flirting? It couldn't have been, flirting wasn't this frank, it was supposed to be elusive and fun and a playful little chase, not—... whatever this was. It was impossible to think that she was dreaming despite how surreal the situation felt, despite how strong her desire was to straddle his lap and pull his shirt free from his body, or to pull his hair and kiss his throat, and she visibly shifted in front of him with her hand petting the sleeping bag beside her.

Yes she wanted to touch him—wanted to touch every part of him with her mouth, that is—she waited long enough! She languished for years trying to make it happen, and if Glasgow was as genuinely interested as she was, why shouldn't she take up his offer? Winona had never felt so attracted to someone so quickly in all her life—especially to someone that outsiders wouldn't consider to be her 'type' due to her taciturn and logical nature—and knowing that she shouldn't have wanted him, somehow, made her desire for him grow more. Every grin, sidelong look, and innocently delivered touch sent all of her senses into a frenzied state she couldn't untangle herself from. It'd also been a long time since anyone attempted to be physical with her and she was starved; even for something as innocuous as a hug. She hoped, however, that what Glasgow had in mind wouldn't be so innocent.

Glasgow graciously answered her invite by dragging himself over to her side with the hem of his jeans falling lower around his waist from how he scoot himself across the floor. Her stunned gaze followed him as she was still unable to say anything else in response, simply waiting in anticipation for something to happen—for him to come close enough for her searching hands, close enough for her mouth to lay claim to his smile, close enough for him to lay her back and for her to feel his breath as it trailed down her stomach.

It was a hope that was quickly dashed away, however, as his sniper rifle was dropped into her hands instead of his handgun.

"She's heavy," Glasgow remarked as he reclined back on his forearms beside her, watching as she gaped down at the gun dumbly; too stunned by how silly she must've looked because as far as he was aware, she was only looking at his rifle. "All 10 pounds o' pure head poppin' fun in e'ry .308 caliber bullet. She's gotta custom flash dampener t'fit a silencer, rubbered stock an' eyepiece, even gotta pretty lil' bipod stand. Been workin' on this haughty bitch fer years an' she's never done me wrong, tho' bullets shred'er insides t'shit. Always needs'a tune up but I ain't mind the work."

"...Yep. Whatta gun—she's something alright. Yep. Cool." Winona replied woodenly, stricken by the sudden desire to just seep into the floor to find herself in an endless void where she could scream for all eternity. She felt so unbelievably stupid for thinking that someone like him wanted to have sex with someone like her.

"...So, 'ya gunna admit t'starin' at my dick like a patriot t'the American flag 'er what?"
Okay, cue the void. Please, please, cue the endless void fit for shrill screams of humiliation. Of course something as obscenely unfortunate as that would happen to her. She could have died of pure shame right there, as she was already marking the final words of her will in her head, but caught the startling look in his eyes; as if he were readying himself to pounce and ravage her completely as soon as she gave him permission.

No man had ever looked at her like that before, with such immense predatory lust that she could hardly stand it—where she almost wanted to feel it suffocate her.

But she wasn't going to let him slide after making a comment like that.

"...You just went right in with it, didn't you?" She muttered and all he did was give a tired, raspy chuckle. "That sounds like something that's the opposite of patriotic."

"I'm the kinda man that's gunna take the shot, doll... and yer 'bout the prettiest thing I've seen out'ere in a damn long time." Glasgow responded with a startling amount of honesty, his shoulders bobbing in a shrug as his rough fingers skimmed over her knee, and each fingertip carried a tenderness in them as if he were testing the seams of her patience to see when they would burst and she'd cry for mercy. They began to skirt up her crossed leg, sending raised goosebumps along with them, toward the hem of her shorts and he was like a raging, untameable fire trying to burn her up from the inside out. Winona should've been more alarmed at how appealing it was to be eaten up by the flames—but she wasn't. She wanted to forfeit control from things she thought she still had control over, like her longevity, safety, and trying to be cautious in everything; of course letting Glasgow in was a risky move, but it was a start to letting go of that control, and it was a start that she was ach'ing for.

She didn't need him to be around for a long time... just for the time being if this moment was her last; if another morning never came, if the moon's ever watchful eye never saw her inhale one last breath, if the Wasteland would lay claim to her like it did, undoubtedly, to everyone else eventually.

Let the danger claim her and alarm could go right out the fucking window.

The inventor let him touch her, undoing her crossed legs from under her with her foot planted against the sleeping bag, arching her knee toward him with her thighs parted, and inviting. His beloved sniper rifle was left forgotten on the floor somewhere beside her, under a splayed hand.

"...You really think I'm pretty?" She ventured and there was an affirmative truth in his eyes where responding verbally was unnecessary. They raked over her, scorching every inch of her skin where they laid, appreciating her so closely in case it was the last time he'd ever see any part of her.

"Like a lid'le pin up dream, with eyes like that... all big 'n sweet... damn near good 'nuff t'eat, ain'cha, doll? Nmph. Hope yer not 'fraid of teeth." There was accentuation on the word 'teeth' as he clacked his teeth under a curled upper lip, with eyes that roamed over her body once more, appraising her wantonly. "Givin' me a God damn zipper problem's what 'yer doin'."

Glasgow turned over onto his knees and took hold of her hips, pulling her across the sleeping back in a swift tug that produced a small noise of surprise from her. His hands then trailed down her legs slowly, purposefully, squeezing at her thighs before one continued on to hook under her knee. His lips then met with the bare skin of her shin, skimming upward in feathery kisses that had her shivering, almost itching from his stubbly facial hair below his chin, in a blazing trail. He was parting her thighs further the higher up he traveled with his hand still under her knee and his mouth began to follow along it's shape to her inner thigh, coming to lay on his stomach between her legs, and she was too dizzy to stop him—too anxiously scared yet also too wanting to stop him—
possibly muttering 'please' under her breath but he continued to take his time with a tormenting grin on his face.

"'Ya want it, angel?' He whispered into her thigh with a nipping bite of his sharpest teeth and her toes curled in response. She nodded, vigorously. His eyes captured hers with a keen, wolfish gaze. "Keep your eyes open an' on me... I like an audience."

A loud, metallic sound from outside startled Winona out of her lusty revere and she snapped her eyes toward the window where a shadow loomed, suddenly lunging away from her sight at the tipping over of a trash can outside. Her hand was suddenly gripping Glasgow's arm to get his attention and when his chin turned up from where it tried to make home between her thighs (she finally noticed his thumbs hooked into the waistband of her shorts, just short of pulling them off her), she pointed toward the window.

"Wuzzit, baby?" His eyes followed her fearful expression to the melted window panes.

"I saw someone outside," She whispered. "At the window—someone's watching us."

The merc frowned and finally sat up, looking to the window cautiously, and his tongue stud was threaded between his lips again in thought. It disappeared back behind his teeth and he looked to her as he got up to his feet.

"Gonna see if the others saw anythin'. Stay here." He warned as he opened the door into the living room and ducked out of the bedroom to investigate.

Winona remained frozen in her bedroll, feeling like she couldn't breathe as she strained her hearing for any give away sound on the other side of the door. She heard nothing at all as the fear in her chest mounted itself to incredible heights while several minutes came to pass. Seconds were counted down rhythmically in her head by the Mississippi and she felt like she was reaching each 60 second mark too slowly; she counted 60 once, then twice, then a third time and then a fourth but Glasgow didn't come back or call for her. The inventor didn't hear the hushed conversations between the three guards that she expected, nor the sounds of their bed rolls being rustled as they rose from the floor, or the metallic clicks of their weapons being cocked.

Not a sound was to be heard through the whole house, except for the whistling wind passing through shattered window panes like mouths missing teeth trying to carry a tune, and the distant echoes of gunfire reporting faraway firefights, and perhaps a woman screaming but she tried to convince herself that she was only imagining it all.

Why was someone watching them? And who, more importantly? Her thoughts immediately registered on the smiley Jack Smith from earlier, and coupled with her memory of the old man that warned her with the promise of something bad happening to her if she stayed—she couldn't stand the torture of waiting with strained hearing and a heart beating out of her control for another 60-second Mississippi more.

She picked up the 10mm pistol she set beside her pillow and loaded an already filled magazine into it, her trembling hands trying to remember the instructions she was given on how to properly load a round into the chamber. She finally managed to load it after some terrified fussing, as if she'd accidentally set off the gun in her hands. Soon she was up on her feet after pulling on baggy pants over her shorts and went to the door, opening it silently after turning off her Pip-Boy, to peer into the living room.

It was empty. Not just of her guards, but of their belongings. The makeshift beds she saw them—Harriet and Sumner—set out earlier were empty, and Glasgow wasn't present, either. The front
door was open and swung on its hinges from the torrid night air, sweeping in Wasteland dust across the floor where her bare feet felt stuck to the ground, too terrified to move. She swallowed down the dread balling at the bottom of her throat and took small steps to the nearest bed mat, kneeling down into it and searching through the blankets for anything that would tell her where the mercenaries had gone—

*Harriet's eye patch,* Winona recognized a loose piece of small fabric with a tie just beside the bed mat and picked it up. It definitely wasn't something Harriet would go without. The inventor now scanned the living room with fresh eyes as the feeling of concern began to rapidly elevate; she could've convinced herself that perhaps the three were just outside for a cigarette, or to perform reconnaissance together, but Harriet's discarded eye patch played to instincts that told her otherwise.

*No signs of struggle—not even a noise outta Glasgow after he left the room,* her eyes panned across the living room as if hoping one of them would suddenly come out of hiding, like it was a bad trick. She instead found the elder guard's gloves discarded behind the couch as she got up to her feet—positioned as if they'd been tossed aside, either forgotten or undesired. Picking up one, she held it close to her chest as if it would help her see where they went. Winona wanted to use it as a reason to go outside and look for her protectors so she wouldn't run back into the bedroom and lock the doors because she was *that* scared.

*What if something bad happened to them?* Winona reasoned in a scolding voice and it was enough to get her up off the floor, almost *rushing* to the door, now. *What if they're hurt?*

The inventor stepped out onto the porch, both hands on her pistol, her finger away from the trigger as Sumner instructed her to do, and scanned the surrounding area. All was quiet and *impossibly* dark just steps away from the porch light of the house—the only thing she could see were the distant porch lights of the grand houses further down the street, and the glowing red peak of the Red Rocket fueling station a further distance behind the Smith's house. Straining her ears again, she could still only hear the whistling wind, as the gunfire and the woman's screaming from earlier had disappeared amongst the blackened dark.

Winona stepped off the porch and into the dirt in her socks, her hands shaking more on the gun clasped desperately between them, and she didn't want to think about having to use it. If her thoughts hadn't been so blank from the adrenaline and the terror, she would've thought about Amata; she would've thought about her best friend, and wondered if this was even a *fraction* of what it was like to feel your finger pull on the trigger, and watch someone catch that bullet and crumple to the floor right in front of you.

She would have wondered if Amata knew, right then and there in the prison hub with Stevie Mack, that the sound of the gun and his cry would haunt her for the rest of her life.

"Gla—... *Gla- Glasgow? Are you out here? Harriet? Sumner?"* She cried out into the night, too faintly for anyone to hear her. She called out louder and tried putting her strength behind it;

"Sumner! Harriet, Glasgow! *Anyone?*"

Winona heard the sound—a sharp *phht*—moments before she felt the sting in her neck. Her hand went swatting for it instinctively, smacking at a small plunger no bigger than her pinkie that was lodged in her neck. Shocked, she carefully plucked it out of her and gaped down at it in confusion, her mind unable to comprehend what it was doing in her neck, as she made the very brief observation of the plunger being empty of any contents. When she touched at her neck, feeling the small site of swelling where she was struck, and recognizing that her movements suddenly felt too sluggish, Winona realized what happened.
Oh my God I've been drugged.

The inventor went sprawling back to the Harris house with feet that almost slipped out from under her, as if she were walking on unstable terrain; like the craggy concrete became sand dunes threatening to swallow her up to the knees, if not completely whole.

The understanding of having been drugged took her confusion and quickly replaced it with an indescribable panic. Someone had planned this. Someone was running behind her—with loud, pounding, purposeful foot steps, and she ran in an onward stumble as quickly as she could without falling over, with her coordination suddenly betraying her. When Winona got inside, the door was slammed shut behind her, and she leaned a shoulder against it to keep it shut as she fumbled with uncooperative, trembling hands to turn the lock bolt. She couldn't refocus her eyes, everything around her was shifting into multiples of itself—dimming to grays before brightening into euphoric colors and she could hear her heart thrumming in her ears in a slowing beat as if the organ was threatening to grind to a complete halt.

Thuum, thuum.

Thuum. Thuum.

Thuum... thuum.

...Thuum—... thuum—...

As Winona's heart slowed, a hand clasped to her chest because God this wasn't normal to feel like there was a bird with a weakening flutter in your rib cage, it wasn't right to feel so—...afraid?...

Am I afraid? She wondered hazily, trying to take a couple of uneven steps toward the kitchen where the back door was to lock it, but she suddenly couldn't remember why her instincts were telling her to do such a thing. I'm not scared... I just wanna sleep—... feel my eyes going heavy, feel it hanging my head, resting on my shoulders—... feel it spreading in my body, down to my bones, down my legs—oooh, this feels good...

Winona suddenly went careening into the floor as her legs went absolutely numb under her body. Her 10mm clattered away from her to partially disappear under the couch skirt, and she stared at the exposed handle that peeked back at her; as everything turned hazy, slowly colorless; and she was too aware of how her tongue filled her mouth with the taste of watery sugar, what is that?; though her hand moved at her side into her vision to reach for the pistol, it swung outward uselessly just to catch on something before giving up. She then, instead, tried bracing a forearm against the ground to get her back up to her feet. Winona smiled jovially to herself—finding it funny that she could see her arms move, and yet she couldn't feel any of it—as if her body was moving of it's own accord and she was a voluntary spectator. She only kept giggling in a slur to herself, waving her fingers slowly in front of her face and now she had 10 (if she was able to count) instead of five on the one hand. She seemed to be getting more digits the longer she stared down at them as her instinct to get up and run continued to slowly ebb away to nothing but a calm numbness as her heart remained slow and steady in her ears.

Slooow and steadyyy wins—... somethin', something gooood... her mind giggled, like a turtle... tortoise? Porpoise? Porpoise with a purpose! Heehee! Ooh, lookit how much I kin count now! Won't sit still, though, can't tell how many... oooh, 17 is my new favorite number, though... bet that's how many fingers I have now. Can do—... Can do stuff faster now...

On the other side of the door there was the jangle of a sparse key chain and Winona couldn't turn
over to greet the visitor. It was rude to not welcome guests, her father taught her better! It was rude to be on the floor, too, what would Amata think of her if she saw her lazing about like this? What if Butch came over? She'd have to fix her hair, she probably looked like a mess, sitting at her workbench all day—did she remember to brush her teeth that morning?—oh, Jonas would *kill* her if he saw that she was neglecting her responsibilities, but the idea only made her laugh again. Jonas was never very threatening when he was angry and that was because he was too good-hearted to stay mad at her for long.

Winona was finally able to turn over onto her back to see the door slowly swing open, and two dark figures occupied the doorway, talking quietly to each other in slurred, deep voices. She was giggling again—they talked so funny! Like bad guys in the cartoons!

One of the figures was now crossing the room unhurriedly to meet her. She tried to sit up, opened her mouth to say *hello* and to ask what brought them by her apartment (never mind how—... different it looked... all of a sudden...?... *My couch isn't Burberry*, she vaguely recognized without complaint) at such a late hour, but no sound came out of her aside from more silly giggling. One figure knelt down on a knee at her side to brush a small lock of hair out of her eyes, and in a slant of light that came from the porch entryway, she saw the beaming smile and frenzied eyes of Jack Smith.

"Hey there little lady," His voice was soothing despite sounding heavy, almost lethargic, by the time they reached her ears. His key chain jingled under the hand that he set on his knee to keep his balance. "Now what're you doing down here on the floor?"

Winona belted a cacophonous laugh. "17 porpoiseeeees." Was all she could respond with as she accidentally bit her now numb tongue. Jack laughed as if he understood her response to be something more than the guttural murmur that it was. Black edges began to obscure her vision like shadows creeping closer to her pupils with blackened claws and she looked to them, trying to swat them away—*shoo, shoo!* she thought—but they wouldn't leave her sight. Jack grabbed gently at her swatting hands to bundle her wrists together as the second figure came over, with coiffed hair and a delightfully patterned sweater vest, and knelt beside him to help tie Winona's hands in front of her.

"Don't you worry a bit, now—we're taking you to see your friends." The man in the sweater vest explained as the rope chaffed her wrists. It was a strong bind and knot.

"Glasgooow? GlaaSgow... Sumner—... I like Sumner... Summer... Summertime!... Reminds me of my daddy... his smile makes my heart warm. I wanna see my daddy." She slewed incoherently but the words only rang in her head, though the inventor thought she said them out loud.

"I'd say she isn't worrying much about anything right now, Bill, she's as high as the clouds! Isn't that right, little missy?"

Winona's mouth opened again to respond; "*Why's my mouth taste like burnt cookies? Mrs. Palmer never burns her cookies!*"; but the only sound emitted from her was another grumbling mutter.

"You wanna carry this one?" Jack asked his accomplice, Bill.

"Can do! She ain't as big as the other ones, is she? Bet a strong wind could barrel her right over!" The two laughed in unison as Bill moved down to Winona's feet to cross them at the ankle. They were soon tied up with overlapping rope and she couldn't move her legs at all—even if she hadn't been drugged, the ropes were tight.
"Wanna see Toby Summertime," Winona sang drowsily as her vision was now dipping in and out, along with her consciousness. The ceiling spun above her head like a merry-go-round of spider cracks in soiled popcorn plaster but she didn't feel dizzy... no, she just felt peaceful, and very, very sleepy.

"Now don't be implying I don't know how to pick 'em."

"She's just a little small is all. She won't last us long."

"They never last like they use to, but heck, I'd eat my own hat if she isn't the kinda meat that prize-winning casserole are made of!" They two continued to idly chat as they checked her over for weapons—patting her inner then outer thighs, torso, pants pockets, and then turned her over onto her stomach to pat through her hair and down her back. "Look at her, the sweet thing hasn't got a mark on her! Pearly white teeth, strong hair and nails, clear eyes, tender all over... talk about Lady Luck! Bet if we check her with the Geiger she wouldn't be irradiated at all, too... her being small isn't that bad of a thing, at least she isn't strong enough to get away."

"Alright, alright, you convinced me! It's those other three that I'm more worried about, anyhow. The old one's too spoiled, I think." Bill went on. "The other woman's all tendons and muscles, hardly right for chewing... and the last one? Hoo-boy, don't even get me started on what I think about that one! I bet he's carrying all sorts of infections and— and diseases! He looks like a raider."

Don't be mean to my friends, Winona thought defensively as her unfocused eyes rolled around the room. Jack and Bill were now nothing more than colorless shapes busying themselves about her as they completed their checks—squeezing her fleshier parts as if appraising it, checking her hair for lice, two cold and shaking fingers to her throat to check her pulse—strong! Jack commented enthusiastically—before she was being picked up from the ground and helped onto Bill's shoulder to be carried back out of Old Man Harris' house.

"We'll check the rest for quality, don't you worry there, Bill. We wouldn't wanna feed the youngsters anything that'll make them sick. The ones we can't afford to cook up we'll take out with yesterday's newspaper. Oh, but I gotta get to this one, first... we only have a few hours before breakfast, and you know how much Linda loves some good bacon with her coffee and morning gossip mag."

"So what do we do with the others until after breakfast? I don't know if they'll be out that long, remember what I said about the new batch of tranquilizer—"

"You worry too much. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"But—"

"Have I?"

"...No, 'ya haven't, brother." Bill sighed defeatedly. "So, the other three? What do we do?"

She was too fatigued now to keep her eyes open for another moment longer. There was a small spike of fear that thorned her heart momentarily upon the mentioned disposal of her protectors, but it was soon gone as she was bobbed on Bill's shoulder, feeling a brisk night wind caress her face, and the drugs completing their take over of her system.

"We'll keep them sedated regularly until we can run a quality check. We've still got a few hours left before they wake up, and by the time they do—... breakfast will be served."
Winona relinquished herself to the swimming blackness.
"Harriet, wake up."

There was a voice calling to her from the leaden dark.

"I need you to wake up—"

The voice pushed and pulled in her hearing like a dark tide, coming drowsily and worbled to her ears.

"We have to find Miss Parker!"

Harriet wanted to rush out and greet it; to wake up, to open her eyes, but her body disobeyed as her consciousness slept on.

"Harriet!"

The mercenary's good eye finally cracked open and was assaulted by weak vision, tunneling before widening and then tunneling again. Her arms were unmovable as if they were foreign appendages attached to her body, and her acrid mouth tasted unusual, like spoiled Fancy Lads with curdled icing. She could barely lift her head to look around, and even if she could have, her vision continued to swim, turning everything around her into roving shapes of too bright colors and silhouettes of things she couldn't quite make out.

Everything was draped in brown and striking red, accompanied by the unmistakable putridness that was progressed decay.

"That's it, wake up. You haven't been out cold long but I need you to get up, we have to find Miss Parker," A voice came into her hearing. It was that same push and pull again... weaving in and out as if her ears were trying to play a game of tag that they had no chance of winning.

"Su—... Sumner—?" She called weakly, feeling her arms being tugged at.
Harriet vaguely registered that they were arched above her head and restricted, unable to come back down. The cold clamps of shackles on her wrists felt ice cold, like they were freeze searing her, and it started a heart-thrumming panic that was rapidly overcoming her lungs. She could feel them ready to burst yet also closing up in her chest, allowing little passage of air down her throat even though she was breathing. The hyperventilating was coming dangerously close and if she got to that point it'd thoroughly break her sanity as she felt herself dragged down into her most awful of memories.

She was back in *The Bad Room*.

The decomposing smell, her hands shackled to the wall, coming out of a sudden sleep she didn't remember falling into.

She could feel phantom stings all up and down her legs of small bleeding knife cuts that weren't actually there.

Bristly legs of baby radroaches crawling all over her, coming to find the wounds of their feast to fester their mouths into, pulling away at chunks of her.

Harriet was trying to kick and pull her little hands out from the shackles, screaming her sincerest of apologies for her misbehavior to anyone who would listen—but God she was so fucking hungry, and she didn't think He'd notice just a little bite had been taken off His plate—

"Hold still, you're alright. I can't get these off you if you keep moving."

"*I can't breathe,*" Was all she could rasp out in response, thrashing more. "*Katie I can't breathe, they're all over me—get them off! Fuckin' get them OFF! Please!*"

"God dammit—stay with me, now, I can't afford to lose you here—look at me, Harriet!"

Harriet couldn't focus her one good eye no matter how damn hard she tried—rolling it about the red-splattered room as if she couldn't see though she could now make out the figure in front of her. Large shoulders, black clothes, long gray hair sprouting in a ring around a bald spot. She knew it was Tobias but the horrific flashbacks in her mind only saw the ginger-haired, sweet faced Katie-Cat, trying to soothe her with encouraging mantras as she tried her best to help kick the radroaches off of her legs.

"Breathe in—4 seconds—hold—7 seconds—release—8 seconds.*" Tobias gently led her through the breathing exercise with a hand on her shoulder. She wanted to speak but her tongue was like shriveled cotton, absorbing all the saliva out of her mouth until it was so dry her teeth could have crumbled to dust. "You can do it, *I know* you can—yes, that's it. Just keep breathing. Don't worry about anything else but trying to breathe. *Breathe.*"

Harriet did as she was told to the best of her abilities. 4. 7. 8. 4. 7. 8. 4 in, 7 hold, 8 out. Slowly, the mercenary began to fall into the same rhythm; shallow at first but she began building up a steadfast pace until she felt like she could breathe normally again, like she had reclaimed her lungs. As she worked on just trying to get her *sanity* back in check, Tobias was fussing with the cuffs that kept her bound to the wall; they were handcrafted metal shackles with a chain threaded through a link hook soldered into a wall support beam. A similar pair of shackles to hers still possessively captivated Tobias' wrists with the chain between them shattered—easy enough to break like that when one of your arms has the strength of 5 men. He was only tugging on Harriet's own restraints with his right hand, his left arm remaining at his side as if it were useless in comparison, and she knew he wasn't utilizing the true strength of that modified right appendage of his.
He was afraid of possibly hurting her.

"Stop God damn pussyfootin' and just get me out of these fuckin' things." Harriet's threat was watered down by the pathetic pleading tone it carried.

Tobias nodded in understanding, forcing as many of his fingers as he could into the cuff, which painfully cut into her wrists but she didn't mind the pain if it meant getting her out. Next to her ear she heard the whirring of the mechanical parts in his right hand, churning, grinding, peaking only slightly louder before the cuff broke apart into pieces as if it had been made of porcelain, and she was freed from the wall with the other shackle hanging off her wrist with several inches of thick chains accompanying it. Her hands were too big to just pull the other one off, but she could tolerate it being there if her full movement wasn't hindered.

Fuck the Brotherhood. They had nothing on the tech-junkies up North with all their human robot people and craftsmanship in prosthetics. The skin on Tobias' right hand was a little shiny if you looked too close, almost waxy looking, as well as his fingernails, and the knuckle hairs were wiry and shiny, but he always had his gloves on so none of those inorganic details mattered. Not until one took enough notice, either, could they see that his fingers would move a little stiffly—unnaturally—when he tried to pick things up in that right hand.

"Don't think this means we got matchin' friendship bracelets, old man." Harriet murmured in a half-convincing attempt at banter as she rubbed her reddened wrist. The shackle still on her opposite hand jingled with the length of chain as she nursed herself, looking to the remaining shackle still left on his own right wrist.

"I wouldn't dream of it," He replied in kind and offered a hand to her to help her off the floor. She wordlessly waved him off to signal that she needed another minute to herself to get her head screwed back on properly. "Get your legs back under you—you're a mercenary and I still expect you to damn well act like one. We have to find Miss Parker."

"She ain't here?" She grimaced as she took the order with some contempt, forcing herself up from the floor and she soon took in their current surroundings. Tobias shook his head in the negative.

The room they were in seemed more like a small building, if the howling wind shivering the four metal walls could indicate anything. The door barely rattled on it's hinges, and a dimming ceiling light—a flickering bulb under the hood of a rusted lamp shade—bobbed helplessly above their heads from a long braided coil of wires. It threaded across the ceiling and down the door's side where it disappeared to a struggling generator that she could hear several feet away from the backside of the building. The room had a long L-shaped counter in one corner, topped with tools and blood stains leading to a single, large floor drain in the middle of the room, and the wall opposite of where she was had a squat freezer in the corner that also seemed wired to the outside generator. Various other shackles and handcuffs decorated certain places along the lower walls for captives, and on the floor in the far corner she spotted a mound of bones free of flesh save for some stubborn tufts that remained.

Hate fuckin' Virginia. Too many damn cannibals out here, she thought grimly.

"Here, hold your head still." Tobias directed as he cupped her temples to peel back each of her eyelids with his thumbs, looking into them closely. "We've been drugged. Any headaches, nausea, or dizziness? Shortness of breath? You don't have a fever or any sort of rash so whatever we were knocked out with isn't having an adverse effect on you... what do you last remember?"

"...Remember—?" She frowned as she tried to think while he checked her pulse and counted under his breath to himself. "...Dunno. It's all jumbled up and fuzzy. Remember we got to town, made
"I see that you recall much less than I." He replied solemnly.

"Yeah, well, you ain't all human old man, so I'm sure whatever we got doped with ran outta your system faster than us... where are we?"

"We're in a town called Andale, about another two days away from Megaton and a day's walk in any direction from any other settlement." Rising from the floor, the squad leader turned away from her with his attention fixated elsewhere, and as her good eye followed him, it settled on an unconscious Glasgow—bolted to the wall in the same way she was, with his lower body dragged across the floor with his head dropped forward, his chin meeting his chest. "I've been checking on him every one-half hour. He'll be fine."

"He's had worse from boyfriends he's specifically asked through him up," Harriet responded gruffly as she found even footing and pulled herself up from the wall to lean back against it for support. "...So if the princess ain't with us—...?"

His eyes were dour set and carried foreboding shadows as his gaze met with her own. Harriet didn't want to think about what'd happen to her if they failed their mission and the little rosy-glasses vaultie turned into Grandma's award-winning chicken and dumplings; they'd be hunted from border to border just for the principle of failing one of the most powerful men in all of the Capital. Sending another merc outfit after them was no trouble of time, money, or patience for Charles Burke—all of which he had in abundance, apparently—if it meant proving a point to all future business partners of his. No expense was too great and no sea too wide when Burke always got his man.

If Harriet wasn't the type of woman that she was, she probably would've been properly terrified of him. At best she was only unnerved and tried to keep contact with him at a minimal, if it could be helped. Tobias normally did the talking, anyway.

"What's the plan?" She inquired instead of finishing her sentence of the dweller being dead and eaten. When she carried to the counter to see if there was anything useful as a weapon, she found a roll out mat of multiple knives. Each blade seemed to be constructed with a specific purpose in what and how it was meant to cut.

A long bladed knife, with a worn handle that suggested many years of use (one could clearly see the ridges of the users fingers and palm) was handed off to Tobias after Glasgow had been freed from his own shackles. She took several that were easier to conceal and tucked them in places that were within easy reach for wielding.

"Escape to a safer location, first of all. Secondly, we locate our belongings or at least better weapons, and thirdly—we search for Miss Parker and cut down any poor whore's son that gets in our way." Tobias affirmed with a commanding presence in body and voice. The elderly gentleman could make even the most practiced of gunslingers, the foolhardiest of raiders, and the biggest of yao guais turn tail when his eyes bore a searing rage he wished to indulge in. He didn't like being inconvenienced, if you called being kidnapped by a presumed cannibal a simple inconvenience.

He'd cut down a poor whore's son, alright... cut them down into small pieces to package back to their prostitute mother alongside a 'sorry for your loss' card, just to spite her for birthing something that should've been a stain on her chin.

"What about scab? Can't take him with us, the dead weight'll slow us down." Harriet reasoned as she looked down at Glasgow and nudged his side with a hard boot toe.
"It's best he remain unconscious for the time being. I wouldn't want this to awaken any of his old —... appetites. We'll secure him somewhere safe." Tobias, with set eyes and a tight jaw, went to the only door out of the small shack and knelt down beside it. His fingers ran down the wall beside the door with a testing pressure, where a seam of metal was bolted into the jamb support, and found a corroded edge and crumpled it away until he could peek out to scope the outer surroundings, leaning down on his hands and knees with an ear to the floor to rest his head.

"Looks to be about 0600 hours at best guess—maybe 0700. No viable threats in immediate sight. The house we camped in is about 9 yards ahead, and it'll provide good cover and it's a straight shot to the back door." He observed before withdrawing from the wall and tucking his hand back through the hole he made. He was peeling the plate back without needing to use much strength thanks to the metal's corrosion. Soon the small section of the wall was rolled back just enough for Harriet to crawl through, being much smaller in stature than himself.

Understanding what had to be done, she crouched on the old blood-streaked ground and laid on her stomach, easily shimmying herself straight out of the shack to the other side and pulling her legs out after her. When she got to her feet she examined the outer lock on the door; a padlock hooked through a custom made handle and link to keep the door shut tight. A fist-sized rock on the ground made short work of breaking the lock apart, smashing it repeatedly until it popped open and plummeted to the dirt, and she opened the door in time to see Tobias picking Glasgow up off the ground to sling around his shoulders.

Tobias silently nodded towards the Harris house, making a small gesture of his fingers to his eyes that translated to 'recon' and Harriet nodded in the affirmative as she crept her way to the back of the house with her taken knife in hand. Pressing her back to the wall below the windowsill, she carefully peeked over to see that the kitchen was, at least, empty. There wasn't any movement from the living room as far as she would tell, either, as she pressed her hearing to be as alert as possible for any noises inside.

Silently, she signaled to the older merc to follow her lead as she opened the back door, and Tobias was at her side with Glasgow in a heartbeat. They both disappeared inside, still in low crouches.

Glasgow was carried off to the back bathroom to be hidden and Harriet crept about the couch, still keeping low to the ground with the front windows that surrounded her. The sunrise was just beginning to form and they had very little cover of night to fall back on at this point... if they led an assault to retrieve the vaultie, they'd have to be much more tactical unless they were pressed for time and Sumner wouldn't be saying 'no' to a potential bloodbath.

Harriet pulled apart their remaining sleeping rolls for any sign of their belongings, which were obviously taken by their captors, and found nothing—until she picked up her eye patch. It's discovery made her touch her heavily scarred eye, were the eyelids were deflated from the absence of an eyeball and the muscle and lids were too damaged to hold a prosthetic in place. Immediately replacing the patch over said scarred eye, having to look down to correctly adjust the band behind her head, she spotted a 10mm partially hidden under the couch skirt. She whistled back to Tobias as he went rifling about the master bedroom. The gun was picked up and the chamber was checked for a round, but she shook her head upon recognizing that the safety was on—if Winona had planned on using it, she wasn’t getting a shot out.

She hates this thing. Wouldn't touch it 'less she had to—means she was scared enough to try, Harriet surmised as Tobias finally looked out to her in the living room.

"Brat's gun. Loaded round, safety on." She worded with one handed gestures to Tobias when he gave his attention. Her other hand slid the gun straight across the floor to the older mercenary in
the next room, and he checked the loaded magazine himself before speaking back to her with hand signals that were more eloquently executed than her own had been.

"Backup stashes?" Was his question, and she made one quick signal to say that she was checking and he nodded, confirming that he understood her before ducking back into the bedroom.

Harriet pulled away the cushions from the couch and took from underneath them a stashed pistol with several magazines of ammunition and a 7-inch serrated hunting knife and a stimpak. Circling her way to the kitchen for the second backup stash, she removed from the cabinet below the sink her power fist, Samantha, a couple more stimpaks, and then moved on to the master bedroom. Tobias was sitting back on his heels with a knapsack pulled into his lap—its contents meticulously removed in hopes that he would find something of use.

"They missed it." He signaled to her and held up Winona's own hunting knife, her first aid kit, and a couple of tin cans. Upon showing her the cans, he made a one-handed sign for explosion and then rising smoke.

Smoke bomb, Harriet recognized as he underhanded them to her to examine; they were in pristine condition and filled with a hard brown tar surrounding an ignition wick. "Homemade. Quality. Pre-War ingredients." She explained to him.

"Good. Sun's up, need cover." Tobias replied. "Glasgow," His call sign was the old soldier giving a smile with his thumb drawing across his mouth. "Has bathroom stash when awake."

"Tactic?" She questioned with some grimness. If the shack they were cuffed in was Andale's chop shop, and Winona wasn't amongst them, there wasn't a doubt that the princess was in one of the residential houses. Harriet decided that she was abducted last because she wouldn't have tried using her gun if Glasgow had been with her.

There was a reason why Winona was separated from them and Harriet couldn't let herself think about why; she had to focus on the mission.

Tobias firmly shook his head in the negative and began to swiftly relay the plan; "Produce cover. Any resistance is acceptable casualty. No exception for kids, sick, old. House this side of street first."

He's not playing with kids gloves. Harriet nodded in understanding of her orders before her leader signaled that they were to roll out.

They exited Harris' house through the back kitchen door after dividing up the found supplies and pocketing what they were taking. They traveled through the adjoining backyards of the neighboring houses with Tobias leading, his stashed pistol held at the ready in front of him as Harriet prepared one of Winona's homemade smoke bombs—the one with the shortest wick—and tactically tossed one through a shattered bottom floor window as they flanked the Wilson estate. The growing sunrise threw tall shadows at them from the horizon line of debris of the remainders of Andale; broken houses too torn apart by the blasts and time to be utilized, a rusted playground that would disintegrate under the weight of a child, and the barren trees with brittle branches trying to withstand the morning breeze.

The morning wasn't quiet for much longer as Tobias kicked down the back door and the two filed in, disappearing into the milky smoke.

Winona slowly opened her eyes, blinking heavily as if it were a great chore for her and in her
vision only vague shapes of things about her were legible. Her mind felt too heavy as a dank fog clung to the contours of her brain. She couldn't conjure a single thought, her mouth parting to swallow or call out, but she only drooled on herself instead as she tried to move her hands to brush a lock of her red hair out of her eyes.

Her arms wouldn't move. Her shoulder joints felt strained and it was painful.

When the inventor looked up, her mouth turned to a slight frown as she dumbly pulled at her arms again, wondering why they wouldn't come when she told them to. As the thick, befuddled smog began to clear and she could recognize what was happening to her, she realized that her shoulders were indeed stiff and painful, and her arms were bound above her head. Her body was freely swinging as if she were hung off of something she couldn't see in the pitch blackness of the room and she heard the grinding, shrill creaking of metal on metal at her hands. Was that a chain? Was she hanging from a chain? It was hard to tell with how her thoughts were running rampant, seeming to intensify and jump to horrid conclusions caused by her magnified imagination with her lack of sight. As she kicked about to register on floor or anything else to stand on, nothing came within reach of her toes and she didn't want to think about how high off the ground she was. Her legs were cold, as a damp, muggy air snaked about her lower body in loose tendrils and she knew without being able to see that she was stripped out of her clothes, down to her underwear.

Where was her armor? Her clothes? Her gun? Who undressed her?

Her heart rapidly began pounding in her chest, her head, her ears, and she wriggled helplessly from where she was hung, trying to pull herself up but her body was still too weak to bear weight and she whimpered at the round of newfound pain that blossomed amidst the strain in her shoulders. It effectively stilled her and the throbbing lessened only slightly.


Winona shut her eyes as if it would help her concentrate, and she could make out the haziest of memories of the four of them arriving in town... which meant that they weren't ambushed on the road, they arrived safely. But what happened after that? Who did they talk to? Were they possibly jumped on arrival? The last of her memories seemed to be the most blurry, as if they were coated under a smoke she couldn't wave away, and all she could completely make out through how hard she concentrated was a smile; it spanned from ear to ear, looking like it would split the mouth of anyone who wasn't accustomed to grinning in such a way. She remembered someone grabbing her —someone old, shaking, petrified—she remembered Glasgow yanking them off her and that was it.

They were definitely attacked, but what the hell happened after that last memory? It was like the more she concentrated the more those memories seemed to run from her... until she realized it wasn't just a smoke, or fog, or a haziness tiding over her brain—it was like whole chunks were missing and she didn't know if those memories would ever be returned in completed pieces.

The panic began to rise again and she had to repeat back to herself a mental mantra of; Calm. Calm. Calm. We're going to be calm. Breathe in—

Upon deeply inhaling, her nose was assaulted by such a horrifically putrid odor that she immediately began gagging—feeling her throat tighten and her mouth heave, preparing to vomit and she tried to force it back down. The room was entirely too dark to make out what was around her, and her imagination continued to conjure the most grotesque scene before her; radroaches scuttling about and scavenging feasts off of dead bodies; feral dogs laid about in every corner with bellies too full of other victims to bother with her; the putrid, moving masses of what she
thought super muties were—tangles of sinew pulled too tight over frames that were probably once human, watching with ugly, yellow eyes, and she could see them like glowing pinpoints staring right at her in the dark—!

The inventor finally heaved one last time, unable to swallow down the tightness constricting the insides of her throat, and vomited—barely registering it dripping down her stomach, legs, and between her toes into a puddle underneath her. She began to sob loudly with bile on her chin, pleading to the dark for someone—anyone—Glasgow, please! Help me!—to find her as she helplessly pulled at her bindings above her head, flailing her legs to try and find something to touch or step on. She shrieked upon feeling something cold touch her heel and she imagined the tongue of a mutie licking up the sole of her foot for a quick taste.

Her scream caused a swift patter of feet to pound about above her head. She trained her eyes on the noise when she finally fell silent, swiveling her head about so her ears could also follow them, trying to gauge where they were coming or going and how far they really were, and she prayed that it was one of her friends coming to save her. Her breathing was panting yet shallow, anxious for a friend and panicked by the coming of an assailant, until she finally heard a chunk, like a lock turning with a key, and then the open of a door somewhere in front of her. There was a faint clik before her vision was assaulted by a waning yellow light bulb flicking on and bobbing above her head that made her shut her eyes. She was afraid to open them again, to see what the room around her really looked like, but they flung open at the sound of someone carrying down stairs and her breathing, like her heart, went still as her mind was overloaded by the awful sight of the room before her.

Remnants of skeletons were piled in a corner bin on a rolling dolly diagonally opposite of her, completely covered in wriggling maggots like it was a constantly moving mound, and was set beside two large refrigerators and a slide-open cooler. In the center of the room were two long counter islands sitting parallel to each other with dull marble tops, littered with uniform lacerations like they were wounds that had no chance of healing over—and one of the islands held various tools of specific purpose but she couldn't bare to imagine what they were. Some looked like they were for precise cutting, some for prodding and hooking, some had cleaver blades like they were meant for hacking and others had thin, flat heads for scraping or flaying. The only tools she recognized were surgical scissors, clamps, and a polished scalpel because they were things her father once had on hand in the vault clinic. A vice grip was bolted to the short edge of that counter, beside the tools. Short chains hung from the paint-crackled ceiling in a line along the wall where she resided in it's furthest corner, hanging from a slowly swinging meat hook with her hands tightly bound above her head. She was dangling at least a foot off the tiled floor where a clear outline of a blood stream washed away to a floor grate growing black fungus.

She was in a basement.

She was hanging from a hook like a slab of prime meat in someone's basement—they tied her up, undressed her, and were planning on hurting her. Did security from Tenpenny Tower follow them, dubious that she wasn't some spy from England for Allistair, coming to get the 'real truth' out of her? Was it some Wasteland madman that had captured her? Was it the townspeople in Spoon? Did they realize that the four of them lied about who they were and they wanted the truth? She remembered Sumner limping like a frail old man, Glasgow's arm around her shoulders as they walked together, Harriet glaring at her from across a coffee table in a living room she didn't know—why couldn't she remember anything?

"I think it's a bit too early to be making all this ruckus, 'ya know!" Her eyes snapped toward the bald man that loitered at the bottom of the stairs, carrying a too wide grin despite chiding her, as if she were a child caught playing kickball in the house and he couldn't be mad at her rascally nature.
She recognized not him but his unnaturally big teeth.

The name Jack Smith struck her suddenly as if he were an old friend she couldn't forget—and yet only moments ago she didn't know, or at least remember, who he was. She knew him somehow.

"What did you do to me? Why—Why can't I remember anything?" She exclaimed hoarsely with tears filling her eyes, feeling panicked and frayed. "Wha- What—... What did you do to me?"

"Aw, heck, that's ole Bill's doing. That serum of his is a mighty odd thing, isn't it? Strange you woke up before your friends did! And with your size? Hoo boy, color me impressed! I've seen men the size of a bus take half and be out cold all night and day!" He crowed proudly with his hands on his hips and strode across the brick floor to her.

"Sta- Stay away from me! Someone help me! Help!" Winona screamed as she wriggled her body, kicking her legs about under herself as if it'd help her back away into a corner, but she was still hanging, and helpless, only swiveling and thrashing in place. It was like a nightmare—one where you were chased by a monster most foul and yet when you tried to run and hide from it, you only seemed to be running in place despite trying your all.

"Hey now, if you keep screaming, I'll have to shut you up, and I don't think you want that—do you?" His chipper suggestion came as a very thinly veiled threat and she only silently stared back at him with wide eyes, her breath heaving. She couldn't help but lose herself to her terror, despite her mouth and nose being filled with that unbearably hideous stench. It invaded her insides, her lungs, her head, like it was settled behind her eyes, making it's home so she would never forget it, and she felt polluted.

"Look at that, you made a mess of yourself! This won't do—won't do at all—a man's gotta have a clean work space! And, well, between you and me and what about Bob, I can't stand that smell." Jack tutted cheerily at the vomit that coated Winona's front before whistling in merry tune as he stepped back around the counter on the same path toward the stairs.

Winona shut her eyes, hoping that forcing out the awful room in front of her from her thoughts would help to keep some semblance of her mind; her protectors were out there somewhere, they had to be if she wanted to have any chance of escaping Jack's basement, and she couldn't find a way out if she couldn't keep her rational thinking in check. Resigning herself to the overwhelming terror would surely seal her death.

The inventor heard the faint twist of a knob and she shrieked from the shock of a frigid shower that hosed her down. She coughed on what was unexpectedly swallowed, feeling the icy drops pelting her skin relentlessly like hundreds of needle heads, soaking her undergarments and hair. He finally stopped when he deemed her to be 'clean enough', which he muttered under his breath as if only partially satisfied, and then turned to hosing off the remainder of the vomit puddle under her. She opened her eyes only to watch it swirl toward the black fungus-encrusted drain in the floor where it gurgled emptily as Jack stepped away, still whistling, to wind the long black hose back on it's spool, attached to the wall. When he shut off the water pipe it was bolted to, their eyes connected from across the room as her teeth chattered and her body shivered from the sopping wet cold, and he was beaming. He was beaming as if he couldn't believe his luck—like he bagged the biggest game he could have hunted—and Winona knew right then and there that she wasn't leaving that basement.

Jack Smith was going to hurt her, and he was going to hurt her very badly.

"Wha- What did you d- do to my fri- friends?" Winona pleaded through her clattering jaws.
"Don't you worry about the other guests, little missy." Jack had called her that before... little missy, little missy, little missy. She hated those vague feelings—residual phantoms of memories that felt like they weren't coming back any time soon.

"Guests? You tr- treat all your guests this w- way?" She glared at him weakly.

"Aw, heck, not all of them. If we go around hog-tying every Joe, John, and James that comes on through, we'd lose our most prime source of food! Shame it had to be you this time. I rather liked you. You seem like good people." He lamented as he went to the counter where his tools were laid out and began leisurely organizing them in a line, one after the other in straight alignment to each other, from smallest blade head to largest.

"Then why me? Why us? Tell me what you did to my friends!" Winona yelled and thrashed her legs again as if she were at all threatening, and he laughed in amusement, watching her.

"Because I just plain couldn't let you get away from me," Jack responded when his laughter died and she immediately went still, gaping back at him fearfully in how transparent his tone was. It sent a chill up her spine that ran deeper than her cold and wet exterior—it was one that leeched at any semblance of courage that she had left.

"You'll be feeding my family mighty good for some time... mighty good indeed." He sighed while delicately picking at one particular blade from the line that he made. "I'm real sorry about all this... truly I am. We are. We don't like hurting decent folk, and heck, we sure would've taken you in if we had the room here in Andale, but good meals are scarce out here—'bout as scarce as good people in this world, which makes this even harder for me to go through with—but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do to feed his own, doesn't he? In fact, he's even got a right to it."

Winona took notice of the way his hand moved on the handle of the knife after taking it from the counter top. It was more than just a mere shaking, or trembling, his hand was practically quaking as if he were short of seizing, like he couldn't voluntarily keep himself still. It looked like more than just adrenaline, the thrill of the hunter, the blood thirst of the wolf; her mind conjured more memories of moments and conversations she didn't remember taking place—her talking about old George from the vault, people shaking because they ate human flesh, doing what you had to to survive.

She had wondered if someone would go that far to survive, and Glasgow promptly answered that question; "Either them or you. Someone's body or starvin' t'death."

He told her about cannibalism.

And Jack Smith was undoubtedly a cannibal... but maybe not just him, but his whole family—his whole town—picked their own survival over someone's body. They picked their survival over the corpse of men and women that they willingly killed. They picked survival over morality. Winona couldn't breathe, like her own body was forcing her to suffocate, her lungs constricting and she choked down an inhale that wouldn't go anywhere at the realization—the realization that her flesh would be consumed by another human person.

She was losing time to escape, she could see that much with the look Jack's eyes carried, as if they were clocks ticking away at time she couldn't afford. All she could think of was her dad's smiling face and how she would never see it again. The warmth in his voice, the touch of his lips atop her head when he hugged her, the glimmer in his eyes of thoughts she always wanted to ask him about but knew he would never divulge. She wanted to ask those questions, she wanted to feel his hugs, and hear his voice, and see his face.
Just one last time.

"If it's food you want, I have money! Lots of money! Stupid amounts of money! I live in Tenpenny Tower about a day's walk from here, if you just let us go, I'll give you every last cap I have, I swear it! I'll give you whatever you want if you let us leave safely! Please! Don't do this!"

Winona sobbed through her pleas, her chin quivering as she forced herself to keep from crying. Calm, calm, calm continued to repeat as a mantra in her head that had very little effect at this point outside of distressing her even further.

"You'd probably laugh at some of the absurd things I've heard people say down here... but don't you worry about a thing anymore, little lady. I'll make it quick—like I said, I don't like hurting decent folk."

As he set down the favored knife back on the counter, he picked up instead some scraps of fabric and circled about the island to come toward her. Her pleading became incoherent and tearful from how it tumbled forth from her mouth, frantically kicking at him as best she could when he was close enough, her strikes uncoordinated as she lost her vision to her tears until she could blink them away—he was warning her to stop, "don't make this difficult, or I'll make this hurt!" he threatened—but she kept kicking until he got tired of her defiance with a frustrated huff and walked back away. Winona blinked more of the tears away, forced herself to keep from crying again to keep her vision, and watched him stride back towards her with a length of rope after some seconds.

"Fine, we'll do this your way, little girl!" Jack proclaimed as he lunged at her. She hiccuped out another desperate plea while bucking her legs, but she was starting to lose the fight as well as her energy, becoming fatigued. He managed to finally grab hold of one of her legs and clamped it down against his side firmly with his back facing her, and all she could do was give a pathetic whimper before falling away to more incoherent begging, slurred from her panicked crying; her other foot stomped down against his back repeatedly with as much power as she could give, unable to lift her knee any higher to strike his head or the back of his neck. Soon both her legs were tied together and Jack had broken a sweat, looking agitated still but triumphant.

She was down to the very last seconds of her escape and she was now too panicked to think of anything that would help her; she couldn't convince him with food or money, she couldn't appeal to any moral side of him, she couldn't get out of her binds on her own and now she was too exhausted to even try.

"Please, please, please," Winona wheezed brokenly, her shoulders bobbing as she sobbed. Think of something, think of something, Parker! Would he care if you lied about being pregnant? Would he stop if you kept him talking, at least distracted him long enough for the others to get you? What if they don't know where I am? What if they're still out cold? What if they escaped and left me here?

"Now you've gone and upset me! Shame on you! Be glad I'm not the type of man that loses his temper!" He barked as he grabbed for the original strips of cloth and came back at her with them. "If you bite my little piggies off, I'll gladly return the favor—"

And just as the first strip was nearing her mouth to be stuffed past her lips, she had a sudden spark of an idea through her mental straining.

"I'm sick!" She screamed as loud as she could and Jack immediately stopped, the balled up fabric lowering from her mouth. "I'm sick, I'm sick, I'm sick!" She repeated manically.

"What're you going on about?" He laughed dubiously. "You expect me to believe that? Why, you're
'bout as healthy as the day is long! You expect me to believe—" 

"I- It's true," She wheezed with her voice barely above a whisper, as if she were divulging a secret not meant for his ears. "I'm sick. Mutated. Have been since I was young. My hair use to be black." 

"Now I really can't believe you!" Jack's mouth clacked open to let loose another hearty laugh but she cut him off. 

"Look at my legs. Look at my arms, my body hair—I didn't dye it! I'm white all over." Winona insisted as she swallowed back the lump in her throat caused by her fear and sobbing. "I- If you do what you're going to d- do—what I think you're going to d- do—you'll get sick like me. You'll all get sick like me. Do you want that?" 

"You're just blowing smoke out your tail pipe, trying to confuse me!" He exclaimed exasperatedly. 

"It's not just the white hair—it's the things that haven't happened yet. My dad's a doctor, he told me it'll change over time and he can't predict how—it's white hair today, but what about tomorrow? Even I don't know," Her voice dropped to a mystified whisper again. If she could talk him out of hurting her—just a little more—! 

"You're not tricking me, little girl, not Jack Smith!" He yelled, obviously getting agitated again. "I know what you're doing—" 

"If it's not me that'll get you, it'll be my guards." She cut through his shouting to make sure she was heard. She had to keep him talking somehow. "If you hurt me, you'll regret it. My guards aren't just some common mercenaries or hired help, they're bonafide soldiers, and they're soldiers with only one mission—to protect me." 

"You don't even know if they're still alive!" He balked. "For all you know my brother Bill's already taken care of them! And besides," There was a crack of a disbelieving laugh. "You're in no position to threaten me!" 

"I'm trying to warn you, before this goes further than it has to." She replied gently, calmly, her adrenaline running out of her quickly and all she could hear was her father's voice telling her "keep calm. Keep calm. Keep calm. It'll pass, you're okay, just keep going sweetheart. You're doing great." and she felt his arms embracing her and she felt the vivid memories of a goodnight kiss on her forehead. Her courage was slowly returning. 

"...Warning me," He replied with some hint of nervousness about him. 

"They'll do anything to protect me. They'll put a bullet through anyone or anything that they have to if it means making sure I get out of here alive—so if they get free—and they will get free—they're going to kill you and your family to get me back. They know you have children here... we saw them. Do you want that to happen to them, Jack?" 

His eyes were alight with a protective rage at the mention of his child. "Junior doesn't know anything about all this! He's just a boy!"

"If they think he's a threat, it won't matter how old he is." Winona replied pointedly, and some hint of realization registered in his eyes, seeping away his anger and he was very, very frightened. He was practically petrified. "If you hurt me I can't guarantee his safety—but I want to, Jack. I don't want him getting hurt, and if you listen to what I'm saying, he won't be. You just have to let me go."
Jack regarded her with a troubled, genuinely fearful look—it looked like he believed her but did he really have the option of choosing? All Winona could do was pray that she reached him somehow. She could only pray that her protectors would come and find her if she failed. She could only pray that the end she met in that basement would be quick and painless so she wouldn't be hurting for long if she wasn't going to be rescued.

When she escaped the vault and came to Megaton, meeting the Outsiders for the first time and witnessing the rampant poverty, crime, and constant fear, she could see in the bulging eyes on their emaciated faces that they silently accused her of a most heinous crime; being well fed, well protected, and above all, well ignorant of the brutal nature of survival. They all were haunted by the losses of loved ones that weren't strong enough or lucky enough, tortured daily by the things they had to do in order to make it that far, and at what result? Wallowing in a back end town, starved and hurting? Would death have been kinder if they had allowed It to take course? Or did they hope that to survive another day, even as horrible as it was to continue on, would be worth it if they could possibly find some meager semblance of happiness and comfort?

Winona thought she truly understood the possibility of not making it another day like those people did; she thought she was taking chances and risking herself, like was really trying to survive, but not until this very moment—dangling in Jack Smith's basement and trying to talk him out of his plans of hurting her for his family—did she really understand that unforgiving want to survive. Not until that moment when she could see in his eyes that she wasn't able to talk him out of this, when he refused to put down the blade that trembled in his hand, when he neared her to do the unthinkable, did she realize that if she did make it out somehow, she would willingly kill every last person in that town to ensure that she would be totally safe.

Survival wasn't just about escaping. It was using a flamethrower to destroy the hornet's nest instead of knocking it down with a stick. It was gutting your opponent to make sure he was really dead even if he was already grounded. It was like being the people in Megaton; understanding that you'll have to do unspeakable things to live another merciless day, and forcing yourself to cope with it.

She'd have Jack and every person he knew killed, their homes bulldozed, and the ground salted just to ensure that she could sleep at night without worrying that something would come back for her; to ensure that she would never be dragged back to his basement. The most extreme measures would be taken to ensure that nothing would follow her out of Andale... and she understood that she'd spend the rest of her life trying to make peace with the destruction she caused.

Just because Jack Smith was twisted and backwards didn't mean that she would sleep easier at night.

Jack suddenly had her by her hair to yank her head back with bruising strength, and the bundled strip of cloth was shoved into her mouth when she yelped in surprise. Before she could keep her head thrown back in protest, yelling against the first gag with unintelligible questions of why? at him, he was tying the second gag around her head to keep the first gag stuffed in her mouth. She screamed into them but her voice was effectively silenced, and then she screamed a second time with defeated tears rolling down her cheeks even louder when realization struck that she had lost. The inventor didn't know how thick the walls were or if they were sound proof (probably not if Jack heard her earlier screams), but with her bound and gagged, she couldn't make noise that anyone past the basement door would hear.

She lost.

She lost and she was going to die.
" Doesn't matter if you're sick, now. Doesn't matter. We're at the point of no return—are n't we, little missy? Even if we let all this go and untied you, we did things we can't take back... if you're really from Tenpenny, someone'll come looking for you and your friends." Jack replied somberly with a hand wiping down over his mouth and peppery beard with uncertainty of what to do next, his eyes cryptic to her. "You're no good if you're telling the truth about your—... illness, but we can't let you go and now I've got loose ends to tie up... for the family."

Winona watched after him with confusion knitting her brows, her body trembling through the alarm that rattled her bones, the bewilderment that shackled her mind. Loose ends, he said, but what was he talking about—

The others, she finally realized as Jack went to the stairs to take his leave. The inventor began screaming into her gags again as loudly as she could to draw his attention back to her; shrieking, no, howling so loud that she could have sworn her throat was being torn to frayed threads and she couldn't see straight. Don't hurt them! Her mind cried as loudly as her own voice did.

Jack didn't look back over his shoulder at her. He was soon up the stairs, the door closed behind him, and she stopped her screaming long enough to hear a key being turned back into the lock to bar the door from the other side.

Winona looked up to the chain and hook above her head, seeing her hands tied with rope as best they could be with her Pip-Boy in the way on her left arm. She still couldn't pull herself up, even though she considered herself to be relatively strong in thanks to carrying around heavy loads up and down stairs while in Vault 101's maintenance, and without anything under her to keep her upright, she didn't have any downward pulling power on the hook, either. The inventor looked around her to see if there was anything nearby she could stand on and just sling herself off the hook, but the closest thing were the tools on the counter. If she could at least get herself unhooked, she could cut herself free!

Think, bitch, think! You can do this, you can get yourself out of here—you've built robots outta rusted scrap, you made a weapon when you were 9, you're a God damn Parker! She mentally yelled at herself with a newfound determination. Talking to Jack didn't work in the end, and if it had gone worse she would have been dead by now—it taught her a valuable lesson in that she didn't have the luxury of being diplomatic anymore. She couldn't waste this miracle of a second opportunity, and her escape had to be precise, timely, and most of all, merciless no matter who tried to stop her.

Need some other means of force to get off this God damn hook and you don't have a lot of energy to do it! Think smart, not hard!

Winona looked back up to the hook above her head that she swayed from moving slowly back and forth, back and forth, feeling like she was twisting in a wind she couldn't see, her body still trembling from her wet hair, beading water down almost naked body. She shut her eyes to think, but no sooner had she done that did she know what she had to do.

There was no way for her to guess if it would work, but she had to damn well try and she had to do it quickly.

Winona began flexing her core, swinging the whole lower half of her body one way and then the other, working up a stable momentum with her body boomeranging forward and back. Her shoulders were scorching with pain from her body weight pulling on them from her bindings, her energy draining faster than she could replenish it, but her ache and fear kept her forging onward toward possible escape. Plaster sprinkled down onto her her, she could hear the ceiling cracking
above her head to fall into her hair and eyes the more she arched her body and the further she swung. It only renewed her desire in getting the hell out of that basement, in the dustier she became and the more the beams above her head, amidst the ceiling plaster, began to creak and strain, crying for her to stop or lest they splinter apart under her weight.

She finally swung forward one more time—tucking her legs under her as if it would suddenly help her become heavier—and the pin was ripped from the ceiling with chunks of soiled plaster, leaving her to plummet to the cold, wet floor. Landing on her side and elbow painfully with the thick smack of her flesh hitting the tile and having water splash back up onto her, her bound arms were unable to catch her fall at all, and if it wasn't for her elbow hitting the floor first it would have been her head. She sat up and ripped the gag down to rest it around her neck, coughing out the bundle of fabric from her mouth with a hooking finger, feeling like she could breathe again though the oxygen was raggedly delivered, and heavily did it re-enter her lungs. Unable to get up to her feet with her ankles tied, she rolled onto her stomach and, despite the pain radiating up and down her arms from her stiff shoulders and injured elbow, she forced herself to squirm on her belly and forearms across the floor until she came to the first counter.

Don't have a lot of time—not a lot of time! Made too much noise! She barked at herself mentally while maneuvering her body onto her knees so her weight rested on her shins, trying to get enough height to throw her bound hands onto the island where they swept across the counter for the closest knife. Finding one, she plopped back onto her rear on the floor with her legs twisted around in front of her to cut through the ropes on her ankles. She sawed through them as quickly as she could with her eyes flicking back and forth between her work and the basement door atop the stairs, her ears strained to the floor above for any noise that would let her know where Jack was; for footsteps, talking, creaking floorboards, anything, but there was no sound that gave him away. If he was in the house still, there was no way he wouldn't have heard her basically obliterating one of the basement support beams of his home.

So if he's not here, that means the others're held somewhere else.

Winona finally cut through the ropes around her ankles, and with little time to celebrate her regained mobility, she got up from the floor to her feet and rushed for the vice grip bolted to the short side of the counter. The handle of the knife was set between the clamp's teeth and she turned the tension handle enough to hold it in place—she wasn't going to cut through her ropes by herself, not with how they were tied with several loops of rope. Once she was sure the knife wouldn't slip through the vice grip, she began rocking her binds back and forth over the blade, watching the serrated teeth bite through her ties until they were flayed into threaded cords. The blade caught on the skin of her arm, letting her know that she was clean through moments before they slackened, releasing her to her freedom, to her gaining courage and relief.

Now, escape—we have to think this out carefully, Parker. We can't just take off running now that we're free, and we still needa get the door open. She revolved back around to the island with the rest of Jack's scattered tools atop them and picked over the knives for an appropriate one to protect herself with... too small, too flatheaded—ah, perfect, too sharp to even look at!

The inventor knew that she could lay in wait for Jack to come back—hide at the bottom of the stairs and wait for him to open the door for her, and ambush him once he reached the last step now that she had a weapon... but she had to get to the others. Despite her determination to get out alive, she knew she wasn't going to survive without them if she escaped from the town on her own. The idea of abandoning them made her sick.

The basement didn't have any windows so her only exit out was the door that, assumedly, led into the rest of Jack's house. Carefully making her way up the stairs, afraid that they would groan under
her bare feet and give away her escape, she moved on the balls of her toes to step as quietly as she
could with watery footprints following after her until she was at the door to examine the lock.

*Can't be opened from this side, of course... and I can't chance making any more noise by breaking
this damn thing down, but I don't have time to figure out picking it open.*

Winona had a lot of experience with lock picking back in the vault, but most of the locks she dealt
with were lock boxes with flimsy security or electronic doors—she didn't know how to pick a
keyed door that didn't have a computer attached to it!

*But maybe—... I don't need to pick it,* the inventor realized with some moderate disbelief, as she
examined the door jamb between the door frame and where the lock turned into it, and splintered
off a crumbled chuck of wood easily. *This house's pre-war and barely structurally sound. The lock
looks new... but the door frame's original. Maybe I don't need to work with the lock directly...?*

The thought wondered off as she took hold of the knife that she had from the counter and plunged
it into the wood, using it as a makeshift crowbar to pry away more splinters from the door frame
right where the lock jamb was located, pricking her fingers with small, sharp slivers of wood as she
did. The last chunk of wood was finally pried away and under was the lock jamb, where the lock
bolt was received in the door's frame; she dug out the jamb to expose the bolt, only having to push
it back into the door with a single finger, and from the other side of it she listened to the lock turn
until it *clicked.*

The door swung open easily. It was a remarkable sight to behold, but all Winona could do was
keep her breath held in, feeling it go so deep it was like it bypassed her lungs and went straight to
her stomach. She was at the point of pure terror, her courage dashed again when she realized that
Jack could *still* be in the house somewhere and she had to find an exit. The inventor had to
consciously coach herself through remembering how to breathe, as she cautiously peeked out with
an eye and an ear for anyone in the adjacent room.

*It was Jack's kitchen.*

A window overlooking the sink sent dappling spots of early morning sunlight dancing through the
dingy, moth-bitten lace curtains, spotlighting the tiled floor and the empty breakfast table. Three
chairs sat empty, one smaller than the other two, and it made her think of the parental rage that
sharpened his eyes to daggers when they spoke about his son. When she moved to the bare counter
to glance out the window, she saw the sun slowly arching its way to the high of the hot afternoon
from its rise at the horizon. Even with her small size, she didn't think she could pull herself through
a shattered window of that size without severely cutting herself up.

Looking to her Pip-Boy to check for any bodies in the house using her reader, to her dismay it was
powered off. The internal battery ran dry while she was unconscious, and now, she was walking
Jack's house *blind.* At least her Pip-Boy would've cataloged it so she knew the easiest means of
escape.

Winona gathered up what little bravery she had despite wanting to find somewhere small to hide
and carefully crossed the kitchen. There wasn't a backdoor leading out to the barren yard behind
Jack's house, aside from the small kitchen window. The knife trembled in her hand as she held it in
front of her assertively, shaking more and more with each step she took down the hallway that led
out of the kitchen and into what looked like a spacious living room. Her bare footsteps landed
carefully on the old wooden floorboards as she tried leveling her breathing alongside her heart,
which was pounding so loudly in her chest that it felt like it was trying to expand its way up her
throat—as if it didn't have enough room in her chest, with the confines of her rib cage squeezing it
The exit was just ahead. It was only a short walk across the living room, adjacent to her current place in the hallway where she now walked guardedly. Only a few more steps had to be made, almost convincing herself to just go sprinting headlong for it and throwing caution to the wind, but as she readied herself to run she heard creaking coming down the stairs to her side.

She didn't have time to see who it was before she was back-stepping quickly into the kitchen to hide, throwing herself against the wall just beside the hallway. Whoever belonged to those footsteps, they were light on their feet, as she barely heard them pattering across the old wood floorboards of the living room. The inventor readied her knife, clasping the handle shakily between two sweating hands, her grip constantly adjusting on it as if she couldn't figure out how to properly wield it and waited for the intruder to enter the kitchen.

Small feet came to *pit-pat* on the kitchen tile and Winona was frozen upon seeing the Jangles pajamas the child wore, unable to plunge her knife down onto the small boy that was in front of her. It was no doubt Jack's very drowsy son looking for breakfast, with a hand ruffling over his messy bedhead and the other rubbing his eye sleepily.

"Mama? Watcha doin', makin' all that noise?" He grumbled to the empty kitchen, having not seen Winona with how both of his fists were now rubbing into his eyes.

Winona's heart was splitting in her chest as she didn't know what to do. If the boy saw her, she didn't want to think about what would happen—what she would *have* to do—to ensure he wouldn't alert his mother, who was most likely upstairs. She rose her knife reluctantly, the tip arched over the child's head, stopped herself as she tried to strangle down the rise of a small sob, and the knife was slowly lowered back to her side.

She couldn't do it.

"Mama?" The boy called tiredly again when he wasn't answered. Just as he lifted his head to look around the kitchen, the front door slammed open forcefully and startled the poor child out of his half-asleep state. He swiveled back to the front living room and ran back down the hall, allowing Winona to watch with wide eyes of shock and the slow release of a relieved breath, clutching her knife back to her chest in thanks that he wasn't going to be her first willing kill. She almost sunk down to the floor as she listened to the two in the other room.

"Son, you have to go upstairs and hide," She heard Jack demand frantically.

"Papa, what's wrong? What's goin' on? Did somethin' happen to grampa? Or uncle Bill? Are there bad people in town?"

"**Listen** to me, now, Junior—do what I tell you to! I want you to go upstairs and hide under your bed, just like your mother taught you, alright? I want you to hide and **don't** come out until someone you know comes and gets you. Not a **moment** sooner, you stay up there all night if you have to, do you understand me?"

"I wanna help you protect everyone!" His son stated fiercely. Winona listened to the moment of sniffling silence, as if Jack couldn't respond, and when she peeked out she saw him knelt on one knee in front of his boy, hugging him tightly.

"When you're older. Right now, this ain't nothing your old man can't fix," Jack assured before pulling back, looking into Junior's face. "Your mother and I'll make the bad men leave. Just—... Just **hide** until we tell you to come out. Okay? Now go get your mother for me."
Junior nodded reluctantly and turned, bolting up the stairs just as Winona pulled herself back from the hallway corner and clutched the handle of her blade, finally finding the proper way to wield it. She strained an ear to listen for Jack to come close, tried to visualize in her head him rising up to his feet and crossing the way to the kitchen for her to get the jump on him, but he didn't come. Instead, heavy footsteps came thundering down the stairs.

"Jack, what's going on!" A woman exclaimed in alarm.

"They got free," Jack replied darkly. "I told Bill to make do with what he had when he told me he needed more Abraxo. The doses he made were weak, they woke up hours before they should have. I should've listened to him when he said he needed more, Linda."

They escaped, Winona's mind seized as hope flooded her, finally sending the tears from her eyes and she rested her head back against the wall she leaned against. They didn't leave me behind. They're coming. 

"Oh, God," She cried fearfully. "Jack, what do we do?"

"I'll take care of them, you have to hide with Junior."

"What? No! We're a family and I have the responsibility of protecting this house and my son just as much as you do. Where's Martha and Bill?"

"...I don't know. Their house is up in this—this white smoke. I ran back in the moment I saw it. I don't know where they or dad are."

"Oh my God—Jack, we have to give that girl back!"

"It's too late for that!"

"No it's not! We give back that girl and maybe they'll leave! Just—send her out, make her make them stop—!"

"Go upstairs, Linda."

"But I—"

"Go upstairs and get the guns. We'll take care of this. Go!"

The inventor heard the same heavy footsteps running back up the stairs over her head after a stunned second, and her clutch on the handle of her knife tightened when she heard Jack approaching her hiding spot in the kitchen in a hurried stride. He was coming increasingly closer—coming faster than she could prepare herself to attack—and she readied the long-bladed knife in a hand that arched above her head, to plunge down on him when he entered the room.

Jack rounded the corner.
A/N: Hey lovelies! Welcome back to another chapter c: I wanted to throw up a quick warning here that this chapter gets pretty graphic and pretty dark, so bear in mind that it's gonna get heavy. I don't know if it will be considered 'triggering' for some, but it can definitely be a read that'll be hard to swallow.

Hope y'all enjoy nonetheless, and I apologize if it upsets anyone!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out

Glasgow stumbled out of the cramped bathroom and had to latch onto the door frame, if only to keep his wobbling world steady as he looked outward to a nearby window, his mind carrying the annoyed thought of where the fuck am I? His eyes caught the scorching rays of the rising sun, and he flinched away with one hand clasped to his forehead to protect his overly sensitive left eye. The sun was brighter than he remembered it being, almost searing... actually, everything was brighter than he remembered it being. Colors were bolder, things around him would turn shapes if he tried looking at them directly, and everything had an almost orange-tinged hue to it, like he was looking at the world through orange lensed sunglasses.

He blindly felt for said sunglasses amidst his swimming vision but found that they weren't on his face.

Fuck.

When he lifted his head again and felt sweat bead down his neck, causing his shirt to stick to his slicked body, he clasped his 9-inch blade with the brass-knuckled handle at his side. Licking the salt from the corner of his dry mouth, he grinned to himself excitedly as he reviewed his orders;

Shoot to kill.

High casualties tolerated.

Danger near, use caution.

Target missing.

Those were Sumner's orders, hidden behind the cramped bathroom's mirror where it was scored into the old, craggy paint for whenever Glasgow regained consciousness. He never was taught how to read, and so knew only very few basic words like doctor, food, and free, and so Sumner—as their squad leader—always had to relay information to him in his own secret code of quick drawn pictures if he wasn't around to directly deliver his orders.
A bulls eye target; *shoot to kill.*

A head with x'd out eyes; *High casualties tolerated.*

A hollow triangle with a skull in the middle; *Danger near, use caution.*

A light bulb, which was Winona's call sign, followed by a question mark; *Target missing.*

_Angel eyes' missin', git yer useless puke-suckin' ass up._ Glasgow growled at himself as he hopped his temple with the heel of his palm and shook his head, as if hoping it'd get his vision—and his fractured mind—back to use. It wasn't the first time he woke up and didn't remember anything of the last few hours, but to forget almost the last day? He knew he was drugged, and was definitely the last to wake up of the three of them, but he'd confirm his suspicions later when he killed the son of a dick-gargling slut that knocked him out and secured their target.

Glasgow, armed only with his favorite blade, as it was hidden just behind the bathtub in one of Sumner's obvious 'back up stashes', opened the back door of the one-story house he occupied to step outside. Avoiding the main street was his only choice, as the rising sun gave too much visibility, and if he took the back way he had more cover behind the houses if he kept low and quiet. He quickly scanned his surroundings; a man-made tin shack with a busted door was just ahead of where he stood, with blood-streaked walls and the familiar smell of decay that wrung his nostrils, and it brought back too vivid memories of meals he taught himself to be hungry for; to his right, a two-floor house wept with white smoke out of every possible opening, like the shattered windows, holes in the side paneling, and the kicked down back door. The smoke rose to the air to disintegrate in the sunlight before it could even reach the broken street. When he looked out to the main drag, he saw a still standing house just opposite of the smoked out one, surrounded by the debris of other homes that didn't withstand time.

_Non-toxic,_ he surmised, upon sniffing at the air to hock it back into his mouth and spit it on the ground. *Jus' plain smoke. Ain't one'a Zhāng's lit'le beauties, neither... she woulda poisoned it._

Just before Glasgow could take another careful step out onto the back stoop of the house, he watched small hands claw their way outward from the kicked open door—followed by a scrawny little body dragging themselves out from under the smoke, to drop themselves into the dirt with wheezing, struggling coughs. He watched as they—a little girl—with frazzled blonde hair and gangly limbs—sat up in the dirt with blood that wasn't her own streaking her flowered nightgown, and she trembled as she wailed tearfully back into the silent house.

"Mommy—?" The little girl tried, hiccupsing through her sobs and she finally got up to her feet shakily. "Mommy! *Mommy!" She screamed desperately.

It was then that Glasgow felt a jolt run through his body—the ever familiar twinge of *sadistic thrill,* plucking at every rubber band and strip of duct tape that kept him put together enough so he looked *somewhat* convincingly human; it was like trying to redress a predator, that walked on four legs and snapped at its prey with gnarled teeth, but it wouldn't look anymore human than if it walked on only two legs and wore people's clothes. The sheep could still see through such a disguise if he got close enough. It had been so constricting, tightening upon his stomach and throat, keeping him from indulging in his appetites lest one bite would burst his shrunk stomach, and _the Thing_—something ominous and _dark_—stepped forward in his subconscious, grinning unnaturally and saying that it was _starved._

He would feed it.

The terrified cries of the little blonde girl threatened to reawaken something in him that he was
forced to bury a long time ago... *the Thing* that enjoyed hurting people, that Sumner tried his
damnedest to make go away, but you can't make something like that disappear; you could only
force it into hiding.

And *the Thing* didn't mind the dark.

He watched as the little girl hobbled on the back porch, crying to herself as she slapped her tears
away with bloodied hands, looking as if she was debating on running back into the house. She was
silent now despite her sobbing, unable to call for her mother again, as she crouched on the ground
and hugged her knees to her face, rocking herself back and forth pitifully in her helplessness.

Glasgow couldn't take another second of watching it as the *sadistic thrill* threatened to crash down
on him, but he couldn't bring himself to step forward as he was trained to heel. He could
almost feel Sumner standing behind him, *gauging him* with a look so sharp it could cut the
grotesque thoughts right out of Glasgow's brain—but when he turned around, his squad leader
wasn't there.

That's right... Sumner wasn't there, holding *the Thing's* leash after muzzling its smile.

*Thing* wanted to come out. It was worse than a monster—*worse* than pure evil—it was telling
Glasgow to tear into everything he could, to carve himself into everyone he broke and mark them
in such a dehumanizing way that if they happened to survive the mutilation, they—
Glasgow *and the Thing*—would be left with their victims... scarred upon their very body...*forever*.

The *glasgow smile* would be with them for forever and *ever*. It wouldn't leave them until their
bodies would be picked clean by the buzzards or leeched into the irradiated soil under their
gravestone.

The little girl wasn't right for the smile—no, no, not *today*. Maybe when she was older, if she lived
that long. Most children that were small and scrawny like her didn't live past 10 years old, and she
looked to be about 7.

And besides... it wasn't fun if they weren't strong enough to fight back.

Glasgow stepped off the back stoop of the house he hid in and walked on towards the small child,
his boots crunching over the crumbled dirt and the weathered rocks, but not until he whistled
between his tongue and teeth was she finally aware of his presence. Her head snapped up to him,
her blue eyes bulging in complete fear, with her mouth parting open as if to scream but it lodged
itself in her throat. She tried to run off in the opposite direction, even though Glasgow didn't walk
any faster than his same leisurely gait toward her, and laughed when she fell from stepping on a
sharp rock and tumbled into a nest of dry weeds, crying in pain as she clutched her bleeding foot.
When he came to her, he bundled the front of her nightgown under one fist and pulled her up off
the ground to plant her back down both feet, making her whimper from being set on her injured
limb carelessly.

"*Up 'ya go, lit'le darlin',"* He cooed almost condescendingly as he hunched his back and leaned his
hands forward onto his knees, coming to eye-level with her and she couldn't stop gawking at his
wrong eye and he called back into the house. "*Hey! Glas' reportin' in, you aw'right in there?"*

"*Suck my cock!*" Harriet yelled back from somewhere on the second floor, followed with some
muffled sounds of a scuffle and Sumner demanding cooperation.

"Yeh, they're aw'right," He cackled and looked back to the little girl before him with the wide
smile still plastered on his face. "What's yer, name, hmn? Wait, *wait*—dun' tell me, I wanna turn
this int'a game. "Ya like games, lil' girl?"

When she didn't answer him, still too frozen in fear to respond other than the quivering of her bottom lip, he cocked his head with a little hum and she sniffled before nodding once hesitantly.

"Well whatta coinkee-dink, I love games. Here're the rules—if I guess yer name righ' in a few tries, 'ya gotta do somethin' fer me... buh' if you win—I'll letcha go. Fair? I think tha's fair. So, is iiiiiit —... Sally?"

Skiddishly, the little girl shook her head and her bottom lip quivered more as fresh tears ran over the blood stains on her face.

"No? Well, how 'bout Becky? Stacy? Vanessa? Jennifer?" She shook her head timidly at each suggestion, clutching the front of her bloodied night gown as well, and her face tightened more and more with each guess—looking close to breaking apart right in front of her, as if he had been too close to her name.

A small smile came to his cooled face as he looked back into her eyes. "Janice? Janelle? Jenna? No? How 'bout Jenny?"

The little girl, Jenny, released a small noise that sounded like a strangled whimper and her teeth bit into her lip again, as if it'd stop her chin from shaking. He almost laughed at how pathetic and small she looked, but instead it rattled on inside his head, cruelly, and he only grinned wide and bared his teeth.

The Thing—the glasgow smile—it was coming out more and more with every tooth that was revealed under his parting lips.

"Jenny, now? Well, ain't that a sweet name? I knew a Jenny, once... hell, pro'ly knew tons of 'em. You ain't special." His eyes glanced toward the house without rotating his neck, and then they flicked back to her as he raised his knife—the handle pinned under his hand on his knee—to use the blade to tuck a lock of hair out of her eyes. Jenny shut them quickly and trembled in place with her knees buckling in terror upon feeling the tip of his knife trail down her jaw.

"...Yer old lady still inside?" The smile faded from his face as he mused aloud, his expression cold as his tone turned accusatory in a sing-song voice. "Your mommy? She givin' my people trouble?"

"Ple- Please," She rasped. "D- Do- Don't hurt m- my mom." She begged, her eyes still tightly shut and her head bowed, too afraid to look at him again.

"Ah, ah, I won the game—not you. S'winner pick, lil' girl," Glasgow pressed the flat of his blade against her cheek threateningly. "So 'ya know what I want? Scream fer yer mama."

Fat tears began rolling down her cheeks as she shook her head firmly, hiccuping on breaths that wouldn't fully reach her lungs with snot rolling along her upper lip. Glasgow put a hand on her shoulder and she shrugged away, her lips tightly pursed together as her jaw freely trembled now.

"Scream!" He boomed in her face but she shook her head defiantly once more, and the smile on his face slowly faded away as he kept the knife pressed to her cheek. Grabbing her by her hair, the leverage practically took her feet off the ground as he flung her away like a weightless rag doll, listening to the way her body hit the ground and she immediately shrieked so loudly from the pain that it made his ears ring like he'd never hear again.

From the upper floor window of the house, he heard Harriet cuss loudly in Chinese ("nǐ māde
"bī!", she taught him that, once) before her head went out the same window to call down to him;
"We gotta runner!"

No sooner had she warned him did a woman with short, strawberry blonde hair come barreling out
from the smoke wafting out the back door with blood smearing down her soiled, silk nightgown
from her bruised nose and cut temple. Glasgow's arms were already open to grab onto her the
moment her bare feet left the door step and she yelped furiously, bucking her legs and clawing
wildly at his arms to get free; he only whooped with boisterous laughter as they both went crashing
to the ground, him toppled on top of her to keep her down, clasping both of her wrists under each of
his overpowering hands to keep her held down, and then straddled her stomach so she had no hope
of forcing him off her.

"Aren'cha a beauty?" Glasgow commented in amused fashion as she glared at him from under a
tight brow, her nostrils flared to show no weakness through her expression but he could see it in her
eyes—especially when she tried to kick her legs out from under him, attempting to find some way
to turn herself onto her side to find her screaming daughter, who only laid on the ground several
feet away from her and sobbed.

"Don't hurt her!" The woman under him howled threateningly as she tried throwing out punches at
him, but both hands were immediately pinned back down on the dirt. "Don't hurt my daughter!"

"If I wanted'tuh hurt her, I woulda by now," The unnatural grin returned to his mouth, his eyes
scanning over her face as if examining her. She had a nice mouth, the kind that turned slightly
downwards at the corners as if she were constantly frowning, and all he could think—with
immense excitement—was watta unfortunate mouth... perfect t'fix right up, tho'.

"Jenny, run! RUN!" She shrieked back to her daughter with her golden hair splayed across the
ground, trying to shove and hit him off of her. Before she could scream again, her mouth just
parting to yell, Glasgow had the tip of his blade hooked into the inner corner of where her lips met
and she immediately stopped, staring back at him with the same bulging and terrified eyes her own
child had given him moments before.

"You gotta mouth that needs fixin'," He whispered, feeling a coil in his gut come alive as if it were
on the receiving end of a live wire—oh, how he missed the heat! The way it boiled over in his
chest and sent his heart into a frenzy as if it were trying to dance off of hot coals. "I kin fix
it. Lemme fix it."

"Glasgow!"

"One sec, doll. That's jes' my superior trynna crawl up my ass," Glasgow stated in a teasing
whisper with a single finger held up to the woman's face in a 'wait' gesture, and she used the
opportunity with her now freed hand to try and punch him in the jaw. Her attempt was thwarted,
however, when his knife went plunging clean through her palm to nail it back on the ground. The
mother howled as Sumner neared the scene with Harriet following quickly behind, Samantha
wielded at her side and splattered with blood and chunks of brain of whoever else had been trapped
upstairs.

"You're getting distracted from the mission," Sumner accused sourly as he held his pistol in two
hands, the barrel pointed at the ground. "We have to rescue Miss Parker!"

"Then rescue 'er," He responded flippantly and looked back at the older mercenary with a
patronizing smirk on his face, which bore his sharpest of teeth, as he tore the knife out of the
woman's hand—replacing his knee and weight over it so it remained trapped under him. She wailed
with her eyes rolling as if she was losing consciousness from the sheer pain. Sumner grimaced at
the sight before him, with his eyes flickering between the crying little girl, the woman that laid
under his subordinate with his knife penetrated clean through her hand, and then to Glasgow's own
amused face as if challenging him to stick around.

"...Don't do something you'll regret." Was his reply, his finger twitching over the trigger of his
pistol as if he were thinking about rehoming the bullet in Glasgow's sick brain. He knew the twitch
was intentional—enough to get his attention but not enough to seem threatening, since the wrinkly
fuck's number one rule with guns was "don't linger on the trigger, twitcher". The rhyming was
intentional to make sure even a damn gob-stuffed fuckass could remember it.

"'Ya should take yer own advice, old timer," Glasgow warned in a mocking voice in return.

Sumner's finger tightened a fraction as the woman under Glasgow began to scream, her legs
flailing helplessly under his body where she was pinned into the torrid dirt, as the tip of the
sharpest edge of his blade began slicing through the edge of her mouth, moving toward her ear so
smoothly it was like a shrill noise amidst the silence—met with very little resistance. Her daughter
sat several feet away with her bleeding foot curled against her side and her hands slapped over her
ears to drown out her mother's agonized screams, though her own had joined in.

"Sumner, we ain't got time," Harriet reminded their leader as she gripped a hand on his coat arm,
sending a one-eyed glare at Glasgow as well in disapproval. "We gotta find the vaultie."

"Can't save e'ryone out here, tho' I know how much 'ya loooove playin' Captain Good Guy! So's it
gonna be this cank'rous bitch, or our ever lov'ly target? She's yer new favorite, ain't she? I dun'
blame 'ya. She's a cutie."

Glasgow chided with a hearty laugh, withdrawing the knife from the new
gaping wound in the woman's splitting mouth. Blood poured down the side of her face, staining her
strawberry blonde locks a crimson red and it pooled in the back of her throat, making her choke.
He clamped a hand over her mouth tightly to shut it, forcing her to swallow her blood alongside her
pained shrieks.

Sumner stared him down with a sober glower, his green eyes dark as he weighed the options in his
head despite Glasgow already knowing how the remainder of the exchange would go; he already
knew the choices the patronizing old bastard would make because 'the good ones' were always
just that predictable, and him, more so, because he was a soldier who thought it was
his privilege to save even those who weren't worthy enough for it. Glasgow sure as hell wasn't
worthy, as hard as Sumner tried to reform him, because Glasgow knew he was a twisted son of a
bitch and he certainly didn't need fixing. He liked being twisted and he was always honest enough
about it. In the end, Sir Tobias Sumner still wouldn't turn his back on his uncontrollable
subordinate because he got too invested in the lost cause... like the hero that he was. The guy was
his own bad guy in the same breath he used to try and save someone from jumping off the ledge.

Sumner turned his eyes back to little, bleeding and sobbing Jenny one last time before ducking his
eyes away to look back at Harriet.

"Create cover and secure the next residence—two hostiles and Miss Parker are inside so proceed
with utmost caution and bias. We have a mission to complete and a target to secure, regardless of
whether or not the weak link of our chain would grace us with his presence."

Harriet's mouth tightened into a thin line of further dismay, looking to Sumner with one curious
eye. When she looked back down at Glasgow bent over the woman that choked on her own blood,
struggling to pull free just to breathe, she made a small noise of distaste in the back of her throat
and stalked off to the middle of the street.
"Sick fuck," She muttered under her breath as she left the two alone. Sumner glared at him with a dark countenance about his form, his finger still hovering over the trigger of his firearm, but it was still no more threatening now then when he first made it obvious.

"Remember what happens to weak links," He muttered grimly.

"Dey break?" He teased with his own ear to ear smile, his tongue flicking out of his mouth lewdly with a gargled noise, taunting his superior.

Sumner suddenly leveled his weapon in both hands at him with an invigorated heat lighting his eyes, and Glasgow actually felt a small spike of uneasiness—the smile frozen on his face though his elation disappeared. A certainty crossed the older man's eyes and it was so clearly resolute that Glasgow knew he made a mistake and had finally pushed too far and got too arrogant. Once that realization crossed his mind did the rapid succession of exactly two bullets come, but the first, which clipped a little too closely to his head, momentarily deafened him enough in that ear that he didn't hear the second one; he only knew it was delivered through a second flash that lit up the muzzle on the exit of the second bullet.

He went sprawling sideways into the dirt with a hand clapped over his aching ear as it rung with the cacophony of a startling alarm siren in his head.

"Fucking son of a skull-fucked whore!" Glasgow howled furiously as he thought that he had been shot, that Sumner actually shot him, but when he brought his hand from his ear to his eyes to examine, there wasn't any blood. He then sat up to see a precise shot dead center in the mother's skull—and looking further ahead was her little girl, staring back at him with dead blue eyes as she pitched sideways from her sitting position, her little hands falling from where they had been clasped over her ears, her face terrified even in death.

Sumner mercy killed them both.

"You God damn—" Glasgow was up on his feet in an instant, enraged that his fun had been stolen away from him and charged at the older mercenary without logical thought in foolhardy fashion, wielding his bloodied blade. No sooner had he let out his battle cry, however, was he flipped onto his back on the hard ground, and all of Sumner's weight in his 6'7" inch soldier body was impressed upon him by only one knee knelt down into his chest—his hand with the knife still in it pinned under Sumner's other boot heel, poised to grind down onto his fingers until they broke, one by one on the knife's handle. The hot barrel of his recently fired pistol neared the underling's gullet alarmingly, and if he swallowed hard enough, he knew he would feel the burn.

"I only keep you around so you have constant reminder of what you could be, and yet you squander your talents at every opportune moment on your old knuckle-dragging proclivities—and without even having the decency to do it while walking upright on two legs. What an insult. What a waste." Sumner hissed down at him and Glasgow only silently flared his nostrils and felt liquid—blood—fill his mouth as pain began to blossom almost jarringly in his jaw, and it registered in his mind that he had been punched before even hitting the ground. The pus-suckin' cunt actually socked me.

Then he felt the firearm's mouth press firmly against his throat, right at the cusp of where his jaw met his neck and sizzled the skin. He hissed through clenched teeth because he wasn't giving Sumner the satisfaction of making a sound worth listening to. The gun wasn't removed until the sizzling stopped and the older mercenary looked satisfied.

"Tell you what—you survive possible infection from that, I'll be gracious enough to consider
Sumner stated viciously as he got back to his feet, kicking the knife out of Glasgow's hand. He bent over, picked it up for himself, cleaned off the blood on the younger man's shirt, and walked away with his back facing him—unthreatened and unafraid.

Glasgow sat upright, glaring after him with a murderous rage filling his eyes and he spat out the blood that poured into his mouth, his tongue slicking it off his teeth—his back teeth had cut into his cheek upon the delivery of the punch. When he got up to his feet, his clothes streaked with dirt and blood, his eyes lingered on the body of the half-carved mother in front of him. The work was incomplete and the glasgow smile within him scowled in disapproval, returning back into the shadows with a still growling stomach.

It still demanded victim—play toy—a pretty face to carve into—a mouth to splice and spit inside.

Glasgow would feed the Smile in good time... and Sumner was **lucky** he didn't have a pretty enough face to offer it.

Sumner heard the reporting gunshots of a brewing fire fight as he neared the street, quickly ducking behind nearby cover—the burnt out frame of a corroded car—and readied his pistol as rogue bullets from the opposite side of the street pockmarked the road and concrete around him. The Smith's house, where the gunfire was coming from, was releasing thick plumes of milky smoke from almost every heat-shattered window, and it lazily curled towards the cloudless sky above their heads as it carried to the wind in fading tendrils. When he looked around his cover, he saw Harriet some several feet to his front right, crouched behind a metal trash can with her power fist on her lap as she tried to reload Winona's recovered 10mm pistol in her hands, grimacing at the stray bullets that nearly grazed her.

When his eyes wandered towards the second floor window on the right hand side of the house, he saw the flashing rebounding off the smoke at the rapid fire shots and counted them as well as timed the intervals between each bullet; it wasn't a forceful sound so the shooter didn't have a rifle; it wasn't the sharp piercing fire of a 10mm, nor as quick to shoot, and had no auditory characteristics of a .32 or a 9mm. He timed 6 rounds, several seconds of a halt to reload, and then another 6 round fire.

".44 magnum, unmodded! Keep your head!" Sumner called over to Harriet just as Glasgow came to his side, pressing his back against the car door with his eyes leveled over the trunk to the same window.

"Glas', that's 40 caps!" Harriet declared as she lifted over the trash can and fired back at the window, swiftly ducking back under cover when a bullet ricocheted pierced through the trash can lid a few inches from her face. "$hit!"

"Ya want yer money now, or kin I fish it outta my ass later?" Glasgow yelled back in sarcastic response.

"Go stick your dick in a centaur's mouth!" She boomed, chancing another shot before ducking behind cover again.

"So we callin' numbers and loser runs distraction 'er what?" He asked as he turned his attention to Sumner during the shooter's reloading. "Or I kin flip a bottle cap!"

"I'll do it! I want to hear three send offs!" He grimaced as he offered up the small firearm in his possession to Glasgow.
"Oh, I'll give 'ya three, old timer." The younger merc only grinned and looked over the trunk of the car again, fixing the grip in both his hands as he readied himself to come out from under cover. "Now!"

Sumner bolted out from behind the car to run towards Harriet's cover behind the tin trash can. He heard rounds pelting ground somewhere behind him, unaware if the hostile was following the distraction or not. The shooter had the chance to fire only two bullets before the sound was intermingled with that of the distinct firing from his own pistol in Glasgow's hands—triggering three exact rounds—and the magnum barrel from the window was gone. Sumner dropped behind Harriet in a hard kneel, both of them observing the upper window tensely until Glasgow called to them.

"All clear!"

"If you're in there, Jack Smith!" Sumner yelled to the house as Harriet handed off to him Winona's 10mm and replaced Samantha, her power fist, upon her left hand. "You've got your hands on the final member of our cavalry, and we'll retrieve her with or without your cooperation! If you send her out unharmed with our supplies you stole, we'll leave peacefully!"

The three mercenaries exchanged tense glances between themselves and the front door and all of the the broken out windows on the bottom floor, waiting for any response to their offer. Sumner checked and reloaded Winona's pistol in his hands by pure subconscious memory as he kept his eyes trained on the porch, watching the remainder of white smoke leak out from under the front door where it rolled across the worn out Welcome mat. He aimed down the sight of the 10mm right at the door, Glasgow readied in the same stance from behind the car, and Harriet only watched with her eyes on the front most window that was closest to them; they needed another way in if things went sour and she already had that in mind.

But soon the door swung open, exhaling flighty smoke, and the three remained alert and focused as they waited for someone to step out.

Glasgow was the first on his feet to meet Winona as she stumbled out onto the front walkway wearing nothing but her undergarments and a shell-shocked look that plundered any consciousness from her eyes. Her front side and arms were streaked with a staggering amount of blood, the knife held limp at her side also dripping with it, and in her wake did she leave naked and bloodied footprints on the cracked pavement.

"Hey, doll—'ya alright, there?" Glasgow inquired as he tucked his pistol into the back of his pants and neared her cautiously.

Winona raised the blade from her side threateningly when he got too close, her eyes still bleary and lifeless as if her body was moving on its own, and he immediately took a step back and put his hands slightly up in a gesture of no ill will.


"She's a goner," Harriet muttered as she kept behind the trash can still, eyeballing the knife in Winona's hand with some alarm in her face.

"It looks like the same could be said about Jack Smith," Sumner commented back in a mutter as he kept his weapon drawn and neared the two in their stand off, but still kept a moderate amount of distance between himself and Winona.
"Sumner, waddo I do?" Glasgow asked from over his shoulder with his eyes still on her and his hands upraised in front of his body non-threateningly.

"Just talk to her, near her slowly and take hold of the knife—don't use any sudden movements and keep speaking gently."

"Hear that, baby? We're jus' gunna talk, just you n'me, aw'right? Ain't gotta stab me in my good eyeball 'er nothin'." He continued speaking calmly as he took small, measured steps toward her with his hands still up for her to see. Winona remained still, her eyes almost downcast as if she wasn't seeing him at all, but the knife remained poised in front of her and readied to shank him if he got too close.

"That's good. Remain calm, Glasgow. Calm and slow." Sumner directed quietly as he watched them both. He didn't think he would have to shoot Winona, even if she attacked Glasgow in her current state, and surmised that his subordinate could shake off a stab wound from a girl half his weight if that was what the outcome would be—unless he could harmlessly unarm her.

"Das it—drop it fer me—c'mon, now—" He hummed as he was finally close enough to take the blade from her, and it slid out from her fingers with quick ease to be tossed away to the side. She stood before her three guards, numb with eyes that went unsearching, and Glasgow wrapped an arm around her to pull her in close to his side to help keep her steady. Her bloodied hands remained limp at her sides and her face didn't seem to register that she was being held.

"We gotcha, doll face, we gotcha. Yer safe."

"Harriet, secure the residence and locate Jack Smith," Sumner ordered back to her as she finally came out of hiding, deeming it safe enough to go about business. "Engage in any opposing hostile behavior with extreme prejudice—"

Just as he spoke, an unnatural glint came from the second floor window right at the corner of his vision.

"Down!" He yelled moments before a couple uncertain shots rang out in the silent street from the window. Harriet ducked back behind the trash can at his side immediately, and Glasgow kept Winona wrapped in his arms as he dove out of the way with her—protecting her head and torso with his own body from where they were sprawled across the front porch as Sumner lined up his shot accurately and fired.

The gun was dropped out the upper story's window where it landed in the brittle shrubbery below, and he saw part of a head, a child's hand, and an arm sleeved with Jangles the Monkey print pajamas before the gunman's lifeless body slumped and dropped back inside and out of view.

"...Shooter neutralized. All clear." He responded as his arm, with his gun, dropped back to his side.

"I thought 'ya blitzed the fucker—!" Harriet snapped at Glasgow as she got up to her feet and the garbage can finally tipped over onto its side, spilling smelly rainwater and trash of days past onto the street.

"I did!" He barked back as he sat up, looking back down at Winona underneath him and he testingly shook her when he realized that she was out cold. "Doll face s'out! Can't tell if she's hurt 'er nah with all the blood on 'er!"

"Harriet, secure the house—locate Smith and the two gunmen. Proceed with caution." Sumner interrupted firmly with his eyes still trained on the second floor window.
"On it," She grumbled compliantly as she went around Glasgow on the front step, having to step over an unconscious Winona to get into the house to explore.

Sumner followed after her but stopped short of Glasgow, kneeling beside him to examine the young inventor—checking her breathing and airways, as well as her pulse and the steadiness of its rhythm. Once he was satisfied with her strong vitals, he turned to checking over her body for serious injuries and found none as he smeared away the blood with his own bare hands, and none of it surged up from hidden wounds of any sort.

With that much blood, he already expected that none of it was hers.

"Stay with her, I'll clear the house with Harriet and locate our missing belongings." Sumner shook his head as he pointed off to the Harris house with two fingers. "Take Miss Parker there, it's already been secured. You'll find her belongings in the master bedroom so get her cleaned up and dressed. We'll rendezvous with you there."

"Any survivors in this massacre, boss?" Glasgow asked as the older man got to his feet, picking up Winona bridal style in his arms with some adjustment. The only time the younger mercenary called him boss was when he was trying to pretend that he wasn't sore—and Sumner knew Glasgow would be sore about his kills for days.

"...No. The last house we had two males—one elderly—the female, and the child. The young male resisted and the elderly one was caught in the crossfire... and we know what happened to the other two." He responded dourly as Harriet poked her head back out of the house, just as Glasgow gave a hateful scowl.

"The shooters're dead. Woman an' some kid. Jack's in the hallway ahead," She nodded back into the house and disappeared inside, leaving the two men to glare at each other before Sumner turned away first and followed her in.

Entering the living room of the house, from where he stood in the doorway, parallel to the joining hallway that seemed to lead to a kitchen at the back of the house, was Jack Smith's dead body. Harriet was knelt beside it in a spot that didn't happen to be pooled with blood and Sumner made his way over as well to make his own examinations; it was hard to tell exactly how many times Smith had been stabbed, but the chest of his shirt was shredded amidst it soaking his blood, and his stomach was slit open so deeply that it gaped up at the two mercenaries like another mouth. His dead eyes and almost shocked expression stared upward at the crack-riddled plaster ceiling, as the floorboards under him hungrily sopped up the blood that flooded into their seams.

It was a vicious attack... one that was desperate, frenzied, and overkill.

Sumner looked to the blood patterns surrounding Smith's pulverized corpse as he remembered the way the blood stuck to Winona—and he saw the clean outline of two peculiar and similarly shaped spots, just beside where Harriet was now crouching, where Winona knelt down on both knees and repeatedly stabbed Smith. It was a clean pause symbol amongst the splattering, where her knees had made the outline and kept the old wood floorboards from swelling with blood. She had done it for some time, he noted, as his eyes circled the mouth of the hallway and saw the flecks that draped the walls and old picture frames from when she pulled her knife out to drive it back into the man, sending cast-off bloodstains.

"The wound on the abdomen came first," He concluded as he looked over Smith again. Harriet's eye rose to meet his face as she remained crouched, and his own eyes gathered in more of the scene and hallway before he stepped over Smith's body to circle himself to another viewing position from the kitchen. "See there? There isn't any blood under him. He bled out after falling. Defensive
wounds mark his hands and arms but not enough for this kind of brutality. She cut him open firstly, he collapsed, and was then unable to fend her off as she knelt beside him and repeatedly stabbed him through the chest."

"How many times?" Harriet whistled as if impressed, though her face showed uneasiness.

"That's difficult to say. There's too much blood to tell... but she had the time to do it as many times as she wanted. Through the gunfire, I'm sure his family upstairs didn't hear any of it."

"Hard t' think the princess did all this."

"...We all saw how she looked when she stumbled out of this house. I've seen my best soldiers look through me with those exact eyes after seeing a man obliterated from the feet up after stepping on a rogue landmine." Sumner sighed with a shake of his head as he, once again, looked over Jack Smith's corpse. He turned into the kitchen to see a small breakfast table dressed in a sheet with summery yellow and white gingham print spotted with grime, and he ripped it off the table to bundle it up and toss it over to Harriet—who caught it as she rose to her full height.

"Lay this over the boy upstairs. We'll bury the children later."

"The others?" She inquired, tucking the table cloth under one arm.

"We'll leave the doors open on our way out... leave them for the animals is all we can do." He rubbed his chin quizzically, the thumb of his real hand brushing his facial hair. "We'll have to wait for Miss Parker to wake up before we can continue on to Megaton. We can't very well travel if she's still unconscious and we run into another threat."

"Not much 'tween here and Megaton." Harriet tried to reason, almost grumbling at the idea of being stuck in the town for another few hours until their target woke up again.

"It's still another two day walk. We're not taking another risk from here on out." He replied firmly and looked to her for any objection. She, surprisingly, gave none verbally though her eye said something different in her silence, and she walked away from him to go up the stairs and cover the boy as he instructed. Sumner turned away from Smith's body once he knew Harriet was upstairs and he went to the kitchen sink, leaning against it with hands on the edges to stabilize himself as he peered out the back window—his head bowed low in guilt as he rubbed his eyes with his real hand.

All this happened on account of him. If they had kept walking yesterday evening, they could've possibly found shelter beside a hill that at least covered their backs; a cave etched into a rocky side; a fallen tree where they could've thrown a tarp over; anything. It was ultimately his choice that they stopped in 'Spoon'—this hellhole of 'good old Virginia' called Andale—and led Winona and his entire team to their almost certain deaths. If he hadn't woken up that quickly, or if none of them were able to overtake the Wilson residence, or if Winona hadn't been able to defend herself against Jack Smith, Andale would've made an improper grave for them all.

The old soldier replayed in his head the way she looked when she stepped out of the house... her dragging feet, the blood that marred her almost naked body, her eyes, and he shut his own as he plopped down into a chair at the table and pressed a palm to his temple tiredly.

Yes, it was all his fault.

He knew before agreeing to the contract that Winona Parker was going to be his last mission, and that was something he didn't mind, because he found her to be delightful and her intelligence stimulated the educated man he was that his cohorts could barely tickle. There were worst
missions to have as your last; killing an innocent civilian because of a petty brawl that marked them as good as dead; sweeping a town contracted as 'no exceptions' and having to clear their hospital full of sick, injured, and already dying folks that screamed and pleaded to live; gunning down an entourage meant to protect one man who was leading a peace movement that was thwarting a major drug supply of watered down jet in their crusade.

It was a bad day, that last one. The peacemaker was a good man. Most of Sumner's missions involved killing good men because that was what the Talon Company was best at, aside from taking any contract that reeked of no small sum of caps... and he needed the money. Regrettably, he needed the money, and he was a soldier through and through. It was all he knew that he was great at.

So yes, Winona would be his final mission. He was an old mercenary that made a costly mistake and he didn't know if even he could trust his own judgment anymore... but he would take his money once they returned Target 2, James Parker, and Target 1, Winona Parker, back to Tenpenny Tower, and he would leave the Capital Wasteland. He wouldn't look back. Washington D.C. was just as crooked and political as it was before the war.

Sumner decided right then and there that it would be time to finally go to New Vegas.

There was a boy he had to find.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sooo... do we hate Glasgow now or nah? (deepest apologies) And this brings us to the final piece of "Custom of the Wasteland", with the next update (Friday - 4/27) featuring Butch DeLoria! After that, the schedule will return to normal Friday postings.

If you haven't followed me already, check out my Tumblr (thecoolkidsbasement) for more writing/fanfic related stuff, and ask me questions! or ask my Ocs questions! please!

Thanks for reading! *heart*
A/N: Hey guys! I'm sure most of you have realized that this chapter was hella late, and I can't apologize enough for making you wait. I also thank you for your patience. My internet was out for a good portion of the night, and when I was finally able to post I was out of the house for most of the day, so now that I'm finally home I can FINALLY POST GDI

Anyways, thanks for the patience, and I hope you enjoy the chapter! It might undergo an edit at some undetermined later time just because writing this chapter gave me a lot of trouble and I'm not 100% happy with it, so my plan is to—at some later time—review it to see if I'm still unhappy with it, and if I am, it'll be fixed. It'll most likely be a very minimal edit with word usage and descriptions of things so don't worry about a complete rewrite of the chapter!

Anyways, thanks again for your patience guys, and starting next week we resume our regularly scheduled programming with a posting every Friday c:

Please follow my Tumblr (thecoolkidsbasement) so you can get updates on the story like my wifi being out (=_=") or any other issues so you're not sitting around wondering where I am in case something like this happens again! Thanks for understanding!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out

Butch sloughed his way back to his apartment, loosening the zipper of his jumpsuit to pull apart the stiff collar and he aired out his skin as it stuck his undershirt to his body. His feet dragged behind him, his body felt heavy, he was groggy and fatigued, he just wanted a damn drink but with the radically enforced water rationing, a cold shower or glass of water wasn't a currently accessible solution to the malfunctioning temperature control. Today was the worst it had ever been from what he could remember of the recent past, which was right before the chaotic exit of the Parkers—and back then the temperature would at least pendulum back and forth between being hot and freezing, but currently it would stay boiling hot for hours and then return to a somewhat normal degree before fluctuating back to being boiling hot. There was no reprieve from it, and today he was just constantly sticky and the halls felt muggy.

Today, Vault 101 was a sweltering tomb, and such a thought suffocated him more than the heat itself could.

Fuck this, he grumbled inwardly as he finally caved and took off his leather jacket amidst his anxiety. He could feel the material peel off from his soaked back before the arms were tied around his waist lazily. The tousle of hair that styled the front of his pompadour was a drooping curl in the heat, the armpits of all his jumpsuits were stained, and he was constantly having to pat himself dry.
If the temperature control wasn't going to be fixed any time soon than he was going to have to find a different place to sleep at night. He didn't particularly enjoy waking up in a hot sweat when he had the meager allowance of three 2-minute showers in a week, and the thought of having to wait for his next shower another day from now caused a garland of curses about somebody's mother to string forth from his mouth.

Long before any of the water rationing was put into effect, Butch showered every single day. He took pride in his self care, to the point where it was probably obsessive, Paul had once said while giving him a hard time, but the truth of the matter was a shower stall was the only place he could go unbothered. They were the last enjoyment he had in his now meager and uncertain life, and other than getting his next meal of the day, or his head hitting the pillow at night, showering was the only other thing he could look forward to; the time spent between those three things was simply spent waiting for one of them to happen.

They all were such simple and stupid things to look forward to, but shit, what else was there to do? What else did he have to look forward to?

Him not losing anything or anybody else?

Wally being put in a cage like the animal he was?

The door opening so he could leave this wretched place?

Fat fucking chance to all of the above—and so, with very little to look forward to or to do, he kept himself busy enough. Every day he followed a schedule and found chores to complete and errands to run for Lucy or his mom because he needed a distraction. Butch want something more than just waiting.

Every morning at 8 AM, he would go and stand in line to collect the daily food rations, and it was barely enough between him and his mom for the day. Thankfully, stealing an extra packed meal from the diner handouts or jimmying open a food dispenser was no big deal... it was the drinking water that wasn't easy to swipe. It was regulated directly through an appointed Security guard that controlled the tap, and most days that guard was Wolfe, who was Allen Mack's best friend, and the fucker was a prick about his job.

By 9:30 AM the rations would finally be boxed up and he'd be on his way to the clinic to deliver to the girls their daily portion. It was enough food for two meals and enough water for drinking and cleaning Christine's burns. While he was there, Butch would check to see how Amata was healing and see what Lucy needed. He would get his errand list, see that Amata would be doing fine because she was getting back to her old and naggy self, he and Susie would viciously argue because she had a stick up her ass and he always felt like picking a fight, Lucy would break them up, and then he'd be on his way back to the living quarters with his own rations.

The rest of his day from then onward consisted of looking after his ailing mother before doing Lucy's To-Do List—and his mom's constant need for care was exhausting on all facets of his well being. She was still too ill to do much of anything herself so he prepped her meals and forced her to eat, he'd refuse to let her go back to sleep until she drank her water (because dehydration was the last thing she needed, especially with her profuse sweating from her withdrawal fevers), and he bathed her with a sponge and a bucket of some of their drinking water rations. She was too weak to stand for a shower let alone even get out of bed on her own.

Butch hoped that it'd all be worth it, soon. He hoped that the years of shame and broken promises she put him through would be worth it if not, at the very least, forgivable. The Tunnel Snake understood why she was the way she was, weak and helpless and too trapped in her own emotions
to be able to move on from his dad's death, but he also understood that to linger and self-medicate wasn't how she was going to heal.

Butch was ready to put it all behind him and to finally have a meaningful relationship with his mom. These days, it was the only thing he could smile about, and he would gladly give up those last few things he looked forward to; the meals, the showers, and the sleep if she would get better right then and there.

As of late, he actually thought about moving them out of the apartment and somewhere else—somewhere bigger, that would be closer to both the ration checkpoints and the infirmary, and further away from the temperature core than theirs.

Winona's old apartment just so happened to be a perfect fit for his needs. Looking after his mom and playing errand boy for Lucy weren't distractions that lasted long enough, and because he was still dogged in finding a clue in cracking the infirmary's safe, he spent sparse hours over the last two days tidying up the place; he picked the garbage off the floor, he scrubbed the insults off the walls, he taped sheets over the broken windows, and Butch suspected that in another couple of days—when he could drag out the broken furniture and move in their own belongings—he could carry his mom over into their new place.

The Tunnel Snake doubted anyone would care about the relocation. The living quarters were a mess anyway, as survivors moved wherever they pleased after losing their assigned homes to the roaches, explosive fires, or any other threat. They didn't have time for the Overseer to file the appropriate paperwork and cross his T's and ink his approval stamps, especially now when he seemed far too busy hiding out in his office to fix anything at all. He was playing Hide the Sausage with his thumb, and he was apparently playing it well, because it was lodged so far up his ass he had no hope of getting it back. Security was also hiding out, per Overseer's orders, and Butch only ever saw them around when some trivial matter seemed to be getting out of hand, or if Wolfe needed reinforcements at the water tap.

The Overseer was still the only person that pissed Butch off enough that not even the stifling heat could deter his rage. The guy was still trying to rule over the hopeless masses while refusing to allow them to leave, and the frustration Butch felt was close to reawakening something he hadn't felt in a long time. It was an almost completely forgotten desire—one of Vault 101 wasting away into the earth like it should've done a long ass time ago.

He remembered a striking conversation he had with Winona months ago, shortly after they were paired up to be married, and the discussion was about the longevity of the vault over a couple sodas in an empty billiard room at 3 in the morning. She made the observation that without them, without the residents, who did constant upkeep and maintenance over the last 200 years, the vault probably would've corroded and wasted into the earth as a forgotten relic of the pre-war world; Butch agreed with her strongly on the matter, but never revealed that the thought of Vault 101's violent collapse filled him with glee. It was nothing but a place of pure ruination for many generations, and it hadn't done any of them any favors in the long run. He wanted to see it drowned with concrete. He wanted the reactors to explode so the halls would be uninhabitable. He wanted the roaches to be so numerous that they had no choice but to flee.

Thinking about outside again gave him a chill.

What's it like out there, Parker? Butch thought to himself, almost gruffly, as he wiped the sweat that beaded down the back of his neck. Sometimes I wish you dragged me out with 'ya, girl.

Butch turned into the living quarters just as all the lights shut off at once and he was stopped in place, looking up and down the darkened hallway. It was another scheduled black out, which the
Overseer was strictly enforcing as of two weeks ago. He announced over the intercom that whole sections of the vault—the unimportant sections—would be temporarily shut off some days without warning, to conserve as much energy as possible.

He rushed on ahead to his apartment to be with his mom. If she woke up already, he didn't want her to panic at the sudden lights out.

"'Ma? You up?" He called into the apartment as he threw his jacket on the coffee table carelessly. He supported himself against the nearest wall to pry off his boots, as he was too tired to bend over and undo the shoe laces properly, and wiped his dewy face once again.

The apartment was hotter than normal and the air was suffocating, as if it was pushing back against his lungs, in refusal of letting him breathe. The Tunnel Snake stalked off toward his mom's bedroom in damp socks that left perspiring footprints behind him as he crossed the living room tiredly. Coming closer to her door, he heard an odd sound on the other side—sounding almost strangled, guttural, intensely struggling—and when he opened the door he heard the unmistakable sound of his mother choking. Rushing into the bedroom in alarm, the first thing he saw was her feet kicking up against the floor from the other side of the bed from him, as if she had fallen off of it, with her sweat-soaked sheets pulled down with her.

"'Ma! Mom!" Butch cried as he leapt across the room to his mom and gaped in horror; her eyes were rolled deeply back into her head as it bucked against the metal floor repeatedly, her arms were contracted against her body stiffly, and her back was arched high off the floor as she violently convulsed with blood pouring from her mouth. He dropped to her side and found himself unsure of what else to do to help her but try and keep her head from hitting the floor another time—which made a hard, almost twangy crakking sound each time it struck the metal.

"Help! Somebody help!" He yelled back out of the bedroom and into their empty apartment. "Help us, God dammit! Please!"

Looking back down to his mother helplessly, he sat down beside her and tried to pull her over to him as carefully as he could—allowing her to ram her head back on his lap and into his stomach where her almost combative struggling could be cushioned. His hands danced about her head, unsure of whether or not he should directly hold it still with how hard her breathing was, as if she wasn't getting any air into her, and he was afraid that he would hold too tightly or hurt her more. Butch had never felt so incompetent, so unsure of how to help her, as he saw momentary clips of health class back in grade school run through his head; he remembered all the times he spent trying to balance his pencil on the tip of his nose during instructional slides on performing CPR; throwing paper airplanes around the room to see how close it could reach Brotch's desk, and they were made out of the notes he was supposed to fill in on how to help someone who was choking; the times he spent sleeping off nauseated hangovers at the back of the room during tests on what to do when someone around you was having a heart attack.

Did his mom need CPR? Was she choking? Was it a heart attack? Why hadn't he paid attention to the course? All he could think about was the desperation, the anger he had towards himself for not listening to Brotch's lessons, because maybe, in this moment, he would've known how to help his mom instead of watching, in tearful horror, as she was possibly dying right in his lap.

This was Paul all over again.

This was him failing another person, who was important to him, that needed him, all over again.

If she died, Butch knew he would never recover. He began crying and quietly pleading to her.
"Don't you God damn leave me!... Don't you die on me like this, 'ma—it ain't fair! It ain't fuckin' fair! Help!" He screamed as loud as he could as he kept holding his mom to him, his voice cracked and broken amidst his sobbing and he sounded so weak. "Please! PLEASE! Someone—! She's gunna die!"

Butch looked back down to her as the blood from her mouth splotched his jumpsuit from her jerking, but soon her lurching movements were becoming softer and softer, slowly, over the long and torturous seconds, until she went completely still in his lap and her eyelids snapped shut over her rolled back eyes. He looked upon her in fear, his shaking hand finding her sweaty, clammy cheek to pat it with some force as he tried to wake her up.

"Mom? Mom? Wake up—!" He pleaded desperately and held her closer, pulling her in against him with an arm under her body to keep her and her head upright, his legs bent awkwardly under her with how he sat under the floor. His tears struck her face. "Ma, please—don't you fuckin' leave me! Mom! Mom—!"

Her eyes finally opened drowsily, rolling about the room with her brow slowly crinkling as if confused before settling on him in a bleary stare. Her breathing was hard and uneven, still sounding mildly choked as she took in each ragged breath, and he felt her warm hand come to touch his wet cheek.

"Ba- Baby, why're yoo cryin'?" She slurred quietly through the blood still in her small mouth, her tongue looking swollen. "Butchie, wha- whazz wrong—?"

Butch only wheezed in relief as all words were lost on his tongue. He clutched her tighter to him, absolutely refusing to let her go with his trembling hands latching onto the back of her sweaty jumpsuit, as he buried his face into her shoulder and openly wept. He felt like he lost all control over himself as he was unable to stop sobbing. Soon, Butch felt his mom's hard breath against his greasy hair, her heartbeat strong and rapid against his ear on her chest, and he felt her hands settle on his back to hold him with murmured words of comfort.

"Luckily, seizures are rarely life-threatening. Most fatal injuries from them occur during the seizure rather than because of the seizure."

Butch stood outside the clinic with his back against the hallway wall, listening to Lucy's best diagnosis with a bowed head. His eyes were trained on the toes of his boots, tracing the flecks of his mother's blood that blackened upon drying on his jumpsuit, and he couldn't lift his chin to the old woman that stood before him. His heart wouldn't sit still inside his chest as it bounced around his rib cage, feeling almost out of rhythm as he kept playing through his head the image of walking in on his mother convulsing on the floor as if she were being possessed.

He couldn't stop feeling that, despite the reassurance that her life wasn't in danger, that he almost lost her. They once talked about seizures during the health course, he remembered that much... but again, instead of paying attention like he should have, he, Wally and Paul found the jerking fits to be funny. Now that he saw it in person and just how terrifying it was, it was one of the most awful things he ever experienced. It ranked right up there with the way Paul looked, all bloody and pockmarked and bitten up by the roaches when Butch saved him.

"Wasn't a heart attack'er nothin'? 'Cause of her drinkin'?" Butch asked quietly with his elbows on his knees and his hands clapped together, still refusing to look up at Lucy.

"...Sweetheart, do you really want the truth of the matter?" She inquired somberly, as if she pitied him, and he only gave a small nod amidst the familiar shame he felt at her tone of voice. "What she
had was called a **grand mal** seizure. I think it was caused by the fact that she quit drinking cold
turkey—and her withdrawals have been very stressful on her body. Coupled with this scalding heat
and her dehydration, I'm sure it didn't do her anymore favors."

"How's she dehydrated? I made sure she drank water every day!" He exclaimed, bewildered and
almost resentful of his mother; he could deal with the shaking, the disorientation, the refusal to eat,
the aggressive mood swings, the sweating and having to bathe her or take her to the bathroom—but
the seizures?

It was supposed to be *over*. You're tricked into thinking that when addicts stop being addicts that
they're immediately better, but *no*, his mom was only getting sicker and he didn't think he would
ever be getting her back at this point.

Butch was **furious**. He was angry and he felt cheated.

"With the amount of drinking water we've being allowed right now, even a healthy person would
be dehydrated... coupled with this unbearable heat, I've already had two people come in for heat
stroke just this morning! She has **hyperthermia**, meaning that her body temperature is *much*
higher than normal—a symptom of her withdrawals—so she's sweating out more than she's drinking."
Lucy explained calmly. "We found some IV bags and we're re-hydrating her now, so hopefully that
helps some... they always get worse before they get better."

Butch pressed his face into his hands with the heels of his palms stubbing his eyes and he shook his
head wordlessly. This wasn't something he wanted to hear right now.

"What other symptoms has she had?"

"...Dunno. Nausea, I guess? She acts—... different a lot, always barkin' at shit and angry all the
time over small stuff... calls me by my old man's name, sometimes."

"Hallucinations are common in alcohol withdrawals." Lucy gave him a kind smile that was meant
to be reassuring but it only showed how exhausted she looked from the busy morning. "Let's hope
that *this* is the worst before the getting better part. We're taking care of her now, so if you want to
head home, just know that she's in good hands—"

"Lucy?" A small voice came from the infirmary's open doorway. When the two looked over, they
saw Amata stepping out while readjusting the makeshift sling that held her once broken arm.
"Christine's asking for you."

Lucy gave one last look to Butch as if to ask for permission to leave, and he gave a meek nod just
to be polite before she whisked herself away back into the clinic and left the two young adults
alone. Butch regarded Amata with a quizzical glance under heavy lidded eyes when she didn't go
back inside after the old woman, but instead came to stand beside him. She pressed her back
against the cool metal wall and swallowed visibly in relief with her head bowed back and her eyes
shut, looking as if it was the closest she had come to being comfortable in the last week with her
hair done in a thin, loose braid to hide her scalp injuries. She was sweating just as much as the rest
of them were—even though the infirmary was considerably cooler than the living quarters
currently were.

Minutes of silence passed between them before Butch took a crumpled, almost empty pack of
cigarettes from his jumpsuit pocket and tapped out a single stick, placing it between his lips. When
his lighter followed from the same pack, and he flicked it in a struggle to ignite a flame, the sound
made Amata open her eyes. She didn't look at him, but rather stared ahead at the wall ahead of
them both before clearing her throat to speak.
"I'm sorry... about your mom." She began stoically. "Sounds like she's going to be okay."

"...Yeah. We'll see 'bout that." He responded impassively as he puffed at his cigarette until it had a good light and he took a drag, cocking his head back to exhale the plumes of smoke toward the ceiling.

"What happened to her?" Her deep brown eyes turned up to meet his face in a curious gaze.

"Lucy thinks it's a seizure."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"...That sounds serious."

"Yup."

"...Well, I'm glad to hear that she's fine—"

"What're you doin', Almodovar?" Butch finally lifted himself away from the wall to look down at her with his lit cigarette dangling limply from his mouth. "Why the fuck do 'ya even care?"

Amata's dark brows curled tightly over her eyes as a slight tension captured her jaw and it pursed her mouth. Her eyes carried a deep fatigue as she seemed to be thinking about slinging a sour response back at him, but instead she only sighed and shook her head, looking back ahead at the wall in front of them.

"Your mom should've gotten help." She replied.

"You're fuckin' blamin' her—!" He began to yell and her face softened in surprise, as if what she said was taken wrong.

"That's not what I meant," Amata responded quickly. "I'm saying we should have helped her—the vault should've helped her—instead of gossiping and turning their backs on her when she obviously had a problem."

"...What're you drivin' at, princess?" He weakly snapped without any of the fuming acid he felt inside. Not only was he not use to anyone but himself showing genuine concern over his mother, but he was use to her being like some public plaything; she was always treated as fodder for the old hens that liked to gossip—like she was the reason why he was a no good delinquent with an attitude problem—she was the resident addict in a broken family that set the bar for "well, at least our family isn't like theirs", while everyone tried to avoid making eye contact with the Mack Madhouse for obvious reasons.

Amata's concern made him more uncomfortable than it made him mad... and he realized it was because she was being genuine.

"...Growing up, my father—the Overseer—always talked about unity. He talked about coming together to accomplish a common goal while working as a flawless, cohesive unit... but then I'd watch him turn away anyone that was different. Anyone that was an outsider that had no place in his obsessive need for perfection, like those people were nothing but a burden... a liability. I watched him deny help to those of us who needed it most and ignore the fact that he had all this power at his disposal to help them."
Butch frowned the more and more Amata explained herself, his cigarette now burning down, forgotten, between his fingers as he listened silently.

"I think if we helped those people instead of ostracizing them, we wouldn't be here." Amata went on quietly as if guilt ridden, like she had some hand in the breaking down of the vault, and looked on into the open infirmary door. Lucy was bustling about to help the few people that tottered into the clinic that morning—those who had heatstroke and were dehydrated, she mentioned—while Christine watched over the old woman's shoulder attentively and tried to make mental notes of the work.

"So we could'a been one big, smiley, happy family?" Butch responded with mock sarcasm and he was shot with a dry expression of a tight mouth and a quirked eyebrow.

"If we actually had worked together, maybe your mom wouldn't be sick like this—or could've at least gotten the treatment that she needed... maybe so many people wouldn't have died. Maybe Winona wouldn't have been forced to leave, maybe my father wouldn't have done that to Jonas—"

Her eyes turned sad as her mouth slowly drew shut, like whatever she wanted to say next (which had sparked a small, almost easy to miss flame of anger inside her) quickly died out, like she thought better of saying it at all. "...The door could have been opened. We could've had a chance in understanding that we're not meant to live down here like this for very much longer... we could explore and establish relations and rebuild again."

"...So, lemme git this straight—" He began in a serious tone, realizing that this wasn't a time for him to be his typical smart ass self, even though Amata gave him a lot of Campfire Kumbaya material to work with. "You wanna open the door?"

"Doesn't everyone?" She deadpanned. "At least, anyone that understands that we're not going to survive much longer like this... especially with the Overseer hiding up in his office like he is. He's too scared to come out."

"Why's that? You been talkin' t'him at all?" He asked with his cigarette burned down almost to the butt, and he tapped it off to take one last, long drag of it before his thumb scratched the sharp edge of his brow.

She shook her head almost somberly with her eyes downcast. "I haven't seen him since—... well, since Winona escaped. He had Freddie and I dragged away but we managed to escape the guards in the confusion."

"...You were there?" He asked faintly with his eyes keenly on her face. "When she got out?"

Amata nodded. "Yeah, I was. We opened the door together—she and I. Freddie was there, too, and we tried to keep the guards distracted from her so she could run... feels like the only thing I've done right these last few weeks and I still feel like shit about it."

Butch nearly blinked at her cuss, having very rarely ever heard the prim and proper daddy's girl use such crude language, and found that it reminded him of the first time Winona told him a dirty joke.

"Wait until you hear my joke about a virgin on a water bed."

"...Get the fuck out, I've gotta hear this one."

"It's called a cherry float."
It couldn't get him to smile this time around.

"Listen, Butch," Amata glanced into the infirmary again to make sure that everyone within hearing distance was too preoccupied to pay the two young adults any attention. She then took his arm and led him further down the hall, and spoke even quieter. "I'm only trusting you with this because I know you probably want the door open as badly as I do, and if Winnie could trust you—"

"Wait, wait, what?" He balked in surprise and was only met with a dubious look.

"C'mon, this isn't a time to play dumb. I know she was hanging out with you behind my back those last couple of months before everything went to hell—and even though it's beyond me why she'd try and be friends with you, I trust her judgment." Butch grimaced and opened his mouth to counteract her slanted insult but she continued talking over him. "I want to get the door open and you're going to help me."

"Princess says what now?"

"We have to figure out a way to get my father to open up the vault. If we don't, we're all going to die down here, and I don't want it to reach that point when he finally realizes that he's doomed us all." She shook her head as a dark countenance overtook her slightly freckled face. "I had Freddie talk to his dad for us. The reason why we haven't seen Security around these last few days? They're guarding the door. The Overseer thinks some of us are going to make a run for it and the guards were authorized to use lethal force on anyone that got too close. The atrium's a red zone."

"So we ain't blowin' our way outta here is what you're sayin'."

"No explosions," She responded quickly with a a stressed tone. "And in the past, talking didn't help, either. I've tried to convince him before with a sound argument and it didn't change anything. Instead, he only got angry and invoked the Proclamation Law."

"Wait—I ain't breezin' over that last bit, he did that 'cause of you? 'Cause you tried t'get him to open the door?" Butch grimaced with a bitter expression curling his upper lip in a weak sneer.

"Winnie was going to try and talk to him but I thought I had a better chance—look, that stupid Proclamation Law doesn't matter now!" She exclaimed in frustration. "We can't use force to get the door open because we'll either get locked out if we succeed or killed if we fail, and I couldn't get through to him before, but things have changed since then. Things are more unstable now, so I want to try and see if we can get through to him again."

"You ain't goin' up to his office lookin' like this, we'd never get 'ya back down here if he had anything t'say about it." He reasoned frankly and gestured to her yellow bruised face, her mending arm, and her messy hair.

"It won't be me talking to him this time around."

"...You don't fuckin' mean me, do 'ya?"

"God no—" It was the first time Butch had seen Amata smile in a very long time, and he could tell that her perfect teeth were trying to hold back a laugh. "I have a plan. It's not a good one—hell, it's probably the worst one I've ever had—but it's the only thing I've got."

"Your bad plan's probably the only plan anyone around here's got," He admitted in a small grumble and flicked away the burnt down filter of the cigarette he didn't get to fully enjoy. "So what're you thinkin', Almodovar?"
"Lucy! Lucy—!" A terrified shriek came from further up the hall. It startled the two out of their conversation, and as they looked back to see who the speaker was, they watched Susie careening like a malfunctioning Mr. Handy from around the corner.

Soon, she was barreling towards them in a full on sprint. The closer she drew near, the redder her face looked between the intense running and struggling to hold back tears in her wide eyes, which were like those of a deer in the path of an oncoming train—though she looked twice as panicked and fearful. Shoving past Butch and Amata on her way to the clinic, she ignored the two yelling after her as she continued screaming out for Lucy desperately.

"Watch it!" Butch exclaimed as he stumbled back into the wall.

"Susie, what's happened?" Amata cried, having enough sense to get herself out of Susie's way before the other girl could do it herself.

"Lucy! Help! He needs help—!"

The old woman had no choice but to abandon her current patient—Chip Taylor—in her alarm, and she ran out of the clinic to meet Susie in the hallway, where she skid on her heels to an abrupt halt that almost had her tripping over her own scrambling feet. She bent forward with her hands on her knees, and with the way her body shook, it looked like it was the only way she could keep herself upright as she attempted to get some air back into her.

"Susie—Susie, calm down, dearie, and tell me what happened!" She insisted. "I can't understand you!"

Susie choked brokenly as she was finally overtaken by the tears she tried to hold back, her body swaying slightly as if she were close to dropping to the floor from having exerted herself, and Lucy tried to help her stay upright as Susie held a hand to her aching side, looking like she was in pain.

"I- It's Fre- Freddie's dad," She wheezed airily, sucking in breath between every few words. "The- There's been an accide- dent."

The infirmary felt like it was encased in an invisible box, holding in a palpable air of sorrow as some people sniffled amongst themselves with mournful tears and dead stares of shock, though no one spoke. There were no exchanges of comforting words, questions as to what happened, or even something wordless and bleak dangling in the space between everyone—it was a thick exhaustion that clouded them over at losing another resident.

But this person wasn't just any resident.

It was Herman Gomez; the guy who volunteered to be in the Security program not because he failed his G.O.A.T. exam, but because he felt that he could do more for Vault 101 and the children as a guard compared to being a credit accountant; he was the guy who spent his free afternoons coaching the baseball team for years, and only quit because there weren't very many children left who were interested in competitive sports; he was giving to his neighbors with a well known motto of "only look in your neighbors bowl to see if he has enough, not to see if you have more". The only bad thing anyone could say about him is that he probably didn't relax enough. All his good deeds and kind intentions went unrewarded because he thought it was his responsibility to do all that he could for the vault.

Despite the friction that occurred between him and Butch from when he was a trouble-making child, he could acknowledge that Mr. Gomez was probably the best guy around... but now, he was
It was God damn surreal.

Butch looked out from the office where he sat on the floor beside his resting mother on a grounded mattress, checking to make sure her IV was still dripping before getting up to his feet and walking out into the main room. Lucy sat on a doctor's stool in a far corner where Amata stood with her, and the old woman's wrinkled face carried an expression like she will had been crushed, her narrow eyes filled with self condemnation. Amata's jaw was hard set and her own eyes were twinkling and wet from the sparse tears that littered her bruised eyelids, trying to sniffle as quietly as possible and she wiped her face with her good hand with her face turned away from everyone, making sure her grief went unseen. The two looked like they were comforting each other as Amata retook the elderly woman's hand in her own after drying her own eyes, and the hold looked tight and white knuckled.

He looked away, unable to bear the sight any longer. He knew that Lucy was blaming herself because out of all the people she treated since becoming the unofficial doctor of the vault, Gomez was the only person she lost; she was able to treat the extensive injuries Amata received from her brutal assault by Wally, and was able to slowly heal Christine's burns while ensuring they'd never get infected... something about it made the Tunnel Snake think that she could overcome the impossible, but it was a fall down some stairs that had shattered her astounding record of treatment.

Looking onward from the two in the corner, he saw Susie and Christine loitering near the infirmary's front door. Susie was holding herself, due to the fact that her injured cousin couldn't offer her any physical comfort, and she looked skittish despite the teary absence in her eyes. Christine's own face was puffy and red from sobbing, but her cries were as silent and strangled as the clinic itself felt.

Butch had never seen a more hopeless crowd of broken people before.

Soon, he saw Freddie Gomez run past the front window and the door opened, startling Susie out of whatever numb revere she was able to slip into. He looked haggard and disheveled, like he was barely able to put the right boots on each foot before leaving his apartment—and the ex-gang leader felt a surge of fury for the other man before forcing it to cool in the pit of his stomach.

"Susie!" He cried as he stumbled into the clinic, looking around wildly in his panic from face to face that stared back at him with heartbroken expressions. "Where's dad—? Where is he? I've gotta see him—!"

"Freddie," She began tentatively as she circled behind him. He whipped back toward her, not seeming to comprehend the sorrowful look in her eyes as she took his limp hand from his side to gather it into both of hers.

"...Susie, where's my dad?" He asked again in an apprehensive voice that was slowly being overcome with dread as realization struck him.

Her hold tightened on his hand, silently saying that she wasn't going to let him go—even if he tried pulling away.

"I—... Freddie, I'm so sorry—..."

Freddie's face fell immediately and he wouldn't move, seeming crushed by that cage of sorrow as it
rushed in from all corners of the clinic and encased him with formfitting bars that would never release him. Susie immediately embraced him in an overbearing hug that he barely had the mind to return, his arms unable to wrap fully around her, and his knees momentarily buckled from under him as the weight of his disbelief overtook his body. She instinctively held him up on his feet until he could stand on his own, and he buried his face into her shoulder to muffle the sounds of his anguished, stuttering cries.

His girlfriend only held him tighter and in a weepy mutter repeated over and over again how sorry she was and that there was nothing they could've done for his dad's injuries—that they were just too late to help him.

Butch looked on, remembering only his vaguest of memories from when he was a kid, when his old man died; he remembered being pulled from class one day by a Security guard and escorted to the Overseer's office, and his mom was already sitting at the Overseer's big desk. She turned back when the door opened to see him, and he remembered how sunken her eyes looked as her swollen eyelids were rimmed with uncontrollable streams of tears, and she rushed out of her chair to pick Butch clean off his feet to hold him tightly. He remembered being frightened because his mother looked so scary then—he never saw such a look on her face before—a look of pure despair—and the memory of walking into that office never left his memories.

Other than his dad's funeral, and how full it was with all the people that came to give their condolences, his mother's broken hearted face was the most vivid part of those memories. He remembered sitting in the cafeteria with her that same night, eating mac 'n cheese while she only had a beer, and she watched him wordlessly from across the table with a hand upholding her jaw and her eyes still puffy.

She told him he had an accident.

Butch didn't know until he was older—old enough to understand death better outside of "dad's not coming home anymore"—where he was told that he fell down a flight of stairs and hit his head pretty hard on the bottom.

He turned away to shut the door to the back office... he didn't want his mom hearing any of this, and having it reopen such wounds that never fully healed if she happened to wake up.

"Something's not right," Amata whispered at his side once the door was shut and he turned to face her, unsure of what she meant. She was staring back at Susie and Freddie at the front door with a suspicious gaze. "Something just—... isn't right."

"Waddya mean?" He inquired with an equally quiet whisper.

"...I don't know... I don't know, Butch. Lucy told me that Mr. Gomez was at the bottom of a flight of stairs in maintenance, going down to the reactor level—and I'm not accusing Susie of anything—but what was she doing down there?"

Butch looked askance to the mentioned girl and watched as she continued to console Freddie by stroking his hair and rubbing his back, and still speaking soothing words of comfort while trying to choke back her own growing tears. Her eyes were heavy as if rimmed with contrition, looking almost guilt ridden, and when she noticed that Butch and Amata were staring at her while quietly talking amongst themselves, she ducked her face away—as if to hide, showing a small look of fear, as if the two had the power to look clean through her—and buried it against Freddie's neck just to keep from making eye contact with them again.

Amata and Butch looked back to each other skeptically, as the look in Susie's face only seemed to
confirm the suspicion in her inquiry.

Now *that's a good question*, Butch thought with a frown. *A damn good question.*
James kept a hand clapped over the bucket hat sitting a top his head, the brisk wind threatening to snatch it off as his neck craned upward to the peak of Rivet City's bridge tower in the distance. He stood on the river side of Anacostia—or perhaps it was the Potomac, his memory of the area was fuzzy from disuse in the last 20 years—as a cool mist dampened his trousers and left dew on his boots. The crisp air that came off the water was almost metallic in smell from the radiation and the corrosion of Rivet City tainting the sickly looking river, but the chilliness was welcomed amidst the Capital heat. It was still hot for October, but he suspected that the Wasteland would blink, and it'd be November, and they would all be wishing for the warmth again.

He missed the wind.

Ducking his eyes from the sun's rays, they glinted off the salt-eroded metal of the beached aircraft carrier, as if to blind him purposefully, and he turned his eyes away to look further down the river to Jefferson Memorial longingly. To see the old laboratory, even from so faraway and across the water, filled his heart with a suffocating guilt and heartache that fit a ball in his throat, and the ghosts of old memories he thought he long forgot came flooding back to him; the day they moved into the Memorial as Steel paladins thundered about in power armor, using their augmented strength in the mechas to carry out heavy, broken exhibits; Garza fussing over the generators and breakers as James held a flashlight over the handyman's shoulder, where they shared an awkwardly timed joke he couldn't precisely recall; a dance with Catherine at 3 AM in the rotunda as she cradled a snack cake in her other hand, and when he twirled her back into him, he tried to steal a bite when he thought she wasn't looking, and she laughed and pulled him in closer for a kiss. They were supposed to be finishing their work but the day had been so long and tiring that they just wanted to have a little bit of fun.

The memory left a whisper of words in his head, of the song that filled the rotunda while they danced from the old, small record player—it was Billie Holiday sensually crooning *All of Me*.

That was Catherine's favorite record... and she replayed it such an obnoxious amount of times that the other scientists would audibly groan when they heard the record scratch under the needle. She played it so much that after she died, sometimes James heard Billie Holiday singing in his dreams of her.

What hurt as much as reliving those memories was seeing the hulking, ugly super mutants stomping about the outer perimeter of the historical landmark. There was absolutely no way he was punching through their defenses without a team of soldiers or mercenaries, and a bit of good charm and choice words could only get one so far when he barely had a handful of caps to his name.

He hoped Madison was alive and well in Rivet City, because if she wasn't—

"You really think that 'ya wanna stand that close to the water? This's 'lurk territory, 'ya know." An orotund voice called from behind him.

He looked back over his shoulder to see "Lucky" Harith, the caravaneer that allowed the good doctor to travel with him all the way from Megaton, standing some several feet behind him. He looked on with an amused smile despite the nervous curl of a brow over a dark eye, shifting back the bill of the mottled baseball cap on his head to gaze back at the river behind James.
"I suspect that the edge's too high this side for any of them to get too close."

"Those're famous last words if I've ever heard 'em, brother," A rough, genial chuckle escaped the firearms trader as James walked back up the dirt path, which was a small landslide carved out from the wasted foundation of a small, waterside office building just beside them. The roof collapsed in decades ago and broke through the upper most floor, smashing out all the windows where jagged rebar and broken plaster stuck out from the windowsills, and withering green vines that scaled down the building side were pulled with the breeze.

"Any luck ahead?" He inquired hopefully.

"Yeah, the guards scoped it out. Lucky there ain't any muties this side until way further ahead, so we should get t'Rivet City just fine." Folding his arms over his chest, he looked on to the caravan guards that accompanied them all this way. They shared a cigarette silently. "Call it about —...another 20 minute walk? Maybe 30, we'll see how the old gals feel today."

James glanced to the mentioned pack brahmin to watch the two heads grind their teeth happily on dry reeds. They were prickly patches that sprouted between the craggy splits of the concrete road, and maybe in another life they were meant to be mutated flowers that the sun dried up, but the bovine didn't seem to mind either way. The heads were both lightly bandaged about their marble eyes and wrinkled throats, during times when one would instigate the other into a bashing match over small things like sharing water, or just from boredom or the immense heat—they punctured each other with their stubby horns like squabbling siblings.

Harith said that they were just playing with each other.

James knew better, but said nothing as he tended to the wounds. He was grateful for the work because it kept him distracted, and even though he obviously wasn't a veterinarian, he was the next best thing and the boisterous trader tipped him graciously for the work.

"We ready, boss?" One of the guards asked Harith just as the shared cigarette was finished. It was dropped onto the ground to be smothered by a boot heel.

"Lead the way, gentlemen," He responded gleefully with a thumbs up and took hold of the reins of the brahmin, pulling them along just as they, with impeccable timing, were finished searching the splits of the road with their mouths for wilting, mutated dandelions.

Momentarily, James couldn't follow. He stared after Jefferson Memorial with a broken heart and a curled fist, watching the super mutants that loitered about outside it—talking around a stew pot and campfire while laughing raucously or threatening to punch one another just because. He was inexplicably angry in seeing what became of their dream, and the pain and the fury were soon gone as guilt revisited with a packed bag of anxiety on the doorstep.

Despite all his planning in his careful nature (and he had to learn it through old age, as his youthful fire hadn't done him very many favors), he realized that he still didn't know what he'd do if Madison wasn't in Rivet City, and if no one knew who she was or where to find her.

He sacrificed the safety and luxury of the vault, the autonomy of his daughter in her forced marriage, the notion that he could let it all go and finally settle into the life of a fattening, lazy doctor—all for a dream.

*It always started that way*, James lamented with a bittersweet smile as he walked beside the brahmin and papped its rugged, sun-spotted hide. *We always circle back here with a dream.*
James was rushed along the bustling caravaneer encampment, allowing him very little time to marvel at anything worthwhile as he was forced to tail Harith as closely as possible, given the hurried comings and goings of the crowd around them. They were surrounded by traders that pushed loaded carts of their wares onward to the security checkpoint, or were struggling to pull along exhausted pack animals into resting stalls for the afternoon, and the few caravan guards that were hired to protect the traders stood off to one side and talked as if most of them knew one another.

The camp, which Harith called The Watering Hole due to it being a rest stop for traders wanting to trade with Rivet City, felt more like a minor settlement that defied the giant that was the city on the water; the camp was set up like a marketplace, and was rung by several stalls where the brahmin could be gated, as well as areas tented by old tarps to protect the traders from the shade—outhouses remained on the far side, closer to the water for disposal, and there was a sense of community amongst the traders as they bartered food or water from each other and swapped stories amongst a circle of ramshackle chairs. Music blared from somewhere amongst the crowd but he could barely hear what was playing as an agitated guard banged her fist atop the radio, making a passing snide comment about how a particular radio station (Galaxy News, if he heard her right) seemed to be on vacation. He vaguely recalled the conversation he had with Colin Moriarty weeks ago back in Megaton about an obnoxious disc jockey named Three Dog, who ran a radio station of that name but the Wasteland hadn't heard a peep out of him for some time.

James looked on toward Rivet City in awe again, watching the massive vessel bask in the irradiated waters of the Potomac, and heard the hollow groaning echo of metal as the floating settlement barely bobbed on the green water. When he looked on ahead again to keep himself from getting distracted by the remarkable sight, he barely caught himself in time to keep from trampling over a trader's mutt, quickly recalculating his landing foot so he stepped gingerly over it. It was a beast of a canine, with filthy matted fur and old, pink scars on its slobbering muzzle, and it seemed to be protecting it's owner's brahmin because it laid along in the dirt in front of the gated stall and growled at him for being too close for it's liking.

James quickly went on and kept in step with Harith. Although he was a resident of the Wasteland for just over 30 years, being gone for nearly half his overall life left him feeling disoriented and misplaced. The home he once knew was now nothing more than a strange place he no longer belonged in, and some part of it wounded him greatly. He tried not to show this apparent weakness in his face, because to show that you weren't local to the area was a fault that some people would gladly take advantage of... even if he was among seemingly civilized folk, and just on the outskirts of one of the most heavily guarded settlements in the Capital.

The world had changed.

Vault 101 wasn't a time capsule—it had been a comfortable prison.

Soon the two men were coming across the security checkpoint, which was housed by a three story steel metal structure, with a reinforced outer wall on the second floor to cover the holes that had been flayed from the structure over time. The third floor was open to the vehement afternoon sun where the remaining bones of the structure, probably once a loading bay for the soldiers that entered the ship, spearheaded the sky. The front entrance of the checkpoint, which was up a long and steep ramp, was marked by a large metal plaque laser cut with the bold words of RIVET CITY. It swung tensely on the wind, and below it hung another sign that read; "Security Checkpoint", and below that read another sign saying; "prepare to declare all wares and personal items".

James found the written signs to be pointless, given that a good percentage of the Wasteland
population couldn't read or write. The city's security seemed to be making up for this, however, as a guard positioned at the base of the ramp in black spray painted armor, wielding a rifle with the protective visor of his helmet flipped up, loudly announced over the line of clamoring rabble what was expected of them in order to be allowed in.

"All traders're have to declare any and all wares! A full log of any supplies including, but not limited to, weapons and munitions, clothes, food, medicine, scrap, and money exceeding 500 caps must be accounted for before meeting with the Ledger on the right hand side of Floor Two!"

"Stall fees will be handled by the Booker on Floor Two on the left hand side! If you have a sponsor within Rivet City, note who your sponsor is to the Booker so we can send notification ahead!"

"Body and inventory searches can and will be executed at the discretion of the Ledger at any time!"

"General civilians, visitors, or applying residents are expected to declare absolutely everything on their person! We have the right to refuse entry for any reason! Those who try to ignore this refusal will be shot on sight!"

"Hey! I see you over there, cool it or I'll toss your ass to the back of the line!"

"Contraband on the ship includes, but is not limited to, any undeclared item, addictive chemicals and drugs meant for recreational use, explosives, heavy or industrial grade weaponry, napalm weaponry, nuclear weaponry, or large guns that feature a gun belt! Use your common-fucking-sense, folks!"

"C'mon, I gotta friend up on the second floor." Harith reassured upon seeing the doctor's impatience in the long line snaking down the ramp. It must've been a good 30 people, all bundled together, wiping their sweaty brows and panting in the heat as they clutched their few meager possessions close to them.

With a relieved exhale, James followed him up to the wide, open doorway of the checkpoint unquestioningly. The other man was easy to follow and keep an eye on, given his token goldenrod-yellow jumpsuit and bright red baseball cap, and the two shoved their way past to the guard that was yelling out directions of where to go and how to behave. James was the only one to apologize for the intrusion to the people that forced past.

"You're permitted to the Third Floor to see the Gate Master only after you've been cleared —Lucky! My man, what's good?" The guard clapped one gloved hand into Harith's, and the two shared a firm handshake. "What can I do 'ya for?"

"Lookin' for the big man Polk. S'he in?"

"Should've just finished his break," Now that James was closer, he noticed how young the guard actually was... he couldn't have been any older than Winona. When the guard noticed that he was being watched, he returned an unimpressed glance under a crinkled brow, as if he were gauging James' threat level.

"He upstairs, then?"

"Yeah, yeah. Go on up. Keep an eye on your friend there, Lucky—wouldn't wanna mess to clean up."

James typically could speak for himself, but decided that entering Rivet City was a daunting task to
accomplish, and if Harith was his easy ticket in—letting the charming caravaneer do all the talking was probably in his best interests. At the young guard's warning, Harith only laughed in that good natured way of his and James gave a gracious 'understood' and nothing more before hurrying onward to the stairs. Their boots sounded thunderous upon the metal grates as they went up, finding winding lines quartered by assembled ropes on opposing sides of the room—and each line held a small sign with hand painted lettering.

The left sign dripped with the word Bookie. The two men went to the right of the room, which was busier than the left, where the sign said Ledger and under that Declaration Desk.

Again, the signs seemed useless, but the floor didn't have a yelling guard to explain where to go.

"Polk! Polk!" Harith called as they neared a Ledger table—there being two to quickly run through the line that would build—and at the calling of his name, a male guard looked up after having just finished a young woman pulling her toddler with her to go up to the third floor.

The guard was older despite having such a fresh face, save for the scar that dimpled his chin and the reveal of a missing second premolar on his left side when he smiled just wide enough. His eyes were a bright green, his hair combed back cleanly and free of a helmet that the rest of his cohorts wore—a combat helmet with a face shield and chin strap, also spray painted black. James noted that on his hip was an extendable nightstick rather than a firearm.

Polk's non-threatening appearance seemed fitting for someone who's only job was to log down whoever wanted to come into Rivet City. At least he looked like he enjoyed his job... and something about the man reminded James about Jonas, back from when they first began working together in the clinic. They had similar smiles—the kind that were genuine.

"Old Lucky!" Polk greeted merrily as he got up from his chair to meet the trader. "I didn't see you by these last few weeks, looks like I got worried for nothin'!"

"Careful with that word—old! Some of you 'round here might trick yourselves into thinking you can take me on!" Harith joked in response. The guard laughed, again flashing the missing gap in his teeth.

"So waddo I owe the pleasure? You here to get processed?"

"My friend James here," He began. "Needs a helping hand."

"That right?" He questioned as he sat back down behind his table, which was covered in a big book full of pages that seemed to be hand drawn into a table; the headers read things like Date, Name, Age, Possessions, a place to check mark whether or not an applicant was a Trader or Civilian, and finally, Reason for Business.

James recalled that even back 20 years ago, Rivet City always had a very disciplined security program, and it was something that was damn impressive considering how consistent and enforced the regimen was just to get in. Rivet City was easily the largest settlement in all of the Wasteland, and they didn't play children's games when it came to handling inside crime, troublemakers, or general delinquents that weren't going to improve or at least not disrupt their way of life.

He and Catherine talked about living in Rivet City when Purity was erected and Winona was born... the only thing that kept them from committing to it fully, even in plans, was the fact that at the time it didn't seem to have renewable resources or supplies, or anything to build itself around other than the rumored science bay that started the city. Obviously the city had been doing even better in the time James was gone.
"I'm here trying to find someone," James explained, deciding that now was probably his chance to speak. "A Madison Li? I don't quite know if she would be here or not."

"Madison Li? You're talking about Dr. Li, correct?" Polk, who held the countenance of a sweet puppy with a toddler now seemed all business with a cool expression as he took hold of his pencil and turned to his ledger to catalog some information. "And what's your business here to find her, Mister—?"

"Parker, James." He supplied politely. "I'm an old colleague and friend of Dr. Li. I've recently found myself back in the Capital and was hoping she was here."

"When did you last speak with her? What kind of business do you have with her? Does she know you're here, Mister Parker?"

"Last I saw her—? 20 years ago. My business with her involves a project we worked on together a long time ago, and no, I'd be surprised if knew I was about." He almost chuckled at the question, not because it seemed silly given his situation, but because of an old nickname his mind conjured from a long time ago. 

_Mother Madison._

When they worked on the project together long before, Madison always seemed to know everything that happened in and around the workplace; like who improperly cleaned the water testing equipment and when; who left a towel on the floor of the shared bathroom—and _hell_—James even personally witnessed a situation where she called out Agincourt for taking the last of the ground coffee, which she had already claimed for herself that morning. It was the only motherly thing about her, and perhaps, in some way, it had been a cruel nickname said behind her back, but the others only meant it in good fun—that ability of hers was definitely a remarkable one.

James had never seen Madison blindsided by anything. She was always calm, cool, and composed, and showed great leadership ability in the fact that she could navigate the group through any seemingly impossible task with flawless precision (if it wasn't for her snippy attitude at times, or her inability to be patient). He was happy to have her as a fellow founding scientist.

The last week that they were together, however, she had been blindsided by everything... the Brotherhood withdrawing from the project by Lyons' orders, Catherine's death, James' own departure—

He understood completely why Madison was so hurt.

The memories were retained in the back of his mind as Polk continued on with his interrogation, which felt like a laundry list of questions that seemed to barely progress the conversation forward until James had to empty his pockets of his possessions. He removed the heavy backpack off his old back and allowed Polk to search through it with meticulous and eagle-eyed fashion—he declared his 10mm given to him back in Megaton by the general goods trader there (he tried to recall her name but only remembered bright red hair and a pale blue RobCo jumpsuit), the money in his pocket and the utility knife on his belt—and his backpack was finally put back in order and handed back to him in approval some few minutes of silence later.

"You'll find Dr. Li in the Science Bay. Best way to get there's to take the stairwell to the midship deck and follow the signs. There'll be an intercom on the lab door where you can buzz someone inside." He explained as James readjusted his backpack on his back and tilted back his bucket hat to see Polk's face as it returned back to it's wide, genteel smile from before. "You've gotta bit of faith in you—more than what we give to normal citizens, but that's because of your buddy Harith
here. If you cause any problems, just remember who's sponsoring you. Do we have an understanding, Mister Parker?"

"We do. Thank you for your time, Officer Polk." He replied with gratitude and reached across the table to shake his hand. "You won't have any trouble from me, I assure you."

"Only way you can prove that's by showing us." Polk responded with a definite nod and then looked to Harith. "I'll see you down at the Watering Hole this evenin'—gotta prescription that needs filling."

"I'll even wrap it up in a big pretty bow, just for you," The trader teased and the guard laughed heartily as he handed James a small ticket that was stamped with a date and the word APPROVED.

The two were then shooed out of Polk's line, walking up the staircase that led to the third floor. They were out under the open sky again without a roof to shield them, and some several feet from the staircase was the extended bridge that lead to the side door of Rivet City. Three guards stood at the foot of the bridge, all expectedly clad in black combat armor with matching helmets and rifles, and they stopped any person on the third floor to check their approval ticket before waving them on to walk across.

"I'll get in tomorrow mornin'," Harith explained as they stood side by side, and James' eyes wandered upward to the bridge tower that reached for the off colored sky. "Gotta get the old gals processed and stalled first, and that'll take the rest of the damn day."

"I can't thank you enough for your help, my friend." James turned to the trader and shook his hand in both of his, nodding his head in an indebted bow. "I doubt that I would have gotten this far without your caravan."

"Lucky Harith's gotta nose 'bout people, brother," He chuckled low. "You're one of the good folks. Better than most. I hope you find whatever you're lookin' for in Rivet City, James—most people do. And if you ever need anythin' on your way back out, you just let me know and I'll set'cha up real nice."

"I appreciate it, thank you." He returned the smile. "If things go well, perhaps I'll see you inside."

"If not, I'm usually in stall 13. They call it an unlucky number, but hey, Harith's all luck!" Harith laughed and clapped a hand against James' back in what seemed like a gesture of wishing him good luck.

"Next!" The middle guard of the three called before the doctor could respond in return, and he rushed forward in timely fashion to give up his ticket.

He was waved through without issue, and when James looked back over his shoulder, Harith was still standing at the top of the stairs—smiling and waving in goodbye.

He waved back with a returning smile before marching on across the bridge.

James came up the musty hallway where a thick fog clung low to the ground, his boots cutting a swath through them in footsteps that lingered behind him before settling, swallowed up by the fog again. The door of the Science Lab stood before him, as if it were a guardian judging him for his past wrongdoings, and he looked to the intercom wired into the side.

He tentatively pressed the button so it buzzed for attention, released it, and waited.
And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

James pressed the button again as his heart raced about his rib cage, unable to be calmed or settled as his anxiety built. All these years of toiling away in his own guilt—all these days of traversing the Wasteland, where he was plagued by constant uncertainty that he had made the right choice in leaving the vault and his daughter trapped inside—and he was finally here. Madison was just on the other side of the door before him.

Even if she was still too hurt to want to return to the project, too scorned by his abandonment to want to even listen, just seeing her face would settle his rampant thoughts.

Seeing Madison again would justify that all the sacrifices he made weren't made in vain.

"What is it?" A venomous voice hissed over the intercom when James was forced to ring a third and then fourth time. The voice made his heart leap and he knew it was Madison's, because he'd know it anywhere—especially with her usual intolerant tone.

At least in voice she hadn't changed.

"Madison?" James inquired rather than apologizing for interrupting her important work. "It's me—it's James."

Nothing but static sounded from the other side. He knew he wasn't getting in to talk to her if she refused to entertain a conversation with him, as the door was barred, and in any other situation he would've said he understood and would promise to wait for her for when she was ready to talk... but this was different. He had to see her, he had to make amends and he had to convince her to come back to the project.

Purity wouldn't stand a chance without her, when they already had so many other odds stacked against them like lost data and Catherine's passing.

"Whoever this really is, I'm not interested nor am I impressed. If you don't leave this instance I'll call for security, where they'll be more than happy to escort you out over the nearest railing some 20 stories up off any solid ground." Madison threatened over the intercom, the venom in her voice now so lethal that he felt a palpable loathing from it.

Regardless, he pushed on.

"Madison, please—it's me. You know it's me. I came all this way to talk to you, at least hear me out face to face."

"...If this really is James Parker, he'd know that he doesn't have any right in demanding to talk to me."

"If I really was me, and I am, I'd demand to talk to you, regardless. And I know you're not going to wait until I'm thrown overboard to see if it's really me." James replied with a well meaning smile that he hoped wasn't obvious in his tone of voice.

The line went dead and the smile was gone.

He buzzed again, calling into the intercom desperately for Madison to come back and talk to him
—trying to sound firm so she knew it was serious, that he was serious, that he damn well wasn’t leaving until she heard him out—

But then the wheel on the door twisted and it swung inward, revealing Madison Li to be standing on the other side and he was too shocked to smile again. He had forgotten how petite she was, her rounded jaw leaner than her recalled it being but she was free of any blemishes that would reveal her age, and her acerbic looks were pinched. With a taut mouth and eyes sharper than a deathclaw baring new teeth, she regarded him with a glare that darkened her deep brown eyes to a near black, her brow firmly set into an annoyed expression. She was smartly dressed in a knee-length gray skirt and a pale blue button down blouse, which was the only splash of color she had on her person, and it was smothered out by the drab white of her lab coat.

When she removed her rectangular bifocals from the perch of her nose to let them dangle from the beaded leash around her neck, he clearly saw how she looked like she hadn't aged a day; save for a bit of sprouting gray in her black as night hair, but he had noticeably more in his own than she did, with probably twice as much wrinkles on his face.

She was the only thing that hadn't changed on the outside while he was gone.

"You haven't changed a bit, Madison." He could finally smile despite it probably being inappropriate for him to do so, and remained put until he was told he was allowed to come inside.

"...You've gotten a little comfortable around the middle, I see." She snapped flatly, referencing his softened stomach caused by the comfort of Vault 101. "You really have some kind of nerve to come back here, James. After everything that happened, you think you can just waltz back in here —"

"It's good to see you too, Maddy." James replied brightly, unable to feel any shame in her scolding but only delight in seeing her again after so long.

She rewarded him with a peeved expression. "Don't you 'Maddy' me, you bastard. And don't think you can prance about with that 'charm' of yours you rely so heavily on, either, and think that I'll brainlessly follow your every word like it's scripture."

"I never took you as the religious sort." He teased mildly.

"Shove it." She retorted coarsely and turned about on a short heeled pump, walking away from him. James knew he was pressing his luck, but there was just something about Madison—there was always 'just something' about Madison—that always made him feel like a young man again. They met in their early 20's, after all, and he giddily annoyed her back then just as much as he giddily annoyed her now.

He hoped there was enough memory of their good times together to get her to listen.

James took her leaving the door open as a tense invite to come in, and so he stepped over the threshold and politely shut the door behind him. When he looked back, removing his hat from his head to have dust and stale dirt cloud from it, he saw her standing at a catwalk railing that overlooked the whole of the room. He joined her to marvel at the several projects that her team seemed to be working on, and immediately recognized work with hydroponic farming as one particular scientist—it was Janice Kaplinski!—seemed to be testing the nutrients of the water with gloved hands and a tube. Beside her was Daniel Agincourt up on a ladder trying to fix an exhaust fan, and the engineer was someone James couldn't have been less pleased in seeing again.

If Madison was difficult to convince, Agincourt was impossible.
"What're you even doing here, James? Aren't you supposed to be hiding out in a cave in Virginia somewhere?" Madison asked quietly without looking to him, and instead oversaw the work going on below. James also recognized Garza moving about heavy metal containers with a tight back, Anna Holt was at a desk cataloging what looked like important reports with a mountain of files about her, and Alex Dargon was looking over her shoulder at her work while sampling a shiny red apple.

Absolutely everyone from the old team was there, with an additional two people—both scientists, by the looks of their lab coats—that James didn't recognize.

"Plans changed after I left, and I found myself in Vault 101... but I escaped. I had to see you."

"Escaped? I suppose not all of your plans can work out like you hoped, then." She commented with some smugness in her voice, a tone of serves you right, but she sounded mostly exhausted and in need of a drink. They use to sample scotch together on cold nights when she was ready to admit that she needed a break.

"I want to reopen Project Purity." He responded.

Madison frowned then and turned her gaze up to him dubiously, her brow tightly crinkled and her mouth loosened in her shock.

"...You're kidding."

"I'm serious."

"You're insane."

"Probably," James agreed wholeheartedly. "I want you to know that I never stopped believing in Purity even though I left, Madison. It's haunted me every day of my life, and sometimes I wished I never left and that we forged on, but back then we hit a dead end—our numbers were poor, the Brotherhood had pulled out, and Catherine—"

"You can't tell me that you never stopped believing." She interrupted viciously, turning to fully face him with her expression twisted into reserved anger, which was only a hint of the wrathful fire in her eyes. "You gave up! You gave up and you left when you didn't have to—we could have escaped here to Rivet City, started this lab together where it was safe and where our work would've been respected! Not—! Not mocked by the naysayers that told us we were crazy. I looked crazy alone. You did stop believing, James. You did."

The only other time James had seen Madison this emotional was the day that he told her he was leaving. Winona was being watched in the other room by Garza, and James went to her with his bags already packed to tell her that he was going to Virginia to keep his baby safe.

"...I spent the last 20 years running experiments in secret—at the risk that if I were discovered, I would've been exiled along with my daughter."

"You say that like it's supposed to impress me," She shook her head and looked out over her laboratory once more just to avoid having to look at him for another second. Her hand was clutched tightly on the railing. "You're not the only one that's made sacrifices here."

"I know what went wrong. I know where we failed, the piece we were missing in order to get Purity working again! Our methods were inefficient, the Brotherhood presence in the lab overshadowed our need for privacy—it was a whole slew of internal and external forces that are
too numerous to name. But I think this time away has been a good thing! We can return to Purity with fresh eyes and wiser minds, and with Braun's notes—"

"Braun—? You don't mean Stanislaus Braun, do you?" She inquired tensely.

"One in the same. In thanks to his employment with Vault-Tec before the Great War, his genius led projects into the possible reform of a nuclear destroyed Wasteland. Including a project that birthed a portable terraforming module known as a G.E.C.K., or Garden of Eden Creation Kit." James went on to explain, pleased that Madison was at least listening to what he had to say, but the reluctant pursing of her mouth had returned when her shock waned. "I've done some research in thanks to Vault 101's archives, and he was on the reservation list for a vault right here in the Capital!"

"And what're you hoping that'll come from all this, James?"

"I want to find the vault that he was assigned to—Vault 112—and see if I can recover any of his notes, research, records—hell I'll take a blasted doodle on a coffee napkin if that's all he left behind, though I'm hoping for something more concrete."

"I mean with resurrecting Purity!" Madison exclaimed in disbelief. "Do you even realize the lunacy in just talking about reviving it?"

"I know it, more than you know," James lamented. "But I believe—I really do believe, Madison—that where we failed, Braun could have succeeded! Vault 101 records showed that only some vaults here in the Capital were given a G.E.C.K., and, regretfully, Vault 101 wasn't placed on the recipient list, but what if a G.E.C.K. can be found in Vault 112 along with any of Braun's other work and research? What if that could be all that stands between us and making Purity real?"

"...What's going to stop you is that I can't do this again, James." She replied with a hint of sadness in her voice, sighed, and lifted her eyes to meet his face as her hand fell from the railing. "You're not blind to the work I've done—the work we've done—with the team that you left behind so you could go and hide. We're making real change, engaging in science I only dreamed of a long time ago, and I've constructed a life for myself here that I can say with complete certainty that I'm proud of."

"Madison, please—" He begged.

"My answer is no." The sadness went out of her tone to be replaced with a hard firmness. "You're crazy to think that I would've said yes. To think that I would want to come back after all this time—the research is destroyed, our numbers and tests gone, barely anything escaped with us when we left."

"Madison—"

"You need to go." She interrupted once more with a wave of her hand, and he knew she was done. She was undoubtedly done with hearing his apparent crazy talk for another second. "I suggest you go back into whatever vault you dragged yourself out of and leave me be. It's what you're good at."

Before James could stammer out another word in his shock and heartbreak, Madison turned away and strode down the stairs into the heart of her science lab. By this point, several pairs of eyes had turned up to James—Anna, Janice, Garza, Alex, even Agincourt—every single one of them wearing shocked expressions as if they had seen a filthy looking ghost just up on the walkway. Madison disappeared into a room on the far side and shut the door behind her after whispering something to Garza, and James assumed it was orders to escort him out if he didn't leave of his own accord.
James gripped the railing tightly under one hand before clapping his dusty hat back onto his head and striding back out with a renewed vigor in his gait. Madison, rightfully, thought he was absolutely insane, and had he been in her shoes in switched sides, he probably would've thought the same—but he couldn't let the dream of Purity die. He couldn't let Purity die twice after he had come all this way, toiled and obsessed and cried over the last 20 years trying to figure out where it went wrong, knowing in the deepest corner of his heart and soul that if he gave up now (or gave up again, in Madison's opinion), he would've given too much away at that point to want to get back up again.

He thought of Winona. He thought of her dimpled smile, her laugh, her elated voice in his heart telling him to keep going—that he knew what he had to do, and if he was so serious about bringing Purity to fruition, he had to 'get his head on straight and his ass in gear'.

He was going to find Vault 112, he was going to find nothing in worst case scenario and notes or even an untapped G.E.C.K. at best, and he was going to be one of the first to dip his hands into the purified tidal basin of the crossing rivers after Purity was working.

*James Parker wasn't giving up and hiding this time.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Now that I'm no longer suffering from a headache at 1AM, it's time to write the author's notes~!

The more research I did into Rivet City, the more it became one of my top five favorite locations in all of the Capital (Vault 101 still holding the number one spot)---it's arguably the safest and most well defended settlement in DC, but due to game development, I think that Rivet City didn't shine in a way it could have; a bustling city with a high population, regimented and strict security, and a thriving marketplace full of traders, residents, and visitors. I was hoping to portray mainly the security aspect of Rivet City in creating the minor 'settlement' "The Watering Hole" and detailing how extensive it is to get into the city even has a trader.

The city was built on a military aircraft carrier, and I suspect that some of those old military traditions and regimens transferred into how the current security was trained and are taught to handle the visitors. It's orderly, concise, and no nonsense.

I've also always wanted to write a one shot of James and Madison reuniting for the first time after 20 years as a one shot, but from Madison's pov in writing--she was a woman that, I think, was in love with James and felt slighted by his leaving in more ways than one, and she chooses to ignore the fact that Purity would've collapsed even if he /had/ stayed because she was so personally betrayed by his leaving. I think she's an intriguing character, more than her 'stand offish and bitchy' demeanor grants her, and I hope the Madison I have in my head gave in-game Madison some justice!

Fun fact: The title of the chapter 'A Love Suicide' is in reference not only to Madison's unrequited love for James, but also in James obsession in resurrecting Project Purity. Most titles for my chapters are either coined by the in-chapter events, or something unforeseen that's lurking in the shadows... such as Chapter 37's "According to Plan". Wonder if y'all can guess what that means c;
Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie
Winona stepped out of Mister Burke's home and set foot on the stale dirt of Megaton's main square, shutting and locking the door behind her before the key was dropped into the pocket of Butch's Tunnel Snakes' jacket. She didn't enjoy living in Burke's personal abode during their stay in town any more than she liked being near the damn bomb. Elation had once filled her heart in knowing that she *singlehandedly* saved Megaton from a narcissistic madman in a fancy ascot, along with outsmarting his most lethal right hand man, but upon returning to Megaton, she was somber and defeated.

Although the old world warhead was about as useless as a hammer made of glass, she discovered that, perhaps, she hadn't really saved anyone at all. There was something still inherently dangerous about the bomb, because even though it was deactivated, it was still dangerous in *idea*. Confessor Cromwell still held his sermons from morning to evening and his spiritual flock still came to wash their hands and drink from the stagnant water-filled crater; and so long as the Church of Atom was allowed to continue their practice in town another murder like Angelica's could happen. Another family like Burke's could be completely destroyed.

She hadn't stopped anything or saved anyone, unless the Church was told that the bomb was deactivated—but she suspected that even if they were told, they'd pack up and leave and spread their disease.

They lent truth to the saying that religion could be dangerous.

Winona stopped by the Brass Lantern's outdoor soup bar and perused the hanging menus for a quick dinner alone; Sumner was meeting with an old connection about safe travel to Rivet City, Harriet was running about town gathering supplies, and Glasgow was—... probably doing whatever
Glasgow felt like doing. The need to protect her wasn't so urgent while they were in a safe town, especially one as guarded as Megaton, and so she was free to do as she pleased without them following her about like three overbearing mothers.

She found herself wishing, however, that she still had their company.

Ever since leaving Andale, the inventor had trouble with being alone—and that was a tough thing to try and remedy because she still felt that solitude even when she was surrounded by people, as she was now. The counter was packed with a rump plopped onto every mismatched stool, with scruffy men and filthy women hunched protectively over their food as if someone would come and snatch it right off their chipped plates; she listened to two men slur dirty jokes amongst each other and boisterously guffaw, like they were competing to see who could laugh the most obnoxiously; there were clinks of watered down rum bottles trying to refill dirty glasses that would always be empty in a matter of seconds; she watched as bowls of steaming food and bent caps exchanged hands as orders were quickly filled by a fatigued woman sweating through her yellow jumpsuit, and she'd wipe her brow with a towel linked over her shoulder and return to frying grayed meat on a pan seasoned by the dozens of orders before it. Winona watched the savory smoke wafting through a hole in the roof of the outdoor soup kitchen to the blue and blackening sky, like a signal to those hungry and weary to come and join the mismatched camaraderie that was commandeered over greasy stew and crab cakes.

Winona wanted to be present in the moment. She could see, but it was like she couldn't feel as her mind was somewhere else—especially now as her memories of their time in Andale came back to her, piece by piece. Sometimes a smell, or a sound, or even a single word would make her recall something she didn't know before, and other times they were reconjured into her memories without her having tried at all. She would wake up in Burke's bed in a sweat, believing that she was waking up in Jack Smith's basement all over again... like her escape had been an excruciating dream, and more often than not it sent her into horrible hyperventilating spells that she tried to handle on her own.

Sumner explained that she was drugged, as they all were by Jack and his brother, and showed her a small case of vials partnered with needles and a dart gun that delivered the sedative from a short distance. They were found amongst Andale's collective trove of supplies that were taken from other unfortunate travelers, where they repossessed some of the more valuables pieces like firearms, clothes, and various other goods that they could drag to Megaton for selling. Sumner decided on taking the sedatives to add to his personal weaponry, and Winona found her gaze—more than once—going to the drug box now pouched to his belt with a weariness like it'd spring open and release a storm of pestilence.

The moment Winona saw the empty darts sitting in the snap case when Sumner had shown it to her, it was one of those times where seeing something recalled a memory, and it was of her abduction; she remembered trying to run but her feet betrayed her, she remembered collapsing on the ground as the room around her spun and turned everything into hideous pulsing shapes of color, and remembered most importantly the pure fear and how it drowned her from breathing.

She never felt such immense terror before—not in seeing Jonas' body, not when she ran from the Springvale raiders, not when she realized she was out in the outside world alone... never. Winona recalled drugged thoughts filling her head, silly ones, of turtles and the number of fingers on one of her hands, as she was groped and prodded for quality, and it was all a memory she wished she could have been left to forget completely. It made her wish her head was still empty of the whole ordeal because now all she felt was a shaking rage as she terrorized herself with replaying in her head, over and over and over again how her abduction happened—how she let it happen to her—and how she let Jack Smith overpower her.
Winona was so angry because she blamed herself. She was completely helpless against Jack, and before that night she never saw herself as a weak woman; her lifestyle was always very active, she was fit and strong for her size, she out-weaseled a man like Charles Burke, and yet in Andale she wasn't able to protect herself or her autonomy (and it was a miracle that she managed to not only stall but divert Jack's attention away from her). Thoughts went through her mind of being kind to herself, constantly laying down such excuses like the fact that she was drugged, she was alone when they took her, her guards had been skillfully incapacitated, Andale was full of trained kidnappers and they planned the crime as they did to dozens of victims before them, but nothing —... nothing could break through those self-hating thoughts or the stifling feeling of shame over not fighting back, over not being strong enough, for not having some kind of survival instinct kick in that could have at least made it harder to take her.

All she did was lay on the floor in a daze and giggle to herself about how much Sumner's name reminded her of Summer, and trick herself into thinking, momentarily, that she was home and coming out of a bad dream in the middle of the night.

She wished as much as she wished to find her dad that it was all just a nightmare. An awful, torturous, forever nightmare that could never leave her, even now when she was awake, and as she jumped at the sound of the cook in the yellow jumpsuit smack a cleaver through a cooked Brahmin shank to cut through the bone. It sent a sudden shock wave of memory through her of Jack nearing her with his knife, imagining hearing her own bones shattered with cleavers in the basement of his home, smelling her own flesh cooking on his stove and no sooner had the manic fit entered her brain was it gone and she was snapped back into the present, shuddering with a shallow breath. The inventor lost her conscious mind and forgot that she was still standing at the edge of the Brass Lantern bar, looking at the people open-mouth chew the meals that they protected like prison inmates without watching; hearing the drunken tellings of hilariously slurred stories without listening; wanting to vomit at the smell of the cooking foods as the stale aroma permeated her hair; and people walked past her without notice of the trauma she was currently enduring, how it deadened the light in her eyes until it was gone, and shook her hands at her sides as she forced them to remain still with white knuckles, as a sudden need to self-harm overtook her fists. She wanted to punch the memories out of her own head.

Winona felt like a ghost watching as the world spun madly on around her... trapped in a prison that was her own mind.

"Order somethin', hun?" The cook turned to her after noticing that the inventor had been silently loitering until now, and wiped the sweat rolling down her face from working the hot outdoor stove.
"Just made up some grilled shanks, damn good in a bowl of noodles—or on some 'tater biscuits for a hot sandwich. You want in? We got some clean tables inside with half-price drinks."

Winona only silently shook her head and walked away quickly, deciding that her mouth was too full of the screams lodged in her throat to want to eat. Retreating to the ramp that led to the higher levels of Megaton, all about the town came the whirring of the generators as their timers clicked down to a very prompt 7 PM, and she stopped at the top of the ramp to watch as the dozens of strings of Einstein lights, with lantern heads made out of spliced cheap beer cans, all turned on at once and covered the massive town in a yellowed glow. The starved ravens that sat upon the garlands took flight when they were startled, flocking to the sky as the ocher spackled clouds were losing the fight with the drawing blackness. The stars were out along with the half moon, and she silently cursed at them for making her feel even smaller, as they scraped across the obsidian tarmac of night.

The swell of drunken laughter from the Brass Lantern carried to her from up on the catwalk as a night breeze rippled her clothes, and she heard a radio turn on. It played a song with the smooth,
bluesy voice of Ella Fitzgerald scatting *It Don't Mean a Thing*, and had she been in better spirits, with company that delighted her, she would've wanted to dance her worries away but it hardly felt like an appropriate time to be jovial. It felt almost *wrong* to even tap her foot to the tune.

Winona decided that if Amata had been there with her, she would've danced with her—danced in a way like no one was watching, while unashamed of wanting to play silly games or drink and laugh raucously like the people at the soup kitchen down below were doing. Her best friend couldn't undo the injuries inflicted upon her destabilizing psyche, but Amata would've made her not feel so guilty about wanting to be *okay*.

Instead she walked higher up the catwalk, going up another ramp to the highest walkway in the city that overlooked absolutely everything, and decided that if she was going to be alone she might as well have a view to be alone with. She zipped up Butch's much too large jacket over her body, despite it being too hot to wear leather in September still, with a hand tightening the jacket belt over her waist, and it hauntingly felt like his arms around her body—reminding her once more of the last time she'd ever see him, and of a kiss that seemed to have taken place a longer time ago than she felt it had been.

She missed home so much and all of the things about it that she never thought she would miss; like the monotony of everyday life that she once loathed. She'd gladly take it back in a heartbeat if her father and Jonas would be there waiting for her.

"Ain't'cha look all deep in thought? Not poppin' 'tats without *me* 'round're 'ya?" A voice ahead of her teased and she snapped her attention towards it.

It was Glasgow, sitting on the railing of the curving walkway with his feet dangling freely over the side, absolutely unafraid of the distance between the soles of his boots and the solid ground below with nothing but a flimsy, rusted bar holding him back. He looked to be celebrating something alone as a whisky bottle sat on a nearby lawn table under a holey umbrella, and his calloused hands were rolling a fat cigarette from a package of shredded tobacco. New aviators, as his old ones were lost somewhere back in Andale, were balanced on his long nose to obscure his eyes despite the dark of the night, and the beer can lights flickered off of their scratched lenses along with his canines, which protruded from the smirk of his lips.

Its boyish nature was charming and she returned it with her own smile. Winona silently thanked the fact that she was now no longer alone with her own torturous thoughts as she neared him with her hands in her jacket pockets, stopping at his side to lean a hip back against the catwalk railing lazily. When it creaked loudly, she immediately flinched back from it in caution and put her weight back onto her feet.

"What're 'Tats'? Some kinda performance enhancer?"

"*Mentats*, chica. Tabs? 'Ya pop one under yer tongue, and it's the kinda stuff that makes 'ya feel —... *smartererer.*" He explained with a finger tapping his temple. "Kinda stuff that gits yer dumbass head on straight an' in the game."

"It's just *smarter*. Not *smarterererer.*" Winona teased and he grinned in response with a scoff, turning back to finish the roll of his cigarette with his pierced tongue wetting the edge for wrapping. "So it's a drug? And how's Sumner feel about *that?*"

"What the old man don' know won't hurt the kiddies, heh?" Glasgow peeked at her over the frames of his sunglasses with a quirked eyebrow, winking at her with his good eye flirtatiously. "Life ain't fun if yer not goin' behind daddy's back drinkin' his best stash."
"So this is Sumner's?" She remarked as she straightened from the rail and went to the lawn table, plucking up the whisky bottle in both hands for examination.

"Can't confirm r'deny that," He tutted as his fat cigarette was tucked behind his disfigured ear for later consumption. "Jus' don't tell daddy uncle Glasgow was drinkin' on the job. Our little secret, sweetheart."

"How about you make it worth my while and I'll think about not telling him?" She smiled coyly back at him over a shoulder and pulled herself up onto the lawn table top, making it rock and groan under her as she shifted into a good spot. The bottle was then settled on her lap as she examined the peeling and yellowed label, barely held on by the worn out adhesive underneath.

"I jus' love it when a good girl goes bad." Glasgow was grinning wide as he nodded to the liquor in her hands. "Guess I gotta make me a cute lil' partn'r in crime so's I kin cover my ass. Wanna drink?"

Winona shrugged a shoulder and twisted off the cap, sniffing curiously at its amber contents with the smell biting at her nostrils. It was definitely a strong liquor—and the strongest she ever had was a couple of warm beers in the company of a certain loud-mouthed Tunnel Snake, but even that had been difficult to swallow. Making eye contact with Glasgow momentarily, seeing her reflection on the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses, she took a small sip of the drink and her face immediately tightened in disgust with her eyes cinched and watering. Her throat was seared from the swallow like it was liquid fire plating her insides until it reached her belly, feeling like a smoldering campfire had been lit inside her. Glasgow laughed at the twisting of her entire expression into one that spoke of a volume of committed mistakes before coming to stand just beside her.

"Guess we gotta work on the bad part, hmn, my good girl?" His question came out mildly choked through the dying of his laughter as he sat against the table edge, just beside her, and slung his free arm around her shoulders—pulling her in close to his side with his body weight dropped comfortably against her.

She felt a hot blush creep up her neck at their proximity but didn't feel particularly sheepish about his forward gesture, and so put her own weight back on a hand behind her with her other coming about his waist to keep herself close. She looked out over the whole of Megaton once more, and aside from the drunken singing of the Brass Lantern below, and the rowdy jeering and chatter from Moriarty's Saloon further down the walk, the night was quiet and empty as the pathways were cleared of any town residents or nomads that arrived that day.

Winona rested her head against Glasgow's shoulder below a patch of mismatched fabric tacked on with a square of metal safety pins, and listened to the thrumming of his heart in his chest. It was slow, calm, causing her eyes to draw shut as she pressed closer to him with the bottle pinned between her thighs.

"...How's Sumner feel about this?" She asked curiously in a mild, playful tone. "Isn't this fraternizing with your target or something?"

"Like I said," When she felt his chin brush her temple and a curl of her red hair tucked away from her forehead, Winona finally opened her eyes and looked up at him. "What daddy Toby ain't know won't hurt the kiddies... n's not like we ain't been here before, angel eyes."

Winona knew that to be true, as she recalled some memories of Glasgow's hands upon her body and how his sharp lips were skimming up her inner leg tormentingly slow—this was a dance they had before, when she was timid about going through with it... and now it seemed like something
so trivial to be afraid of in light of everything that happened in Andale. Something in her changed since that morning three days ago, and she wasn't afraid of the intimacy anymore.

Perhaps she shouldn't have been there with Glasgow that night, or allowing him to get this close for a second time as her feelings conflicted with her mind, apprehensive and yet also desperate to play this game of tag with someone like a dangerous, rough, and callous mercenary with a too charming smile; she knew she probably should've put more thought into it but she was so tired of the thinking and the fear that she didn't want to care anymore.

She wanted the distraction from her thoughts, no matter if it was 5 minutes or 5 hours.

She wanted something aside from reuniting with her dad that proved to her that pain could be worthwhile.

She wanted oblivion—the delicious destruction that wouldn't tear her down but rebuild her anew.

Winona let him in. She let in the dangerous, rough, and callous mercenary with the too charming smile in to let him ruin her.

When Glasgow's mouth lowered toward her, she felt the hot exhale of his smoky breath in her hair as his lips skimmed over the shell of her ear teasingly, and the jolt of sudden intimate connection came like lightning striking through her. His rough fingers followed in a second devastating attack, having pressed against her bare hip under her leather jacket, and pushed their way into her pants where a single finger stole her breath from her. Her core ached fiercely at the contact as a throbbing heat invaded the apex of her thighs along with Glasgow's probing fingers.

He was moving too fast but she wasn't bothered enough to stop him.

"Feel like playin' behind daddy's back, baby doll?" He inquired in a lustful purr and she felt her earlobe being captured between teeth, scraping gently as it was released with the flicker of his tongue stud against it.

She couldn't help the hungered response of her body as her eyes rolled back in pleasure when his mouth migrated down the side of her throat, expertly using his lips and teeth to explore her most sensitive of spots until possessive marks marred her dark skin in purple bites. His fingers continued working themselves into her and she couldn't help but rock her hips against them, trying to find a friction that would make her toes curl and her eyes roll back, but she was only working against herself as Glasgow took his time. The whisky bottle was forgotten from her loosening thighs and she dropped it distractedly to have it spill over the edge to waste, her head only filled with the repeating instinctual thoughts of desiring more, of taking whatever he was willing to give even if she had to beg for it.

Winona's eyes opened only to look back up into his face as she gripped the front of his duster under a trembling hand, his chin meeting her forehead as she pulled herself in closer to his body, and he muttered words of praise to her; "feel good, baby? Lookit yer cute li'l face, now das' a pretty picture..." She cupped his jaw with his radiation burns collected under her splayed fingers and used the leverage to guide his mouth to hers forcefully, claiming the pleased smile on his face with the smashing of her lips to his, and wanted nothing more than to take the damn grin off his face under the gyration of her hips.

Winona watched Glasgow as he sat up beside her on the bed of Charles Burke and examined the bite marks that riddled his shoulders, where she inflicted her teeth upon them to bare down through the tearing pain; he smirked back at her with a challenging glint in his eyes, like he was silently
promising to pay her back for the blood she drew, and then his weight left the mussed bed as he
gave a satisfied sigh to go and find the bathroom. His heavily tattooed and scarred back had been
turned into clawed road maps and she recalled when she created every one of them: the rows of
teeth that marred his shoulders to keep from sobbing, as the pain became so intense she thought she
was being torn apart inside; the places where she broke off nails to plant under his ripped skin,
when the agony of him driving into her became too great; it was all moments where she tried
finding somewhere to anchor herself onto because it was probably one of the most painful things
she had ever endured.

Back in the vault, when the girls became young women and began to understand their place as
child bearers, they were told that it was as much their civic duty to please their husbands in bed as
it was to give him children—they were told that it'd be a wonderful experience because it was with
someone they would begin a new life with—they were warned that yes it would hurt, but not too
badly, and that was a normal thing to happen and to not be alarmed because it would pass quickly,
as to not distract them from their duties as new wives.

But from the dark purple bites that riddled the tops of her small breasts, Glasgow's semen drying
where it was spilled on her stomach and between her thighs, and the pain that pulsed between her
legs—this wasn't normal. Winona barely enjoyed herself outside of knowing that she satisfied him,
but even that small victory felt hollow when she felt that she hadn't satisfied him as a woman but as
a tool—like she was only used as a means to his own euphoric finish, and he paid little attention to
her asking that he be gentler or to go slower so she could adjust properly.

For all those years, where she conjured fantasies in her mind of rugged bad boys bending her over
workbenches, of criminally trying to push Freddie into having sex with her, of feeling her body
starving and almost rabid for physical attention—Winona thought that she was ready for when she
was finally able to have sex for the first time.

She wasn't ready at all.

Glasgow came back into the room, still naked with a cloth dabbing at the blood crusting on his
shoulders, and Winona tried not to look at his uncut manhood where the stains of her virginal blood
and his semen coated it. She sat up and bundled the blankets to her to clean herself off, and if she
wasn't so emotionally preoccupied, she would've considered leaving the bed that way for Burke to
clean up the next time he was in Megaton, just to spite him.

Now she only wanted to destroy all evidence of their fucking.

"Got me fuckin' good, angel eyes," Glasgow crowed as if proud and sat beside her, still dabbing at
his shoulders. "Didn't mind bein' yer scratchin' post but shit. Yer sum kinda swingin' kitten with
them claws."

Winona continued watching him with the now soiled sheets bundled around her waist. Shifting
under the covers, she moved closer to him to take the towel he found and collected up the blood
that still seeped from his wounds, dabbing gently.

"Ya ain't gotta be all gentle with me, now." He teased at her ministrations with his bad eye peeking
back at her over his shoulder. A hand settled on her thigh with his thumb brushing over her knee
and she nearly jumped at the contact. "Look fuckin' good 'nuff t'eat, jus' like that... look'it my sweet
lil' doll."

Glasgow planted a puckered kiss to her cheek and she almost smiled at him despite the turmoil that
she felt. Although she wanted to voice her concerns between his roughness and her lack of
preparedness in having her first time, she decided that they were things to be kept to herself.
Winona doubted that it would've been any better, any gentler, or any prettier.

None of it felt right. She felt a disconnect between the way he roughly treated her and how silly and sweet he was now.

"Don't you sweet talk me you bitey bastard," She joked and he laughed in response with an arm hooking around her to pull her close and he kissed over the marks he left across her chest, as if it would soothe their sting. It was the first time he kissed her since burying his fingers inside her up on the walkway, just some 20 minutes before they went stumbling down to Mister Burke's house for privacy.

"Thought 'ya liked teeth." He remarked and the moment she felt his canines graze her flesh, as if preparing them to take another bite out of her, she flinched away with a startled giggle.

She quickly realized that she didn't feel as okay as she made herself sound, but she kept the smile on her face.

"Shit, 'ya wore me out. M'fuckin' starving." Glasgow commented as he got back up from the bed and disappeared to the stairwell to find his discarded pants to pull them back on, up to his hips. "You hungry?"

"I could eat," The inventor lied as she remained sitting on the bed and pulled the sheets back to her, bracing it over her breasts so she wouldn't be so exposed. She didn't want to be vulnerable anymore, the time had come to pass.

"Gunna grab sum grub." He didn't bother cleaning himself up before tucking his cock into his pants and zipping them up. Soon finding his thrown away shirt, he yanked it on over his head and marched down the stairs to find his boots, his matted dreads spilling down his back.

Winona waited for him to come back upstairs and kiss her. She waited for him to call from downstairs to ask what she wanted to eat—she waited for him to at least tell her goodbye and that he'd be back soon with dinner.

All she had waited for was the open and shut of the front door as Glasgow left without another word back to her. She laid back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling for some time with a broken expression on her face, unable to swallow down the hand that felt like it was clawing its way up her throat—and she couldn't tell if it was a scream or a sob. Despite the soiled nature of the bedding, she pulled it up to her chin and bundled them all around her naked body, protecting every inch of bruised skin from the stinging air, wanting to shower but being unable to move, as she cocooned herself in her regretful decisions.

She should've had more power in the situation. She should've been more demanding instead of meekly asking him to slow down. She shouldn't have let him in and listened to the warning signs in her head. She should have waited for a more appropriate partner.

She became the doting housewife that was only there to please the husband, and the realization struck her with such an unforgiving blade in her belly that she felt like she was doubled over and unable to breathe.

The pillow was barely enough to suffocate her maddened cries.
Butch stood in the hallway outside the atrium, kicked back against the wall with a boot planted on the metal as his other upheld his weight, trying to draw out the enjoyment of his final cigarette. It was his last pack until he could 'borrow' another from the cigarette dispenser in the game room. His eyes were turned upon Amata, who stood before him at the parallel wall, attempting to fix her loosened ponytail with her good hand as her other remained at her side. He'd offer to help fix it for her because \textit{damn}, it was painful having to watch her try and hide the discomfort in her face as she pulled on the sensitive scabbed wounds on her scalp. The only reason why he \textit{didn't} offer was because he figured she'd only give a disgusted response about his hands being on her, and would insist that she could do it all on her own.

"Think we shoulda stayed back at the clinic instead of goin' to this stupid meeting. Anythin' the Overseer's gotta say ain't worth our time." He argued blandly.

"But you heard what he said in the announcement this morning. Any resident that doesn't come will be given docked rations \textit{for a week}—that means less supplies for the clinic." She replied as a twinge of momentary pain overcame her face as she gently tried pulling her hair scrunchie free with the one hand. Her other came to help but it caused more discomfort to come to her face. Her arm had healed thanks to Lucy's resetting it and a couple of stimpaks those few weeks ago, but it was still stiff and uncomfortable at times. Another half plunger went into her arm before they left the infirmary but the massive needle only made her shoulder ache.

"Haven't got any word on whether or not he got cuffed for what he did t'ya. Not even Susie knows where that big-beaked prick is." He tried to reason as his cigarette dangled from between his lips.

"We can't trust a word that comes out of her mouth, Butch, you know that," Amata's dark eyes met his from across the hall as she finally got her hair free on her own, where it spilled down her shoulders in long tendrils and framed her thinning face. "After what happened to Gomez—? She's not in the clinic as much and is always skittish or off in her own head. There's something going on with her."

"Hey, I said we coulda kicked her out if 'ya think she's hiding somethin', but \textit{you} said no."

"I \textit{told} you already why I can't do that," She huffed indignantly. "If we make her leave, Christine'll go with her and so would Freddie. We need all the help we can get to keep the infirmary running for Lucy, and if we lose them, we lose all their resources—we lose Freddie's tabs on Security—and we can't afford to lose anybody else or to separate more than we already have. The vault's too unstable for that right now."

Her response came with small hisses of pain as she brushed all of her hair over one shoulder with her hair tie around her wrist, struggling to do a simple braid. Lucy typically would pin Amata's hair
"You're killin' me over here, Almodovar," he groaned as he killed his cigarette in one last, drawn out drag and then flicked the butt away carelessly, exhaling the smoke through his nose. "Turn 'round."

Amata shot him with a disapproving sneer, as he predicted. "You are not touching me—"

"You walk in there lookin' like that, your Overseer daddy's gunna take one look at 'ya and make sure you're not walking back outta that atrium with the rest of us." Butch snapped in frustration. "So shuddup and gimme the damn hair tie."

Her mouth clamped itself into a tight line with her brow crinkling into a reluctant expression, glaring weakly back at him. After several seconds of silence and the exasperated look he gave of "c'mon, I ain't got all day!", she finally lifted her arm, allowing him to take the hair tie off her wrist himself. She then turned around to let him start his work, which he tried to do as quickly and as gently as his trained hands would allow.

Within the wispy tendrils of her thick, dark hair, Butch could see the portions of scabbing that overtook parts of her scalp where chunks of her hair had been pulled out by Wally. It wasn't the first time he'd seen these injuries of hers, as on the day of the attack when she was asleep, Lucy watched over him as he washed and cleaned her hair (since that's what he was trained to do as a barber, after all)—but this was the first time he could clearly see the injuries; there was heavy flaking amidst her discolored red and yellow scalp in places where skin had gone with the hair, and if Lucy hadn't been around, he could easily imagine that her head would've looked a hell of a lot worse... it probably could've gotten infected.

It didn't take Lucy, or any kind of doctor, however, to know that Amata wouldn't regrow hair in those places. Even Butch could see that—and he was angry for her. Sometimes just looking at her and thinking about how Wally had so viciously brutalized her made him sick to his stomach. He was especially sick now that he got a front row view of her injuries.

"...Thanks," Amata responded quietly, her gratitude watered down in the shame she felt in having to get help from her childhood bully.

"Don't mention it." He shook his head with a cool look and glanced back to the atrium door. "...'Ya sure you won't change your mind—?"

"Positive." She replied, without much positivity, and stalked towards the door with her eyes averted from his own in her embarrassment.

Butch hesitantly followed her to the door with the anxious thought of saying 'fuck this' and returning to the clinic to be with his mom. She was still recuperating between her seizure some days beforehand and her withdrawals, and even though she was on the up and up everyone agreed that it'd be in her best interests to stay behind... even at the risk that they'd lose her portion of water resources. He knew he couldn't abandon Amata, given the state she was in, and especially with her father being on the other side of the door.

Butch knew she was nervous seeing him again and in a mandatory meeting no less. They both knew it wouldn't be a happy reunion.

The atrium door rolled open to welcome their arrival, where the two were immediately gusted by a cool air and they both audibly sighed in relief as they walked into the chamber. On the upper
walkways, he could hear the air vents rattling and clanking loudly, strained to the point of overload as it tried propelling chilled air into the massive room. He was amazed at the fact that the air conditioning even worked this far from the malfunctioning temperature core, but he was too overjoyed by finally having cold air to question it. The AC was probably the only thing that would make the mandatory meeting bearable, because when he looked about the room, everyone he saw looked exhausted and uncleanly. The last allowed shower day was two days ago and the atrium had a faint stink of musty sweat and body odor in thanks to it.

Lucy, from the back row of chairs, waved silently at them to come and join her, gesturing politely to the two seats she saved off to her right side. As he and Amata walked over, he looked over the heads of the few people who showed up; the Overseer was, predictably, on a podium at the front of the room shuffling about note cards and mumbling to himself, with his middle-aged secretary, Mrs. Wheeler, on a typewriter beside him; a crying Mrs. Gomez was sitting in the very front row with Freddie beside her; the remaining survivors in the Mack-Armstrong family tree (Allen, Mrs. Mack and Susie, Beatrice with her adoptive son, Steve, Stanley, and Christine) took up the two middle most rows; the Wilkins siblings of Jim and Janice sat in the row just behind them looking like they hadn't slept in days; Mr. Brotch was by himself another two rows back, fiddling on his Pip-Boy; Richard and Debbie Horowitz (Dolly's folks) sat just beside the teacher with a seat between them because the couple could barely stand each other, without Dolly amongst them; Chip Taylor was on his lonesome with Emile and Lance from the funeral parlor talking quietly with him; and finally, there was himself, Amata, and Lucy in the back most row. Several other unnamed folks that Butch couldn't immediately recognize or name were dotted about the crowd.

The one person he hadn't expected to see was Tom Holden in a middle chair of the crowd, right behind Freddie and his inconsolable mother.

Thought the Holdens got blitzed by Security, he wondered with some surprise. He was told through the living quarters grapevine that both Tom and Mary Holden died the night Winona escaped, as the two tried using the ensuing chaos to storm the door. They didn't know it was being patrolled and a planned ambush had been made to catch Winona, not them. He remembered telling Wally that they were dead and no one was saying which trigger happy Security guard had done it.

Considering the fact that Mary wasn't sitting with him, Butch decided that it was probably safe to say that only half of that rumor was true.

Otherwise, the only other people in the room were Officers Richards and Park walking on either side of the chamber in full riot gear. He knew that there were some guards still kicking around and alive, and probably still guarding the door with Wolfe on the water tap, but he was shocked nonetheless by all the empty chairs in front of him—like whoever set them out had underestimated just how many survivors were left. When social events were held in the atrium back in the day, it had always been packed full of people—and when there were funerals or mandatory vault-wide meetings, the floor was made up with rows and rows of chairs with a body for every single seat. Today, though, there weren't enough chairs out to even make up what he roughly thought was a miniscule fraction of the vault population just those few months ago.

He was crushed by the harsh realization that they really lost that many people.

Butch knew a lot of people died, but to actually see a number—or, lack thereof—associated with it was haunting. He took one last survey of the room before Amata recaptured his attention by tugging on his jumpsuit sleeve, gesturing that he should probably sit down because Officer Park was eyeballing him suspiciously for just hovering over his seat. He sneered at the guard before plopping down into his chair, and just as he did, a door on the far side of the atrium, behind the Overseer on his podium, rolled open.
It was Hannon Sr., Paul's father, dressed in the same riot gear as Officers Richards and Park with a protective visored helmet on his head, a heavy bullet proof vest, and an extendable nigh stick on one hip with a holstered pistol on the other. Butch's throat tightened upon seen him. Growing up, if none of the residents had known any better, Paul and his old man could've been mistaken for brothers, nearly twins, and for a moment he thought it had been Paul walking into the room.

He wanted to look away but couldn't. Amata must've noticed, because she gave him a sympathetic look.

"...I never told you," She began in a quiet voice when she noticed where he was looking. "But I'm sorry about Paul—really, I am. He wasn't that bad a guy from what Winnie told me."

"...He was the best damn guy 'round here," He replied with his arms folding over his chest as he slumped back into his chair, trying to seem indifferent despite how hard he had to swallow to remove the ball in his throat. "Bar none."

Amata said nothing else, deciding that it wasn't her place to try and console him as his eyes looked to the opposing atrium door again, seeing Andy follow Hannon Sr. in. The Mr. Handy seemed jovial despite the miserable aura of the paltry crowd as he bid a good afternoon to everyone, and briefly apologized for not having set out snacks or refreshing beverages, as apparently he was barred access to the food locker and his condensation collectors were broken from lack of maintenance. None of the residents said anything in return, with most only shaking their heads as they looked down at their laps, trying to avoid eye contact with the Overseer at the front.

When Butch craned his neck, he saw two people lingering in the doorway and talking from where Andy and Paul's father had entered. He couldn't tell who they were from how far away they stood, but finally one of them strut out into the light of the atrium. Momentarily looking away in disinterest, Butch's eyes had almost immediately snapped back to them in shock, having barely recognized them on first glance until his brain kick started in a snapshot of realization.

It was Dolly, dressed in a collared, long sleeved button up dress with a knee length hemline. It was Security's navy blue and each shoulder of the dress had the embroidered patch of the Vault Security Personnel, which was the Vault 101 door with crossed fountain pens behind it. She was also wearing nude stockings, clunky black heels, a narrow black tie, and a black belt. What had initially surprised him just as much as her clothes was her make up; it was much more modest than usual, and her typically fluffed up curls were swept back into a professional chignon bun. She looked like a textbook secretary, and Butch would've bought it if he didn't remember all the nights Dolly got sloppy drunk, or how much makeup she always lacquered onto her face, among her other provocative behaviors.

What the actual fuck—? What's with the get up? He grimaced while squinting at her, but it was now more in fury than disbelief.

He knew Dolly would never dress like that willingly, and even though it'd been some time since the two last spoke, he didn't think she'd go to the Overseer's side after everything that happened! After all the underhanded fuckery the old bastard pulled over the last year; after he hid up in his office for weeks while everyone else struggled to survive and lost family and friends; after all Butch did to instill in her the ability to see that the tyrannical asshole wasn't to be trusted; and how angry she had been that Wally was 'betraying the Tunnel Snakes' by wanting to sign up for the Security program—?

She was now Vault Security Personnel?

Seeing his ex-flame like that made him absolutely sick to his damn stomach, but just before he
could look away from her, he watched as the person she had been talking to out in the side hall followed her into the atrium. He was wearing a pressed suit in the same Security blue as Dolly's dress, a black tie over a white button down, and a Security Officer rank medal was pinned to the breast of his suit.

It was Wally with an impassive expression and a new flat top hair cut.

When the shock dissipated from his chest, he felt his blood beginning to boil and it felt like it could've seared his heart from the inside and out. He moved to get up out of his seat in a rather aggressive and swift manner, wanting to bolt across the room to tackle the piece of shit to the floor and pound Wally's teeth up into that twisted brain of his, to call for Dolly to get away from him, but a hand latched onto his arm kept him from getting up.

"Don't," Amata warned in a mutter. "I can't afford to lose you, either."

"Come visit me in prison if 'ya'd miss me so bad," he snapped and tried to get up from his seat again, only to be forcibly pulled down by her again with a firm look.

"No." She muttered again, more harshly this time as Lucy took Amata's other hand into hers, squeezing gently to comfort the younger girl.

When he glanced down to her hand still holding his sleeve, he saw her fingers shaking just enough for him to notice, although it looked like she was trying her damnedest to hide it. He looked back into her face to see a fleeting glint of unimaginable fear cross her eyes before she steeled her jaw, forcing herself to seem unafraid but her hands still shook no matter how hard she tried to stop it.

Amata didn't want him to stay to keep his rations—she wanted him to stay to protect her because he was the only one who would. She was absolutely blindsided by Wally's sudden appearance, even more than he had been, and he could tell that she was terrified.

So Butch stayed in his seat, wordlessly telling her that he wasn't going to fight her on it with a begrudging scoff, and looked back toward the front. Dolly and Wally were talking again, her face twisted slightly as if whatever they were talking about was getting her incensed, but Wally's own expression remained indifferent as he tried to talk over her blabbing. At that moment, Wally's eyes crossed the room to connect with Butch's hateful gaze, nearly startling the Tunnel Snake leader out of his grimace, but his old serpent brother's face didn't change at all despite registering that Butch was in the room... and that Amata was sitting right next to him, still clutching his arm.

He expected Wally to glare back, to smirk in some 'I got you right where I want you' smug way of his, to be alarmed that Amata was in the same room as her father and could tell him about the assault, or to even mention to Dolly that Butch was there as they quietly spoke—but his demeanor didn't change in the slightest. He didn't glare back, he didn't smirk, he didn't look panicked, and Dolly didn't turn around. His face remained stony and cold, and soon, his eyes felt like they were boring right through Butch's head.

He had to stifle the chill that ran through him, because the look Wally gave him reminded him of Allen Mack with that sociopathic, emotionless stare he'd get on his face sometimes; like he was thinking about treating you like how he treated his wife, Gloria.

The only difference was that Wally was completely unreadable as he turned back to Dolly.

The Overseer interrupted Butch's concerned thoughts by tapping a single finger on the podium's microphone head to test it's volume. A shrill feedback echoed over the silent atrium, ringing off the walls before settling once again to silence with an eerie technical hum. He then cleared his throat
and spoke into the microphone while looking down every few words to reference the small cue cards he had been reading earlier.

"I thank you all for your presence at this very important meeting, given the recent changes that have overcome our vault... but I believe that today will be a fortuitous day, not an unhappy one, as I have hope that this meeting will mark the day where we stood together in unity—in our collective grief—and instead of giving up and retreating, we came together stronger than we've ever been before."

Butch glanced to Amata to see her frowning mildly as distrustful thoughts whittled themselves away into disgust in her eyes. She didn't like the overly gleeful tone of the Overseer as he spoke, like his optimism was being utilized as a tool to gloss over all the shit that had taken place.

The Tunnel Snake would be genuinely surprised if the Overseer even mentioned the death toll in a genuine fashion.

"I understand that our way of life has been drastically disrupted for the last few months and has been rife with new problems, which we were ill-prepared in combating amidst the confusion. We have scattered and forgotten what life here has duteously instilled within us—loyalty, integrity, brevity—and that being said, I propose a regrouping, and implore each and every one of you as a resident of our beloved vault to come together, with myself as your valiant Overseer, to make positive change that will pave the way to our better tomorrow. A tomorrow that we constantly strive for! A tomorrow where there will be harmony amongst all of us, where we can reclaim the life that we once led with pride."

Butch couldn't help but snort out loud in disbelief. Luckily, the Overseer and the patrolling guards didn't hear him.

"So I hereby begin this meeting by calling upon our first order of business. It has come to my attention that the clinic has gone for some time without a reputable doctor housing our injured and sick, and while I must commend this unnamed person for their work, I—unfortunately—cannot allow this unqualified practice to go on any longer in light of the unfortunate passing of our beloved Officer Herman Gomez—"

A strangled sob pierced through the Overseer's words just as he took pause, and most everyone turned to look at the newly widowed Mrs. Gomez as she covered her mouth with a handkerchief, trying to stifle the sound of her weeping. Freddie put his arm around her comfortingly, looking close to crying himself.

"...We all share in your sorrow the loss of such a dedicated and hardworking member of our vault, Mrs. Gomez. I offer you my deepest of condolences, as well as an honorary pin in remembrance of Officer Gomez's work, which will be sent to your residency by this afternoon. He went above and beyond the call of his duties, and with that, he has the gratitude of us all."

Butch had been watching Lucy discreetly as the Overseer spoke of Mr. Gomez, especially in his vague implication that he had died because Lucy was under qualified as a doctor—but her expression remained stoic throughout that portion of the speech. She held her head high and didn't allow the sorrow in her eyes to blossom outward to the rest of her face with her jaw set. He was pissed that the Overseer's 'gratitude' for the dozens of lives she singlehandedly saved was given without publicly naming her, like it was meant to be a passive aggressive slight. Lucy didn't have to help anyone, but she did because someone had to and she wasn't going to stand by and let people die.
If she didn't fuckin' do shit, who knows what woulda happened to your precious little girl, jackass, he seethed to himself.

"As the Overseer, I hereby relinquish this unnamed resident as temporary vault physician, and reward the title to our new doctor—who has passed the appropriate testing and was recently awarded with a qualified physician's license—our very own, Andy." He gestured to the Mr. Handy that was at podium side, who practically looked like he was going to blow a bolt on his casing in his excitement. "Congratulations Andy on your new position."

"Thank you, Overseer, sir! I will not let you down!" He responded cheerily as a hushed murmur fell over the crowd in shock, which the Overseer was obviously trying to ignore. Andy was known to be incredibly clumsy for a 200 year old robotic handyman advertised to carry about his work with utmost precision and elegance, and although the Mr. Handy meant well, he was about as disastrous as an unstable reactor.

The crowd, regardless, clapped half-heartedly when the Overseer did for Andy. Butch was astounded at the fact that everyone was going along with it—that no one was so far standing up, shouting at the Overseer how useless he had been in his duties, and that this wasn't the time to call for some fluff meeting but to do action. The only thing that kept Butch from being that guy was Amata's hand on his arm still, reminding him that she needed him to keep his head cool for her and not do anything outrageously stupid.

All he had to do was look at Wally and his jaw steeled itself shut, though the tightness in his fists remained—his fingers itching, aching, to crack him in the mouth.

"And while we are on the topic of a brighter future and recent job openings, many positions amongst our Vault Security and Personnel Program have become available including, but not limited to, starting level Officers, ordinance maintenance, victim advocates, and varying peacekeeping roles. Applicants are expected to undergo rigorous evaluations to prove compatibility with such roles. We are also opening positions for two pest exterminators in order to subdue our radroach infestation—duties include dismantling nests and proper handling in exterminating the vermin and their brood. Lastly, there is a variety of admirable jobs available in maintenance and ration control."

The Overseer turned away to clear his throat into his fist, and then turned back, shuffled about some paper work, and then droned on their contents while gripping the outer edges of his podium.

"Prior experience is unnecessary in order to qualify for all of these openings. Some applications will state that the position you are applying for will be voluntary. Some positions offer a temporary increase in water and food rations, and all other positions are currently unpaid until further notice where candidates will be reinstated the full amount according to their service hours. Those who have retained their prior jobs are eligible for occupation relocation as well... and as example, I introduce you to Miss Dorothy Horowitz as our new Vault Security Patch Seamstress, and Mister Wallace Mack as an entry-level Security Officer. Congratulations to you both on your newfound positions, let's all give them both a deserved round of applause."

He gestured back to Dolly and Wally, who stood with Andy and Hannon Sr. still, and though Dolly charmingly smiled and waved, Wally didn't move at all aside from bowing his head as the crowd rose with half-hearted applause again. Butch gaped in shocked disbelief, not realizing that his jaw had probably fallen into his lap, upon confirmation that Wally was indeed inducted into the Security Program.

How the fuck did that happen?
When he looked to Amata, her face was completely drained of color, turning her typically bronzed complexion chalky and ashen. She looked like she was about to vomit as her hand shook more on his forearm, gripping it tightly without realizing as she struggled with breathing normally, and in her eyes, he saw the flash bangs of painful memories implode inside her thoughts. His own hands were tightened over the knee pads of his jumpsuit as he struggled to remain seated, wanting now more than ever to wallop his ex-brother in arms. He didn't care how many people were there, he didn't care that there were three guards standing as witness. Butch genuinely wanted him to suffer.

"For the job openings I've mentioned today, or to see any other openings that I haven't mentioned, please come to my office later on today to get an application. All applications will be filled there, with the expectation that an immediate review can take place—and candidates who fail to meet specific requirements to a position have the possibility of being automatically assigned to an open occupation where their skills are better met. Those who are currently unemployed for whatever reason, whether it be from termination, suspension, community service, or retirement prior to current unfortunate events must also report to my office for job placement. Those who currently hold careers in positions that will be temporarily suspended, as they will temporarily have no place amongst our new regimen, must also report to my office for job relocation. If you're unsure of whether or not your current job qualifies under the latter, please set a private appointment with my secretary for discussion. Now, does anyone have any questions that went unanswered about these openings, applications, or interviews?"

He gazed about the room to see no one raising their hand in question. Most people still held their heads low, with their chins toward their laps and their eyes downcast to the floor. If it wasn't for the air vents above still struggling to chill the room, or for Andy's jets that kept him aloft, the room would've been filled with deafening silence. His ears still rung, however, as they pulsed with the pounding of his heart and the rapid fire thoughts that shot through his mind.

"Anyone? No? Excellent, then as Overseer I hereby call this meeting to an end—"

"You're not planning on addressing anything else, Overseer?" A teacherly voice resonated over the crowd. Just by the condescending voice alone, Butch knew it was Mr. Brotch before he even stood up from his chair. "Not the exponential death toll? How about the residents who are daily getting heatstroke from the broken temperature control or are dehydrated from the water rationing, and the clinic running out of the appropriate supplies to treat them? What about the dwindling food supplies—the criminals going around and stealing rations from their neighbors?"

"Mr. Brotch, your tone will not be stood for here—"

"Then I'd suggest you take a seat and get comfortable if that's the case, but it seems like all you've been doing these last few months is sitting and doing nothing. We've all got questions for you, Overseer, and I think it's about high time you properly address them and make actual decisions and change rather than bullshit your way through a joke of a speech like the one you just gave." He flippantly replied with his arms crossing tightly over his chest, unwavering despite the simmering glare the Overseer shot him with.

"Edwin's right!" Lance agreed as he shot up out of his chair, and Butch noticed that his coworker, Emile, sat beside him with a mortified look on his face. "Me and Emile've been clocking overtime for weeks to process all the dead bodies! I've got urns with no family to claim them, the vault mausoleum hasn't been maintained with how much it's grown in such a short period of time, the funeral records are a God damn mess, and the incinerator's about to run empty with all the energy cuts you've made! I've still got another roster of bodies to deal with, and your solution is to talk
about fucking job openings like a salesman trying to sell a used couch? There probably isn't even enough people left to fill up every opening!"

The Overseer tried to keep a collected demeanor about him, but his noble expression was cracking to show an expression of disdain. "Mr. Santos, I assure you, the well being of the residents is of utmost importance to me as your Overseer."

"If that's true then why won't you help find my little boy?" A female resident at the front called but she didn't stand up, sounding teary with a broken voice. "I've come to your office every day asking for your help, but you won't answer my calls! You've enlisted your Security to turn me away every single time while you hide in your nice office! We know you have almost the entire Security program guarding the door like it's a damn bank vault, but you—! You won't suspend even one just to help me find my son!"

"We need more rations, how'm I supposed to take care of my family like this?" Allen Mack yelled angrily and Butch saw several pairs of disbelieving eyes swivel towards him, with grimacing looks that read as 'the bastard has some fucking nerve'.

"Overseer, the residents should be allowed the right to bear arms so we can protect ourselves from the roaches. Two exterminators isn't enough! Downstairs is a mess, too, and if we don't deal with the destabilizing reactor, the failing filtration systems, or even our last water chip we'll have to leave the vault whether we want to or not." Stanley argued from beside his son-in-law, Allen. Some people gasped in complete shock of this, murmuring to one another in horror.

"Mr. Armstrong, I implore you not to cause alarm amongst your fellow residents in this manner!" The Overseer insisted, seething that Stanley had said such a thing out loud.

"Well maybe the door should be opened!" Jim Wilkins yelled with his fist in the air. "We can't survive down here like this anymore, if we try, there might not be any of us lef—"

"Open the door? Are you fucking stupid?" Allen Mack snapped back at Jim with a furious glare. "We open the door, we'll be dead for sure!"

"And what makes you think we'll fair any better this way?" Janice, Jim's typically timid sister, stood up with a frown back at Allen. "Vault 101 was designed for a population about 4 times the size of ours, but look at who's left, Allen. Increasing rations isn't going to help anyone at this point, it'll only dwindle our supplies faster."

"You're either deaf or stupid because I wasn't talking to you! Did it sound like I was talking to you?" He snapped at her and she balked in surprise, causing Jim to grimace and shove Allen into Stanley in his spit of anger.

"Don't you ever talk to my sister that way!" He barked. "Just because your family tolerates that kind of bullshit out of you doesn't mean the rest of us will!"

"Everyone, everyone!" The Overseer called over the crowd while banging his flattened hand on the podium edge like a gavel, the loud pounding ineffective in reigning in anyone's attentions or tempers. Almost the whole room began arguing with each other about what the right thing to do for the vault would be; to open the door, to not open the door, to allocate more people to maintenance or the water purifier, to increase the rations anyways, to close down whole portions of the vault and use only what they needed, to just abandon 101 completely. Chaos seemed to be building all around Allen Mack and Jim Wilkins, who were at the heart of the growing tension.

"You fucking lay a hand on me again, Wilkins, I'll shove my foot so far up your ass—" Allen
began to threaten.

"You're going to threaten me? Oh, please, try! I'm begging you to try—kicking your sorry ass'll be the best thing that's happened to me in the last three months!" Jim challenged with his fists clenched at his sides.

As the two continued arguing, looking like their yelling was about to progress from a shoving match to a full on knockdown drag out, Butch watched as Tom Holden struggled to get up out of his seat—producing a cane that had been leaning on the chair beside him to help him get up to his feet. His full weight was leaning on it as if he completely depended on it to keep him upright, and when he shifted, Butch could tell that there was something wrong with his right leg as he tried to keep weight off it. Tom calmly rose his hand straight up towards the ceiling, like he was waiting to be called upon by the Overseer to speak frankly, and Butch almost laughed at how absurd it looked given the current escalating situation, where almost everyone around them was arguing.

Until someone in the crowd had shrieked "Gun!" as Tom fired off a single shot into the air. The resounding poomb was deafening as the jarring sound bounced back off the atrium walls, and the wild shot shattered the glass of the light up sign that stood above the Overseer's office window—the lights struggled to stay on before flickering out soon after, no longer highlighting the message of Thank you, Overseer!

Butch reacted quickly, putting a hand against the back of Amata's neck to shove her down to the floor, using the leverage to keep her head down, and she only complied given the fact that she completely froze up. Lucy quickly followed, having been pulled down to the ground with Amata, their hands still intertwined, and Butch knelt beside the two women with his eyes peering over the chairs of the row in front of them, staring after Tom Holden in complete terror as people much closer to him scrambled away, shoving over chairs and people to garner distance from his revolver. Others stood, frozen in shock like Amata had been, their bodies unable to make a physical response of escape with their eyes unable to leave the weapon in his hand.

Tom lowered the revolver, his thumb cocking back the hammer shakily as he did, and he pointed it right at the Overseer. With wide eyes, he rose his hands slightly in the air as shock overtook him, and Amata gasped out "Daddy—!" beside Butch in a breath that barely escaped her lungs. Butch hissed at her to stay low to the ground and not get up until he told her to. He looked back at the door they entered the room from and wondered if they'd be fast enough to escape that way, in case Tom decided that he wanted to shoot as many people as his gun would allow before Security could take him down.

The three mentioned officers—Hannon Sr., Park, and Richards—swiftly surrounded Tom, flanking from behind and at his sides with their weapons drawn and targeting him.

"Tom, drop the gun!" Hannon Sr. yelled. "Drop it!"

"My wife is dead." Tom's voice was cracking and emotional as he ignored the officer, glaring hatefully at the Overseer. "She was shot down! By Security! By the people meant to protect us!"

He went on, unable to reserve himself as his voice heightened in pitch with a starting wave of tears, still pitifully leaning into his cane to keep him upright.

"Mr. Holden—"

"I'll never walk right again! My knee cap's shattered, and they shot Mary dead when she didn't do anything wrong! On your orders! We just wanted to leave—we just wanted to go—to leave this miserable, soul-sucking place behind us!"
"Holden! Put the gun down!" Hannon Sr. barked again with his weapon still drawn on Tom, everyone watching in horror.

"How many other people have you killed, Overseer? How many? One? Two? Half a dozen? A full dozen? We all heard the rumors about Overseer Mayhue! You couldn't squash them out even if you tried—and we all know you tried!"

"Mr. Holden, let's all just calm down, where you and I can speak peacefully about this in private—" The Overseer fearfully insisted, his voice still echoing over the microphone.

"No! A time for peace is over! You had your chance!" Tom shrieked, his voice torn from his grief and he sniffled hard before his volume dropped to a tragic voice. "I wanna know who did it. I wanna know the name of the fucking pig that murdered my wife, and you're going to say his name for everyone to hear! So everyone here knows the name of the bastard that's protecting them!"

The more he talked, the more irate he became, his voice building in volume again but Butch couldn't turn his eyes away. He continued watching on in terror, just as frozen in reaction as everyone else was. Despite his frantic and racing mind, all he could think was God, I don't wanna fuckin' die down here!

"Tom Holden, this is your final warning!" Hannon Sr. demanded again, louder and more urgently this time to show that he was serious about shooting.

"Butch, we have to do something!" Amata cried beside him. "They can't shoot him! We can't let them do this—!"

"No, you have to keep your head down!" Lucy replied fearfully, her arm over Amata's back now to ensure she wouldn't get up, though Butch kept his hand latched onto the nape of her neck to keep her head ducked below the horizon line of chairs.

"I want his name!" Tom screamed desperately. "Say his name! Say it! I wanna know who murdered Mary—"

A loud, rapid succession of pop pop pops from multiple firearms cut off the remainder of Tom's cries, and a red mist spurt from his body in all directions, as he jerked with each pop that cut through the air from the firing pistols of the three officers that surrounded him. They all watched as his body went completely limp and fell back into the row of fold out chairs like he was falling in slow motion, toppling some over as he collapsed bonelessly to the floor with his head cackling hard on the metal tile in such a sickening sound, and Butch didn't watch one more second of it as he was already rushing for the back exit with Lucy and Amata pushed ahead of him.

When they finally reached the door, it drew itself open automatically to allow them to run in without having to stop, and he chanced a glance back over his shoulder; residents were still fleeing in a scatter, the Overseer was yanked off of his podium by Wally to duteously carry him to safety, and Tom Holden was strung out on the ground with his eyes toward the ceiling. Blood pooled out from under him across the floor, each intake of his ragged breathing sounding hollow and bottomless as the bullets that tore through his torso gushed, the revolver forgotten beside him.
Butch watched, mortified and damned, as Holden took one last, struggling, worthless in take of breath before going completely still, his chest unable to rise one more time.

That was the last breath Tom would ever take and he saw it. Butch was there to see this man, who he had known all his life, die so violently right in front of him.

The door silently drew shut, and he was being dragged away by Lucy and Amata to his own safety.

"As your Overseer, I speak with the heaviest of hearts over the events that occurred during this afternoon's meeting. The actions of Tom Holden have certainly shocked us all, but we must remember that the recent death of his wife, Mary Holden, had pushed him to such emotional extremes due to an unfortunately simple matter of misunderstanding. Mary Holden was not killed by a member of our very own Security force, but rather by the forces of recent disrupt around the vault—in fact, the fires some weeks ago—and we are currently investigating into how Tom Holden was given such false and upsetting information. This person will be severely held accountable for Mr. Holden's actions today, as it ultimately led not only to his demise, but to the injury of several vault residents. Security is also investigating into the matter of how Mr. Holden procured a contraband weapon."

"I must also deliver the harrowing news of the current state of Vault 101, which also come in light of the events that occurred today. Martial Law will be put into effect... immediately. As your Overseer, these news are given to you bitterly, but understand that my only duty is to serve the public with utmost care, and to work to the best interests of you all. Sacrifices must be made for our better tomorrow and we will, as we always have, adjust accordingly. I thank you all for your understanding in the face of these uncertain times, and I continue to be grateful for such understanding. Otherwise, nothing changes, and job opportunities will still be open for perusal in my office unless otherwise declared. I thank you again for your understanding and patience—this is your Overseer, signing off."

As the intercom clicked off with a pleasant chime, silence completely radiated from within the clinic, seeming to crawl about the floor and through the back office. Everyone within was quiet, barely able to look at each other as the weight of the situation fell onto their shoulders collectively, worrying them all.

"...Martial law—... what's that mean?" Christine asked from where she sat on the floor beside Susie, who was slumped against the wall with her legs strung out in front of her, her jumpsuit flecked with blood as her cousin cleaned away the red marring her face and hair. Her eyes were dull and rimmed with tears as she hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the toes of her boots. It was Tom's blood.

"It means that residential law and rights will be suspended for the time being, under a militaristic-imposed regime." Mr. Brotch called from the back office.

"Almost done here Mr. Brotch! So very terribly sorry about the gun shot. At least there will be a very enthralling story to tell behind this scar!" Andy cheerily stated.

"Andy, perhaps you shouldn't use that to remove the bullet—" Lucy tried to insist helpfully.

"Mrs. Palmer, I assure you, as the new vault physician I am more than qualified in the proper removal of a bullet from the patient's—"

"OW! Careful back there!"
"Oopsies! My apologies for your posterior, Mr. Brotch!"

"What're we going to do?" Christine frowned as she looked to Amata hopefully. "Amata, there's gotta be some way you can talk your father out of this, right?"

"The only thing that fucker's gunna listen to are the voices in his head at this point," Butch grimaced, leaning against a wall beside his mother's mattress, where she was resting after having eaten. "This is such bullshit!"

"...Hey, Freddie—?" Amata piped up as she looked to the mentioned boy, who was sitting on Susie's other side with a comforting arm around his girlfriend's shoulders. He looked surprised that she was choosing to speak with him, as the two hadn't exchanged much words since Freddie joined them in the infirmary, but it was also the first time she had spoke since the meeting. She looked as shaken as Susie had been, maybe even more so, as she paced the floor while taking steadying breaths to keep from going catatonic.

"Hey—yeah, what's up?" He responded.

"You know a lot about Security, right?"

"...Well, I me- mean—I know some stuff because of my dad—"

"What could happen under martial law? What would Security do? How would they change from before compared to now?"

"I—... w- well, I guess that they wouldn't report to Head of Security anymore. That's Paul's dad. Now Security would have to answer only to the Overseer and do whatever he says, and they can't do anything without his o-kay." He replied a little uncertainly, his brows crinkling as he frowned while thinking.

"Don't they do all that shit already?" Butch grimaced as he occupied his hand in his pocket by thumbing his Toothpick handle, trying to keep his hands from shaking. He couldn't stop replaying over in his head how Tom Holden's face looked as his eyes searched about the room, unaware that he had been shot repeatedly. Amata was looking nervous now by Freddie's response with a hand pressed to her clammy forehead, before it pressed down her cheek and neck and she took in another steadying breath, slowly, where it reached deeply into her and she straightened out her shoulders. A newfound strength returned to her face to steel her pretty features as she took kindling to a small smolder behind her eyes, trying to set it alight to a bonfire of flames.

"Mr. Brotch, are you listening?" Even her voice had changed in those momentary seconds, sounding more resolute and prepared for anything—like she was ready to charge headlong into a fight.

"Like a bloodhound." He replied with a tight, uncomfortable voice from the other room as Andy continued working on his bullet wound, with Lucy watching nervously, all out of sight from the office.

"You said that residential rights would be suspended—that we'll have to follow a 'militaristic-imposed regime'? Care to elaborate?"

"The long version is that we lose our rights to things like freedom of assembly and speech, folks can be detained without charge and arrested without due process—that's suspending habeas corpus—there'll be strictly enforced curfews, random house and body checks can take place for contraband, weapons, food rations and medicine can be taken, so we won't have a right to our
own supplies anymore...but the short version is that we're vulnerable to the forces in power completely because we lose our protection behind the U.S. Constitution and our civil rights."

"So the Overseer would be watching everyone closely?"

"The only way he'd be able to watch you any closer is by gluing his eyes to your backside."

"That ain't leave us much breathin' room," Butch grumbled as he took out his Toothpick and leaned away from the wall as the switchblade was taken out of his pocket. He flicked it open and twirled it between his fingers to keep himself further occupied. "What're we gunna do? What's the game plan?"

At that instance, the infirmary door swept open and in came running Dolly, still in the same Vault Security Personnel uniform she had been wearing earlier during the meeting. Her eyes were frantic and wide until they fell upon Butch, and when she let out a breath of relief, her shoulders dropped as if her body deflated with the exhale. She rushed towards him and flung herself at him with open arms, clinging tightly.

"Baby, I'm so glad you're okay!" She cried, pulling back to look up into his face. "I was so worried —"

"You're not supposed to be here!" Amata grimaced as she pointed at Dolly with an accusing finger, her eyes distrustful and angry.

"I can go wherever the hell I please, I don't take orders from you Little Miss 101!" Dolly snapped back at her heatedly. "I've gotta right to see Butchie and I gotta right to be here if I want!"

"You're outta your God damn mind, is what you are!" Butch exclaimed as she turned back to face him. "What even makes you think I wanna see 'ya? You're on his side now!"

"It ain't like I had a choice," She frowned with her arms recoiling from him to fold tightly over her chest, her face reddening as she grew increasingly upset. "Richard just keeps hoardin' all the rations like the dick he is so I took the seamstress job 'cause mom and I need the extra food and water. We're plannin' on stashing it from him."

"It don't matter, we can't trust 'ya." He frowned with his arms thrown out at his sides. "You needa go —"

"You can't just kick me out, Butch DeLoria!" Dolly yelled as she stomped her foot defiantly with her fists clenched at her sides. "I ain't leavin', and you can't make me!"

"Dolly leave!"

"You moron, aren't'cha listenin'? I'm not goin' anywheres, and further more, you think I trust that motherfucker—? Fat chance! I still know the Overseer's a snake, I ain't dumb!"

"Prove it," Amata demanded harshly as she neared Dolly. "If you're telling the truth, prove it."

Dolly glared back at the Overseer's daughter with a disdainful glint in her eyes before looking back up at Butch, speaking to him solely, if only to give Amata a discreet 'go fuck yourself'.

"You don't trust me? I could be your inside source, like a mole in the spy movies we used t'watch. After the meetin', I overheard the Overseer talkin' to some of the guards—Armstrong and Wolfe, the pricks—he wants'ta take the clinic and kick y'all outta it."
"Why?" Amata interrogated further with the distrustful glint still touching her dark eyes, her brows curled tightly down over them in suspicion.

"He says 'cause he wants a monopoly on all necessary services. He wants t'take over the cafeteria too, and kick out the volunteers so only Security'll pass out rations. He's gunna spread patrol throughout the livin' quarters and halls that go to restricted sectors, like maintenance and near the atrium and his office. He wants the clinic 'cause it meets a middle point between all these places instead of the prison hub. Officer Hannon agreed with him." Dolly explained in a huff with her arms crossed over her chest again as she continued speaking solely to Butch and purposely ignored Amata.

"If he does that, nothing could get by without them knowing about it," Christine remarked a loud from her spot on the floor. "The whole floor would be under their control! They'll have complete control over all the supplies and who gets them."

"It'll force people to comply if they want their services to continue..." Amata muttered to herself in realization, pacing back away from Dolly and Butch with her hands massaging her temples, her eyes shutting. "And at this point, I think most of us who disagree with my father are too exhausted to even try and argue."

"It's a power move." Butch frowned and Amata glanced to him, seeming slightly perturbed. "After that shitshow that happened today—? He's trynna get back control. Puts out Security t'take the shit he wants back 'cause they've got the manpower he needs, he'll get control over everythin' and we'll be singin' "Hail the Overseer" out our asses before the week's over."

"And he still wants whatever's in the safe." Christine piped up. Butch had completely forgotten about the damn safe between his mom's failing heath and other recent developments. "If he takes the infirmary he'll have full access to Dr. Parker's safe!"

"Dolly," Butch turned back to his ex-girlfriend. "Has the Overseer said anythin' boutta safe in here?"

"Not in front'ta me, no." She shook her head. "But I can find out for 'ya. If you let me stick 'round."

The Tunnel Snake glanced back at Amata with a helpless look over his shoulder, relaying to her that if they wanted an inside scope on the Overseer's operations, they had no choice but to let Dolly stay—with her eyes and ears in his personal space, alongside the Security team, they could always be one step ahead of whatever the Overseer's plans were... like a possible assault on the clinic to kick them all out. If the safe was still that important to them, they definitely needed it open.

"I don't know about this." She admitted frankly with a shake of her head.

Butch glanced down at Dolly discreetly before walking over to Amata, grabbing her arm to pull her to the side to talk quietly with her in an unoccupied corner.

"Look, I don't want her here anymore than you do, but if we wanna stay one step ahead of the game, we ain't gotta choice." He replied with some resentment in his voice. "I've dealt with her long 'nough t'keep her on a leash. She'll do whatever I tell her to."

"Can you keep her in check? Can you be sure she won't betray us, Butch?"

He nodded. "She's a pain in the ass but she's too dumb t'stab anyone in the back. Especially me."

Amata glanced back toward Dolly at the door reluctantly, her internal thoughts ticking away over
several moments as she weighed their current options before sighing and shaking her head. She crossed the room back over to Dolly with Butch following close behind to join them.

"Alright fine, you can stay. But the minute you do something suspicious, you're out on your ass, got it?"

Dolly exhaled a snort of a restrained laugh, obviously not at all threatened by Amata as she put a hand on her cocked out hip and raised a painted eyebrow at her. "Sure, whatever. You can threaten me all 'ya want but don't forget I'm doin' 'ya a favor."

Amata shot her with a grudging glare before turning her nose up and way, facing everyone back in the clinic. "Alright, everyone—from now on Dolly's with us as our eyes and ears into the Overseer's office, and if she's right about this, she says that he's planning to take over the infirmary and have us removed. We don't know if they'll do this peacefully or lead a full on assault, but we'll have to prepare for the worst, just in case. If he gains this post he can take full authority over all of our goods and services and we can't let that happen. If we do—... the vault's unstable enough."

"So what're we gunna do, Almodovar?" Butch questioned as he stood with Dolly. Her arm snaked around his waist to press herself close to him, and he, hesitantly, allowed her to without a grumbling word.

"...I think we have to open the door," She responded frankly.

"...What—?" Freddie blanched with wide eyes. "You're serious? You wanna open the door? Are you nuts?"

"I think Butch's right. The Overseer's losing traction and trying to regain power the only way he knows how—through fear and forced compliance because he hid away for too long. Look at how long it took him to address everyone—to start rebuilding efforts—hell, to even get a damn exterminator to control the roaches!" She exclaimed as she began pacing the floor again from front door to office door in long strides, her mind running wild behind her eyes. "Stanley said that the reactor, the air filtration, and the water chip is going to hell, and Janice said we don't have enough rations to keep going this way, and that the vault isn't running to full capacity with how few of us are left... at this rate, we'll be forced out whether we like it or not."

"How're you planning on pulling that off?" Christine asked with her eyes just as wide, but she seemed noticeably more open to the idea than Freddie was. Susie was still out of commission, staring at her boots with a slow blink. "Something like opening the door won't be easy."

She finally stopped as the thoughts behind her eyes seemed to draw to a final conclusion, and with the heightening of her back and the way she broadened her shoulders, she looked back to everyone behind her, her pacing coming to a full halt as she rounded from the front door.

"You're right—it isn't. And don't misunderstand me, I don't want to abandon the vault. I just think that if we can convince the Overseer to open the door—if we can convince him to establish a supply branch and allow more people, good people, from the outside come and join us, we can rebuild again."

"You are not gunna talk to your old man 'bout all this—" Butch began to argue but Amata only shook her head.

"That's not the plan," She spoke in a determined voice with a fire still brimming behind her eyes. "The plan is to bring Winona home."
If one were to enter the atrium of Vault 101, when many residents have been coming and going from that particular chamber as of late when there were changes in Security shifts, they would find a sight that the Overseer had the displeasure of viewing daily just outside his office window; sitting in the middle of the atrium was a single picture in an ornate metal frame, perched on a small metal box before a congregation of white funeral candles that wilted under their weakly burning flames, melting and shrinking as if they were in sorrow.

The picture frame held the portrait of Mary and Tom Holden, smiling happily as they held each other on their wedding day.

Days had come to pass since their picture was first set out by an unknown person, and so every other morning the Overseer wrote, rehearsed, and then voiced his concerns over morning announcements—claiming that the candles being left unattended posed as a safety risk, that they were a 'fire hazard', and that the 'criminal responsible' for creating the memorial would be expected to come by and dismantle it. He promised that they wouldn't be punished if they did so quietly.

But no one came, and the Overseer knew it'd be overstepping a sensitive boundary if he demanded maintenance to come clean the wax off the floor, where burned out candles were replaced with new ones every few days by the people who left the pictures.

The memorial only grew as daily the few survivors of Vault 101 would lay down their own photos of family and friends that they had lost, where they could join the portrait of the Holdens in happier times. Slowly there came pictures of passionate mothers, proud fathers, laughing children and siblings in brief glimpses where they hadn't been fighting long enough for the photos to be taken—there were grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and even photos of those who had no family at all in their untimely end. Dozens more funeral candles came to join the picture frames as well, so it was no longer a small service of a few mourning candles, but an ocean of remembrance, and it began to fill the atrium nicely as if it had become a final resting place. It was an unspoken room of peace amongst the survivors, where they could lay the photos of their deceased loved ones and finally mourn for their losses. When Security came knocking, asking questions about who started it all, no one said names because then they all would've been arrested. It was as if unity had finally been achieved, and not even Beatrice and Mary, the resident gossipers, said who had been adding to the shrine.

After a few days of the memorial having been established, Lucy came to visit with Amata escorting her there. Together they set out the best photo of Jonas that they could find. Lucy said a final goodbye to her grandson in her own thoughts with a somber smile on her face, and told a funny story to the younger woman about when Jonas was young and how outrageously picky he was with his food—detailing that at one point he refused to eat anything but fried eggs with ketchup on it. Amata laughed until tears ran down her face, but inside she was silently apologizing to Winona for not creating the funeral service she had promised that Jonas rightfully deserved. The two women left the atrium as Amata trained a sad eye upon her father's office window but he was never there. He had grown to ignore the growing memorial.

Next was Christine. With shaking and scarred hands, she proudly lit the candles all on her own—one for little Monica, one for her mother, and one for her cousin, Stevie. Susie told her Stevie didn't deserve it but Christine didn't care, because he was still family and he wasn't always the way that he was... he had been kind, once—normal, even. She set out several of her favorite photos of her little sister coming home from the infirmary the day after she was born, and one of her with her mom on her prom night. Her father, John, came later during another guard shift switch to stare at the photos of his forgotten family, wishing that his daughter, whom was still alive, had stayed just a second longer for him to see. They hadn't seen each other in weeks and more than once had he thought about quitting Security to be with her like he needed to be. He never quit.
Freddie came next to visit the shrine. He had two photos of his dad with him, as he had trouble deciding which one was going to be put with the others; would it be one of him in his best suit during a Security awards ceremony, or would it be one of him and Freddie playing catch when he was 14 and just learning how to play baseball? Freddie ultimately chose the second one and set it up on the floor amidst a row of candles, as his girlfriend, Susie, watched from the door. She refused to come inside to join Freddie but she still cried all the same—feeling ashamed—feeling like she didn't have the right to be there after what she had done to his family. She was so guilt ridden it made her sick that night, and she spent it at her parents' apartment instead of the infirmary because she couldn't stand to look Freddie in the eyes. She knew she would say too much. She knew she would lose him if the truth came out.

The last of them was Butch, who snuck into the atrium after the whole of the vault was asleep and no one was around. He took a moment to look over the memorial, taken aback by all the faces and the burnt out candles that stared back at him, and from his pocket he withdrew a single Polaroid; it was a small one of Paul and Wally, their arms thrown around each other's shoulders with beers in the opposing hands, grinning drunkenly back into the camera. Susie took it the night after the G.O.A.T. exam when they were all celebrating, probably hoping to use it as blackmail if Wally decided to tease her as brothers often do. Butch had been off somewhere else when the photo was taken, sulking about his results most likely, though he was as drunk as they were. Paul's grin was so wide that it could've split his mouth, and Wally's own ecstatic, partially laughing expression was so genuine and forgotten to Butch that it was startling. He had forgotten what it looked like.

He tore the photo down the middle and joined Paul's half with the rest of the portraits, crumpling up Wally's half and dropping it into a still lit candle to burn before smothering it out with his boot heel when it was finished. Although Wally was dead to him, he didn't deserve to join Paul—he didn't deserve to be there. Butch could remember the good times all on his own.

The very next day the pictures and the candles had been swiftly cleaned up by Security, the Overseer again citing that they were removed simply because they were a proven health risk and smogging up the atrium. Everyone knew it wasn't true. It was because he finally had enough of looking at it outside his office window, and though some hoped he had the shrine removed out of remorse, none of them, not even Amata, could confirm that for sure.

The very next day after that, the box of collected portraits had been stolen from Security headquarters but barely any of the guards noticed or cared enough to go looking for the thief.

An hour later, they had been found... by the Overseer, as the box had been delivered to his office door, the culprit unseen, as his secretary had stepped away for lunch.

On top of the pile was a hand written note tucked into the frame of Tom and Mary Holden's happy photo.

It read; remember us.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Lookit my dramatic ass over here with that ending! I couldn't help it, when I finished the chapter I just felt like it was missing something... and somehow my brain conjured up this beautiful imagery of the survivors of Vault 101 coming together in silent unity to mourn everyone that they lost, and it all started because of Tom Holden.
I like to think that most people who were there during that meeting had enough sense to know that Tom was played and framed.

Writing for him was sad. :c hmn.

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter! Got any thoughts? I’d love to hear them all! Especially if you have any questions or comments about anything~

Fun fact: the chapter title, "Memento Mori" has a translation of "remember that you have to die". Loose translations of it include "remember, you will die" and "remember death".

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie signing out
A/N: Hey guys! Couple important announcements to make here so please bare with me (and major apologies for the super short chapter :c )

First announcement: Inventor's Absolution will now be updated every Wednesday instead of every Friday!

Second announcement: I've recently made some pictures of Winona on my Tumblr made with the Fallout 4 character creator (one for her pre-mutation self with black hair, one of her post-mutation self with her white hair, and her Wasteland self lastly). When I have time, pictures of Glasgow, Harriet, and Sumner will be posted after I edit them for y'all!

Third announcement: I'll be taking a short hiatus. I know I just had one in the beginning of April, but things have been a bit rough with writing for me lately and in order to keep up the quality of this story I feel like I need to take a break and meditate on some things like how I want to further the story and all. I've felt the quality in my writing going down in the last couple updates (on a personal level because a writer is going to be their own worst critic) and I think a refresher is needed on my part to get my feet back under me.

The plan is to return on June 13th (a two week hiatus because I think a month would be too long) and hope that I feel better about my work. Even though this is 'just fanfiction' I want to give my readers nothing but my very best and I feel too much love for Winona to allow her story to be shoddily told. I'm sure some of you must be thinking 'I have no idea what you're talking about, Faerie, things have been great at every update!' and I thank you for that, but this is about how /I/ feel, 'ya know?

I'll still be very active on Tumblr in the mean time, if anyone would like to chat with me or ask questions or anything in between. I thank you guys for your patience and promise to be back as soon as I can, especially since this is another multi-part chapter that I'm dropping on you guys.

Thanks guys.

Peace.

~Faerie signing out

UPDATE (6/8/18): Due to a currently stressful family situation and my own mental health, so it's taken away all my time and energy I had for writing the next chapters. Because of this, unfortunately my 'minor break' of two weeks, which was to end on 6/13, will be extended until further notice. I don't want to name a date for when I will be returning in case this extends longer than I anticipate, but I can hopefully guarantee that Inventor's Absolution will return before June is over! So bad news is the latest we'll be returning is 6/30. Good news will be that I possibly return earlier than that and it'll be a nice surprise for you guys!
Until then I'll be active on Tumblr with an open ask box, if you guys need your Inventor's Absolution fix and have got questions for any one of my silly characters. I still want to be active with my OCs, somehow, even if it's not directly through the fanfiction. I can answer personal questions or I'll plop Winona, Butch, Amata, James, Glasgow, Harriet, and/or Sir Sumner in front of the terminal if any of your questions are for them.

I'm so incredibly sorry for having to take a further delay in updating and hope that you guys will understand.

Later.

Winona watched Sir Sumner from her designated spot in Burke's living room, her knees drawn in toward her chest to keep her feet off the floor as he used the space to work on a dismantled laser rifle (he called it an AER9, whatever that means) with the pieces spread over a dirty towel, where he could clean and fine tune each component before carefully putting the weapon back together. She observed the older guard over the rim of her coffee mug with vigilant fascination, and when pieces would change in his hands, she'd ask what their purpose was and he was more than happy to answer all of her questions with a paternal patience; seeming almost genuinely enthralled in placating her inventor's interest.

"And that?" She asked, pointing to a small T-shaped piece that was currently being cleaned diligently within his gloved hands. "What's it meant to do?"

"This is a particle diverter. A laser rifle's ammunition is a microfusion cell—" He picked up said microfusion cell and handed it to her for study. It was a little smaller in shape and size than a tin can, though surprisingly heavy for it's size. "Unlike a bullet in your run of the mill firearm, it self produces it's own energy. These diverters, which are contained in carbon fiber, processes the fusion power from the cell so it can be focused into a beam projectile through this." He picked up another small piece—a lens encased in a metal frame. "A crystal array. A diverter is a very important component in a laser rifle, but it can also be the most dangerous if it fails or isn't properly maintained."

"What happens if it malfunctions?" She asked as she turned over the microfusion cell in one hand, with her other perching her coffee cup on her drawn-in knee. "I'm assuming that the energy isn't concentrated enough for the crystal array and it backfires?"

"Exactly," He nodded as she handed back the microfusion cell and returned to caring for his weapon, using gentle hands and cleaning tools. "You learn quickly, Miss Parker."

"I've never seen anything like it—are these kinds of weapons common out here?"

"They're quite rare, in fact. The American government was still working to perfect them before the Great War and had been working on a fabled prototype—an AER14—that supposedly never came to fruition. Less delicate parts, production of a stronger beam focus, titanium housed crystal array instead of the gold alloy used in this one," He sighed wistfully. "Ah, what a beauty it would've been if completed." 

"So it needs a lot of service, and if you break a piece you're, more or less, royally screwed?" Winona remarked candidly as she took a sip of her now lukewarm coffee. "Why use a high
maintenance weapon like this and not something like a—... I dunno, like what Glasgow uses? It'd need less maintenance and parts would be easier to come by."

"Though it requires a lot of care, it carries a sizable magazine—each microfusion cell holds 24 shots. It's an effective long-range weapon, has a rapid semi-automatic function, and due to the beam being so precise, there's barely any recoil and even a single shot can prove to be lethal." He explained as he cleaned the diverter and gingerly set it back into the rifle's casing. "Though, if I were to be completely transparent, there's some pride in knowing that I am one of the very few who can properly maintain such a sensitive weapon... and it also holds sentimental value for me."

"Sentimental value?"

"Yes, it was my father's weapon." He explained as he stopped to tuck a stringy lock of his gray hair out of his face, combing it back behind his ear before continuing with his work. "When he passed away it was given to me. I've had this rifle for some 45 years now."

"45 years—?" She balked in surprise. "You said it's a pre-war weapon, how has it been able to last this long without degrading completely?"

"How has 200 year old packaged TV dinners withstood the test of time, remaining mostly edible?" He questioned a little playfully and she snorted in a contained laugh. "It's the secrets of the pre-war world, my dear, though I've contemplated as to how they achieved such a thing—"

The front door swung open in front of the two, carrying in a chilly gust of afternoon wind and a clap of dry dirt as Harriet stomped into the house and slammed the door shut behind her with her hip, her hands both occupied with gnarled bags of clothes. Winona got up off her chair after setting down her mug on the floor, stepping carefully over the rolled out towel in front of Sumner to come to Harriet's side to help unload the weight from the small guard. She instead slapped off the inventor and turned over both bags to dump all of their contents out on the floor unceremoniously; creating a small pile of heavy slacks, thick denim jackets, leather gloves with crusty wool lining on the inside, knitted sweaters, several rolls of socks, hats and beanies, and thermals. Just looking at it all made Winona sweaty.

Winter was finally on it's way to the Capital Wasteland as October struck and the guards wanted to be prepared. According to Sumner, DC became colder than most places, given the fact that it was so close to the water, and Rivet City would be right on the water front.

"There, I got your damn pants, old man." Harriet grumbled. "So what'd your source say about Capital South?"

"The bridge we were planning on taking near the Citadel was blown out by the Brotherhood some years back, apparently... mutant swarms used it as quick means to lay ambushes on the soldiers." Sumner explained as his laser rifle was finally put back together, and so he meticulously cleaned up his work space on the floor. "She suggests we cross over early and continue on the opposite side of the river. There's a short waterside route along that way that was established by the local caravans. Minimal contact with hostiles."

"Let's see it." She responded, almost demanding, with her hands on her hips. Sumner gave her a peevish look but said nothing as he turned away to his backpack near his sleeping bag and produced from it his large map of the Capital Wasteland, unfolding it completely to spread out in front of him. Harriet knelt at the head of it on one knee with her other leg folded under her, while Winona stood over them and watched, her hands on her knees with her shoulders hunched forward.
"She suggests that we follow our original plan and keep on the main road leading out of Megaton until we come to here—the local Super Mart." His finger circled the location before dragging his finger across the Potomac River. "There's a car bridge here that she says is stable enough for us to cross to the banks on the Potomac's east side. Here marks the beginning of the trader's trail and it follows along the backside of all the tall buildings here, almost all the way to Rivet City. It'll make for good cover on our left. The main thing we'll have to worry about are any stray super mutants or territorial mirelurks if we get too close to the water's edge."

"That's the Memorial, right?" Winona inquired with a finger pointed down at the map, over the little island where Jefferson Memorial was marked on her own Pip-Boy map by Moira long ago. "It's right before Rivet City on the other side of the Potomac. Is there a way to get there from our side—?"

"My source says there's a bridge leading to the entrance, yes, that links from the trader's trail but we're not stopping there. We're continuing straight on to Rivet City—no detours." He explained as the point of his finger tapped where the mentioned Jefferson bridge would be.

"What—? Why?" Winona frowned. "Dad's notes said that's where Project Purity is, and if it's before Rivet City anyway—"

"Firstly, my source says that Jefferson Memorial's been overrun by super mutants for some few years now. We can't come within a few yards of the site without getting shot at or chased by their abominable watch dogs." Sumner responded with his eyes on her and his finger right on a seaside port on the map, along the bottom edge of the Potomac River that led out to sea. "Secondly, our main objective is to find your father. You told us that he's going to Rivet City so that's where we're going unless new information otherwise states that he's gone elsewhere."

Her frown softened as she nodded reluctantly in agreement. Though Moira said that her dad asked about Rivet City and the best way to get there, what if he had stopped by the Memorial first—since that's where Project Purity was held? What if the mutants ambushed him on the way to Rivet City? What if he never got there, for whatever reason, and the trail would go cold, and she'd never have any hope of finding him? If Rivet City didn't have him or if she couldn't find Madison, Jefferson Memorial was supposed to be her last resort but now that was hopeless, too.

*Stop thinking it's impossible,* she scolded herself, *focus on the mission and nothing else.*

"How many did your source say was campin' out there?" Harriet asked as she eyed Winona with a raised brow and an unspoken question but turned back to Sir Sumner. "How many muties?"

"The most she's seen at once outside the Memorial has been 6. We have to assume that there's more inside that she hasn't seen, as she described the building to be quite large. She believes it also has an underground level or two under it—escape exits and tunnels leading back to the surface, from notes she has."

"Shit," Harriet seethed as Winona leaned away to her full height with her arms folded over her stomach, still frowning to herself as she studied the map. "That's some kinda mutant camp. What're they doin' there, anyways? It's right smack in the middle 'tween Rivet City and the Citadel. Hardly a tactical spot if they're close enough to piss off one or the other."

"The risk is probably worth the reward for them," Sumner reasoned as he examined the map again. "Due to the trader's trail meeting directly with the bridge, I'm sure they use the surrounding area as a place to ambush caravaneers on their way to Rivet City. The roads are unprotected, despite it being between the ship and the Brotherhood's post."
"You've mentioned these 'Brotherhood' people and soldiers a bunch of times, who are they?" Winona questioned as she took her seat again and picked up her cold coffee cup off the floor.

"The Brotherhood of Steel—massive military outfit with a hard on for old war tech. They take whatever they find and drag it back to the Citadel, their home base." Harriet explained as she sat on the floor as well from her knelt position, her legs crossed in front of her with her hands resting on her thighs.

"Are they something else we have to worry about—?" She asked anxiously.

"I've dealt with their kind myself... the soldiers tend to not be very reasonable, but as a whole the Brotherhood doesn't co-mingle with the locals much. They keep to themselves unless you have something that they want." Sumner reassured, but Winona was already thinking of all the valuable things they possessed that the 'Brotherhood' would want to take, so she didn't feel very reassured.

"Until further notice this is the new plan. We'll adjust accordingly if we come across any obstacles."

"When're we heading back out int'the thick?" Harriet questioned.

"We leave the day after tomorrow—we'll spend all day packing and ensuring we have the supplies we need before we continue on." Sumner concluded as he picked up his map again and refolded it back into its small size to return to his backpack.

"Only one more day?" Winona internally balked as her terror rose to the surface of her expression.

The original plan had been to stay in Megaton for two days, but those two days had effectively turned into a full week. The only reason why they stayed for this long instead of quickly restocking and moving on was because of Andale. She once overheard Harriet arguing that they were losing the trail on Winona's father, while Sumner and Glasgow thought that Winona needed more time to recuperate after what happened to her; she had been wracked with guilt since hearing their reasoning, torn between being so afraid to leave the settlement (even more than she was when leaving Tenpenny), and the determination she felt in wanting to find her father. Knowing that they would have to leave Megaton eventually didn't make the anxiety any easier to swallow.

Rivet City was only a 5 day trek from Megaton, but it'd be nothing but strenuous walking under the sun in thick winter clothes, hiding out with a hand clamped over her mouth and nose to keep from breathing, and constantly looking back over her shoulder in paranoia and fear; fear that something too strong and too dangerous for her team to handle would kill her.

Of course the inventor knew that she wasn't ready to walk back out into the Wasteland, regardless of whether or not Andale had traumatized her... but then again, she knew that she'd never be ready. You couldn't ever be fully prepared for a living hell like the Capital Wasteland and this was something that she was reminded of constantly; like when she was shot by the Springvale raiders, when she was taken to Tenpenny Tower at the mercy of a man like Charles Burke, and when she was kidnapped by Jack and his brother and put in their basement.

Something bad happened every single time she left a safe place—so what would happen this time?

"We'll table that for now. I think it's about time to get on dinner, hmm?" Sir Sumner spoke as he got up to his full height from the floor, brushing the living room's small chandelier in a startled head bump and he grumbled at the low hanging decoration, rubbing the back of his head before stalking off to the kitchen.
"Hey, princess," Harriet called her as she also got up from the floor to her feet. "You look like you're gunna pass out, and I'm not any good with trust falls and shit so go sit down."

"If I had to choose between cracking my head on the floor and having you catch me? I'd take the concussion." Winona replied while trying to swallow down her annoyance, which was difficult, considering a ball of fear was stuck in the well of her throat.

"You could afford t'lose a few brain cells, whiz kid." She replied with a snicker.

The condescending smile and chortle Harriet gave Winona irked her more than she wanted it to. Winona was frustrated to the point of feeling nothing but dread whenever the guard was around, because all she had to look forward to was blatant disrespect, one-eyed glares, and scathing insults or teasing. She couldn't combat any of that with the easy sarcasm and thinly-veiled snark that she once had when dealing with a nuisance of hers, but when Winona realized that she didn't have to put up with any of that—*that she was Harriet's boss, for fuck's sake!*—suddenly a spark of her old self had returned to her, and had she noticed that it was gone at all, she would've been surprised at the revelation. She had changed so much in the course of so little time.

But right now, she was too busy gladly reminding Harriet exactly who the hell she was talking to.

"I could also afford going on to Rivet City without you, now, can't I?" Winona responded frankly. "If you continue having a problem with the person that's funding your paycheck, you're more than welcome to leave the party without your bonus and the other half of your paycheck. I wouldn't want you feeling like you have any obligation to me or the job."

"You're not serious, are you—?" A small laugh almost escaped Harriet in disbelief, as if it were a hiccup. "I don't answer t'you, cupcake, I answer to Burke."

"I don't see Burke around, *do you?*" She replied coolly with her deadpan stare leveled with Harriet's gaze. "So I guess that means you do answer to me. This is my contract and part of my money. You're a resource that he's letting me borrow, and so far, I'm not exactly thrilled with the service that I'm getting."

"...You've got some fuckin' nerve," Harriet hissed when her disbelief drained from her eyes as her face took on that usual sour expression of wrath. "You don't have a God damn idea what you're doin' by quitting me—"

"The only reason why I haven't is because I've overlooked your attitude problem in favor of having another gun protecting me. If your usefulness wears thin, you're out." Winona explained as she kept a calm and unwavering tone. "I don't know what your problem is with me but I suggest that you fix it. I've never asked you to like me, but Jesus Christ, stop acting like an asshole and speak to me with the respect I deserve, because as much as you seemingly hate me, I am your boss."

Harriet was silent. In her death stare, Winona could see a spitting rage coming forward, reddening her face as her brows tightly furled, and her jaw tightened to the point of straining as if it had been wired shut—like behind her teeth wasn't a tongue, but a poisoned dagger, wishing to stab her. Winona expected a vicious torrent of a verbal beating, expected Harriet to actually beat her, expected her to walk out at some point and to hell with the bonus, but in truth, the inventor wasn't afraid of *any* of those outcomes. What could Harriet say that would seriously wound her that she hadn't heard already before? What did a punch matter if a bruise would heal and Harriet would be fired? Hell, if Harriet walked out of her own volition, Winona wouldn't have to have the *you're fired* speech at the ready. She was too exhausted to expend more energy into caring or feeling like she had to step carefully around someone who was meant to protect her, and there were a lot of things out there that were scarier than only one Harriet Zhāng.
Like cannibals, gun-toting rapists, or super mutants.

"So—any questions, comments, concerns, uprisings of any sort on the matter?" Winona replied with slightly thorny sarcasm to lighten the tension, but it only seemed to make matters worse; Harriet scoffed and stormed past her to the door, and, surprisingly, didn't intentionally slam her shoulder against Winona like she typically did. She was avoiding the inventor like she was radioactive.

"Can't fuckin' believe this," Harriet muttered to herself in enraged defeat, but it was still just loud enough for Winona to hear. "Sumner, I'm goin' out!"

"You don't have any obligation to stay and are more than welcome to leave." He replied from where he was, unexpectedly, lingering in the doorway of the kitchen while casually wielding a chipped wooden spoon.

Harriet shot him with a scalding look at his teasing, and the whole house shook when she slammed the door shut behind her.

"What a surprising turn of events," Sir Sumner responded in an amused manner as he waved his large cooking spoon in a gesture toward the front door, looking at Winona. "Taking a stand against Harriet takes a considerable amount of nerve. Bravo."

"Didn't you hear her? I've got nothing but nerve," She joked queasily. "...And apparently too much brains. Maybe I should get those fixed."

"There're worse things to be full of, I assure you." Sumner offered a small smile as he leaned away from the door frame, putting his weight back onto his legs. "Don't you worry about her. She wouldn't think to walk away from that many caps over a little squabble like that and she knows it. She's probably more angry about that than anything you just said."

"D'you have any idea how I pissed her off in the first place?" Winona asked as she knelt on the floor alongside the hill of clothes Harriet had dumped out and began gingerly taking out articles of winter wear to divide by size for folding. Some of it stank like body odor and dirt and something even fouler smelling, but she figured that she could spare a few caps to utilize Megaton's public shower near Moriarty's and scrub whatever was too unbearable to wear with some abraxo. She looked forward to the fact that she had a chore to keep herself distracted for tomorrow as the others prepared to leave.

"Harriet is what you call a complicated creature." He responded cryptically.

"...So that's a no." She replied back in jest. "All I wanna know is if it's personal or not."

"I'd certainly hope it wasn't, but I think it'd be improper for me to speak on her behalf. You have to understand that she's led a difficult life thus far, and has that innate 'foot in mouth' ability, so she has an extremely difficult time in forming meaningful bonds with people that don't involve punching, insults, or a general air of complete distrust. She'll come around. Eh, eventually." Sumner explained with weak enthusiasm and reassurance as he turned back into the kitchen to continue with his responsibility over cooking the dinner meal. "She can tolerate being told that she's being problematic without holding it against you, so I suspect that from now on she'll be a little more careful of her language towards you."

"So—what happened to her? That made her like this?" Winona asked as she continued setting clothes aside to fold, taking cautious sniffs of each piece before divvying them away.
"Out of respect for Harriet, the most I can divulge is that for a teenager, she's led a more difficult life than other young women her age."

"Wait—a teenager?" The inventor balked with her eyes panning toward the kitchen. "How old is she exactly?"

"Let me see, now—forgive an old man's memory—I believe she would be 17 or 18 this year."

"...You're joking, right?" Winona responded with profound shock as she got up from the floor to loiter in the doorway with her shoulder bearing most of her weight against the jamb, her arms folded loosely over her chest. "Harriet's 17?"

"If memory serves me right, yes." He informed her from his place in the kitchen, standing in front of the finicky stove with a cooking pot of—... whatever sludge he was making.

I can't believe that she's so young! She doesn't look like it or act like it. How am I older than her—? Winona mused, as she had only just turned 20 years old about a month before her dad escaped. Something about it was so surreal to think about, almost truly unbelievable, and it turned her somber as she thought about all the things that could have happened to someone so young to make them so jaded and caustic in all their interactions. Did it start at home at a young age? Did Harriet grow up alone, with no one to trust? Had she been betrayed? Assaulted? Kidnapped? Tortured and brutalized? Raped?

"...Sumner, seriously, what happened to her?" She asked quietly. "For her to be so young—"

"Now I don't want to hear another word of this," He replied firmly and glanced back to her over his shoulder. "I've already told you more than I should, and I suggest that you not mention any of what I told you to Harriet."

"But you haven't told me anything." She pointed out.

"And we shall keep it that way." With a resolute nod, he turned back to cooking with an air of finality about him. He really wasn't going to budge an inch. "Now sort through the clothes Harriet brought if you haven't already. Divide them by size and who will be receiving what. Anything that isn't usable, we'll salvage for cloth."

Winona nodded diligently and returned back to the living room and knelt beside the piles she had been dividing up until then, examining everything for sizing as she was ordered to, but her thoughts were elsewhere; she thought about what Harriet's upbringing must have been like, if she had one at all to speak of, or what was hiding behind that eye patch of hers, because that alone was telling of her past. Winona could easily believe that she had been possibly brutalized, because the Wasteland was tough but it was even worse for women regardless of whether or not they could defend themselves.

There was a time where Harriet couldn't protect herself, she rationalized a little pitifully as she looked to the door. And after Jack—... that's more relatable than I want it to be.

Winona was struck with a sense of melancholy as she gazed at the front wall of the Super Duper Mart, and she thumbed back the wide brim of her hat from her forehead to let the wind tousle her head of red curls. It fell back from its perch atop her head and was caught only by the adjustable chin cord catching around her neck, and her eyes reflected upon the outlines of black char marks that stained the paint of the building and the cement underneath. The marks were outlines of people, seeming to dance across the walls as more bright figures littered the parking lot pavement
and sidewalk under her feet—they were like active shadows of people mid-run, the only reminder
the old world had of them before they were burnt to not even ashes right in front of their
neighborhood grocery store. Most of them were marked by graffiti, with smiley faces or angry
eyes, angel wings and crazed hair, lewd depictions of human anatomy and slurs in broken writing
covered the resting places of the last people of pre-war America.

In the corner of the parking lot where she stood, just outside one of the two entrances of the Super
Duper Mart, she saw the nuclear shadow of a bike rack full of bicycles too small to be meant for
adults; another shadow laid a foot away from where the missing rack had been, of a tricycle (or
perhaps a child's bike with training wheels) isolated from the others, as if it wasn't permitted to
park with the rides of the bigger kids. Beside the blown out doors of the mart, where the glass
panels either shattered or melted from the nuclear blast, was a figure of a woman standing,
clutching a toddler to her hip as the child outstretched a tiny, pointed finger to the distant sky.

In the records of the vault, Vault 101 had been sealed shut on October 23, 2077 at exactly 9:13
AM. If the bombs came without warning—if they came unexpectedly because everyone thought
that the opposing powers didn't dare to directly bomb American soil—she imagined the nuclear
shadows of these people running for safety into the grocery mart, clutching shopping bags of TV
dinners, apple pie and Halloween candy, watching as their American dreams disintegrated right
before their eyes under the force of a mushroom cloud.

...What was that like? She wondered with some morbid fascination as she stepped up to the shadow
of the assumed mother clutching her child to her, and pressed her palm over the child's
face. Wonder what it was like for them to wake up, to go about their morning like it was any other
day, to look out the window and see the end of the Great War? To see the end of America?

She lost her home and her dreams (whatever they had been, as now she couldn't recall anything but
the day in and day out monotony), but at least she was alive, and at least the vault was still intact
and her friends were safe in there.

Winona removed her hand from the child's face and averted her eyes toward the fading line of the
horizon, where she could see the remnants of the big city buildings of DC crowding under the final
wink of evening, which was turning the sky from a sunny tinted pink to a quickly gaining black.
She looked to Glasgow scouting the parking lot, armed with his magnum and still decked in his
armor and helmet, as he trod over the cracked pavement and amongst the burnt out cars along the
perimeter to check their traps. Many of them were by Winona's design—like gunpowder in a rigged
mousetrap and Halloween sparklers hooked to a tripwire that would ignite a bright spark and loud
sound when triggered. They were made from matches, string, and a pull tab from a can, and she
was especially proud of her ingenious ability in making it from what materials she found
unsavaged in the mart.

She stepped out from under the awning that covered the front of the building and out under the
moonlight, the beaming face of the moon gazing back at her with a mystical eye as she was awash
in watery blue. The nuclear shadows of the running people were pushed to the back of her mind to
be ignored as she neared a car in the lot—a four door for a large family, painted in a shade of red
that was probably bright when it rolled out of the dealership but was now only crackled, flaking
and dingy, and she shrugged off her Tunnel Snakes jacket to tie it around her waist. The cold night
prickled her revealed arms and sent a welcome shiver up her neck. Glasgow neared her just as she
was lifting the engine cover of the car, whistling in satisfaction over the traps and the undisturbed
perimeter.

"Area's good an' secure," He announced as he leaned against the vehicle's cab, an elbow on the roof
to uphold his chin as he idly watched her. "Who taught 'ya how tuh' make those kine'sa traps, huh,
"No one did," She replied while leaning over the complex engine, studying it's contents visually with one hand keeping the heavy hood held above her head. "Just found some useful items and threw them together."

"'Ya gotta show me how t'make 'em some time. The mousetraps? Das' sum good shit." Glasgow whistled low, obviously impressed as he utilized the muzzle of his loaded magnum to scratch an itch near his temple carelessly.

"Sure thing," Winona withdrew from her hunched posture over the engine and settled the hood back over the engine and looked to him, watching as he scratched his head with his gun nervously, but relaxed when he holstered it back to his hip without incident. "Hey, Glas'—can I ask you something?"

"Like I'd say 'no' tuh' that sweet lil' face of yers," He responded as he thumbed her chin adoringly, scooting closer against the cab so he had a hand supporting his weight on the hood. "Wassup?"

"How long've you known Harriet and Sumner?"

"...Heh," He chuckled airily as he drummed his fingers on the car in thought, looking out toward the car bridge that'd lead them to the opposing side of the Potomac in the morning. "Tha's a tough'un... I ain't too good wiff numbah's and whate'er so I dunno fer sure. Know that I met the grampa first 'cause he's senior merc buh' I did'n git switched tuh' his team til a bit later, then Harriet got lumped with us."

"Do you know anything about them? Likeee, where they grew up, or what they did before joining the Talon Company?" She inquired curiously as she remained standing at his side.

"Wha's this really about?" Glasgow shot her with a boyish smirk as if he had caught her misbehaving and lowered his aviators down his nose, staring at her with amused accusation. "Hmn?"

"Why did no one tell me she was 17?"

"Told 'ya already I ain't good wit' numbahs. S'17 bad?"

"She's just a little young to be covering my ass, yeah," She snipped to his entertainment and a chortle. "If I had known she was so young—"

"If 'ya'd known'—why'zit matter?"

"It bothers me. Just a little. She's a kid with the attitude of someone three times her age." Winona explained as she folded her arms over her chest and he shrugged, like he still didn't understand what her concerns were but wasn't going to argue with her on the matter, and pulled himself up onto the hood of the car to sit.

"Look, doll face," He sighed shortly as he tucked a hand into the thigh pocket of his taped up cargos and plucked out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, digging into it for a pre-rolled stick and his lighter. "Don' matter how old 'ya are, the Wasteland's a rancid bitch an' she ain't choosy 'bout who She decides t'fuck with. Kids out here gotta grow up 'fore they're ready 'an half of 'em were ruined or killed before 'dey even gotta chance t'know how fucked up life is."

"...So what happened to Harriet?" She asked as he silently lit his cigarette and puffed for a brighter light, her crossed arms loosening so they settled over her stomach.
He glanced at her over the dropped frames of his sunglasses as he deeply inhaled the smoke with his fingers pinching the roll, and he removed it only to exhale a plume of smoke and tap off the ashes. His glasses were immediately pushed back up the bridge of his long nose and he looked out toward the bridge again, seeming to be thinking because he rolled his tongue stud between his teeth, his brows crept toward his hairline, before finally answering.

"Think she was a slave," He answered flatly. "Alway's lookin' over her shoulder like the boogey man's gunna sneak up and git'er. An' she's gotta property stamp." His cigarette greeted his mouth again to hang limply for another drag before being removed again, his breath strained as he held in the smoke. "Tattoo on'er shoulder—looks all spiky? Tha's a slave brand. Bet she ran off from 'er Master."

_A spiky tattoo?_ Winona wondered as he finally blew the withheld smoke out his nose, and the inventor vaguely remembered seeing such a tattoo on Harriet's shoulder of a 9-pointed star. Was that the calling card of her Master forced upon her body, if she _was_ a slave? It made her sick to think about although no thoughts could run through her mind—she was too shocked to have any coherent thought strike her at the moment. It was just an amalgamation of mortified 'what the fuck?'s repeating over and over, bouncing around inside her skull.

"How—... How does this even _happen_ anymore? People enslaving others? Why hasn't anyone _stopped_ it?" Winona asked bitterly after a pause of appalled silence as she mulled over the new information.

"Ain't no one's stopped 'em 'cause there's whole _towns_ of slavers out 'dere—fuckin' _cities_ of 'em, even—they go n'raze small settlements that ain't gotta broken ass BB gun 'tween eve'yone an burn it down t'ash an' splinters, then they drag off survivor's that're too scared t'shoot back at 'em."

Glasgow replied matter of factly as his cigarette was quickly whittled away to the end with every mouthful of smoke. "An' all the slavers seem tuh' have friends that're bigger an' more fugged up than they are if ey git their brains splatted. Even raiders don' wanna bother wiff'em. They're like us buh' more organized an'got better weapons 'cause when e'ryone's dead 'er collared, no one's left t'fight 'em fer the shiny stuffs."

"You said you _think_ she was a slave, so you don't actually _know_ for _sure_?" She pried as she leaned against the car hood with a hip, and his arm slung around her shoulders from behind so her neck was settled into the nook of his inner elbow. It kept her close with an almost possessive countenance and she could smell his rancid tobacco smoke tainting her clothes just from their proximity—but despite the selfish, almost unsettling nature of how he embraced her, she felt secure as the heaviness of his body settled against her back, and she didn't feel _trapped_, but instead protected and adored, like something prized to him.

"I _know_ she's a run off slave. 'Nother merc back at base says 'e knows her property stamp. Says'at out in Philly dere's this family of slave owners 'dat own the _whole_ south of the city, an' got it gated off t'keep all their slaves in 'ere. Got big houses an' all these guards and fucked up lookin' mutts an' shit t'make sure 'eir property dun' run off. 'Parently 'er mark's from the family, s'like their 'sign'. Each spike'suh head of each house an' the blacked out one's s'posed tuh' be who owns her."

"...Is there any way she was—I dunno—_let go_? Like she served a sentence and was released?" She asked quietly with a desperate amount of naive hope, but it was immediately crushed by the sound of Glasgow's little chuckle to the contrary.

Winona pulled out of his arms at the noise as if she had been scalded.

Glasgow didn't care, nor seem to notice her sudden aversion to being touched by him.
Ever since the day they had sex, her emotions and affections were constantly wobbling on uneven footing; swaying her one way where she wanted to be closer, to be dearer, to be held as he held her moments ago and to be told things she knew he'd never say due to how new the 'relationship' was; then she would be unceremoniously swung about the other way, where just being in the same room as him made her feel empty yet filled with aversion and regret, and she couldn't touch him let alone look at him without wanting to cry and kick and scream. Her thoughts were a mess, her emotions were in shambles, and her desires were being torn to shreds—all by this unapologetic, reckless bastard with a smile that still made her melt and want to kiss him.

"Ya know what prop'rtty stamps're for, babe? Meanz'hat once 'yer collared, you'll always be a slave. Don' matter if 'ya get loose'r escape. Dun' matter if y'er a runnin' slave, an' 'ex'-slave r'a dead slave. Das' why retired raider's're still called 'ex-raiders' an' motherfuckers like Sumner git called 'ex-soldiers'. Once a soldier, always a soldier. Once a raider, always a raider—and once a slave? Always a slave."

Winona silently processed all the information Glasgow had dropped on her without particularly knowing what to even do with anything she was told; all she could imagine was the face of a younger Harriet, teary-eyed and frail, huddled in a corner of a filthy room and starved to the point that she'd peel paint chips off the walls to eat, and doing whatever she had to in order to survive under the unabashed depravity of her Master—because those were the things you imagined when you thought about slavery. You imagined people being forced into heavy labor, being forced into the worst living conditions possible, and being forced under the boot heel of someone that wholeheartedly thought of them as less than human. She had imagined many things like that happening while Mr. Brotch taught them about slavery, and the horrors slaves faced prior to it being abolished; of how people had been starved and brutalized and dehumanized in some of the worst ways possible; of Delphine LaLaurie sailing off to France untouched and unpunished; of women raped and forced to birth the half babies of their Masters; of black bodies swinging from trees, and there was no mercy for young, old, women, or sick, and the imagery was haunting even more as Billie Holiday crooned sorrowfully, and placed upon every listening pair of ears the heart-wrenching horrors of 'Strange Fruit'.

The history of slavery showed such a beastly side of the human race that it made Winona want to cry and simultaneously throw up while she read her textbook. Her skin would squirm over her bones and first drafts of her essays were spewed with grief and partial rambling because she couldn't focus.

For Glasgow to say 'once a slave always a slave' implied that slaves would never leave their shackles—that they would never have their freedom—and perhaps it was true if she was still looking over her shoulder for a 'boogey man' Master.

Winona decided right then and there, as she gave her quiet 'goodnights' to Glasgow and turned into the Super Duper Mart to sleep before her first watch, that Harriet was a survivor. She wasn't an ex-anything. Not an ex-slave, not an ex-victim, nothing, and Winona had more respect for her now than she ever did. She began to understand her protector.

So if this Master came up from Philly to take Harriet?

Winona would make sure he safely returned back to his 'family'—one piece of him for each household carved with the words; 'don't come looking again'.
A/N: Hey everyone! Welcome back to Inventor's Absolution (for now). IA won't be returning to regular postings just yet, but it's been a little over 2 months since I last updated and I wanted to push out a new chapter just to keep you guys from wondering where I've been (and that way I can give an update for you folks that don't know why I've been gone for this long "OTL).

After my dumb depression hiatus, my now 11th month old nephew got into an awful car accident on June 16th and was in ICU for these last two months. He's doing much better now, and his current condition is nothing short of a miracle given the fact that the doctors thought he would be in a coma for months (he woke up a week later from the accident) and then thought he wouldn't make it (he's still kicking). He still has a long way to go before he can have a good quality of life again, especially with the complications that came along the way, but the situation is a lot better now then how it could've ended that day and I'm forever grateful for that.

Otherwise this chapter kicked my ass and I must've edited and rewritten then redited that a total of over 20-something times. It took me all of the last month reworking it until I was happy enough to say that it was posting quality, so here it is for your eyeballs! (Plus I wanted to post it so I could officially tell myself that I can't fix it now IT'S OUT THERE IT'S TOO LATE NOW)

For now the new post schedule is: whenever I feel like it. I want to return to regular postings eventually, and my goal is to make it maybe 1 post every two weeks, but I don't want to promise anything and fall through on it, especially because I'm working on multiple other fanfic projects, like Lovers Lament, and my first ever Fallout 4 fanfic! It'll take place in Sanctuary and feature Codsworth, Mama Murphy, Preston Garvey, etc. etc. as well as a bunch of OCs of mine. I don't know when that will be posted but I'm very pleased with the work I've done on it so far. Maybe I'll post a teaser to my Tumblr (thecoolkidsbasement, follow me plz and shoot me a DM so I can follow you back!)

Thanks for listening. Enjoy this long (almost 20 page, 10,500 words chapter) as a thank you for being so patient with me!

Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie

From the banks of the Potomac, Winona stood amongst the soggy weeds as the salty breath of autumnincoming wind disturbed the comfortable afternoon heat. A mist came off the unsettled waves that frothed amongst the shores as they crashed upon beached rocks and garbage that floated on the surface of the water basin, and across the sickly looking body of water stood the Jefferson
Memorial, looking solitary and defeated. The inventor could easily envision how it had seen better days. The rotund building was pockmarked by time, the wounds of explosive mortars, and the whipping water and wind that plundered into all sides of it. More loose debris clung to the massive metal pipes that fed into the Potomac, as well as the metal walkway that surrounded the whole of the building from the river-facing side, allowing bloatflies to skim the trashed waters for places to lay their nests. In another few yards they'd meet the bridge that crossed to the Memorial building—the one Sumner told her they'd pass on their way to Rivet City.

The only thing keeping her running headlong across it (aside from facing Sumner's disapproval) were the bulky yellow blobs that walked about outside the Memorial as if they were patrolling, while some others sat around a smoking campfire. They were too far away for Winona to clearly see what the blobs were, but she assumed that they were the 'super mutants' Sumner's contact mentioned, and Glasgow further confirmed this by saying that she officially witnessed her first super mutie.

From their current distance, those galumphing, yellow figures didn't look as visually grotesque as she imagined them being... for now. She was fine with not getting any closer to them than this.

As she stepped closer down the banks, the toes of her filthy boots nearly touched the water's foaming edge, and she felt a cool mist roll off the Potomac as the air became chillier with the afternoon's fading warmth. The smells around her began to change from earthy tones of hard dirt and sweat to one of overwhelming contamination, which Sir Sumner explained was the rust coming off of Rivet City and leeching into the water. The inventor plopped down onto a fire hydrant-sized chunk of cement from the crumbling building facing the waterfront, sitting to rest her legs and enjoy the cooling weather and the water (just to look at, she wouldn't dare play in it) while she continued to watch Jefferson Memorial.

It was a grand building despite its deplorable outer appearance, and she wondered what laid inside that the mutants were, unintentionally, protecting. Was it the remnants of Project Purity? Was there anything left inside of her parents' presence and all the work they did and the hopes they had? Was there anything of her mom's in there?

...This is the closest I've ever been to somewhere she's actually been, Winona realized somberly as she rested her elbows on her thighs and let her hands fall between her knees, clasped loosely together. Guess I never really realized 'til now that she never set foot in Vault 101... was this the last place you saw her, dad? In Jefferson Memorial?

As her eyes gleaned every detail of the building's exterior to devote it to her memory, she began feeling that, somehow, Jefferson Memorial was watching her back—like a presence lingered within itself, more human than a dilapidated building, like it was the ghost of her mother.

Winona could imagine her now, peering out from a high window where the glass panes melted long ago.

She didn't talk about her mom much to anyone. Not even Amata, who was always like a sister to her, and this was because growing up Winona held a small fear that she'd be judged for admitting that she didn't miss her. She couldn't admit to something so awful out loud out of fear that, God forbid, it'd get back to her father. Everything in the vault always seemed to once it hit the main pipeline of gossip and she knew she'd be labeled as monstrous, or broken, or wrong inside for admitting to such a thing. It was hard for her to try and love someone that was constantly described as perfection incarnate, and the only relationship Winona ever had with her mother was a broken one; one where she allowed her larger decision making to be controlled by how Winona envisioned her in her head, and in the end, that habit began to destroy her mentality. It turned her attitude into
one of constant self-deprecation—for not being better, for not being smarter, for not being more
brave, or selfless, and was constantly reminded by her vault peers that she was the wrong kind of unique—the kind that concerned people and made her worthy of being ostracized.

But now, as she processed such feelings and thoughts, and watched the Jefferson Memorial across
the water, and chipped away at the detrimental imagining that was her mother, she realized a lot of
things about her. It didn't matter what her dad had said about her—her mom was still human. Just
because she was described as intelligent didn't mean that she could fix everything, to be
courageous didn't mean that she wasn't terrified with every waking step, patient people could still
lose their temper over small, unimportant grievances, and no person was so compassionate that
they were selfless. Her mom must've still being selfish at times just because she could be.

To realize such a thing made her feel better. As if a huge weight had come off her shoulders to
leave her with a peace she hadn't known before; to be able to understand. That made it easier
to connect to her mom, someone who was flawed and still beautiful, and she realized that her mom
hadn't put any expectations on her character—all the self-loathing Winona had was placed
on herself in thanks to her own insecurities and the unbearable expectations of Vault 101.

In the end, maybe Winona was more like her than she realized, and she smiled despite the twisting
heartache.

She could love her mom eventually.

Though I blamed you for a long time, mom. I blamed you for making dad weak—I blamed you for all the bad choices he made. Dad wouldn't have left the vault if this whole Purity thing wasn't still about you, somehow. I blamed you both for everything. Having to leave the 101, for Jonas' death, for every shitty thing that's happened to me and to my friends since, and every day I woke up wondering what the point was in going on. What was the point in waking up when every day I felt myself losing the fight to keep my head above water? Did you ever wanna let yourself drown, mom?

"Hey," A brute voice called from behind Winona as heavy boots came trodding down the dirt path
to where she sat and interrupted her thoughts. "Gunna hit pavement soon."

When the inventor looked up, she was graced with Harriet's disgruntled expression as she grumbled through trying to light her bent cigarette. Behind her, on the trader's trail where the sun-bleached tarmac split long ago from the heat and the nomads that came before them, stood Sir Sumner with his laser rifle in his grip and his eyes panning the immediate surroundings for hostiles. Glasgow was kicked back on the hot hood of a burnt out car by the side rail with his bag and gun on the ground, and he shot Winona a flirtatious smirk and blew a discreet kiss when he noticed she was staring.

"...Hey, you—uh—y-you good?" Harriet inquired a little uncomfortably, as if she wasn't use to showing interest in the turmoil of others, when she noticed Winona look away to hurriedly wipe the tears from her eyes. She hadn't noticed them until now.

"Good. I'm good," She replied on a stabilizing exhale and used her arms on her knees to stand up.
"We heading out?"
The guard nodded in affirmation as she finally lit her cigarette and took a short drag. She leaned her weight onto one leg through an awkward shifting, like she was still made uncomfortable by catching her boss crying by herself, and looked out to the water before finally settling her one-eyed gaze back on Winona.

"...You needa 'nother couple minutes?" She asked.

Winona considered the stiffly though well meaning offer as she gazed back at the Jefferson Memorial.

Yes, she could learn to love her mom. She could learn that love wasn't meant to work in ways she understood.

Today was the first time in a long time she felt like she could breathe again.

"Let's take a walk instead." Winona decided as she and Harriet, who seemed secretly relieved by her answer, trekked back up the weathered dirt path and rejoined the other members of their team.

"Do you remember what we told you about the Security checkpoint, Miss Parker?"

Winona nodded silently, looking out the back window of the cramped brahmin stall they occupied, which offered prime scenery of Rivet City; it was a gargantuan vessel dappled with lights, glimmering through the open pockets of it's starboard side like thousands of lanterns under the drawing night sky. At it's tallest peak—a bridge tower, reinforced with metal parts, and wood planks, toppled with radio dishes and cables and odds and ends of surrounding pre-war buildings partially dismantled for construction—outreached the horizon line as if it were coming for the sun in it's nest above the gathering clouds. The frothing Potomac River bashed upon the ship's underbelly angrily, as if it personally cursed it's majesty in its colossal nature, with its broken bow partially claimed under the irradiated water, forgotten and unrepaired.

Even in her wildest imaginations—for all the books she read of places far away, lost to time and the war and the reaches of her own prison in Vault 101—of the dreams she had of the wonders outside on countless nights—Winona considered herself to be creative, but her imagination had failed to create something as marvelous as Rivet City.

The only thing that would ruin her memory of her first time in such a massive settlement was the overwhelming stench of cow manure and the nearby outhouses that lined the Potomac shore. They were stationed at the edge of the 'Watering Hole', which Sumner explained was a caravaneer erected 'trading hub' placed outside the city, where traders could settle their brahmin and supplies until they could get processed. Apparently because they had so much inventory to declare, it'd take literally all day to get inside, and since brahmin weren't allowed in, the pack animals needed to be corralled somewhere so they wouldn't wander off or be in the way. Even now, from where Winona stood in their claimed stall, she watched traders without their brahmin crossing the long overpass that bridged the gap between the Security checkpoint and the settlement, pushing trains of filled shopping carts, sweating over pushing overencumbered wheelbarrows, industrial dollies, whatever Rivet City fashioned with wheels or had to spare in order to help traders get their supplies to the marketplace.

"Miss Parker, are you listening?" Sir Sumner's voice took on a warning tone.

"Sorry, sorry—I'm listening, promise." She affirmed sheepishly as she forced herself to turn away from the window to face the squad leader. Harriet scoffed quietly from where she sat on her bed mat in the corner closest to the dutch door that led out of the stall, oiling her power fist, Samantha.
"When you make it up to the security checkpoint, what do you do?" He responded.

"Follow their instructions to the letter, make sure I declare all the important supplies to the Ledger —"

"Especially medical supplies and money." The mercenary clarified. "We can't afford to leave anything undeclared. They have their eyes on anyone, and they'll take forgetfulness as lying by omission if you forget to claim something. Also, make sure that you're honest about your answers when they ask what your business is here. Don't hesitate and don't be vague. That'll only rouse suspicion."

"And stay with Harriet at all times. Don't let her lose sight of me." Winona tacked on afterward.

"Good, you were paying attention." He remarked with a slight barb accompanying his jest, and she found herself a little embarrassed in having made him repeat himself. Sumner made it very clear that he didn't like having to say something twice.

"I'm sorry." She apologized again, more genuinely this time, before looking to Harriet slumped against the wall as she dipped a filthy rag into a twist-top jar of oily grease. "So you volunteered yourself as escort, huh? I'm blushing."

"Don't flatter yourself, princess," Harriet scoffed with an unamused, half-lidded stare as she stretched out her legs in front of her. "I ain't exactly tiptoerin' through the tulips about this, either."

"Why're we splitting up anyway?" Winona asked with her hands settled casually on her hips as she looked to Sir Sumner for answer. "I don't get why you and Glas' are hanging back. Wouldn't we cover more ground with all four of us inside?"

"We came to the agreement that the mission would be better handled by splitting up. Glasgow and I will remain out here to watch over the possessions you won't be taking inside—contraband or anything that's reason enough to turn you both away, namely—it'll make going through the checkpoint less of a headache."

Winona nodded along with Sumner's reasoning only to be polite, but found herself questioning it. She couldn't see how that made sense to him and it made her wonder if he was intentionally hiding an alternate reasoning; she dismissed the notion, however, as Sumner was the type of man that wouldn't conceal important details from her or be vague when she asked for a straight answer. This behavior was taken as a token of mutual respect since he was one of the very few people who didn't treat her like she was a naive little kid or an idiot vault dweller to pity.

"And the plan when we get inside?" The inventor responded instead of pressing further on the possible lie.

"Can't rely on your old man's contact actually bein' here, so we're gunna work this like we normally would." Harriet responded as she got up from the floor when Samantha's repairs were completed. "Hit up the hotels, boarding houses, hostels, and any other corners where people get logged for a room an' see if anyone saw him. Next option's chattin' up the traders in the marketplace and the local bar."

"The bars—? What for?" She frowned.

"That was by my suggestion. You mentioned before that he's a fan of scotch," Sir Sumner explained. "We have to cover all our bases. Even the unpleasant ones."

"...Right." Winona replied, though uneasily. She didn't like to think that her dad could be back to
old heartbreaking habits—slumped over a bar counter while nursing the biggest bottle he could afford. She dislodged the thought with a shake of her head.

"I'm gunna grab the scab, see if he got anythin' good off the caravaneers 'round here." Harriet nodded to Sumner as she pulled Samantha onto her fist and then went to the half open dutch door. Their stall was smelly and hot, and so they left the upper half of their door open to air out their rented space until nightfall, when it'd be cooler.

"Ensure that he's been behaving himself, we don't want to wear out our welcome!" Sumner called after her as she let the lower half of the dutch door swing shit back into its gate bolt behind her. She only silently waved a lazy hand back over her shoulder that seemed more dismissive than affirmative. He sighed to himself, and with a shake of his head, went to his own pack to sit and rest alongside his possessions.

Winona herself went to the door to pull herself up onto the lower half, straddling the cracked wood swing out as the bolt groaned in disapproval under her meager weight, and watched the liveliness that took place in the heart of the Watering Hole; some traders congregated in a circle around a growing pot of caps over a game of cards she didn't recognize, sparse caravan guards patrolled the outer perimeter with racked firearms in case some rabid creature got too close, unloaded brahmins stamped about with muddy hooves in their stalls as they grazed anxiously, and over the buzzing of flies and boisterous laughter of the gamblers she could hear a preening radio that some young caravaneers danced together to. They seemed drunk, given how careless they were acting.

There was something about the whole scene that felt so naturally easy... so normal and expected when you opened the door and looked out. There was a strong sense of community amongst everyone in the Watering Hole, and in a far corner where the 'communal kitchen' was, there was a waft of gray smoke snaking towards the blackening sky as a giant stew pot cooked a communal meal to share for a small amount of caps. It probably would've smelled inviting if not for the all encompassing odor of cow shit... regardless, the warmth and community reminded her of the better parts of the vault; it reminded her of all the events they held in the atrium, like potlucks or festive parties, where everyone came together and enjoyed the company and the food and the games and the music. It was the only time where there didn't seem to be any gossiping, or worrying, or in-fighting amongst the residents.

She missed those times. Shit, she missed the food. She'd been craving grape jelly sandwiches for the last few weeks—and that was a weird thing for her to crave, given that she never particularly cared for jelly sandwiches before.

"You know," Winona called back over her shoulder to Sir Sumner, who was now counting out what rounds of ammunition he had left while scribbling out a list of 'groceries' with impeccably penmanship for the women to take with them. "I didn't hear a lot of music like this back in the vault... music with singing, I mean. Before I was even born the Overseer removed most of that kinda music off the intercoms and from the jukeboxes. Felt it was 'inappropriate' or would 'encourage unwanted behavior'."

"Did he succeed?" He questioned curiously with his eyes still on his work but his chin and ear tilted towards her so she knew he had his attention, despite his preoccupation with his current task.

"Welp, when we weren't listening to provocative music, we were doing the Devil's work—knitting, crossword puzzles, pinochle, praying to the almighty Overseer every day like the good little worker bees do." Her sarcasm was rewarded with a honk of a chuckle out of Sir Sumner, which he quickly strangled back into silence to keep his composure. The smile wouldn't leave his face, however.
"I'll be taking that as a 'no', then." He quipped.

"Hell no. People still did shitty things, but they either never got caught or whatever they did wasn't necessarily illegal, just crap loopholes." Winona griped as she slumped back against the support post the door was hinged to with her arms draped in a loose fold over her midsection, her leg swinging against the dutch door's exterior lazily.

"You know, I was 16 years old myself when I heard music for the first time... any sort of music." Sir Sumner admitted as he took his wide brimmed hat off his head. He used his sleeve to dab at the bald spot atop his head, mopping away the sweat that collected there, before using his hat to fan at his face.

"Wha—? You're serious? Why's that?" The inventor balked in surprise, snapping her eyes back toward him over her shoulder.

With a nod, Sir Sumner got up from his place on his bed mat, interrupting his current work to meet her at the door where he put his weight into a shoulder against the support beam parallel to the one she herself was leaning against. His gaze was turned outward to the growing collection of dancers that bopped with the crackling radio as it blared Bill Haley's 'See 'Ya Later, Alligator!'. Two men hooked their arms about each others shoulders and danced in step with silly, overly pronounced movements, which was to the extreme amusement and guffawing laughter of their cohorts, before the two went careening into each other and then crashed to the floor in a heap of tangled limbs.

"That's difficult to explain in how I was raised. I was born in a military compound, and my father was a soldier who kept his radio tuned to only one station. News reports. Propaganda. Inane attempts at boosting internal moral amongst the active soldiers. Neither my mother nor I were permitted to change the channel let alone even touch his radio." Sir Sumner responded with such candid inflection to his words. It sounded so much like Vault 101 it was almost startling to Winona.

"...What was the first song you ever heard? Do you remember?" She asked in fascination.

"Cruising Down the River. Paul Rich." He smiled fondly and she could almost see the warmth of the memory flash behind his eyes, like the sun rising rapidly over the crest of a dewy hill. "When my father died my mother couldn't stand listening to the constant reports and military chatter for another second. She tuned that radio to the clearest frequency from outside the compound and never changed it again. I can still remember that moment, even now—of the static changing and the first few notes of music playing, and the way my mother's face lit up. It was the happiest I had seen her in a very long time and so I try to keep that memory close to me... although I only grow older, and my mother's been gone for a very long time."

In the comfortable silence that hung between them, she made another discreet glance towards her eldest protector and took notice of the way his eyes continued to linger on the merry dancers; watching as they toed their way through every step, or hopped about ecstatically while laughing at every drunken stumble, or misplaced limb, or stepped on foot. He seemed to become withdrawn upon the last mention of his late mother, as if he were silently perusing other old memories with melancholic intent, and the young inventor realized that this was probably the only time he'd ever open up about his history without her poking at him to dislodge something. He wasn't secretive, per say, but he was most definitely private, and now she had confirmation that he, indeed, had a militaristic-imposed childhood. It also sounded like his soldier father wasn't exactly winning himself any 'Father of the Year' awards, either.

Winona wanted to know more about Sir Sumner, whom, at times, was even more truly mysterious than Glasgow had been upon first meeting. Glasgow she had mostly figured out while Sumner
continued to be a constantly composed and unwavering enigma. She wanted to know more about his childhood and the mentioned compound he grew up on, and how he went from being a young soldier to a mercenary for hire, where he continued to pursue work despite being at a retiring age. She supposed that in a place like the Wasteland the work was never done and there was always more contracts to be had. She also supposed that this would probably be the most he'd willingly reveal to her, and so she pushed aside her instinct to be nosy and push her luck, to keep from clamping up again. There were lingering questions of if he ever got married or had a family, because with how kindly yet sternly he treated her—in such a strangely paternal way that reminded her so much of her own dad—she had a sneaking feeling that he'd once been a father, or perhaps wanted children if he never had the chance to start a family.

The main thing that kept her from asking about such a topic was not wanting to unintentionally upset him.

Well, *that*, and he probably would've quickly changed the topic if he didn't want to answer, anyway.

"I suspect I'm overdo for a dance with a lovely young lady, Miss Parker," Sir Sumner's buoyant tone intervened her further thoughts, causing a resurrection in the death of their conversation as he offered a gloved hand to her. A small, passive smile reached toward his forest green eyes. "If you'd do a sentimental old man the honors?"

With a smile on her own face, Winona dropped her hand into his as he pushed out the lower half of the dutch door—leaving her to ride atop it as it freely swung outward with the prolonged creaking of it's hinges. She threw her leg back over the outer side and hopped down to her feet with her hand still upheld by his.

"Just so you know, the whole 'sweet old man' shtick's less convincing when I've already seen you give a raider an involuntary haircut from 180 yards away with your eyes shut," She laughed merrily.

"'Who's counting', 'parently it isn't me!" The inventor replied with a laugh of dry agreement as she was led by him towards the drunken dancers, who welcomed the newest addition to their foolish flock with the offering of stale beer and making room for them to share the 'dance floor'. Another song started up and the others around them clapped out of rhythm to the beat while whooping and hollering joyously as the two traveled about the dance floor.

Amongst the dizzying spins and merry hopping about, Winona was too enthralled by old memories of the vault joining the new ones she made here with one of her guards, and hadn't noticed Harriet and Glasgow on the sidelines, observing. The two mercenaries watched their squad leader and target with lazy half-lidded eyes that smoldered under the burn-out glow of a shared hand-rolled cigarette. It was losing length quickly as it was exchanged between the two.

"So what'd Daddy tell'er 'bout the split?" Glasgow inquired blandly but Harriet could hear the concern in his voice. His eyes followed Winona's beaming grin from behind his sunglasses until she was lost in the puddle of other dancers, her bright laugh following after her.

"Said there wasn't any reason why we'd all have t'go inside... that you two'd stay out here, watch all the stuff that can't go in." Harriet spoke with the cigarette pinned between her yellowed knuckles, and she brought the unfiltered stick back to her mouth to take a quick hit before offering it back to Glasgow. Her power fist, Samantha, hung heavily on her fist at her opposing side.
"She believe it?" He asked as he hunched his shoulders in a forward lean to capture the end of the cigarette with his mouth, his whitened fists jammed aggressively into the pockets of his taped up jeans and his green-tipped matted dreads spilled over one shoulder and down his front.

"Not for a fuckin' second," She snorted. "Could see it all over her face. She ain't like our other contracts. I hate it when they're too smart, makes our job harder."

"So wut'd she say?" He asked with impatient demand.

"Nothin'. She's got 'nough respect for the old man that she didn't call him out on it so I'm still goin' in with her."

"Fuck," He breathed out on a tense sigh, his lips contracting into a tight, chapped line.

"What's it matter to you what she says 'bout all this, or what Sumner tells her?"

He didn't answer her. When Harriet tilted her glance upward toward Glasgow's pointed face, her good eye observed him from its far corner as he inhaled the remainder of their shared cigarette with greedy intent—as low as it could burn without a filter, before it'd fall apart or he'd burn himself on it. She took notice of how his shoulders were pulled back to align them with the stiff posture of his spine, how his hands alternated between balled fists in his pockets or crossing his arms over his chest, how he kept shifting his weight between the full length of his legs from foot to hip as his eyes scanned the dancing crowd with a clenched jaw and his chin hooked forward... it spoke to an anxious rage as his hands trembled on the remainder of the cigarette.

The Talon mercs were trained to read body language so they could predict what a hostile was thinking about doing before they could even go through with it, and although Harriet wasn't a natural at it like Tobias was she could still hear all the 'hostile' alarm bells Glasgow was ringing right now. The blind and deaf could tell he was seriously ticked off.

But, he was also nervous about something... something having to do with their employer.

"You still mad 'bout the split?" She mused out loud. She tried to make her statement sound more like a question just to see what she could draw out of him. Sometimes it was hard figuring out someone like him, someone unpredictable on a good day and straight up reckless on a bad one. Not a thought in his head made sense to anyone but him if they weren't talking battle tactics or recon plans. Only then did he turn into some genius of warfare.

"Course I 'em," He growled. "Whole t'ing's bullshit."

"Which part? The part where 'ya won't see your little girlfriend for, like, two days, or the part where Security won't let you through 'cause you're a fuckin' raider?"

Glasgow said nothing in response as he thumbed the stub of his finished cigarette out of his possession, where it hit the dirt and smoldered out to nothing, but her question obviously bothered him.

"So it's both," She supplied an answer with a self-satisfied tone and he finally looked at her. The only thing that glinted off the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses was her own reflection and the heat of animosity from his masked glare. "Hey, the only way you'd get 'cross that bridge's if the snipers wanted to see how far you'd make it before they popped your head like a rotten mutfruit. Let Tobias play babysitter and keep your head cool till the princess and I get back. Don't do nothin' stupid here, Glas'. You won't wake up to regret it."
Although Harriet couldn't see where his gaze lingered, the discreet side tilt of his chin gave away that he was looking toward the sniper team that stood on patrol atop the open roof of the checkpoint. They paced back and forth with rifles in hand to watch the goings on below now that passage over the bridge was discontinued for the night. The extended arm had been withdrawn back to the ship, leaving nothing but open air, a 3-story fall, and a trained team of snipers for anyone who tried forcing their way upstairs. With the way his expression soured mildly, it lent a doorway into the dark, thunderous thoughts pedaling themselves about in his broken little head— and when the stud piercing on his tongue rimmed his lips in a contemplative thought, the storm clouds in his eyes only grew darker and more disturbing.

That was until she saw him openly stare back towards the ring of drunk dancers to settle on Winona with their squad leader. She watched as his expression softened for just a fraction of a second and his tongue stud disappeared back into his mouth. She had the feeling that he just made a decision about something—and in that instance, something became abundantly clear to her.

"I see what's goin' on," Harriet went on with a controlled voice so she wouldn't sound as surprised as she actually was. "You don't want the Whiz Kid findin' out the truth about you—that's why you're angry 'bout the split, why you wanted to know what Sumner said about it, if she believed him. Why?"

"'Cause I gotta good thin' goin' on, s'why," He responded lightly with a merriment in the lilt of his words that suggested he was trying to hide something. "I ain't wanna scare off 'da firs' good contract Talon s'ad in months. Da' kinda caps we're gettin'ere's mental. Fuck, I'd give up my right nut if I had'tuh."

"Careful, you wouldn't have any balls left." She jabbed coolly and he laughed as he pulled for another cigarette to smoke—one of his own, this time. Chain smoking was another bell ringing sign of his. He was definitely stressed about something, and Harriet knew he was lying, but she didn't know what part of what he said was the lie.

It all left her feeling very alarmed and unsettled. She felt the nervousness coil in her gut like a snake curling up tighter and tighter, waiting to spring at whatever got too close, and she tried to force herself to remain levelheaded. As good as she was at getting hot headed and punching whatever pissed her off the most, it wasn't a tactic that worked all of the time. She found herself looking back toward Winona on the makeshift dance floor as pounding music marched its way over the heads of those in the Watering Hole, and she knew that whatever Glasgow was trying to hide had to do with how the princess would react if she knew.

There's a first, she mused with the spring still wound tight in her stomach. Him worryin' 'bout what someone thinks of him... why, though? So what if she knows? If she'd put up with my shit, she'd put up with his. This ain't about the work, or the caps, or havin' a 'good thing' going—

Her thoughts faltered when she looked toward Glasgow beside her and saw the way he peered over the frames of his aviators, peeking as if he were afraid to be caught—his eyes followed the way Winona danced, showing Tobias through a Dweller Two-Step or whatever weird fucking dances vaulties practiced, and how he seemed to smile ever so slightly when she laughed or smiled herself. His own smile was possessive, as if he were looking upon something that was his, that he was proud of owning.

And it was that smile that betrayed him.

...This 'good thing' isn't 'bout the caps at all, she thought when the shocking conclusion dawned on her.
"You think she'd dump you if she found out. Christ, Glasgow—" Harriet spoke her realization aloud. The moment the words left her mouth, she knew it was a mistake solely by the pressure of something sharp with a pointed head press between two of her ribs. Her breath immediately went still and her eye glanced downward to see the hazy glint of his favorite combat knife, watching as it reflected the ocher flames bounding off the large campfire in the center of the Watering Hole.

"Keep it 'tween us, 'kay?" He whispered to her with a cheery grin, as if he were simply telling a joke and not brazenly threatening her. No one around them took notice. "Can'na 'AVE Daddy knowin' 'bout it... I find out 'ya squealed—? I'll pry out e'ryone'a yer ribs an rip out yer lungs, show 'ya wuh's like tuh' suffocate when'ere on duh ousside of yer body."

Glasgow tensed up at her side with the smile cracking upon his crooked mouth, his eyes unable to turn downward to meet with Harriet's power fist that made a phantom connection with his groin, hovering the ram bar directly over his privates. The pressing of his combat knife into her ribs lessened when he saw the boiling rage that made her eyes sharp enough to cut him clean through. He knew immediately that he miscalculated trying to threaten her into keeping her mouth shut on what she just uncovered.

"You listen to me you walkin' pustule off the swollen cunt of your whore mother—stay away from her if you know what's good for your twig an' berries."

"...Oooowh, I see wazz happenin'," He responded flippantly with a condescending tone and his smirk leaning in dangerously close to her own face, enough to smell his stale cigarette breath and unbrushed teeth. His arrogance caused her anger to flare and she almost considered fully curling her fist inside Samantha so his dick would get power fisted right up into his spleen.

The only thing that stopped her was how giddy he seemed in pushing her to do it. She knew he was a God damn lunatic, he got off on the thrill of cozying up to the Reaper (or a power fist threatening to burst his genitals like an over-stuffed sausage), and he'd push and push just to see how far he could build that thrill.

Sick freak, Harriet spat disdainfully in her own mind, and yet, something about realizing that made her—...scared of him. People who weren't afraid of death, or at least were crazy enough to think they were invincible, always scared her.

It usually meant that nothing scared them.

"It ain't like that you jackass—" Harriet spat back at him. "I ain't lettin' you screw up this job for me. It's fucked enough already with what happened back in Andale, so do everyone a favor and keep your hands, eyes, mouth, and dick away from her."

"An' whad'f I don't?" He teased gleefully.

"You're gonna wake up with a fuckin' speech impediment and trouble walkin' on your own is what." She responded with a caustic barbing of her threat and a little flex of her hand in the gauntlet of her power fist, which caused a loud enough click from the ramming brick that Glasgow could hear. It signified that her glove was under enough pressure to shatter his pelvis if he uttered another taunting word.

Instead, Harriet forced herself to withdraw despite the thoughts of reconsideration she had in ripping off his own nuts and shoving them down his throat and stalked off, releasing the pressure from Samantha so her hydraulic chambers hissed out steam in relief. Now definitely wasn't a time for her to lose her head—it wasn't one of those instances where punching something would work in
her favor, she had too many complaints showing her inability to work in a team, so she'd be kicked out of the unit and the Talon Company at the price of a fleeting moment of satisfaction.

_Nah, I got other ways of crushin’ his berries_, she decided with simmering hate as she decided against going straight to Winona, especially with _Glasgow_ still watching, and instead strode off to their rented brahmin stall. _Gotta do this smart so I don’t wake up starin’ back at the dirt ceilin’ of my shallow grave. Mauled to death by roaches would make for a better endin’... and I still got a bucket list t’finish._

"..._Oooowh, I see wazz happenin’_,"

_Glasgow’s accusation pilfered a front seat in her mind when she looked back over her shoulder at her jubilant employer, and commended the way she could smile despite the shit she’d gone through. Harriet couldn’t look at her without seeing a mistake—a mission gone wrong—she couldn’t _not_ see the way Winona looked when she stumbled out of that house back in Andale—and yeah, maybe after that she had taken the job a little more seriously despite how she felt about her employer._

_She smiles just like Katie_, came as a somber thought that was quiet as a whisper in her mind but struck like a whipping typhoon through the rest of her body. _Too much like Katie. When the bad shit came in she just—... always found some way t’just keep on goin’ even when she was fucked up inside. Should’ve never taken this job._

"I’d do _anything_ for you—you know that, right? Just keep me safe... _please, Ming._"

_Thinking about Katie always made Harriet feel like her heart was being brutally wrenched in her chest, like someone had taken it in two hands and was trying to pry it open like a stubborn jar. The only thing encased inside was bad luck and guilt._

_She kept it sealed for a reason._

_She tried not to think about the sweet girl with the ginger hair for a reason._

_She tried not to think about the last time she saw Katie for a reason._

_But Harriet lost those battles for a reason, as she sat on her bed mat and quietly contemplated what to do about Glasgow, and how to keep her employer safe from him, to keep from something like Andale happening again, well into the night until the others returned and Tobias called for lights out._

_Her sleep was filled with dreams of Katie and Winona, smiling and holding hands._

_Winona strangled an exhausted yawn to silence with the firm clamping of her jaw as she stepped out of their rented stall, stretching her back and arms towards the dark, early morning sky. An oncoming chilly autumn wind took grip on the Watering Hole despite how warm it’d been yesterday even well into the evening. As she stretched and twisted her knotted up back, her eyes turned back towards Rivet City, its underbelly and port side slowly becoming aglow as the citizens inside rose for the day and lit their lanterns, and with each and every light that flickered on she found herself wondering how many rooms laid inside—how many people were aboard that could’ve encountered her father?_  

_She had a dream about him last night that kept her from going back to sleep when it scared her awake. She dreamt that she was given passage into Rivet City but no one was inside, and all the
walls and hallways and stairwells looked exactly like they did back in Vault 101 as she stepped inside with Sir Sumner, Harriet, and Glasgow; but then the door suddenly slammed shut behind them, and when she looked back, her protectors were gone as if they'd never been with her at all. Winona remembered pushing onward through the many familiar halls though they began to twist in ways she didn't remember, with stairwells that went into blank walls or hallways that didn't let out into empty rooms, and soon she heard her dad's voice, echoing to her with her mom's favorite biblical passage—Revelation 21:6—in a sweet, lulling chime. However, the more rooms Winona frantically searched, crying out for him to show himself or come and find her, the more distressed his recital became until his voice was booming at her terrifyingly from every side as she ran down winding hallways, trying to escape from it with her hands clamped over her ears. With every word he uttered it sounded as if he was being struck, crying out with each blow but he was forced to recite the passage further.

Finally, she stepped into a hallway that seemed to swallow her up. The wall shut behind her, pushing her forward to a lone door under a buzzing vault light, and in that instance she couldn't get her feet to move. Her dad's overwhelming chant had gone silent and she was too terrified to continue. The inventor had to force herself to take every small step forward until she met with the door, and when she waved it open—

Her father was laid on the floor with a limp hand outstretched for her, and he was dead and cold with his lips blue and his skin grayed and colorless. But then his eyes snapped open and he rasped, his outstretched hand clutching her ankle with fingers that felt like ice, and his voice sounded like dry reeds extending from his throat; the waters of life aren't free, death has no cure!

Winona tried to make herself stop thinking about it but the words continued to rattle around in her brain; death has no cure, death has no cure, death has no cure, no cure, no cure, no cure,

She remembered those words from somewhere else in memories that seemed so faraway... it was the last time she saw her father, before he escaped, when she visited him in the clinic because of a feeling she had—no, it was intuition—telling her to go to him, and he brought up the grave subject of his death and she tried lightening the mood using the only way she knew how—

"You'll just have to discover a cure for death, in that case."

By cracking a sarcastic joke in the hopes that he'd laugh and not be so serious, but when he didn't laugh, instead scolded her, she knew right then and there that they couldn't laugh their way out of that conversation.

He told me then he wasn't going anywhere... promised me, even. Did he lie then? Did he already know he was going—?... Or did he really mean it? She pondered somberly as she watched a hungover caravaneer in ill-fitting trousers stumble across the heart of the encampment to the outhouses near the riverside. She recognized him as one of the dancers from last night, looking a lot greener and a lot less cheerful than he was last night.

Winona clapped her hands over her face and scrubbed the sleep from her eyes with her palms, feeling the top layer of grime on her face coming away as she woke herself up. When she turned back into the stall to pull on a jacket and wash her face, she realized that Sir Sumner's bed mat was rolled up and neatly bundled with his backpack. Glasgow snored away in his own in the corner closest to her own sleeping roll, and Harriet was just waking up with her greasy hair pinned flat to one side of her head as the hair on the other side stuck out in haphazard fashion.

"Morning," Winona greeted. "You see Sumner anywhere—?"
"Mmm," Harriet slurred sleepily as she sat up and stretched one arm in front of her, hooking her opposing arm over her forearm to pull the stiffness out of it. "Pro'ly out takin' a leak."

"Right." She mused quietly as she went to the door and pinned open the upper hutch to let the morning breeze in for the two before letting herself out, calling back over her shoulder. "I'm going for a walk."

"Out on the ramp'n 10!" The guard groaned tiredly after her, leaving the inventor to hear only a part of it before she was too far out of hearing range.

Winona wandered towards the heart of the Watering Hole in a subconscious haze, thinking only about her father and her dream while walking onward without purpose or direction—in a state of autopilot where she was conscious enough to swerve around other applicants or apologize if her reaction time was stalled. She couldn't ignore the dream—nightmare—any longer and couldn't shake the effect it had on her. She wasn't one to believe in superstition or hidden messages delivered through questionable means, but the words her father spoke in her dream had her feeling like there was something more there.

"The waters of life aren't free, death has no cure!"

It almost felt like something was trying to warn her.

*Isn't that just ominous. Tell me something I don't already know about the Wasteland why don'cha, brain?* She tried to joke with herself but it had very little effect in alleviating her worries. When she came out of her directionless shuffle into the camp and looked ahead of her, she found that in her distracted daydreaming she had walked all the way around to the opposing side of the Watering Hole where the outdoor communal kitchen was. It was mainly an open air shack, with a metal roof held aloft by splintering wood beams, and bundles of plastic rain tarps were tied under the roof eaves to be unfurled when the weather turned sour. It housed multiple tables and mismatched seating of rusted bar stools, broken chairs, cinder blocks and anything else that was usable. Winding out from it was a stretched line of folks coming for the breakfast meal, being served by a woman spooning watery and off colored oatmeal onto plates or in bowls from a thinly bubbling stew pot held over a dug out campfire. Another woman was taking money from those standing in line before they were given a serving and hurriedly walked off to a table to plop down and eat.

She pulled Butch's patched jacket tighter around her, zipping it up to her breast as if she were trying to steel herself and then walked straight into the seating shack.

"Glasgow says your old man traveled in with Harith 'bout a week, week and a half ago," Harriet had told her last night as she and Sumner pulled themselves off the dance floor. "He 'parently got your dad through Security. Glas' didn't get much else outta him."

That wasn't comforting. Winona didn't like how little information she had about this guy and the weak confirmation that her dad might still be on board, and so she decided that the only way she could get a straight answer was by talking to the source himself. The trek from Megaton to Rivet City was almost a week long, probably even longer for a trader if they had a protective entourage and a brahmin or two of supply, so she couldn't rightly imagine her dad traveling with Harith and *not* dropping any telling information.

But then again—up until now, anyone he *did* talk to, like Gob and Moira Brown back in Megaton, couldn't offer him much. It made the inventor feel like he was being intentionally tight lipped and that alone was concerning.

*Why're you keeping to yourself dad?* She wondered as she scanned the tables as they were filling
up with patrons, and walked between the rows of seating with eyes that tried not to linger too long
on any one person. *Is it because it's no one's business? Is what you're doing not that big of a deal?*
*Or is the secrecy for a reason?*

Amongst those seated, hunching over their food while holding their utensils like shovels and
slopping mush into their mouths, she pondered her options. Would anyone here know *who* Lucky
Harith was? Was he a memorable fellow or a nomadic trader that no one ever heard of? She didn't
know what he even looked like or what supply he sold, which already put her search on a not so
great start.

Then, in a far covered corner, stood a Rivet City Security guard dresses in the trademark black
combat armor. His bullet proof vest was white spray painted with stenciled letters reading
'R.C.S.T' and his hands were occupied by the same rifle the rest of the guards seemed to have, his
expression stiff and his posture on alert.

Winona walked towards him.
"Excuse me—" She started, but was promptly cut off before she could usher another word.
"Keep your distance, waster," He barked harshly. "I'm on the clock. Beat it."

The inventor was taken aback by his crude response, feeling more confused than intimidated,
which was dampened by her need to find this trader.

"Lucky Harith. Know him?" She probed with short response in hopes that it wouldn't upset the guard
anymore then it, apparently, already had.

"You gotta hearin' problem?" His brows furrowed over dangerous eyes as he sneered at her behind
his helmet screen, then gestured away from himself with the nose of his rifle threateningly. "You're
gonna have a walkin' problem if you don't take off while you still got workin' legs."

"Sorry," She mumbled out timidly before quickly scurrying away, now at a loss of who to talk to
next as she remembered Sumner telling her running in a zig-zag would make it harder for someone
to try and line you up in their shot. Would the Security guard *actually* shoot her?

Winona had to shamefully admit that once she saw the Security outfit, her vault dweller brain
kicked in and had her convinced that the good neighborhood security officer would answer all her
questions if she was respectful. She forgot that 'Security' out here worked differently; there weren't
any rules or a strong sense of duty and justice—they wouldn't hesitate shooting you if you proved
yourself to be more trouble than protecting you was worth. It was the same back in Tenpenny
Tower, but Winona figured that she was treated like a tip-toeing criminal solely because of
Tenpenny's murder. A lot of them thought she still deserved a 'behind the shed' style execution.

There were still these little lessons that she had to learn herself, and sometimes she had to be
consciously aware of not letting the 'vault brain' do all the rational thinking for her.

"Hey, little sister," A voice called, imposingly deep and rich in tone, and it's words sounded like
they were directed at her. When her eyes followed her ears as she stopped in place, she was met
with an unshaven, middle-aged black man sitting alone at a table. He wore a thick denim jacket
and a tattered baseball cap banded by a pair of goggles.

"You mean me?" She questioned and pointed at herself. He nodded with an amused smile.

"Sure am. You're either not very bright or don't know any better, and seein's how you don't look
like you got the lights on with no one home, guess you're the latter. Don't 'ya know not to mess with the guards 'round here?"

"I wasn't messing with him." She insisted defensively but all he did was give a dubious smile and a shake of his head.

"That jacket on 'ya would say different," He responded as he turned back to his food and spooned a bite of soupy grains into his mouth, wiping away whatever dripped down his chin. "Looks like a gang jacket with that patch. I dunno what gang you crawled out of, but if I were you? I'd be careful 'bout the flag I'd wave around here."

"...Thanks for the advice," She muttered curiously as he gestured for her to come and sit on a crate beside him, acting as a side chair. She remained standing. "I'm sorry, but who're you—?"

"I hear you're looking for Lucky Harith." The man replied as he turned in his metal chair to face her with one arm hooked over the back, leaving the forearm of his opposing arm to brace his weight on the table edge. "Question is— who're you?"

"You overheard that, huh?" She asked as she peeled off Butch's leather jacket and tied the arms around her waist, hoping the folds would obscure the Tunnel Snake patch. "Name's Winona. I was told he traveled in with someone I'm looking for—a drifter he picked up around Megaton."

"This drifter gotta name?" He asked through a slurping mouthful, pushing his food into his cheek to speak before swallowing without needing to chew from how thin it was.

"His name's James. He's a doctor, traveling alone." 

"Hoo, boy," He responded with the suck of his teeth as he dislodged the food from between them, having quickly finished his breakfast. "I knew it the moment I saw you. You're the one that sent out the raider, aren't you? Been poking 'round for me?"

"A raider? I sent out a friend of mine to get some info for me. He's a mercenary, not a raider." She frowned in confusion.

"Are we lookin' at the same person?" The man guffawed in disbelief. "Little sister, he's got the smile of a raider—all teeth and sickness that is, can't trust any of them. Bet when he came back t'you he didn't have anything, right? That's 'cause no one told him anything. They know what he is and they know not t'get too close to his kind."

"He led me to the trader that came in with my dad. That's good enough for me." She responded snippily with her arms folding over her midsection, unable to entertain the notion that Glasgow was a raider. She had her encounter with raiders, was nearly killed by them, too, and nothing about Glasgow made her think he was one of them.

"Wait," The man spoke after a beat with his spoon dropping back into his nearly finished bowl, turning back over to look at her. "James' your dad?"

"Yes, he is. He took off without a word and I'm trying to find him," Winona admitted. "I was told he came to Rivet City with Lucky Harith. I'm hoping that if I can find Harith, he might know where my dad is on board. It'd take me days to look all over this ship on my own and I need a lead."

"Well, guess you're in luck, kiddo," He beamed with a prideful grin as he presented himself in dramatic fashion with a charismatic gesture to himself. "I am the one and
My dad really came in with you—?" She reacted with disbelief. With the brief run around she just got from him, she was reluctant to even trust anything that came out of his mouth at that point.

"That's right! Was on my way out of Megaton the morning I picked him up. He asked, "where're you heading?" I told him "Rivet City! Got the best 'lurk cakes this side of the coast!". He asked if he could travel up with me, offered medical services for free, and I figured if we ran into any big greens he'd be useful. Or he'd just bandage up my old brahmin here when she got ornery, whichever happened."

"Did he ever tell you what he was doing way out here?" Winona asked as she subconsciously pulled out the crate he had gestured for her to sit on earlier, taking a seat with her eyes never leaving him.

"When I helped him on through the checkpoint—gotta friend up there that helps me out from time t'time—Ioverheard his interview," Harith responded with a head bob and his head coming to scratch his chin with dirty fingernails that disappeared into his coily beard. "Heard him say he was lookin' for Madison Li."

The name alone had Winona feeling suddenly overwhelmed. Madison Li. The longer she spent outside, during times when she wasn't thinking about her dad and the only lead she had to him, Madison's face from the Polaroids she once saw slowly began to fade from her memory until all she could recall was a stern-faced Asian woman with glasses; this woman, this old friend of her dad's, his colleague, almost became like a ghost to the inventor. She started to become apart of something that felt more like a dream she could only vaguely piece together after a restless sleep.

"What can you tell me about her?" She asked fervently with renewed hope.

"She's a scientist on board. I hear she's gotta big fancy set up in the ship's stern, with a whole crew and a bunch of expensive equipment. I also hear she gets a big pay cut for her work and she's on city council." Harith shook his head as he slumped back in his seat. "On a more personal note, she's negotiating business dealings with a friend of mine and he swears she's somethin' else—she doesn't look like much but apparently she's a hard ass with a big brain."

"You said her lab's in the ship's stern? How do I get there?"

"It's a place called the 'Science Bay'. I overheard my friend tellin' your dad to hit the stairwell and follow the signs there." He paused, his eyes lingering on her. "I assume you can read?"

"I know my way around the alphabet," Winona responded with a meager smile as she got up out of her chair. "Mister Harith, thank you—you don't know how much I appreciate this!"

"Sorry about the run around, little sister," He admitted as he got up from his own chair and offered his hand to her in what seemed to be an apologetic handshake. She took it gladly. "Gotta be careful about some folks around here, especially when I figured Smiles was your compadre. Some people're quicker with a gun than the R-cest is."

"R-cest—?"

"That's Rivet City Security Team. R.C.S.T., like what 'ya see on their armor. We call 'em R-cest for short." He explained.

"Is your friend up in the checkpoint apart of the R-cest?" The inventor inquired with a deliberate naivete to her voice.
"Polk's a Ledger up there." Harith shook his head. "He interviews the applicants, gets them through if they check out, slams the door on their ass on their way out if they don't."

"Since you said you got my dad in," Winona began. "Could you do the same for me and a friend —?"
A/N: This long awaited chapter is dedicated to one of my lovely readers (and good friends), Jeepers as a little birthday gift 3 she's been supportive since basically day one, always reviewing with such constructive comments with a keen eye for the small details, and behind the scenes we've fangirled over everything from Benny Boy from New Vegas all the way to noir crime dramas set in the 50's. She's the the sweetest, and so very intelligent and intuitive and funny! She's also a very talented writer, so give her a looksee here on archiveofourown! She has a fantastic ongoing story called "Don't Take it Personal" featuring her lawyer SoSu Marlene and everyone's favorite compulsive liar, Deacon!

Hope you have a great birthday, girl! Thanks for your support over this last year (side note: holy crap it's been almost a year), and here's to another year more!

Otherwise, on a more personal note, I'll be out of state on a cruise ship from the 21st to the 12/13 of October so no posting on here or Tumblr until I come home. I'm not paying 25$/day for wifi :I no sir-ree-bob! I'm hoping the quiet and distraction-less atmosphere of the ship and hotel to hotel room will keep me focused (and give me time to write since I won't have much else to do!)

Without further ado, however, enjoy the chapter! We'll be seeing more into Harriet here :;

Happy reading, happy writing!

~TheFaerieChild, signing out

The stairwells of Rivet City were filled with the thunderous cacophony of dozens of boots pounding upon the metal stairs where settlers traversed between the floors, and had their been anymore people stomping about, Winona was sure she would've needed to cover her ears. Every sound, like the foot falls of people or the bulk head doors creaking open or even the hushed conversations carried on in corners seemed to ricochet off of every wall, and even the smallest of sounds reacting as id they refused to go unheard. The inventor swore that she could hear the cry of a church pastor sermonizing somewhere far off, the laughter of children jostling each other with smart-mouthed jokes, and someone asking another to bum a cigarette for a bottle cap.

She barely paid any attention to such goings on around her, however—not even to the Rivet settlers unless one was in her way and disrupted her autopilot mode, forcing her to regain some conscious awareness to navigate around them in her excited rush. Her eyes followed every pipe strung wall for the next sign, seizing every directory they came across for the following arrow that would lead them through a door or up another flight of stairs, and Harriet stayed close behind only a step or two back. She'd been mostly silent since they left their rented room at the Weatherly Hotel, not even bothering to muster an aggressively sarcastic crack or two, and sometimes when the inventor
looked back over her shoulder she saw a lack of tension in the mercenary's eye; to not see her
crowing was a rare sight, and she probably would've found it odd for Harriet, but her thoughts
were too occupied with a multitude of other things to properly notice. She seemed relaxed since
they got on board.

Getting through the Security checkpoint had been remarkably painless, and that was all in thanks to
the old trader, Lucky Harith. He took them right up the ramp past the line of waiting applicants and
no guard stopped them on their way to his Ledger friend's desk, who preferred to be called just
'Polk'. He was friendly and forthcoming after Winona explained who she was and why she was in
Rivet City, and they were shortly waved on through with directions up to the largest hotel on board
and the Science Bay on the mid-ship deck with a green ticket in hand.

*It could end today.* *Dad could be around that next corner, behind that next door—he could
be right in front of me,* she thought in astonishment as every step she took along the path of signs
heightened the anticipation in her chest to pluck at her heartstrings, causing her heart to hum like an
excitable string instrument. She had to exercise some self control to keep from running headlong
down the next hall when she saw another Science Bay sign, and that was because of the patrolling
guards that loomed around the loitering citizens.

Running aimlessly was considered *suspicious activity,* and Harriet warned her that she could be
tackled or, *God forbid,* shot on sight just because security would rather place a bet on her
running away from a crime scene than place a bet on her being some excited kid without any
sense... and after the conversation she had with that R-cest guard back in the communal dining tent,
who basically threatened to shoot her just for *asking a question,* she was inclined to believe her—
especially when she couldn't take a couple of steps without feeling like people were watching her.
Winona felt multiple pairs of eyes on her since she entered the ship, making her feel as if her every
move was being meticulously inspected for holding a motive for trouble making.

Perhaps the constant watching was unsettling or even rage-inducing for some, but for a little ex-
vaultie, the confined halls full of people and the gaze of authority glued to her back all felt like a
titillating whisper of home.

...*Home.* A disingenuous smile came with the thought. As time went on she tried to keep her
thoughts from lingering on Vault 101 because it was a destructive obsession to not have any
closure; to know that she'd never recover from the things she was forced to witness—and Winona
couldn't help but commit self-flagellation because of it all. She couldn't stop questioning the way
she handled everything that happened that day—couldn't help but wonder if she could've stopped
all the atrocities if she had just turned herself in—and her conscience was poisoned with all the
'what ifs'. *What if* she had the chance to explain herself, or *what if* she could have proved to the
Overseer that she didn't know anything about her father's escape? But behind the ignorance and
yearning of the outcome of a different path, she knew that being peaceful wasn't the solution to
every problem and she had to forgive herself for choosing not to exercise diplomacy.

If she had, it might have gotten her killed that morning.

She waved the thoughts away and forced them back down into the Pandora's Box they sprung forth
from. She had to focus, forge on ahead no matter how painful it was to look back and wish things
had happened differently. All she could wish for now was to be with her dad again—to be with the
true, last whisper of *home* she had that remained un tarnished—and she was right on it's front step
as the final sign hung over her head. It was pinned above a locked bulkhead door wired with a two-
way intercom, and while Polk processed her and Harriet, he told her that all she had to do was buzz
for someone at the speaker and wait for the callback.
Her finger hovered uncertainly over the button.

"...What happens if my dad's on the other side of that door?" Winona asked aloud to no one in particular, but she felt Harriet's eye trained on her as if she were the intended recipient.

"We finish the contract, take 'ya both home." She replied without her usual acid, sounding almost—...calm. Easygoing. The inventor had expected a caustic remark about her being an idiot because she should've known what the 'what next' entailed. They talked about it multiple times before.

"Home—?" She questioned, feeling the word pull at her heart and it conjured old memories of her and Amata lazing about the diner sipping on Nuka floats, Jonas bothering her the moment she entered the clinic like a bored big brother would, early mornings walking into work with Stanley offering her a big cup of coffee to start her day—of Butch pulling her in close to kiss her again and seeing a flood of relief within his eyes, along with a lingering sadness as if he had something else to say but he just couldn't say it—

"Yeah. Gettin' you two back to Tenpenny's the end of the contract." Harriet reminded her and the breadcrumbs of memories were picked away by ravenous crows that left Winona feeling empty. Tenpenny Tower was supposed to be home now but she had plans to sell the suite, take her caps, and go. She had to make a new 'home' all on her own and it wasn't going to be in a building full of people who thought she was a murderer plus one reptilian Mister Charles Burke.

"...Right..." She mumbled half-heartedly before turning back to the door, her excited apprehension from earlier returning slowly as she thought of her dad opening it at the ring of the intercom.

He could be right in front of her in mere seconds.

Winona promptly rang with a double press to the call button and waited. It was almost agonizing, feeling those minutes drag along in a leisurely crawl, and it was one of those rare moments in a person's life where they realized seconds could really feel like years and it wasn't an exaggeration at all. She almost retired herself to her impatience to ring again, but the intercom clicked on just as her finger neared the button and it relayed a man's voice that wasn't her father's.

"Agincourt here." It said, sounding occupied.

"Hi, uh—good morning, Mister Agincourt." Winona greeted pleasantly. "I'm looking for the head scientist, Madison Li. Is she in? May I speak with her?"

"Dr. Li is indisposed at the moment and isn't taking any visitors unless it's on important matters having to do with her work. Are you here for said 'important matters' relating to her work?" He questioned woodenly while still sounding distracted, as if he were multitasking on the other side of the door.

"I think I just might be." She replied with partial certainty. "Did a man named James Parker come to see her recently?"

"...Who'd you say you were again?" His attention suddenly seemed take her into focus and his voice carried a strain in it that caused Winona to look to Harriet. She was kicked back against the wall beside her so the intercom resided between them with her arms folded over her chest, silent and straight faced.

"Winona Parker." The inventor answered, deciding not to point out that she never even said her name in the first place. 'I'm James' daughter."
"...Daughter." He parroted back dubiously after a contemplative beat, and then she could hear him gripe to himself in a miserly aside. "Isn't that just—perfect?"

"Is he here?" Winona pushed on politely despite the foreboding feeling in her gut in how the man's voice changed. "I've been trying to find him for a long time—"

"I don't know where your bastard father is, and frankly, I don't care to know." The man interrupted with a spitting nastiness. "He did a number on this lab just by showing up and I'm not going to subject Dr. Li to his brat, too, just because he can't handle being told 'no'! What, did he think he could send you in to try and convince Madison about Purity? Fat chance!"

"I'm just trying to find him!" Winona balked in complete shock, feeling an anger starting to bubble inside her at how she was being spoken to. "You're saying he isn't here?"

"You won a lot of participation trophies and not many First Place beauties growing up, huh, kid?" He deadpanned in a sour dig. "That's what I said, didn't I? He isn't here, he took off again. He tends to do that when things don't go his way."

"He's gone—...?" Her question came as a stunned murmur, unable to believe what she was hearing. He was gone already? Gone again? Right when she thought she caught up to him? "Please, I need to speak with Dr. Li! I have to find out where he went—!"

"Finding him isn't my problem, now, is it? It's yours." He replied with a smarmy tune, sounding quite pleased with himself. "I'm sure if you were unfortunate enough to get even half the brain cell your dad has, you could figure it out on your own. Don't call back here again, and if you do, you better hope that Security'll leave you in one piece."

"Did—Did you just threaten me?" Her question was met with the line going dead, and she hastily buzzed again several times before crying into the intercom. "Hey! Dr. Li? Dr. Li, if you're there, please answer! Hello—?"

When no one answered her pleas but the crackling static of a dead call line, Winona reluctantly withdrew from the speaker with a fuming bewilderment. It had been a minute since anyone dared to speak to her in such an antagonistic way, and the fact that this man—Agincourt—had badmouthed her father only spurned her anger to further heights. She was too stunned to exactly communicate that as she turned toward Harriet with wide eyes and a clenched jaw, silently asking for confirmation that the hostile interaction really did happen.

"...What the fuck just happened?" She blustered.

"Sounds like Agincourt's an Agincunt," Harriet replied simply with an eye on the intercom still. "Just say the word and I'll rip his balls out through the fucking speaker. Won't even charge 'ya for it."

"Don't give me ideas," The inventor warned as the bricked wall of shock that withheld her rage fell away brick by crumbling brick, and she was suddenly ranting loudly. "This is unbelievable! That God damn—! He couldn't even be assed to help! Dad could be out there somewhere again, and he could get hurt, or worse—!"

"Relax, princess, before you bust somethin' important in that big brain of yours." She warned with a casual flippancy.

"How can I relax? If I can't get to Madison because of her fucking guard dog, then I've
got no other leads!" All at once, the anger seemed to deflate from Winona with the sagging of her
shoulders and she pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes to keep the tears of frustration and
exhaustion from rising to the surface. She was suddenly too tired to dispense any more of her
already limited energy on being furious.

"We still got places to go," Was the only comforting (albeit stiffly delivered) thing Harriet could
manage to say after an awkward, prolonged silence fell between them. "Someone must've seen your
old man 'round here—gettin' a drink, asking for directions, somethin'. No one's just invisible unless
they're trying really hard to be."

With a sigh, the inventor dropped her hands from her eyes and looked towards Harriet with a
dejected stare, feeling too discouraged to be convinced.

"So tell me where we're gunna go," Harriet went on with a bobbing shrug of her shoulders. "You
wanna keep lookin'? We'll keep looking. You wanna call it quits? We'll call off the mission and
take you back to Tenpenny. I ain't lettin' you waste my time, raider bait, but either way I intend on
gettin' paid so it doesn't matter to me how you wanna move forward."

"...We're back to raider bait, huh?" Winona responded with some semblance of an unoffended
smile. "Careful. I might start giving you nicknames to match."

"You wouldn't dare," The one-eyed merc leered.

"Oh, I dare, Winky."

"You little fuckhead—" Harriet clutched her jaw to hold back a startled laugh.

"But you're right. And I'm not ready to go crying back to Tenpenny." She confessed as she tried to
strangle her own laughter, thankful that her jab back didn't get her a literal jab to the throat. "So
let's regroup and go with the original plan Sumner made. We'll head back to the stairwell and
figure out where to go next."

"Now you're talkin'," She whistled in agreement.

Winona shot one last sidelong glance back over her shoulder at the Science Bay door, trying to
stifle the feeling of powerlessness she felt in knowing that Madison Li was right on the other side
of it—of helplessly knowing that she was only some few feet away from having that next lead—
and then forced herself to walk away from buzzing the intercom again. Just as she turned around,
however, the tinkerer immediately spotted a little eye staring at her, along with part of a head of
shabbily snipped blond hair, from behind the hallway corner. She recognized the little spy to be a
kid, or she assumed it was a child, because the moment she noticed his presence and he realized
that he was spotted, she blinked and he had vanished.

She walked out of the dead end of the hall and into the intersection, looking toward the right
turning hall where the boy had been hiding but didn't see him. The only people occupying the now
almost empty hallway were two maintenance workers sharing a soda as they leaned on their mops,
talking seriously amongst each other about what sounded like a water leak on the lower deck.

"Hey, Harriet—?" She called to the mentioned guard with contained alarm.

"See a bathroom 'round here? Gotta take a piss." Harriet replied, leaving Winona's call for attention
unanswered and she looked back down the hallway one more time before following closely after
the other woman with a dismissive shake of her head.
"...I think I saw one back up the hall that way." She replied quietly, deciding that maybe the boy that was watching them wasn't anything to be concerned with, but something in her body—something more than an instinct—told her not to excuse it so idly.

As the two walked on through the halls of the mid-deck floor, backtracking through the route they took from the stairwell to the Science Bay to try and find the bathroom Winona saw, she tried to keep from giving in to the temptation of looking back over her shoulder to see if the boy was there again. Back in the vault, catching a child his age sneaking around like that was never taken kindly by authority, and she assumed that Wastelanders felt the same way about catching anyone peeking around corners like he was. Why was he even watching them? Could he tell they were outsiders? Was he looking for trouble?

There could've been a million reasons to sort through and she didn't want to think about any of them.

"Over here." Harriet called as they slunk down the next hall, finally finding a bathroom sign that pointed them in the right direction until they found it and went inside—but not until after Winona looked back again, still paranoid for the boy, before shutting the door when she was certain he really wasn't there.

"Harriet—"

The mercenary hurriedly gestured to her own mouth with a single finger, making the signal for Winona to be silent until she was told otherwise, and then pointed back to the door behind her with a further signal that told her to lock it. She did as she was told unquestioningly as Harriet went to each stall, pushing in every door to ensure that the toilets were unoccupied before she turned back to the inventor at the door.

"He's been following us since the hotel." Harriet announced once she was satisfied with their level of privacy.

"What—?" The inventor resounded with befuddlement. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Big cities like this, kids'll do what they have to to survive if they're on their own. They get sneaky, manipulative, find ways t'flip visitors... wait for an openin' to rob them or see if they've got any 'good will' to exploit."

"Why didn't you tell me he was following us?" She asked with a curled brow, her arms folding loosely over her midsection. "You think he's planning on mugging us?"

"Didn't think you had t'know—'til you figured out he was shadowing us." She answered with a candid shrug. "Thought at first he was plannin' on hitting us, but something—... don't feel right about it. Most kids that get in that kinda business would of made their mark already. Kept close, put on some show and then swiped your caps when you were too distracted, and he had a ton of opportunities to make his move—"

"And he didn't." She finished, leaving the other woman nodding in agreement. "The moment he knew I saw him he booked it, so he definitely didn't wanna be seen. What's the alternative to 'flipping' us?"

"Think he's a lookout for someone, which wouldn't surprise me. You've been turnin' heads since we got here." As she spoke she leaned lazily against the metal bathroom sink, where a busted mirror hung above it with glass that was graffiti ridden with milestone commentary and cursing slurs.
The notion of someone wanting to watch her that closely made Winona extremely uneasy, even more so when she agreed that Harriet's conclusion made sense. The inventor seemed to have a penchant for garnering attention from most people, and, unfortunately for her, it was always the wrong kind of attention or the wrong kind of people. Back in the vault Winona was a constant topic of gossip, and if it wasn't gossip about her hair, it was about her inventions, her failing ex-relationship with one of the most handsome men in the vault, her job in maintenance, how strange she was in comparison to all the normal apple pie neighbors she was surrounded by; and where the wrong kind of people were concerned, in one instance she was almost forced into bombing a whole town and ended up murdering Tenpenny, and in another instance she was drugged, kidnapped, and woke up in a basement.

She tried not to dwell on the memories of the latter. She didn't like the war it created in her mind, where she'd completely lose herself to them and then she couldn't distinguish between it being vividly real or being what it actually was—just awful, traumatic memories. Smells and sounds and sights constantly haunted her around many corners, triggering some untapped memory from Andale that forced her to relive the nightmare as if she were stuck in that basement again; smelling the foulness pooled in that circle of hell; reliving that moment where she and He fought for the knife and suddenly he lost his balance and fell onto her blade, piercing right through his stomach; and she was kneeling over His body as He could barely fight her off, Winona screaming loudly through the reports of a gunfight outside as she plunged her knife repeatedly into Him over, and over, and over again—watching the life drain from His eyes—watching as He could never hurt her again—watching because she couldn't fucking stop herself—

"Princess! Fuck, hey—Winona—" Harriet called with her hands firmly set on Winona's shoulders, trying to shake her back into the now.

"Can't br- breathe—" Was all she could mumble as her tongue swelled in her mouth and her throat seemed to close up in unison. Her eyes panned blankly around the cramped bathroom and she could smell the rotting, flayed flesh of other victims filling her mouth and nose. She started to hyperventilate as the room stretched and tunneled before her.

"Shit," Harriet snapped anxiously as she unlocked the bathroom door and forced her out of the small room when the inventor was too terrified to move on her own. "We're goin', alright? Keep a lid on it 'til we get outside."

Winona barely heard the other woman's reassurances as she was dragged towards the stairwell. The boxed-in hallways were closing in, clamping down on her with every passing second until it was too late and she was gone.

She was back in Jack Smith's basement.

"I'm tellin' you that Sumner's got some weird fucking telekinesis or whatever it is—"

"Telepathy."

"Whatever, so if you don't eat something, guarantee he's gunna know and kick my ass once we get off this shitboat."

Winona stared across the two person table top at Harriet with an indifferent stare, but straightened up in her chair regardless with her elbows on either side of her tray of food to uphold her head in her hands. In a plastic bowl in front of her was probably one of the most appetizing meals she'd seen since leaving Tenpenny Tower—mirelurk cakes with some kind of clumpy mush—but she couldn't bring herself to eat. Her thoughts weighed heavily upon her troubled mind and her stomach
felt like it was cradling an overbearing pit of defeat, leaving no forgiving space for her to eat something.

"I'm just not hungry, okay?" She spoke with a tense agitation as she shoved her food tray away so it slid across the table to Harriet in offering. The mercenary said nothing, at least nothing she was willing to say at normal conversation volume, and quietly grumbled to herself instead as she dumped Winona's food onto her own tray to eat it.

"Guess I'll just get my ass kicked," She complained quietly.

They were currently sitting in the dining section of Gary's Galley in the hustling hub that was Rivet City's marketplace, occupying a table in the farthest corner of the restaurant that they could get so they had a wider view of the bazaar; narrow trading stalls were squeezed together in what little space they were afforded, covered with colorful draping awnings and over encumbered by big signs advertising eye-catching sales, and the clamoring pools of shoppers that clustered themselves in front of the displays of each stall set the whole room abuzz with life and noise. Everything about Rivet City, from the marketplace to the hallways to the stairwell was always busy, loud, and full of people. It reminded her of the movies they had back in the vault—of an adventuresome hero making his way through the market slums of a burdened third world country, trying to blend himself in with the foreign masses to hide from the bad guys hunting for him.

Winona felt like she was trying to blend in alright, but she didn't feel like any kind of glamorized hero as she and Harriet kept an eye out for the boys that had been following them all God damn day.

As the two flew about the ship between the decks, following the directories for every hotel, motel, hostel, or boarding room they could get to (once spending an hour on the upper deck so Winona could stabilize herself), they noticed that more children were sneaking about in watch of them. Every time they would double back to throw one off or take to the cramped stairwell to shake another one loose, they'd spot another gone or two already waiting around the corner, playing hand games or chatting about playing rounds of baseball up on the flight deck but their eyes always drifted toward Winona and Harriet as they strode past. It was becoming more alarming than unnerving at this point and the inventor had already counted about 9 different boys trying to tail them.

She observed that these boys were distinctly set apart from the other kids she saw about the settlement—being hallow eyed, scrawny and filthy without proper clothes, in comparison to the other children who were cheery, fed, bathed, and dressed. She also noticed that these boys seemed to be invisible to absolutely everyone. No one engaged them, looked at them, wondered what they were doing about the halls—and once she even saw a middle-aged woman slam shoulders with a boy who was no more than 8 and just kept on walking like he hadn't disrupted her day in the slightest... like he wasn't even there at all.

It caused Winona to feel a twinge of pity within her. If those boys hadn't been harassing them all day she might've offered to buy a meal for one of them, but then she recalled Harriet's earlier recounting of how dangerous Wasteland-bred children could be and decided—as shameful as it was—that she had to keep her distance for her own safety. She also couldn't afford to 'waste' her caps on someone who wasn't herself when she could only take so little from Tenpenny Tower.

"Is Overalls still around?" Winona asked. With the position of their table, she had no choice but to have her back to the majority of the marketplace, so if she turned around for a peek it'd look very suspicious.

At the question, Harriet held a wary gaze past Winona as she shoveled food into her mouth and
chewed slowly with her eye turning back down to her meal once she took a good look around. She picked up a crab cake with her bare hand and shoveled half of it into her mouth and chewed that for some time before pocketing it in her cheek to speak.

"Yeah. But now there's a new kid with him—haven't seen him before. Gunna call him Stupid Hat."

"Why?"

"'Cause he's wearin' a stupid hat, why else?"

"...Fitting," Winona replied dryly. "What're they doing?"

She shrugged idly, eyes on her food. "Just watchin'. Not talking or nothin'."

"Are they still by the chems shop? Behind the big sign?"

"Ye-up."

"This is getting ridiculous," Winona argued as she collapsed back into her seat with a heated huff. "You know what time it is right now?"

"Time for you to get a watch?" Harriet jested with dead sarcasm.

"It's almost 8:30. They've been following us literally for almost 10 hours all around the God damn ship!"

"Proves that whoever's watchin' you really wants t'watch you." She explained after taking a swig of her beer to wash down the mushed food in her mouth, and her body seemed to halt a beat before she finally set down the bottle as it departed from her mouth. "Don't look, but they just got tagged."

"What—?"

"R-cest guard's talkin' to them." She clarified. "His uniform's different then the others, though—gotta patch on the back the other guards don't have." Harriet whistled low as if impressed, her brows raising slightly on her flat face. "Guy's not packin' the standard R91's the others've got, too. Plasma rifle, looks like a model—...shit, that's a 530P and it looks modified. He's gunnin' for goo piles, not bodies to put in holding cells."

"First of all, you can explain all that to me later—second of all, what if he's the one the kids are looking out for? You said he's R-cest, right? What if he was keeping tabs on us since the Watering Hole?"

Harriet's brows were furrowed as she held up a discreet yet firm hand to Winona for her to keep quiet, her eye trained on whatever interaction was taking place between the two boys and the guard with an unconvinced shake of her head.

"They're arguing about somethin', that's all I can tell—"

"I'm gonna grab a soda and see if I can get close." Winona spoke impatiently as she launched herself out of her seat and shoved her chair back in under the table.

"What—! Sit your ass back down!" Harriet hissed in warning, trying not to lunge up from her chair as well to yank the inventor's back down into hers and draw attention to themselves.

"Keep a visual on me." She replied flippantly and stalked off toward the front of the dining section where the roped off area led back out onto the main marketplace floor. She didn't hear Harriet get
up after her, so she figured that was, more or less, her protector reluctantly letting her do what she wanted.

The inventor swung around the wait cue that wrapped itself along the serving counter of Gary's Galley, walking with a leisurely gait toward the very back of the line to mock wait with the other customers that hung around for their orders to be taken. When she glanced over toward the chems stall—*A Quick Fix*—she saw the two boys standing behind a vertical, pirouetting neon sign that read 'Drug Store' with a pill topper along with the guard Harriet talked about, seeming to corner them against the stall edge. The tall teenage boy they code named *Overalls* stood with slumped, bony shoulders and a shaved head, and beside him was 'Stupid Hat'—a kid who was considerably smaller, wearing a page boy cap a top a mess of unruly brunet hair. The R-cest guard with the patch on the back of his bulletproof vest stood with them with his muscled arms tightly folded over his chest, his back facing Winona where she waited in line.

She turned back forward and fished out some caps from her front jeans pocket to fiddle with, pretending that she was counting through them with a meticulous finger while listening. Behind her she could make out most of the furious exchange that was carrying on in thanks to both the guard and Stupid Hat arguing with raised voices over chatting bystanders.

"Waddya mean, 'snoopin'? We're not snoopin', Hawk-Eye! Beans and I were just admirin' the scenery." She heard the waifish boy snap in complaint.

"It's Harkness, and furthermore that's Chief Harkness to you two," The guard responded coolly, showing remarkable control in the tone and volume of his voice.

"Coulda fooled me, since you could 'parently see us all the way from the other ass end of the marketplace, through this here sign, and 'saw' that we're up t'no good! Can you believe this guy, Beans? You say I'm snoopin'? If I'm snooping, you're snoopin'! Waddya take me for, ole Harky? I ain't no Peepin' Tom!"

"Then it's just a wonder how you got a nickname like Peeping Peter." The man, who called himself Harkness, replied on an audible sigh. She could almost hear the eye roll.

"That's slander 'ya know! Defamation of my character—muddying my good name! I could have your badge for that!"

"Big words from a kid who can't even reach my badge." He responded with barely concealed amusement. "You couldn't even reach the cookie jar from the top shelf if you tried."

"That's why your mother gets 'em down for me—" Peter replied with a caustic jab, and even Winona had to admit that she almost lost herself to a belt of shocked laughter right then and there. This boy Peter was a talker alright, and something about him reminded her of a certain foul-mouthed Tunnel Snake.

"Commander, may I have a word with you?" A woman's voice interjected. She spoke shortly, sounding irritated and sharp. Winona tried not to look over her shoulder to see who was giving her stake out a short conclusion.

"You know I've always got words for you," She heard Harkness respond, making no attempt to sound pleasant with the interrupting woman. He then seemed to turn back to Peter when he spoke again; "Maybe we should start calling you Lucky Peter with how often you get lucky breaks like this. One of these days your smart ass is going to get you more than a slap on the wrist, so I suggest you watch it. Now get out of here before I call Commander Danvers to escort you both to lock up."
"You mean Commander 'Got Harkness By the Balls'—" Peter began with a testing boldness that seriously pushed the luck in a name like Lucky Peter.

"Get!" Harkness boomed and Winona heard two pairs of small feet quickly scatter in the opposite direction. She looked up in time to see the two boys bolt straight past her to disappear right into the crowd with no one taking any notice of their intrusion, invisible to the masses once again.

"I want to know why funding for my work has been cut! Aagin!" She heard the woman snarl seethingly at Harkness once the two boys took off.

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Dr. Li."

The name was immediately picked up by Winona's ears and she snapped her eyes back over her shoulder in recognition, no longer bothering to hide that she was eavesdropping. Standing with Harkness was a petite Asian woman in a lab coat over a dirty mint green dress, glaring pryingly up at the security chief behind a pair of rectangular glasses with a severe frown on her pinched mouth. Her black hair was pinned back into a low bun at the back of her head and she stood with her shoulders drawn back and arms crossed, her posture unyielding.

But it was when she took off her glasses to let them hang from the ornamental leash around her neck that Winona recognized her face from her father's photos.

Madison Li.

"33%, Harkness! I'm not 'mistaking' a 33% cut!" She continued to argue with her glare turning corrosive. "Do you even realize how this will affect my work? This is absolutely ridiculous and I demand an answer."

"You want the truth? Your work with portable fusion power's going nowhere. Your team hasn't come up with anything worthwhile that the Council can hang its hat on—and your work with hydroponics? Why should the city keep funding your endeavors when your success isn't shared with the citizens? There's people on this boat who could use the produce your team's grown and yet it's exclusive to those who donate a mountain of caps and kiss your ass."

"I resent your implication—"

"That wasn't an implication."

"—and I've told you before that our greenhouses don't make nearly enough produce for even a small fraction of the population aboard this ship, let alone such generous patrons! The team barely even has enough scientists to run the lab, so I'm forced to rely on said donations to continue our work because, as much as you and Bannon denied it previously, it's obvious now that faith is being lost in our work. This is the second budget cut in the last month, without even a forewarning, and I don't condone this kind of underhanded behavior from one person who commandeers the public, while the other is head of security!"

"There's nothing 'underhanded' about it, Madison. We warned you in the last meeting that this would happen if something didn't give and here it is." He responded thinly and walked away from her dismissively. "You can take it or leave it."

"I might just take you up on the latter in that offer!" She barked after him.

Harkness continued walking away from her, unbothered by her threat with a hand waving back at her over his shoulder and Winona watched as Madison stood alone beside the chems stall, shutting her eyes and kneading her fingers into either side of her reddening temples. The inventor caught a
brief, muted look of defeat cross the older woman's face, and instead of turning away, feeling pity for the woman that had once been good friends with her dad a long time ago, Winona braved walking across the lane to tentatively come to Madison Li's side.

"Excuse me, Dr. Li? I was hoping I could have a minute of your time?" She inquired carefully, her nerves fluttering. She almost couldn't believe that this woman from her dad's photos was real.

"You'll have to excuse me, I'm not in a conversation worthy mood—" She responded in a biting voice as she turned back to face Winona as she spoke. When Madison's eyes fell upon her face, they went wide in astonishment with her thin brows rocketing up towards the widow's peak of her hairline, and the rest of what she meant to say died in her mouth when she clamped it shut.

"...I know you. Don't I?" She asked quietly after a pause when her shock waned, and Winona could see a faint recognition in the other woman's eyes, seeming almost sad.

"I—... I don't know—" The inventor replied uncertainly. "I don't think we've ever met before. My name's Winona Parker."

"...I was afraid you would say that." Madison admitted as her hands dipped into the pockets of her lab coat, her thumbs framing them on the outside. "I knew who you were the moment I saw you. You're Catherine's daughter. You look so much like her, I almost thought—... never mind. It's not important."
The comparison sent a stabbing pang straight through Winona and she tried to fight back the oncoming prickle of a few tears with the tightening of her jaw. No one ever said she was her mother's daughter; no one aside from her dad had ever confirmed for her just how much she looked like her mom, and yet here was Madison, easily convinced that they could have been one in the same... almost mistaking her for her mom completely.

It filled her with equal parts of pride and heartache.

"What're you doing here, all the way in Rivet City?" Madison went on with the concerned furrow of her brows. "Your father told me that he came from Vault 101, I assumed you were still down there."

"I was, but I was forced to leave." She replied in short response. "I've been trying to reach him ever since. I put some pieces together and thought that he was coming here to find you... was actually starting to doubt it until this morning."

"He's told you about me?" Madison inquired with a feeble tone, sounding slightly hopeful and it almost hurt Winona to have to shake her head in the negative. "...How typical of your father."

"He would've told me about you if he could—look, it's really complicated—" Winona insisted a little impatiently, wanting to move on to more pressing matters. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately? About my dad? He came to talk to you about Purity, didn't he?"

"...Admittedly, yes, but I turned him away." She answered stiffly, obviously not wanting to talk about it. The inventor couldn't tell if the reluctance was about Purity, or about her father, though.

"And why's that?"

"We shouldn't speak about this out in the open." Madison concluded with a handy gesture, telling Winona to follow her. "Come with me, we can talk in my office back at my lab—if you don't mind the walk, that is."
"Walking's become a recent hobby of mine," Winona joked, though Madison glances at her, clearly bemused. "...Never mind. Lead the way."

Harriet remained sitting at the restaurant table, her posture slumped deep into her chair with a knee bouncing in impatience under the table as she watched Winona from a distance, waiting for her return. Further behind the inventor stood Overalls and Stupid Hat, still, apparently, being reprimanded by the R-cest guard, if his body language had any giveaway concerning their tense dispute. Her eye flicked back toward Winona to see her pretending to count out her caps, which was a dumb thing to do out in the open, when someone could run by and snatch them out of her hands before she'd have a chance to react, but she was making a good show of being aloof. Her expression was completely unreadable as she concealed the fact that she was eavesdropping, and Harriet had to admit, she looked like a practiced natural… which was a surprising feat for the vault dweller, who turned heads wherever they went.

What's it 'bout the princess that's got everyone hot under the collar? She considered with partial amusement. It wasn't the fact that Winona was attractive (or at least Harriet didn't find her very pretty, but she liked leggy brunettes so she was clearly biased), but it was the fact that the inventor was a prime cut for the appetite of the Wasteland. She came off as scrawny, naive, defenseless, and furthermore, it was easy to tell that she wasn't from around here; not meaning the Capital but the Wasteland as a whole. She was a puzzle piece of the Wastes that had no place being on the table, a card from a different deck, and that alone was enough to draw in lingering eyes and ill intentions like starved deathclaws to spilled blood.

Harriet knew she'd be damn well earning that paycheck by agreeing to this contract, those caps were too good to be true, and no matter what Winona learned from, or how she changed because of the Wasteland, there'd always be something otherworldly about her—always something for the 'claws to sniff out.

She didn't know how the little vaultie would fair when they found her old man and got them back to Tenpenny, completing the contract. Hell, Harriet didn't know how their team would fair at the end of the contract when Tobias took his caps and ran off to New Vegas; and she knew he was planning on leaving, he didn't even have to tell her. She saw it in his eyes after Andale, the dawning realization that he couldn't do this kind of work anymore, and she knew that there was some kid in Vegas he spent years trying to find. Mercenary caps got you sources and friends in all kinds of places when you weren't blowing it on liquor and hookers to celebrate not dying for another day.

Harriet was taken aback from her wandering musings by the jostling of her table, making her elbow clip the edge as her weight in her arm slipped from where it upheld her jaw in her palm. She snapped towards the disturbance with a vitriolic sneer at having been bothered and was met with a small boy, no older than 9 or 10, staring back at her. His eyes were vacant and hungry, his clothes full of holes smoothed over with mismatched patches, and he scratched at an infected radroach bite on his chin with filthy, overgrown fingernails.

"You Li Ming?" He asked.

The name came like a bullet piercing clean through her, the emotional weight so powerful that it became a physical feeling—crushing her lungs, tightening her throat, roiling her stomach with the need to vomit.

"What'd the fuck you say—?" She could barely force the words out of her throat, sounding more like a startled murmur than an assertive snap.

"You Li Ming'er not, chinky?" He repeated impatiently. Since coming to the table, his eyes
lingered towards her half-finished meal ravenously with a watering mouth.

Harriet found herself nodding dumbly, hating that she responded to that dead name automatically, hating that she was too stunned and had let that slur slide. She never thought she'd hear that name again—never thought anyone in the Capital would know her by that name—by 

"Gotta friend wantin' t'see 'ya, commie. Upper hangar deck, near the baseball diamond in an hour. Say the name of 'the man death forgot'."

"Who sent you?" Harriet interrogated, trying to firm her voice so it didn't show the fear she felt, and under the table she curled her shaking hands into sweating fists. "Wait—!"

The boy, instead of answering her, snatched her bowl of food and ran, vaulting himself over the fence surrounding Gary's Galley to escape with his meal, his message having been dutifully delivered. The only thing left in his wake were the drips of mush as he shoveled it into his mouth sloppily with his bare hand, too starved to wait until he was in hiding to eat. She watched him run away, unable to get herself up to standing feet when her legs felt weak, trembling under the burden of her fear as a sheen of sweat collected along her skin. Her breathing was too laborious to be able to swallow, the incoming oxygen thick like tar as it met with her lungs, as people stared openly at her in question—or annoyance—from her outburst as the boy took off with her food.

_The man death forgot._ She didn't dare even whisper His name in the furthest reaches of her mind, as if He would somehow hear and be summoned to her. It fell from the boy's mouth so _easily_ and yet the title registered on her ears like the mark of a curse; of her drink turning to blood in it's bottle; of frogs and lice and flies overshadowing the land; of a plague diseasing every brahmin; of bodies covered in weeping boils; an embroiled sky of falling hellfire and hail; a scourge of locusts; of an impenetrable darkness spanning over three days and three nights, and when light broke on the fourth morning, it revealed the deaths of firstborns in every house.

The man that death forgot would come like the 10 plagues of Egypt, leaving nothing but disease and despair behind every footstep.

Harriet thought she was safe. She thought she outran the hounds, left The Wall far behind her, cut her hair and took back her mother's name, had been in hiding for _years_—there was no doubt in her mind that they would drag her back. They'd strip her naked and drag her in a bag over sharp rock-strewn roads back to Philly. It didn't matter if it had been 20 days or 20 _years._

The mercenary touched her shoulder, over her slave brand. She was still their property.

She _knew_ she should've burned it off, mottled her face until it was unrecognizable; she should've gone to extensive lengths just to make sure that she was _never_ found, and yet here she was. Someone from Philly knew her, because no one but someone from Philly knew her by that name, and they wanted to meet.

Harriet gripped the table edge to ground herself, shutting her eye. It came like an instinct, the clinging savagery of wanting to survive, and she knew that she had to stop cowering in the corner and she had to _act_. She had to act _first_ and she had to act _now_. She spent too long hiding in corners, averting her eyes, running scared!

The Families weren't getting her back. Not alive, and not as a rotting carcass, either.

So she had to get a plan together.

Despite her erratic, frazzled thoughts, she realized that she was missing something._ Her_
employer. When she looked back towards the marketplace, stuffing her mental frenzy into the back of her mind as she looked over the crowd, she caught Winona standing with a small, Chinese woman in a lab coat. During Harriet's conversation with the dirty little boy, Overalls, Stupid Hat, and the R-cest guard with the plasma rifle had concluded their argument, leaving Winona and the woman to stand near A Quick Fix where they once were. She watched as the two women turned towards the crowd to disappear into it and Harriet immediately took up action—practically catapulting herself over the dining table and out of the seating area of the Galley too go after the inventor.

"Winona! Hey!" Harriet barked over the clamor of shoppers and shopkeepers boasting about their wares and the sounds of heavy bootfalls on metal floors, and Winona whipped around at the call of her name, her expression tight. The Chinese woman stopped behind her, expression impassive.

"Harriet! Shit—" She started, realizing that she had just walked off without even a glance back at her protector. "I'm sorry, I got distracted! I found Madiso—"

Her words were cut short upon seeing the look of fear in Harriet's face, too great to be able to fully conceal as it spread in her eyes, and Winona's own eyes widened in concern. It left her dark eyebrows to furrow over them, her own expression alarmed.

"Harriet, what's wrong?"

"Can we trust her?" Harriet responded instead, nodding back at the woman behind her.

"Ye- Yeah, this is Madison—the woman we were looking for," Winona announced as she gestured back to the woman, Madison. "Harriet, what's going on? You don't look—"

"Stay with her 'til I come get you. If I'm not back by tomorrow mornin', take your shit and get back to Sumner. Give him the rest of my pay cut when you get back to Tenpenny, he needs it. He'll know what happened."

"Wait, wait, wait—tell me what's going on! Did something happen? Are you in trouble? Harriet, talk to me." The inventor insisted firmly with her hand braced against Harriet's shoulder, trying to regather her attention as the mercenary's eye flicked back toward the rest of the marketplace with a look of dread, as if she thought she'd see someone she didn't want to run into.

"Find your old man." Was all Harriet said as she shoved past the two women, shrugging off Winona's concerned touched as she did, and stalked off through the waning bazaar crowd as people took their purchases and left the marketplace. She followed with them toward the stairwell, having quickly disappeared from the sight of her employer.

"Harriet—! Harriet!" Winona yelled in distress after her as Madison stood silently with her, taking in the display.

She had never seen Harriet looking so—... so afraid. They went through so many trials since leaving Tenpenny Tower and not once did the merc look even remotely scared or anxious. It made Winona almost subconsciously assume that she didn't have the capacity to be scared; too angry all the time to let anything stand in her way, too resilient to be knocked down, acting like she had gone through hell and if that hadn't killed her than nothing else could pull it off... and yet, in that moment, it almost felt like Harriet was running away from something.

"We can hold this conversation at a later time," Madison spoke, looking to her as she did. "If need be."
Winona was conflicted. If Harriet was in trouble, she didn't want to leave her alone when she seemed so troubled, but at the same time she was compelled to listen to Harriet's demands and go with Madison—not because she still wanted to talk about Purity or her dad, but because she trusted Harriet and her orders.

With the reluctance of stepping into a possibly dangerous situation she knew nothing about, she decided that she had to go.

"I'm gonna go after her." She concluded resolutely.

"Are you sure that would be wise?" Madison inquired patiently with her hands back in her lab coat pockets.

"Probably not," The inventor admitted openly with a shake of her head. "Guess I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"Winona—" The scientist stunted once her eyes were on her, her small mouth clamping tightly as if holding back what was meant to follow Winona's name. "...I expect that you won't disrupt our work when you arrive."

Winona nodded in thanks before rushing off through the disintegrating masses of shoppers to go after Harriet. Now that she met with Madison, now that she knew she could have her answers whenever she was ready—Winona didn't mind waiting another day to get them. She only hoped that Madison would be willing to offer up explanation to all the questions that loomed in her thoughts; the ones her father refused to answer the day she found his notes on Purity's experiments, and then refused to answer still in the consequent days afterward. What really happened to her mother? How did they end up in Vault 101? Whatever happened to Project Purity, leaving it's remnants to be vultured by the mutants that now patrolled Jefferson Memorial?

She could end her search for her dad tomorrow (if not that, at least end the uncertainty in the 'whys' of his years of lies). Right now, Harriet needed her just a little bit more.
Harriet pried open the bulkhead door that led out to the hangar deck of the ship—the chilled night wind, whipping with sea salt, pushed back against it stubbornly as she dragged herself out into the open to be surrounded by the consuming shadows of a black night. The carrier floor was barely lit with Einstein lights strung over the remnants of railings, lanterns were held aloft in strategic places, and moon rays peered down at her in times when the thick clouds would finally creep away from the moon’s cratered face. The natural light quickly waned with the covering of black wool clouds and when she chanced a look over the railing, she saw nothing below but more blackness.

She was too vulnerable, out in the open like she was—but the darkness was surely as much a cover for her as it was for her opponent.

Keeping the heavy door propped open with a cinder block as a doorstop, she trusted this way back down the tower to be her quick route of escape if everything went back-ass-wards. The only weapon she had with her was a combat knife—which was sheathed around her forearm under the concealment of her poncho.

With a steadying breath, Harriet walked past the husks of pre-war aircrafts and fighter jets stripped of everything but their skeletons, leaving barren remainders in wait for further dismantling, and they left an alarming amount of hiding spaces around her. Her hand grabbed for the handle of her knife guardedly as her eye panned across her barely visible surroundings, and the mercenary wished that she had the foresight to bring in all her weapons. Hell, if at least Tobias was here, even as bare handed as she was right now, Harriet would've still felt safer as she walked until the shells of pre-war contraptions dwindled down to an empty deck save for a makeshift baseball diamond. It was set with four plates in the diamond shape, and baseball mitts, balls, and bats were haphazardly discarded after the most recent game.

This is it, Harriet realized just moments before seeing a lone figure standing at the railing beside a lantern dimmed to a weak flame, and their presence made her heart skip several beats with a pulsing rush of adrenaline. She kept to a safe distance and discreetly pulled for her blade, her eyes tracing along their back as if she would suddenly recognize them, already assuming this person to be the worst case scenario; a Woodsman. Woodsmen were a mercenary-aligned faction employed by the Families for the last 100 years or so, their name coined from old fairy tales of ruthless hunters, and they answered only to the ‘man that death forgot’—given that he was the leading household amongst the 9. They were tasked with ‘collecting lost property’ that got on the freedom
Harriet lost her chance of a silent kill when the figure noticed her presence, looking back over their shoulder as if they were waiting expectantly for her to say something, and the reaction made Harriet pause. Quickly scanning them, they were clothed in a scuffed winter jacket with the hood pulled over their head, dark slacks, and steel-toed boots mismatched in style; one was black and up to their knee while the other was only shin-high and dark brown, tied up with makeshift laces having been cut from a larger piece of fabric. Maybe a scarf, or a shirt.

Whoever this person was, they definitely weren't a Woodsmen just on clothing alone—it was all hardened leather, rivets and pockets and straps. They also didn't look any more armed than Harriet was with her knife.

Something wasn't right here. They should have attacked her by now.

"You the one lookin' for me? You from the Families? From Philly?" Harriet called over the whistling wind, and the figure fully faced her to show that under their hood, the lower half of their face was obscured by a scarf pulled up to the bridge of their nose, just below a set of eyes that looked black and demonic in the flickering illumination of their lantern.

"What's the name of the man death forgot?" The person—a woman—demanded answer, but Harriet heard the waver in her voice, like she was scared.

"Malcolm S. Holcomb. Hope that shit-sucker chokes on his own God damn name one day." Harriet replied with a suspicious grimace, scrutinizing the woman with her hand fidgeting on the handle of her knife. Was this a ruse? The start of an ambush? Something worse?

The woman stared back at her silently, and resolve—and was that relief Harriet saw?—spanned across her dark eyes. With a bandaged hand, she pushed back the hood on her head to let short, black hair spill out from under the garment, then with a hooked finger, she pulled the scarf down to bundle it under her chin. It revealed to Harriet the last face she expected to see in front of her.

"Mei? Mei Wong—?" Harriet exclaimed in a stunned voice, her eye widening in dubious shock as she quietly tucked her blade back into it's sheath.

"...I didn't think it was you at first, Li Ming." She replied with a brokenhearted smile, the wind blowing her hair into her face. "You've changed so much. You—... You look older, now. Not like a kid anymore."

Harriet had lost her voice. She swallowed back the words that were thick in her mouth, and suddenly Mei's face twisted into one of an oncoming sob as she strode toward Harriet and trapped her in a tight embrace that almost barreled her over—her head cradled against the taller woman's shoulder as Mei sniffled, trying not to let the tears overwhelm her.

"When Niklaus came back without you that night, we all just assumed the worst." She mumbled through her tears of relief, smiling despite the pain. "We thought he finally got you this time. Thought I was losing it when I saw you go into the Weatherly this morning."

After a stunned second, when hundreds of thoughts went tearing through Harriet's mind, she finally returned the hug with heavy arms. The adrenaline was slowly draining out of her blood steam and it left her breathless and trembling, feeling tears surging in her own eyes but she forced them back with the smallest of sniffles. When they finally broke apart from the embrace, the two women simply stared at each other in silence; unable to muster a kind smile or even another word as Harriet steadied herself in the presence of someone familiar.
She never particularly considered Mei to be a friend of hers back in Philly—only saw her as another woman in the same shit boat going up the same shit creek as herself. They were both tortured by the same monster and His sick appetites, leaving them bound in the same chains, and because of that Harriet never thought that she'd be so happy to be reunited with her. They hadn't been friends before, sure, but Harriet could call her 'friend' now. It was a survivor's victory to revel on the other side of adversity with someone who endured the same trials as your own.

"...Niklaus did that to you, didn't he, Li Ming?" Mei inquired with her eyes lingering on Harriet's eye patch. "Some parting gift."

"...Don't go by that name anymore." She replied quietly. "Don't want it on me. I go by Harriet, now."

"Harriet," She repeated back the name as if she was testing it out, her gaze skimming over Harriet's body before nodding in approval. "...It suits you. I still go by Mei. For now."

"Should I ask what's with the run 'round you gave me, or is that gonna be a long story?" Harriet asked, feeling her jaw tighten uncomfortably under her skin when Niklaus' name was said again. She didn't want to hear it. Part of her stupidly hoped that she could forget about the pain if she left it all back in Philly, locked up tight whatever couldn't be left behind somewhere deep inside her and promised herself to never speak of it again—as if talking about it out loud would make it real outside of Philly—and she wanted to be someone new. She wanted to be someone that wasn't Li Ming, a girl traumatized by a gruesome past. She wanted to be stronger, a survivor, a human being. She told herself to never let anyone think she was weak ever again.

"You can ask, but it'll still be a long story." Mei answered dourly, her stare somber as her eyes remained on Harriet's face. "I had to make sure it was really you first. That's why I asked about Holcomb."

"And the private, candlelight dinner?" She responded sarcastically with a nod toward the lantern.

"I didn't want anyone seeing us talking in public."

"You've been made—?"

"I don't know." She shook her head with her hands taking grip of the railing, her shoulders slumping tiredly as she looked straight down into the water, roiling like black oil far below and marked only by the radioactive jetsam buoyed on the waves. "We've been in hiding on the ship since we got here from Philly last week... taking up sanctuary in the church here under Father Clifford, and he's proved that we can trust him, but—... two days ago I saw a slaver come out of the Weatherly, where you're staying. I'm pretty sure he didn't see me but I don't wanna take the chance."

"Woodsman?" She inquired with arms folded over her chest as she turned her back to the railing and leaned her weight against it carelessly, lifting an eye toward Mei's face.

"No. You remember a guy named Sister?"

"...Sister," Harriet repeated with a mirth filled snort. She rifled through her memories for a face to latch onto the name, and conjured only a vague image of a small, Hispanic man with bad teeth and an equally bad haircut. The more she thought about it the clearer his place amongst the Families became; he was a city slaver that worked closely with Warwick, one of the 9 house heads who trained and auctioned off slaves to the other 8 houses. Sister was the liaison between the 9 and a kingpin out in DC named Eulogy Jones, if her memory was right.
"Guy had a fuckin' scary set of teeth, didn't he?" She finally asked for confirmation and Mei nodded.

"He's staying in that hotel, in room 4. I don't know if he's alone or how he even got on board." She admitted quietly with her hands running up her biceps to warm her from the cold, her hands crinkling over the fabric of her coat's sleeves. "I'm terrified he'll recognize one of us. If he does—... If he figures us out we don't stand a chance. He'll kill us, or worse. Yumi got hurt in the escape and can't walk very far or fast, and I'm not leaving her behind. I'm tired of leaving people behind."

Harriet felt a pang of guilt pierce her heart like sharpened shrapnel, lodging itself inside and calling it home. Did Mei know about what she did? Did she know about Katie, and what Harriet did to secure her own escape? Her own freedom?

**Did Mei know she had betrayed Katie the night she got away and left her to die?**

She was afraid to shut her eye—to even blink—because she knew Katie would be waiting for her behind her eyelids, all ginger hair and big blue eyes and beaming smile. It hurt too much to even think about her and yet, Katie was still constantly on her mind. *That Night*, Harriet promised to protect her and said that freedom meant nothing if she couldn't have it with her—and then she tossed it all away for her own survival. She regretted it every day she kept herself alive and slowly realized that, yes, she had meant it when she said that freedom meant nothing if they couldn't spend it together.

Freedom felt hollow when she couldn't share it with the girl she loved.

"I don't want to ask you this, because it's dangerous, and you've obviously got your own life now and I don't want to get you involved by dragging you back into something like this ever again, but —..." Mei rambled reluctantly, pursing her lips. "...But you were never scared. At least you never acted like it, back then. You were the only one Niklaus never broke. You're the only person I trust to do this for us, who I know could do it—"

"You want me t'get rid of Sister." She concluded as she looked back upon Mei, who nodded with a pursed mouth.

"Of course, but I don't know if that's what we should do," She replied quickly. "If he's still working for the DC head and goes missing, I don't want anyone to come looking for him, looking for answers. We're planning on heading up North and God forbid we end up being followed."

"What's up North?"

"A sanctuary for escaped slaves." Mei spoke with an inflection of hope in her voice as a small smile touched her lips.

"...You're not talkin' 'bout the Temple of the Union, are you?" Harriet frowned. "Mei, c'mon now—that's just a crock of shit. A honey trap t'catch the slaves that got away so they could get 'rounded up like a bunch of dumb brahmin and carted back off to their masters."

"It might be real. Might not be, either, and we could be wasting our time trying to get there," She answered quietly, but the spirit in her voice was unyielding despite Harriet's skepticism. "But just having a hope to go on for helps those of us who've just—... given up on everything."

"...So what am I s'pposed to do? Help 'ya pack up and leave?" She asked with a dubious sigh and a shake of her head. "A quick exit's not what you need, Mei, and I can't walk you all the way up North. This fucker's gotta go and it's more dangerous leavin' him alive, anyway."
"But what if—"

"Slavers out here ain't like the Families. Out here, they'll turn on their own for a shiny tin can if it was worth half a cap, don't think anyone'll miss dear old Sister enough to slog it all the way out here." Harriet interrupted brashly as she pried herself off the railing and came closer to Mei's side, leaning into her field of vision with a firm countenance. "You know this is what's gotta happen, otherwise 'ya wouldn't've pulled the 'I don't wanna get you involved' speech, yet you're the one that needs convincin' that he's gotta die."

"...Alright," Mei agreed quietly, though her shoulders drew back from their slumped position as if an invisible weight was lifted off of her small frame. "Alright, Li Mi—Harriet. We'll do it your way. But how're you going to do it? There's R-cest everywhere."

"I'll figure somethin' out," Harriet agreed as she looked back toward the door of the bridge tower that she had propped open for her escape. "The less you know the better. For now, stay low. Don't leave the church for any reason, I'll send word when I need to. And I—... you haven't told the others 'ya saw me, right?"

"No, I never got the chance." Mei's face softened. "We all seriously thought you were dead—"

"And I'd like to keep it that way." She replied in a hard voice. "I can't say why. But if you want my help, this is all I'm askin' for back. Okay?"

"...Okay," She nodded though there was more she obviously wanted to say when she shot Harriet with a puzzled, sad look. Instead she bit her lip to silence such questions and hugged Harriet again, whispering softly; "Just be careful."

Harriet returned the embrace silently, saying nothing of the well wishes when Mei departed with a thankful smile to stride away to the propped open door. The mercenary stood alone along with the flickering of the lantern beside her, the wind whispering to her of the consequences of her recent actions, and in the back of her head stood tall the memory of the final moments she saw of Katie—Harriet's memory marred only by her own blood in her eyes that obscured her vision as she crawled away, fingernails breaking off in hard mud as she clawed her way out of a tunnel with Katie's screams at her back, pushing her onward to the loneliness and shame in her freedom.

Harriet bit back the tears, picked up the lantern, and turned back inside with Katie's screams still ringing in her ears.

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Winona stood at the intercom of the Science Bay door, buzzing it frantically before stepping away with her arms folded over her midsection, hands braced on her biceps in a comforting kneading as she waited for someone to answer. She spent the last couple of hours trying to find Harriet, having run herself up and down the stairwell, visiting every floor or room that Harriet could possible be in, hoping beyond hope that she'd pick up her trail again or—better yet—find her outright—... but the end of her search was fruitless and exhausting. Any R-cest guard she came across wasn't useful in her search (and the encounter she had with the one from the Watering Hole made her reluctant to talk to any one of them anyway), and the boys who had been following them around all day up until dinner mysteriously disappeared. She didn't know who else to turn to but Madison.

What if something happened to her already? Winona thought fretfully, her hands twitching with little nervous flexes. What if I'm too late—?

The thought rallied her into buzzing the intercom again, calling into the speaker now.
"Madison—? Madison, it's Winona! If you're there, please, open up—"

The intercom buzzed loudly in a sound of admittance, startling her away from it as the bulkhead door popped open, releasing a hiss of air as it unsealed itself. Winona quickly pulled it open to peek her head in, seeing no one on the other side, and stepped over the shin-high threshold before shutting the door behind her. She stood on a catwalk that overlooked a massive room, where dual head construction lamps set on tripods were dotted about the floor to illuminate the chamber. Along the high ceiling was a mess of color coded pipes that disappeared off into other rooms or plundered down into noisy, important looking equipment. When the inventor stepped up to the railing to look down below, she was greeted with several work stations teeming with experiments, jumbles of parts and tools, microscopes, chemistry sets, and mountains of paperwork (with a lab coat-clad woman asleep on her work).

Madison stepped out of a side room, free of her lab coat to show more of her dress from earlier—now with sleeves hastily rolled up to her elbows—and her hair had been freed from its styling, falling in black tendrils around her shoulders.

"Did you find her?" She inquired, her eyes following Winona as she practically flew down the stairs circling away from the catwalk in a tight spiral to meet with the older woman.

"She's gone," Winona cried, distraught. "I'm sorry, Madison, I didn't know where else to go or who else to talk to—I talked to anyone who could help, went to every place I thought she'd go, no one's seen her and I'm so scared that something happened—!"

"Calm down, there's no reason to panic." Madison replied with a furrowed brow, her words digging despite her sympathetic tone. "We don't know enough about the situation to warrant an extreme reaction, yet."

"Then when will it be warranted?" The inventor snapped incredulously. "When she's been missing for hours? Days—? Can I be allowed to freak out when it's too late to help her and something happens—!?"

Madison stared at her with a slightly pursed mouth and an unmoved expression, arms folded loosely over her abdomen as silence fell between the two, looking almost like a stern mother. Winona's eyes fell away to the floor when her irritation drained out of her and she pressed her fingers into her eyes.

"...I'm sorry," She apologized quietly. "I just—... I know I shouldn't have to worry about her. She's always been able to take care of herself—always—... but this is the first time I think she's getting into something she can't handle on her own. The rest of our team's back at the Watering Hole, so she only has me if she ends up getting into trouble and I feel responsible for her."

"Apology accepted. I understand your concerns, Winona." Madison replied with an accepting nod as she gestured for Winona to follow her. She obliged by walking back with her into the same side room—which looked like a small, tidy office. The center of the room was crowned with a metal desk, and behind it was a line of filing cabinets. A rolling cart holding a coffee pot, several mugs and a hot plate sat beside the desk, and in a far corner from the door was a bed cot kept more private behind a curtain and a couple tall bookshelves.

Madison shut the door before speaking again. "Did you speak with Chief Harkness?"

"Harkness—?" She parroted, thinking momentarily of where she heard that name before. "That's the guy you were talking to earlier, wasn't it? Back in the marketplace?"
"Yes. Did you speak with him personally?"

"Well, no, but I talked to some other R-cest guards, and the gate masters on the bridge—"

"Chief Harkness is the one you'll want to see. He has a remarkably uncanny, almost annoying gift of knowing everything that goes on in this city. He'd surely know where your friend is, or at least have some idea of how to find her." Madison insisted with a shake of her head as she went to the coffee cart and turned on the hot plate to warm up the metal kettle, then busied her hands by pulling back her hair to twist it up into a more polished style.

"Where can I find him?"

"At this time of night?" The scientist paused, thinking. "Most likely retired for the evening up in the bridge tower, but access is restricted to members of the Rivet City Security Team. I'm sure he could be bothered out of bed for your case if you relay the danger your friend might be in. He wouldn't ignore a possible threat to Rivet City."

"Thank you, Madison—!" Winona cried graciously and turned to yank the door open, but stopped upon seeing the faces staring back at her.

The wall beside the door was decorated with several framed photos, but one in particular stuck out immediately to her; it was of her mom and Madison standing together, holding steaming coffee mugs with an open folder between them, looking like they were deeply engrossed in conversation with Madison's hand settled on her mom's shoulder comfortably. She realized it was the only photo of her mom that Madison had up on the wall, and with the way the other pictures circled around it, making it the central piece, it made such a candid photo feel extremely sentimental.

"...Your mother, she—" Madison cleared her throat upon realizing that Winona had been gazing at that picture in particular, and with a mug of reheated coffee, she came to stand beside the inventor. "She was one of our best scientists... intelligent, tenacious, constantly curious and yearning to learn more, to do things more efficiently, to make the lives of others better. The day we lost her was a very—... emotional day. For everyone."

"...How did she die?" Winona asked quietly, her arms enveloping her body in a self hug of comfort.

"James never told you?" She replied with a hint of surprise.

"He did," She counteracted with a shake of her head. "But dad had to lie about a lot while I was growing up. About him, about me, about mom... and if he lied about how she died, too, I—... I could eventually forgive him for the other stuff. That, I can't forgive him for."

"...Cardiac arrest." Madison answered somberly, her voice thick as she, too, gazed toward her mom's photo. "She died moments after giving birth to you. There were unforeseen complications and I—... we, couldn't save her."

"...Thank you." Winona replied just as somberly despite trying to sound thankful, her arms tightening around herself. "...Where did she pass away?"

"Jefferson Memorial. We had a delivery room set up in the basement."

"...Is there some place I can go to visit her?..." She asked with her voice starting to break, nails digging into her arms. "Was she buried—...?"

Madison's silence was all the answer Winona needed. A sad smile touched her face and she nodded once in understanding before withdrawing from the photos to finally go towards the door, finding
that she had nothing else to say. What else could be said? She couldn't even fathom any more questions, any more possibilities for conversation. Whatever other questions she had she wanted to reserve for her dad for when she found him, and to know that her mom's death was one of the things he didn't lie about gave her very little relief.

"I don't know what else your father told you about Cathe—your mother," Madison corrected just as Winona turned away. "...But she loved you very much. She was so excited to meet you. We all were. You were supposed to be the last hope we had that Purity would go on... that when your mother passed it wasn't going to be the end. Hope was supposed to be your middle name, so you always knew how important you were to us and to Purity."

"At least that was the only thing that didn't have to change," She replied in a melancholy murmur, not letting the oncoming tears shake her. "My middle name is Hope."

"...I—... I'm very happy to hear that. At the time I thought it was rather silly, but—... I'm glad." Madison responded as she rose her coffee mug to her lips and took a small sip, letting the conversation slip into awkward silence. Her gaze remained on Catherine's face, and Winona looked at her as a woman who wasn't ready to say goodbye. She wondered how good of friends her mom was with this woman, who Winona herself, felt drawn to. It was the first time she met a woman who had similar interests as herself, in engineering and the sciences, who had a stunning intellect that she wanted to pick at. What could this woman teach her about her own work? How much could she learn from her?

The quiet was soon broken by the crackling of static from a small speaker set in the wall, off to the side of Madison's desk. It relayed an immediately familiar voice to the inventor, though the soft exhaustion it exuded was very much unrecognizable upon the first few words.

"You in there, vaultie? It's Harriet."

Winona exchanged a shocked glance with Madison, who nodded for her to go and answer the call. She did so after practically flinging herself across the room to get to the intercom. "Harriet—? Oh my God, Harriet! Where were you—?!"

"Ain't got time t'explain, just come out here."

"Alright, alright, I'm coming!" She promised before releasing the button, turning back to Madison. "I'll see myself out. I—... thanks, Madison."

"I still expect to see you tomorrow." She responded sternly, the waiting woman Winona saw looking upon her mom's photo now gone and replaced with the Madison she knew.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything," She replied with a smile as she rushed out of the office and toward the staircase back up to the catwalk. Turning the wheel on the bulkhead door, it popped open with the same hiss of escaped air as earlier, and on the other side was Harriet—sitting on the floor with her legs strung across the hallway width, her back propped up against the wall, and her face carried an expression of defeat. She didn't lift her head when Winona stepped over the high threshold and pulled the door shut behind her, releasing only when she heard the vacuum seal.

"...You alright?" She asked quietly, apprehensive of the answer, but none came. Harriet only remained staring straight ahead at the wall in front of her in silence. The inventor glanced up the hallway idly in wait, despite knowing that her question wasn't going to be answered, and instead took a seat just beside Harriet with crossed legs. Her stare was also set straight ahead to fixate on the same wall.
Winona wasn't waiting for an answer. She was just there for comfort, instead, because just from looking at Harriet she could tell that she didn't want to be alone.

"In the time we know each other, I'm only gonna ask 'ya for a favor once." Harriet finally spoke under a dreadful murmur, rolling her head back so it connected with the wall in a small thump and she looked so very troubled. "You'll get a favor back. Deal?"

"I don't—"

"Princess, I ain't the kinda person that likes asking for help, so when I do I need it with some conditions attached so I don't feel like a useless piece of shit, alright?" She interrupted with an exhausted voice, her eye shutting slowly and Winona saw her throat bob in a hard swallow. "So either take the fuckin' favor or tell me to fuck off."

"...Well, you know I'm too nice to do the latter." She tried jokingly, and was relieved to hear Harriet's quiet snort—followed by a small smile that curled her mouth for only a second before disappearing. It was as if she suddenly remembered how serious the conversation was supposed to be... like she didn't have the right to crack a joke or lighten the mood at present time.

"I'll help you, Harriet. Whatever you need, I've got your back."

Harriet's good eye slowly opened at Winona's words and she, for the first time since their conversation started, let her gaze turn towards the inventor beside her. Her one eye held a small amount of gratitude despite seeming momentarily surprised.

"You're gunna regret saying that, 'ya know." She said, her statement sounding more like an ominous promise.

"Probably," She responded with her eyes locked onto the other woman's stare. "But what's a couple regrets between friends?"

"...Friends..." Harriet's mouth tested the word as if she didn't know the meaning of it, but the terminology didn't seem like it bothered her.

"I'm gonna make you like me eventually, Harriet, so you might as well just bite the bullet and get it over with." Winona teased and this time Harriet gave a more genuine chuckle and a smile, though it felt genuinely exhausted. "I've gotta few friends that could vouch for that if we ever make our rounds to 101." She sat forward just enough to hug her knees toward her chest. "If you need to treat this like a favor exchange? That's fine. All I'm gonna ask is that you tell me the whole story—anything I need to know, say it. I can't help you if I don't know what I'm getting myself into."

Silence scraped past them uncomfortably, almost painfully as Harriet rolled her head back against the wall again and shut her eye, seeming to weigh the choices laid out before her. Winona waited patiently, keeping her eyes shifted away so she didn't feel pressured or closely scrutinized, but then when Harriet cleared her throat, the inventor was attentive.

"...I—... I use t'be a slave back in Philly. Got outta there four years ago, ran my ass up to DC and didn't look back if I didn't have to," Harriet began with her hands crawling nervously up and down her strong thighs in an attempt to dry the sweat that made her palms clammy—or perhaps she was working at the anxiety that had already built itself up inside her, trying to keep herself steady. "But tonight I got contacted by someone I use t'know... we were slaves in the same house. That's why those brats were followin' us all day—waiting 'til I was alone to deliver her message to me—then I took off t'go meet her. Reason why I was so freaked was 'cause I didn't think it was her at first. Thought it was someone from Philly meanin' to drag me back."
She finally opened an eye and looked toward Winona. "Her name's Mei. She's in hidin' with a buncha other slaves with plans to go up North for some slave sanctuary, but she's worried they might get caught. Two days ago she recognized a slaver on board that goes by 'Sister'. He did work with the Masters in Philly—brought in DC slaves to trade for his boss. We don't know why he's here in the city or if he's even still a slaver, but we're not taking chances so he's gotta go. Mei's too afraid to move the others off the ship when one of 'em's injured and can't travel fast, or far."

"Okay—" She responded with a steadying breath, trying to process everything she was just told. "So where do I come in in all this?"

"Needa plan for a bag-and-drag." Harriet turned her eye away momentarily as she looked out into the hallway, up one way and then down another to make sure no one was near before turning back to Winona. "There's lots of R-cest to avoid. Lots of witnesses and not alotta places to hide or to do this quietly. I don't wanna fuck this up for Mei—don't wanna overlook somethin' important 'cause I wanna get this over with."

Winona scooted herself around so she was facing Harriet now, her brow furrowed. "You're asking me to help you kill someone—?"

"You've done worse on your own, kid," Harriet pointed out a little tactlessly and Winona shook her head, not wanting to think about what happened back in Andale. "...All I want's a plan. Just tell me what t'do and that's it. If it goes sideways, just get back to Sumner—if it goes better than expected, we never talk about it again. It'll be like it never happened."

"What if he's still a slaver and this boss of his comes looking for him?" She inquired worriedly. "We don't know enough about this guy to go after him. We could step in something we won't be able to scrape off our boots, Harriet."

"And if we don't do somethin' and the others get caught, they'll be dragged back to Philly. I—" Harriet insisted with an angered edge to her voice, her jaw clamping on the next few words that wanted to spill out but she shoved them back forcefully. "...Those people ain't like other slave owners. Can't even tell you what they'd do to Mei and the others if they were caught, Winona. Those fuckers're wired to be monsters, the 9 Animals of Philadelphia. They were bred that way. And now that Mei knows I'm here, I don't wanna risk Sister findin' out about me, either."

"Shit," Winona hissed under her breath as she ran a hand back over her hair, her fingers carding through its short length. "...I did say I'd help, didn't I?"

"Regret it yet?"

"Now that I have a plan I do." She responded as she gripped a pipe pinned to the wall and used it to get up to her feet, then offered a hand to Harriet to help her up as well. She took it with a sheepish nod of thanks.

"You've gotta plan already—?" The mercenary inquired, almost impressed.

"Yeah but we're gonna need a little more help." Winona admitted as she stalked off into the hallway and Harriet quickly followed close after her, nearly clipping the back of her heels with how close she was.

"The more people that know, the more dangerous it'll be for Mei," Harriet insisted, alarmed.

"Who I'm planning on talking to—?" The inventor replied a little cryptically just as she pulled open the door of the stairwell to go through, looking back on Harriet. "It seems like they might already
"Ya know what? I'm the one startin' to regret all this."

"You asked for my help and this was the plan I made—"

"You hired some dumbass kid t'break into a slaver's shit, I've seen people get skinned for less! Just 'cause he's a kid doesn't mean Sister'll go any easier on him if he gets caught."

Winona said nothing as she panned her eyes up and down the hallway, waiting for the arrival of the first step of their plan—Peeping Peter. So far the corridor was empty with the exception of an old janitor, who was finishing up his rounds for the night by painting haphazardly over new graffiti that marked the wall he stood at. The whistling notes of a cheery tune carried up to the two women as they stood alone in wait, his song echoing off the metal walls.

"We didn't have any other choice, Harriet." She finally answered as she looked back to her, watching over Harriet's shoulder as the janitor finished his work with a satisfied nod and shuffled off with his bucket of paint in hand. "We've gotta find out more about Sister before we make a move, and the best way to do that is to find something incriminating in his room—and we couldn't risk sending you in case you're recognized, and I'd definitely get caught trying to break in."

The first step of the plan had been, obviously, to find out what business Sister had on the ship and if he had any accomplices with him. Winona recalled seeing one boy in particular—with high shorts belted over a tattered shirt and plastic wrap for shoes, so they code named him No Shoes—always loitering on the stairs as a lookout between the mid-ship and hangar decks. Without fail, they encountered No Shoes in his usual roost, and with a handful of caps she sent a message straight to Peeping Peter himself; "there's more in it for you—break into room 4 at the Weatherly Hotel and bring back anything good". Minutes after No Shoes took off to deliver the message, a whisper came from a vent in the wall saying that Peter was interested in taking the job. Winona should've known that the boys used the labyrinth of air ducts around the ship to travel from place to place quickly, completely undetected and forgoing the usual foot traffic. The voice in the vent then told them to meet Peter in the hallway of the mid-ship deck where a pre-war stop sign marked the intersection in an hour for a follow up, and it was currently three minutes to that hour.

"Psst! Red!" A voice hissed in a whisper above their heads, causing Harriet to pull for her combat knife from under her poncho in instinctual alarm and Winona turned her stare upward. The grate of a vent was just above their heads, and between the slats she saw a pair of blue eyes peeking back down at them. She casually looked back around the hall and nudged Harriet with her elbow, discreetly nodding up toward the grate to mark where Peter was hiding and the mercenary tucked her blade away in annoyance, grumbling under her breath.

"Thanks for showing up," Winona greeted with her face turned toward Harriet to seem like she was talking to her instead, allowing Peter to remain in hiding.

"I've gotta respectable business goin' on here, and Peter Fitzroy's a man of his word! 'Sides, I've always got time for the ladies," He crooned, causing Harriet to grumble louder beside her. "You got the caps?"

"Find anything worth 20 big ones?"

"You tell me," Peter replied smugly as he dropped a holotape between the slats of the grate. Harriet, with her quicker reflexes, was the first to catch it to hand it off to Winona.
"What's on it?" She inquired, turning it over one way and then the other. It wasn't labeled, and it was old, dingy, and banged up—she'd be shocked if it still worked.

"Dunno! Way I figure it, it's pro'ly important—holotapes're hard t'come by and needs pre-war tech t'play, so there's probably somethin' good in it."

Winona popped open the holotape tray of her Pip-Boy and slid the cartridge in, waiting for it to render before pressing 'PLAY'. A gruff voice come on over the speaker of her Pip-Boy as the recording played, sounding low resolution and crackly with how damaged the tape was.

"Clock's runnin' out on the android, Sister, 'nd Eulogy doesn't wanna miss these caps. He thinks yer competent 'nuff I guess so he told me t'throw a bone your way 'fore Zimmer 'reconsiders'. Now, I got some good news an' some bad news—good news is, we finally got the Railroad agent we nabbed t'sing 'bout the android. Bad news is, it was a shit song. 'Parenly the android's changed it's face and got it's brain wiped, so it don't even know it's a synth! Thinks it's just as human as we are, can 'ya believe that—? 'Nyways, the agent bled out 'fore we could getta name on the fancy doctor the android went to, but Eulogy's thinkin' Rivet City's yer best bet. Boat's full'a eggheads and tech wizards so someone's gotta know somethin'. Do watcha gotta t'get information but be discreet 'bout it—Security on that ship's tighter then two thumbs up a mole rat's asshole and we don't wanna blow our only lead. Heard Zimmer's in the city, too, so meet up wiff'im if 'ya got anythin' good... Eulogy says don't come back without his caps from Zimmer less 'ya gotta death wish. Oh, 'n our lead says whatever tech scraped off the 'droid's face'll leave a scar. Under the jaw and up behind the ear, if that helps any."

When the recording came to a close with Winona's Pip-Boy clicking off, the two women exchanged silent, puzzled looks with one another. The holotape gave the two a lot to unpack although it, at the most, lasted for all of two minutes; Winona couldn't believe what she was hearing. Did androids really exist or was the guy on this holotape just insane? As an inventor, she was always very open minded and constantly researching on the vast reaches the pre-war world and their technology explored, but to be able to build a robot for the express purpose of not only looking human but being able to simulate human emotion, decision making, and free will? It was almost too good to be true! She couldn't imagine an android being post-war technology, that being said, as it's creation would be too advanced for a destroyed world.

"So Sister's on board lookin' for a synth," She heard Harriet mutter to herself. "If Sumner won't getta kick outta that..."

"So this tape's legit—?" Winona replied, dubious. "Androids exist?"

"Some advice for 'ya—ask Sumner 'bout them if we get outta this alive," She responded with a knowing glint in her eye as she turned to look down each hall their intersection met with, ensuring no one noteworthy was coming up their way. "So we know for sure that Sister's flyin' solo and he's still a slaver. Eulogy Jones is the DC head for slave tradin' out here. That all you need t'go on with your plan, vaultie?"

"Actually, this is better than I expected," She admitted frankly as she looked back up toward the grate above her head. "New plan! Peter, you still there? I've gotta 'nother job for you if you're interested in doubling your payload."

"Double—?" Peter whistled, sounding contemplative. "Shit, I'd sell my own mother for that kinda money. Peter's your man, Red! We can kiss on it, if 'ya want. Seal the deal."

"Sorry, Peter—there's a height requirement." She laughed uncomfortably.
“Sheesh, gimme a couple years and I’ll be all the man ‘ya want! So what’s the job?”

“Can you deliver a couple messages for us?”

Sister sat perched atop a peeling bar stool, teetering tipsily in his seat as he slung back his final vodka shot and then slammed the small glass back down on the bar counter where carved grafitti and IOUs littered the wood. He could feel the cunt that owned the Rudder glaring at him with beady eyes trained on his face, her hands busying themselves with cleaning a grimy beer glass, and despite the ire he could feel in her gaze she said nothing. She knew better than to bitch at him, he was the dangerous sort that was slick enough to get his approval at the front gate, and besides, his caps were good.

Well, they were good while he still had them, anyway. He was on his last few and without a steady job on board the ship, he'd end up in a hostel with the other poor and sick trash, or worse, kicked back out of the city. The folks on this boat weren't the type that would be lenient with freeloaders.

Admittedly, his time in Rivet City was unbelievably eye-opening—enough that he abandoned Eulogy's orders and fucked off from finding the synth in favor of staying on the ship indefinitely. Sure, Paradise Falls was great if you pulled your weight and had a glowingly vicious reputation, but it wasn't anything like Rivet City. Nothing in the Capital was anything like the city on the shallow shores. Despite how tight the security was, there was a dark underbelly to the well protected settlement that he enjoyed dabbling in on late, lonely nights such as these, but it was undeniably boring otherwise. A good kind of boring, an easy kind of boring, which was probably an unexpected thing for a slaver to want; there weren't any dumb assholes trying to bump elbows with you to prove their mettle, and Sister was tired of gutting the new blood for having big mouths and getting shit about it; there weren't any 'claws or yao guais or packs of burrowing molerats to worry about; no running out into the hot Capital to hunt down new product; there was running indoor plumbing; and here, he's had some of the best food and drinks he's had since—ever. Back in the Falls, everyone fought for what little they had until they planned on ransacking a caravan or small settlements that couldn't defend themselves—but now he could have his fill of whatever he wanted when he had the caps.

So there was a little oversight in his plan now that he was technically 'unemployed', but he was planning on fixing that, too, with the help of good ole' Seagrave Holmes padding his pockets. Sister recognized his name as a source Eulogy had in Rivet City, but when the supplies dried up and the radio chatter went silent, no one could get inside to rip the mustache off his dumb fucking face. It might’ve been years back when Seagrave did business with Paradise Falls, but all you’d have to do is whisper 'slaver' in a settlement like Rivet City and watch everyone pull for their guns. The poor bastard would probably do just about anything to keep up with his friendly neighborhood schmuck persona behind his shop counter, so now all Sister had to do was gauge how many caps his silence would be worth.

200 caps?

500?

1,000?

He was thinking big now, the wheels in his mind churning relentlessly despite the booze, and he started wondering what else he could pry out of Seagrave while he was at it... but he knew that he needed a clear head for this, and so dropped the last of his caps on the counter and dragged himself off his bar seat to return back to his hotel room. The Rudder's liquor wasn't worth the caps when he
was sure that cunt watered it down, but he couldn't get anything at the Galley in the marketplace—R-cest was absolutely crawling there. He could drink at any one of the service hotels on board, sure, but they were even more overpriced than the Muddy Rudder's backwash shit.

As he meandered up the stairs to the overhead catwalk, he was graced by a cool glare from Brock, the bouncer, as he held onto the wall on his way out. Stepping high over the threshold of the exit door (he learned his lesson last time he was drunk and landed on his face), he pulled for the crumpled cigarette pack in his overalls pocket and drew a stick and lighter from it, stumbling as he tried to concentrate on lighting it as he walked toward the stairwell.

"You Sister?" A small voice called lethargically to him, and when the slaver looked over, he saw a skinny boy with glassy eyes sitting on the bottom step of the stairway with a shaved head and missing teeth. He stared expectantly for an answer despite seeming certain that he was talking to the right guy.

Sister snorted as he took a drag of his cigarette. "Who the fuck's askin'? Beat it, shithead."

"Gotta message for 'ya from a friend," The boy went on, obviously not at all afraid of him. When the hell did that happen? When did kids stop being afraid of him?

"Ain't got any friends that interest me." He responded flippantly as he kneed the kid in the head to get him out of his way and then went up the stairs, not bothering to look back as the young boy hit the floor, hard, at the bottom of the steps.

"Hey, 'ya spic fuckhead, 'ya wanna know where the robot is or not!" The boy yelled after him, sounding more angry than scared and it stopped Sister halfway up the stairs. "Your buddy wan'sa meet up—says she knows where the 'droid is."

He turned over his shoulder to look back at the kid sprawled on the floor at the stairwell end, glaring at him with a hand grasping the top of his head where he was struck. Sister hobbled back down the steps lazily, tapping off the ashes that burned from the smoking cherry of his cigarette as he did, and then squatted beside the young boy so the two were eye-level with each other. Sister contemplated the boy's message; someone knew he was looking for the android, and they knew where it was on the ship?

He didn't like when people got in his business—especially people he didn't know—but something about the offer intrigued him as a new plan began to formulate itself inside his mind. What if—what if—blackmailing Seagrave got messy? He was a marketplace slot owner and was obviously likable, which meant he had friends, and if the bastard had enough brass balls to work with slavers and then cut off their supply, that also meant that he could have scary friends. Plus, Seagrave could flip on Sister and get him kicked out, and he was in enough hot water with Commander Danvers already (a bitch couldn't take a compliment, could she?). But, if he found the android—he could get it to Zimmer and get the caps for it, and it'd be the easiest 5k he's ever cashed out!

Zimmer would fuck off back to the Commonwealth with his robot, Sister would pocket the full profit, and Eulogy would be none the wiser, wouldn't he? And even if he did find out about the double cross, he wouldn't be able to get on board, anyway. He proved that already when he couldn't go after Seagrave.

Sister blew wafting cigarette smoke into the boy's face as he spoke, and he finally leaned back away with a small glimmer of fear in his eyes as he nursed the growing bump on the side of his head.

In the end, Sister always got what he wanted.
“What's this 'bout a new friend of mine—?” He asked, almost in a sing-song.

*Always.*

Sumner stood outside the rented brahmin stall he shared with Glasgow, hearing the other man's strangled snores from within but he paid no mind to the disturbance in the otherwise peaceful night as he looked out over the Watering Hole. It looked like a drunken dance was carried on almost every evening, if only to cause distraction from the menial waiting that came with getting processed into Rivet City, and he was constantly amused in watching the same dancers from the night before make fools of themselves. It reminded him of nights in his youth, and the memories the music brought forth—mainly memories of missions ending with a celebratory drink, with friends that were as old as him now, or even passed away at this pointed—and it filled him with a nostalgic homesickness. As time went on he only became more and more mawkish, finding sentiment in old memories he didn't need to torture himself with replaying over and over again.

The comfort they gave him was always short-lived before it reminded him of his regrets and mistakes.

Looking down to his left hand prosthetic, he took off his glove to briefly survey the waxy looking skin before kneading between his knuckles with a rough, massaging thumb. Every passing day the weather was slowly shifting to something more Autumn appropriate, and he could feel it in his metal bones as his arm got more finicky and his back began to ache; and it'd only get worse once Winter hit with enough snow to make the Capital even more treacherous than it usually was. That alone made his retirement from the Talon Company all the more enjoyable to think about when he imagined the torrid desert landscape of New Vegas—and the only thing standing in his way was the 2,400 miles between there and DC, as well as whatever threats spanned over the distance.

He was ready for his last grand adventure. He was ready to put behind him all the deplorable things he did in the Talon's employ for the sake of money—to bury the regretful part of himself in the hard, unforgiving dirt of the Capital—and he even found himself thinking about leveling the Talon compound on his way out for their abhorrent, money-mongering ways. However, several things kept him from going through with such a plan.

*One:* Sumner was too old to be picking fights with people who'd waste no expense in hunting him down. When it was time to leave for New Vegas, he wanted to be free to enjoy his new life—he was tired of being chased, and for once he wanted to know what it was like to look in the rear view mirror and see an empty road behind him.

*Two:* ending their operation wouldn't change the past, or make it any easier for him to live with the things he did. He still did them, free of his own volition, and he would have to learn how to face that he, too, had been money-mongering in some capacity. When he first was hired on with the Talon Company, he was naïve enough to think that he could live with whatever jobs they put him on, and he was *dead* wrong.

*And Three:* the compound was a large building, meaning that it would've needed a lot of C4 and a lot of careful planning in order to bring down. He wasn't going to waste the bullets on every sorry hide that walked inside.

At least, in the end, he could say his final contract with the Talon Company was an honorable one—one that he could be proud of when he looked back on it. God forbid it was something like assassinating a peacekeeping diplomat, or protecting the assets of some floating scum that crawled out of the stagnant cess pools of the Wastes, or hunting down decent folks that didn't do a damn thing wrong. No, he could say his last mission was reuniting a young woman with her missing
father, and it was enough.

*It was enough.*

Taking a photo he kept pinned to the inside of his coat, he relinquished it from its hiding place to look upon the faces that stared back at him over the patchy film; a much younger version of himself stood off to the side of a hospital bed, stone faced despite the prideful day, with a soft brunette-haired woman occupying the bed while cradling a screaming newborn baby boy in her arms. The picture turned the slightest of smiles upon Sumner's lips as the edge of his thumbnail traced the faces of both his wife and his son. They were the only precious things he had in his life, that made him fearful yet courageous in the same instance, and when his son was born—perfect with all ten fingers and toes, and a little wisp of light hair on his head, and was so small despite being taller than the average newborn, and carried an unbelievably loud cry—Sumner held all of the love and pride in the world for him.

When they found out Evelyn was pregnant, he told himself that he wasn't going to be like his father; hardhearted and invulnerable and callous. He promised to show his son love every chance he could and he cursed his rough soldier's hands that made him afraid to hold his delicate boy. His son taught him to be tender, to be patient, to be *giving.*

He'd be 30 now, Sumner realized somberly as the smile faded from his face. *31 in December... I'm so sorry, son. Maybe this could be the first birthday I'll be with you for.*

A rattling knock beside him dragged the old soldier from his troubled thoughts, and he quickly tucked the photo back into its secret pocket when he got his wits about him. Looking to the disturbance, he was met with a tall boy with brassy colored hair and a scar on his brow knocking on the loose door of their brahmin stall. The upper door was pinned inward to let the night air in, and the boy leaned over the lower half with gangly arms and knobby elbows, peeking in on the snoring Glasgow that remained sleeping on his bed mat on the floor.

"You Summer?" He called down to Glasgow, then stood up to his full height when he wasn't answered and shook the door loudly, in an effort to wake up the ex-raider.

"I'd highly recommend you not do that," Sumner piped up. The boy looked at him pointedly, despite seeming bored.

"I'll take your advice when I ask for it, gramps." He deadpanned, but moved away from the door regardless with a cautious look back at Glasgow. "Lookin' for a guy goin' by Summer."

"That would be me." Tilting the brim of his hat back, he regarded the boy with a curious glance and decided not to correct him about his name, or his manners. "What's this about?"

"Gotta message for 'ya from a friend, says it's important." He answered as he fished into the pockets of his pants, which looked to be a size too small on him, and offered up a folded sheet of discolored paper. "Important 'nough she wrote it down, at least. Wouldn't say a thing t'me."

Sumner took the note and unfolded it as the boy immediately took his leave, walking back in the direction of the Security clearance building. On the inside was a short message scrawled in neatly written handwriting that he immediately recognized;

*Sumner—*

*There's a slaver in the city that knows Harriet and she needs him to take an early retirement. He's taken the bait and we're sending him your way—too risky to do it on board. He'll be at the*
Atlas statue at 0500 hours. I hope that’s enough time for you to get set up. Destroy this message as soon as you can.

You told me once that killing’s a chore left for God and I've never forgotten that.

I'm sorry.

—Whiz Kid

Sumner slowly folded up the note in his hands with too careful hands as his thoughts burned with Winona's words, his eyes shifting toward the calm water surrounding the boat as glowing scum floated on it's surface. Crumpling up the letter to tear into pieces, he walked to the edge that overlooked the Potomac, the very edge of the Watering Hole that threatened to collapse into the river, and he sifted the crumpled fragments across the water, watching them until they dissolved in the radioactive glow before walking back on towards the brahmin pen to retrieve his things.

He promised Harriet a long time ago that he'd always protect her; promised her back when she broke down on her bunk because she hadn't slept in days; when he came in to replace the light bulb in her room because it burned out from being on all night every night; when she admitted that she couldn't trust any of her fellow mercenaries in case one of them was the enemy in disguise; when he saw her put on her boots at curfew so she could escape quickly in case she was found by Them while in bed; he promised her that he'd do anything to keep her from being taken back to Philly and he meant it. Sumner meant it so much that he could take that 'chore' off God's hands and do the Lord's work himself, because sometimes He didn't get through His 'To-Do List' fast enough.

Some people said God wasn't the vengeful sort and neither was nature, but they both must’ve been if there needed to be balance kept in the world. They must've been if they allowed humans the free will to take back their pound of flesh.

The Lord's work indeed, he chimed soberly to himself as he accepted Winona's apology, buried his soon to be regrets, and grabbed for his laser rifle with his eyes set out of the stall window—toward the Atlas statue that upheld his globe, far down the road where a lone man laid in wait for his own murder.

Whiz Kid,

It's been done. Stay safe.

—Sumner

They got the note early this morning after waiting up practically all night for some news. Winona got the letter first from one of Peter's boys, and she handed it off to Harriet while looking a little pale and shaken. If the mercenary was being completely honest here, however, she thought that the little vaultie had done—... well.

She said she'd be honest, but that was the best admission you were going to get out of her. After all, Harriet knew that asking Winona for help was going to be a big risk, and she had already considered all of the outcomes; most, if not all of them, ended with her employer telling her to 1.) "fuck off", 2.) "hell no you're on your own", or 3.) "I've got my own problems to deal with". Part of her didn't think Winona would have actually agreed, especially with how reviled she initially reacted to the proposal, but the little 101'er was full of surprises. It was only a matter of seeing if she was running out of tricks to pull out of her ass at this point.
Harriet refolded Sumner's note and stuck it in her pocket. Leaning her forearms across the barely hinged railing that overlooked the water from the hangar deck, she took a deep inhale, held the smell of musty salt water in her lungs, and let it go.

Slowly.

Relishing it.

And it felt like she was breathing for the first time in *forever*. It was a victory that was so inconsequential to the big picture, to the monsters that she was still running from, but to her it was a triumph all the same. Harriet tried not to let the 'what ifs' and the 'could bes' tarnish the win, because what stuck with her most through the whole situation was the fact that Winona rallied with her pretty unconditionally. She could've asked for any favor in return, and Harriet would have done it because she didn't like obligations or loose ends to come back around, but *she didn't ask*. Winona left it at that, *a favor that didn't need returning*, and Harriet didn't know if it relieved her or made her worry that it'd bite her in the ass at some point; that Winona could change her mind and ask for something awful, dangerous, or *impossible*.

She wasn't use to things being unconditional, especially after the big favor she asked Winona to help her with. Planning someone's murder wasn't in her wheelhouse, even though it was someone who had it coming to them. The vaultie wasn't a killer at heart and it showed—and while it was something that annoyed Harriet at first, because it made her employer weak and naive, and that usually meant that it was going to be a tedious contract full of stupid mistakes, it was something that she grew to admire at some point. It was refreshing when everything and everyone around her was itching to kill or was violently dying.

Of course, Harriet would never admit that she grew somewhat fond of the vault dweller. *'Fond'* isn't even the word she wanted to use, but she wasn't really good with them in the first place and so she left it at that.

Winona said she wanted to sleep in after getting the note, so the mercenary said *'no problem I'm gonna go see Mei'* and left the hotel room... but she didn't go to the church, like she said she would. In fact, she hadn't seen Mei at all. She snagged one of Peter's boys in the halls while she was procrastinating on doing down there, told him to deliver the good news, and left her hands clean of the whole exchange. Harriet didn't want to risk seeing any of the others that Mei had escaped with —she didn't want anymore of her past creeping back in on her like *she* did—and she didn't want to subject herself to seeing what little others were left after all these years. The ex-slave didn't want to think about all the others that didn't make it out, that were left behind, that died fighting for their freedom.

She didn't want to look at the others and think about Katie.

*But Harriet couldn't stop thinking about that night* ever since Mei Wong showed up.

The night that they tried to escape was one that they planned for over the course of a year, and it's success was threatened by so many factors—a hurricane had hit, Katie couldn't get anything stronger, or more lethal or potent to drug Niklaus with, and Harriet had been pulled out of her room to be brutally raped by him in what would be the very last time. The trauma allowed her to get close enough to slip the sedative into his drink to drug him, but Harriet wished every *fucking day* that she spent running that she killed him right then and there; as he laid in bed, delirious and hallucinating and *defenseless*, and not let Katie drag her from the room right when she did, but she was *pleading*. With house keys in hand so they could get past the dozens of locks through the house, she reasoned that they didn't have enough time to kill him and escape.
Before Harriet knew it, she was leaving Niklaus behind to scream profanities and threats after them, and they undid all the locks on the back door, and they were running out into the turbulent, stormy night to escape. She remembered not having any shoes or underwear on as they ran out into the dark, but Katie gave her her jacket and promised her that everything was going to be okay. They ran hand in hand, grips tight, knuckles white, and refused to let the other go for anything.

They went to the back woods that surrounded Mad Hex's property, his hunting grounds for his sick pedophilic fantasies, and found their escape route; a shallow tunnel dug out underneath the Wall, which the two had spent the last year carving out in secret whenever they could and they covered it in debris and plants until the time came to leave. The rain made the earth soggy and the hole was almost flooded and collapsing from the torrent of pounding water, and the two were trying to shovel it out with their hands when Niklaus found them. He was stumbling about, drugged enough to lose his faculties but not fall unconscious, while slipping on the slick mud under untied boots with his combat knife in hand. He and Harriet fought for it but he overwhelmed her easily and took her to the ground.

That knife plunging toward her face was the last thing she ever saw out of that eye. She was sure the whole blade had gone through her brain, that he was murdering her, that she was dead already, and all she could do was scream. It came like a deaf ringing to her ears as Niklaus' knife remained jutting out of her eye socket. The rain fall seemed to almost stop all around them in that moment in time when everything turned red in the eye she had left. She remembered Katie looming over him with a tree branch in hand and bludgeoning him across the back of the head with it—remembered how it practically shattered into splinters on impact—and then he was slumping off of Harriet, into the mud at her side.

Katie was screaming about the knife in her head, unsure of what to do, begging Harriet not to die and leave her all alone. She remembered thinking that they didn't have much time, and the adrenaline was keeping anything from hurting; it was going to keep her going, but it was going to wear out soon and escape was going to be that much harder. Katie helped her up to her feet and shoved her toward the tunnel, crying about getting her to a doctor as soon as they were free.

She promised again that everything was going to be okay.

They were barely two feet into the tunnel, squirming on their bellies and forearms through the sinking mud when Katie disappeared from behind her, screaming that Niklaus had gotten a hold of her. Harriet looked back just in time to watch her getting dragged back out, seeing that brief moment of fear when the horror clicked in on Katie's mud-caked face, as her hands were clawing through the sopping ground, pulling at tree and plant roots to keep from being taken but anything she grabbed for came free.

And then she was gone. She screamed frantically for Harriet to help her—the sound was so awful, of her screams intermingling with the sound of Niklaus' meaty fists beating her—and Harriet remained frozen in the tunnel, too frightened to go back for her.

"Li Ming please don't leave me!" Was all she could make out from Katie's throat-tearing screams and Niklaus' brutality and the pounding rain. Until the screams turned to sick gurgling, a breathless choke, and then silence.

And Harriet—

—she—...

She kept crawling until she was out of the tunnel. And she ran. And she didn't look back. She left Katie back there, the girl that she was in love with, whom she promised to never leave behind, to
always protect, alone to die. She left her to die in the middle of the woods in the pouring rain, viciously beaten to death, abandoned by her one and only friend some few feet away from freedom.

Harriet regretted that more than not killing Niklaus that night, and after these few years she still held so much rage toward him and toward herself and for Katie. Some days she wished it had been her that died that night, or that she had died side by side with her, and on others Harriet thought about killing herself just to level out the injustice—but she never went through with it. Instead, she spent her days covering other people's asses in firefights, picking fights with all kinds of people, and playing with explosives in the hopes that it'd be the last gunfight, that she finally picked her last fight with the wrong person, and that this time she'd be just careless enough to get herself killed with a rogue grenade. She stopped trying to preserve herself and survive and merely felt like she was waiting for what was coming to her.

Every day began with hoping it'd come to be her last, and every night was ended with hoping that tomorrow would be different. There was never anything to look forward to, never anything worth fighting for, and in these last few months she could feel herself spiraling out of control. The only thing keeping her afloat was moving from contract to contract, completing the work, getting her caps, and numbing the constant warring of her thoughts with booze and the occasional inhaler of jet when gin just wasn't enough.

But today, with Mei Wong—with Winona—with the death Sister—she was breathing.

Slowly.

Relishing it.

Harriet was breathing and she was looking forward to the breath after that, and the breath that came after that, and that, and that and that. She was looking forward to every step she could take next, looking forward to where her feet would lead her, to when they would take her right on back to the doorsteps of the 9 Animals of Philly. While in Niklaus’ house, on mornings when he tried to beat her into submission and failed, on afternoons that he'd cut her up and leave her chained in the Bad Room where starved radroaches bred, on nights when he'd drag her out to viciously rape her over and over and over again, she wondered if she would be the one to kill him one day. The only gift he had ever given her was how to be creative in your torture methods and she always planned on using his own manual against him.

Never before did she think she could do it, and when she escaped she didn't think that she was strong enough to go back and face Niklaus, but something in the last 24 hours had changed her.

For the first time in the last four years, she was looking forward to what came past tomorrow
A/N: ...so I've got no excuse for being gone this long after my mentioned family emergency LOL all I can say is that I was working hard to plan out the rest of Winona's story and fighting through this chapter was the worst thing EVER. There was so much information I wanted to deliver about how the vault changed since the prior vault/Butch-centered chapter, and it was difficult determining what information was pertinent to the story, and what had to be cut out. Even with all the trimming I did, the chapter is still quite long-being one of my longest yet!-but hopefully you guys enjoy the length after my being gone so long, and, enjoy the upcoming action of this chapter... :3c

Now, just because I'm posting doesn't mean I'll be back on the story's schedule of before-at this time I'll post when I'm ready to, but I absolutely DO NOT intend on there being hilariously long hiatus' between chapters (like a year and a half long, COUGH).

If you don't already, feel free to follow me on tumblr at thecoolkidsbasement where you have the opportunity of hearing more updates from me about the story than I can obviously bring here.

Well, that's all for now! Thank you to those who've been so patient and have stuck around despite the long hiatus, thank you to those who completely forgot about this story but came back to check it out again (ROFL), and thank you to those who're just picking my story up now!

It feels so good to say again; Happy reading, happy writing!

~Faerie, signing out

Butch stood in the infirmary’s doorway, watching as folks settled in for the night on the hospitality floor. They fought over spots closest to the bathrooms, despite the risk of everyone stepping over you to go, and he looked on as the territorial arguments resolved themselves, bed mats were laid down, and packaged ‘clinic casseroles’ (rations mixed with a little water and a lot of stale crackers to help spread the food over more meals) were passed out for dinner by the Wilkins’ siblings. Jim carried the box of meal containers and Janice handed them out with a big jug of water strapped over her shoulder; anyone who wanted a drink would hold out an empty cup for her to spigot the water into... sparingly, of course, with the water restrictions still going on, but it was enough.

It was a wonder for Butch to see so many people in one place. After the Overseer’s meeting those couple of weeks ago, where the atrium wasn’t even a quarter full with the residents that were strong-armed into showing up, it convinced him that they were all that was left of Vault 101; the Overseer, a handful of Security guards, and just enough folks to make a dinner rush in the cafeteria.

Butch couldn’t describe the relief he felt when he found out there were still more residents than
that lurking around everywhere. They either couldn’t go to the meeting, just like his mom, or purposely risked the consequences for reasons involving, but not limited to, fuck the Overseer that’s why—and then some of these absentees ended up amongst them somehow, taken in by their once small group in the infirmary for any amount of reasons; some folks needed medical help, which Lucy closely supervised after Andy and distracted him when he decided amputation was the only course of action for a little roach bite; others came looking for rations after martial law took place and Security came and took whatever food, water, and medicine they had… ‘for the good of the vault’, they always said, as they left folks to starve and suffer; a handful of others arrived and begged to be taken in solely for the strength and safety in numbers—again, with martial law in place, some residents figured that being in higher population would keep their families protected.

The Kellans were a prime example of that.

When his eyes panned across the room to where the small family nested in a far corner of the hospitality floor, he spotted Mrs. Kellan draped on her side with an elbow propping her head up, and her 6-year-old daughter, Wendy, asleep against her front. Mr. Kellan sat cross-legged beside his wife, whom he seemed deeply engrossed in a serious conversation with while sporting a black eye, a broken nose, and a busted lip. Butch overheard him telling Amata that Security made a contraband search on their home and when they predictably found nothing, they took the rest of the Kellans’ food and water ‘for the trouble’. Mr. Kellan’s facial rearrangement was nothing but a parting gift for ‘obstructing justice’ when he yelled at the officers to leave.

Butch watched as Mr. Kellan smiled reassuringly at his wife, as if saying the worst was behind them, while she remained unconvinced and teary-eyed. He pulled her into a desperate kiss before laying down beside her on their bed mat with little Wendy wedged comfortably between them and kissed the top of his daughter’s head while Mrs. Kellan stroked her hair. The smile faded from his face once his wife shut her eyes to sleep, and Butch realized he probably wasn’t anymore confident in his situation than the rest of them were about their own.

“How’s it looking out there?”

Looking back to the voice behind him, he found his mom lingering in the clinic, seeming well-rested despite her exhausted smile.

“S’alright, I guess. Got more people in today.” He shrugged vaguely in reply.

“That’s good. We should stick together in a time like this and look out for one another.” She said with her eyes panning across the floor as she came to his side, momentarily taking on a look of sorrow when she spotted the Kellan family. “I thought I heard Mike and his family was here… poor Jessica… we should make sure Wendy gets an extra blanket. Goodness, I can’t remember the last time I saw a child since all this started… poor little Wendy, she must be so lonely.”

“M’Sure she ain’t the only one.” So many people died already. Butch didn’t want to think about the same happening to a kid… but his mom was right, wasn’t she? When was the last time he saw a kid since all this started?

Frankly, he didn’t want to think about that, either. There was already enough misery to go around for everyone. You didn’t have to actively think of miserable things to bring it around.

“You eat dinner yet, Butchie? I see you working hard around here for Amata, I worry you’re not eating enough.”

“Not like there’s much t’go around,” He said with a feeble snort, and she responded with a scrutinizing look.
“How about I grab us some dinner?” She inquired hopefully as the look faded into a slight smile. “We can sit together and eat… like we use to.”

Butch regarded her with soft eyes. Since being admitted for her alcoholism recovery, she became clearer with every passing day; her strength was coming back, too, and while Lucy wanted to continue monitoring her for another week, she declared that Ellen DeLoria was more than welcome to leave the infirmary and move out onto the hospitality wing with the general population. The Tunnel Snake saw her trying her fucking hardest every day to get better and stay better, and while he silently praised her in her resiliency, there was always that small, lingering voice in the back of his head telling him to tread carefully. Sure, she was trying to form a good relationship with him, but he didn’t know what a good relationship with her meant anymore; when he lost the ability to forgive her and the resentment crept in; when his heart could hardly bare another lie, another broken promise, another stint at sobriety that wouldn’t last no matter how much he wished it would.

Butch knew that the only thing keeping her sober now was the vault fucking going to shit, and if he dangled a vodka bottle in front of her, she’d snatch it up in a heartbeat. He would always know it would never be about him—he was never good enough to make her quit in the first place, and so made his peace with that pain a long time ago. The pain that came with the now was that he didn’t know where they could go from here—he didn’t know what a functional, healthy relationship with his mother would look like, what it could look like if it was even possible—…

But he was tired of climbing out on a limb that would snap under the weight of his hope.

Butch didn’t know if he had it in him to try again, not now, with everything else going on.

“Sounds great, ‘ma.” He answered instead, feeling as if he were still stepping out onto that limb despite his resilience when his mom smiled as if relieved.

“Steak, medium-rare, with a big baked potato and butter rolls? Maybe a little green beans on the side, too?” She teased, and he threw his head back with a groan as his mouth turned into a salivating faucet.

“’Ya don’t even know how fuckin’ good that sounds right now.” He agreed as some nearby folks who heard her joke nodded in solemn agreement and dreary cheers over their soupy casseroles.

“Watch your language, Butchie,” She exclaimed through a laugh, and he grumbled an apology as she left to flag down the Wilkins siblings. “Now go on and wait by my bed, I’ll be back in a minute!”

Butch watched her go, bypassing Amata on her nightly check-in around the room. Every evening, just before everyone settled in for sleep, Amata would walk the floor with a clipboard and talk with every single resident to ensure they had what they needed, and if they didn’t, she’d write it on her little notepad and try her best to get it to them by the time they woke up the next morning—things like extra blankets, socks and underwear, a little extra water or shower time, or just for her to take a minute or two to listen to the grievances they had with another resident. It looked so tiring talking to that many people daily just to listen to them bitch and make demands, to do everything that she did for them constantly and asking for nothing in return but their happiness, yet she always did it flawlessly and with a personable smile on her face.

At least, the Tunnel Snake thought she was doing her nightly check in. When he realized she wasn’t carrying her clipboard, and found the way she scurried around looked a little suspicious, he watched her weave about the sleeping mats and dining residents with her head down to evade eye contact with anyone. Amata hurriedly navigated the room until she was standing at the base of the
stairs leading up to the next level, stopping only to give a cursory glance back over her shoulder, and then went up them all secretive-like when she was certain no one was watching her leave.

No one but him had seen her go, at least, and he stood in the infirmary doorway, frowning and puzzled. What was she up to? And why was she sneaking off to do it?

*Now what kinda trouble could she be gettin’ up to?* Butch wondered (he’d never admit he was seriously worried, *but he was*) as he went toward the stairs to follow, but had taken only three or four steps before the entire wing was plunged into an impenetrable darkness. The clinic dwellers tittered quietly in alarm, their panic growing no louder than the small hum of a crowd as he heard Mr. Brotch (he told Butch to call him Edwin but that just felt weird) staggered out of the infirmary behind him on his crutches, stopping only to fumble with turning on his Pip-Boy flashlight to attract everyone’s attention.

“It’s alright, everyone! Just another perfectly timed black out by our ever thoughtful Overseer,” He jeered, to some nervous laughs from the residents. “This is nothing new for us. The lights always turn back on eventually, so there’s no reason to panic. If anyone needs a light, they’re more than welcome to use their Pip-Boy, but please keep your sleeping neighbors in mind if you do.”

A sparse few residents turned on their own flashlights as his permission, and Butch did the same thing just to light the rest of his way to the stairwell so he wouldn’t step on anyone. Before he could move on, however, he heard his mom calling his name just behind him.

“Butch! Butchie, where are you going? We were just about to eat dinner.” She asked, holding a water bottle for them to share and two small carriers of food.

“Somethin’ came up, ‘ma, I gotta go check it out. I’ll be back in a few minutes, alright?”

“Can’t it wait? You shouldn’t be leaving the infirmary in a blackout, it isn’t safe upstairs with the roaches, and—and Security.” She frowned worriedly at his vague answer, her eyes searching his face pleadingly, and he only bobbed his head before kissing her forehead. Part of him felt guilty in taking off, especially now when he saw just how excited she must’ve been to have dinner with him—but Amata walking around out in the vault without someone with her rang alarm bells in his head.

Was she going up to get something?

Was she meeting someone?

Was she doing something she shouldn’t have been doing? It was unlikely for Amata, but given current desperate circumstances—... She hadn’t left the clinic since Wally attacked her, and he didn’t know if she knew just how much upstairs had gone to shit.

His mom was right, it was dangerous.

“Don’t wait up for me,” He apologized back to his mother over his shoulder as he went thundering up the stairwell to the next floor.

The adjoining hallways were empty, and as he stood silently at the intersection to catch onto Amata’s footfalls, the dark, empty space around him was quiet; that didn’t mean he was ready to admit defeat, however.

*If I was the princess, sneakin’ out like a teen after curfew, came a thought, where would I be sneakin’ off to?*
Again, it wasn’t like Amata was trapped in the infirmary and couldn’t go anywhere she pleased, but it was the way in which she left that had him concerned. There were only so many places she could go, where she would go that he could think of—maybe her old apartment? Too risky, even for her, since her shithead old man never signed off on her getting her own place, said the vault rumor mill.

Butch’s feet began moving on their own in the direction of the living quarters, as if they knew before he did where he had to go.

*Her apartment ain’t much,* he decided, *but it’s a start.*

Silence in a room of fond memories only made the quiet overbearing. The absence of laughter, of anything familiar, or warm—and Amata was foolish and didn’t realize until it was too late that being in Winona’s apartment again would be one of the hardest things she could make herself do. She stood with her eyes shut despite the blackout and attuned her ears to this silence, praying beyond reasonability that the walls would impart her with some desperately needed wisdom or whisper a dire secret left behind in the floral wallpaper. As if Winona left messages etched into the chrysanthemums specifically for her.

The gutted apartment remained in its agonizing silence, and yet it told her what she feared most—

*There are no answers here for your questions.*

*The chrysanthemums know nothing.*

Opening her eyes, Amata sunk down to the floor and sat cross-legged with her arms strung over her knees, turning on the dimmest setting of her Pip-Boy’s flashlight so she could take in the barren bedroom. When she arrived, the door was still in disrepair from the morning of Winona’s escape, left broken and ajar for anyone to walk in. The living room and bedroom were empty now with all the furniture taken, photos and paintings were pulled down, and even Winona’s workbench and inventions were missing. Her bedroom walls were once plastered with blueprints like motivational posters (and Amata proudly swore she’d be able to recall every one of them if she was asked to) and pieces of her projects were always scattered across every surface the apartment had, only growing more and more cluttered with every visit Amata made. It always felt like she was stepping into a world away from the vault and everything awful about it just melted away when they were together.

Amata hoped it could make her feel that way now, and give her the peace she so desperately prayed for, but instead it was like Winona Parker had never even been there. Any modicum of her identity was absorbed back into the life cycle of materialistic possessions in Vault 101 where people were born, they collected as they grew, and got married, and had children and grandchildren, and they collected still until the very day they died, and then all those things they collected meant nothing if there was no family to leave it to.

Every couch, dinner plate, and pair of baby shoes went back unto which it came.

The vault took everything back in due time as a silent reminder that no resident ever possessed anything real or worthwhile… and now it had taken Winona. It took her best friend; it took the only other home Amata had; it took the one thing she still thought she had left aside from her memories. She couldn’t risk going back to her own home where she still lived with her father until that horrible morning—and admittedly, she was risking herself even now, having left the sanctuary of the infirmary for the first time since being hospitalized—and she did so without telling a soul where she was going or why.
There was a passing thought of telling Butch at least, but she ultimately decided against it in favor of the needed quiet. Amata mainly came to Winona’s apartment to be alone, to think, and to be comforted by her best friend’s presence as the struggles she faced in recent days became overwhelming. Once confessing to her plans of bringing Winona home to the others, she became the unofficial leader of their rag-tag infirmary family, and that authority only grew as more residents came seeking help; they apparently saw her as a natural and compassionate successor that rivaled her paranoid father, and daily these people were begging for her advice, for her foresight despite the uncertainty of the now, for her guidance through their own problems. This strong moral responsibility she felt to them, in doing right by them, gave her a fear of failure she’d never known before and it made her question her own decisions, that trapped her and rendered her frozen from taking the first step.

How could she possibly bring them peace when she couldn’t even pacify her own turmoil?

How could she promise them to fix everything, to bring Winona back to do just that, and not even know how?

Amata wanted to help them, to protect them, to serve them the best she could, and it scared her to admit that she didn’t know how; it scared her to admit that she might have already failed them through inaction, when they couldn’t see that their wellbeing was on her mind at every waking moment. There was a constant worry in keeping everyone fed, as the clinic casseroles were only a band-aid fix to the food problems, and the lack of water was another critical issue. With Andy now amongst them, his internal condensation collectors helped in providing them with a little more water, but it limited him to producing only five bottles every day or so.

The radroaches were as dangerous as ever as pest control positions remained vacant, and with the funeral department clocking on overtime, bodies were left where they were found until they could be retrieved for incineration—and sometimes the roaches got to them before Emile could, leaving a lot of closed box incineration ceremonies for any remaining relatives to grieve. Coupled with the recent heatwave, it made for optimal radroach breeding conditions and more people were coming into the infirmary for roach bites more than anything else these days. From there, more and more people wanted to stay, and the infirmary was also running out of room to accommodate everyone.

That reminded her of the conditions downstairs as well. Christine was their only liaison to her grandfather Stanley (as Susie still couldn’t be trusted, and was acting increasingly despondent as the days passed), and would frequently check on him and his thinning team to give status reports back to Amata. He wasn’t very enthusiastic about the temperature control ever being fixed despite working tirelessly day and night to keep the mainframe at an optimal temperature, which held priority above all else; he also told Christine if the core of the vault fell apart, he hoped that the fail-safe would kick in and the door would bust open because if it didn’t, they’d be trapped inside 101 indefinitely.

Stanley surmised that the increasing radroach population would get to them before starvation did once the rations were gone, if they didn’t kill each other first in last-ditch desperation attempts of survival in their steel tomb.

Amata didn’t know which ending was the ‘worst case’ scenario and so tried not to think about either of them.

And then there was the recently enacted martial law, and her father’s plans to take hold of the hospitality floor. Dorothy struggled to get a read on when he was planning to come down to carry out his negotiations, and so—worryingly—she couldn’t confirm either if he was planning on ‘negotiating’ with his words, or with Security officers holding them all at gunpoint. It was also
difficult for Dorothy to rendezvous with Butch to even provide these updates in person, as they were being careful to not raise the Overseer’s suspicions in who she was really working for.

Dorothy was also as problematic as ever, but Butch kept her tame enough to be tolerable.

Amata dropped her head into her palms as she only became more overpowered by the problems she faced as the leader of these residents. She cried silently into her hands and wished to become so small, she could disappear through the metal plates of the floor and hide away. Being in Winona’s apartment was supposed to bring her some kind of clarity, to answer her question of “what would Winona do?”, to show her what she was missing, a way out she hadn’t considered or at least give her the strength she needed to go forward with the hard decisions she had to make!—but being here only made her so unbearably aware of how powerless she was.

Through her tears, she unlocked her Pip-Boy and clicked through the menus to come to the vault messenger interface where Winona’s name was pinned at the top. When Amata missed her so much that the pain made her cry for hours, she’d scroll through and read all their old conversations and reminisce over memories of better times, and it left her imagining all the things Winona might’ve been doing right now; was she out there making new friends, or fighting to survive like the rest of them? Was she just as alone, scared, and defeated as Amata felt right now? Did she find Dr. Parker? Was she with him right now, and was she living and breathing and enjoying whatever was out there?

Was she safe?

Was she happy?

Wherever Winona was out there in the great wide Somewhere, Amata hoped she was reading the same messages in her own inbox and thinking about all the same silly memories; of nights where sleepovers were spent cramming whole textbooks into their brains for important exams the next day; of lounging together in the Game Room with nobody else around, reading comic books and drinking Nuka-Cola in comfortable silence with their legs hooked over the others in a back booth; all the breakfasts they had together, either early in the morning or late at night when they became working adults with little free time, and although the exact conversations were lost to her over time, the hilarity of all their inside jokes lingered in Amata’s synapses and made her smile despite the crippling sadness.

Ever since Winona left, however, Amata would send messages she knew would go unread… there was still something comforting about the ritual, like putting one’s scattered thoughts on paper. It was the closest she could feel to her best friend when they were an entire world away from one another.

—Messenger Date: 8/19/77—

Almodovar_Amata (03:14): if you’re there Winnie please tell me you’re okay

Almodovar_Amata (03:15): please tell me you got out

Almodovar_Amata (04:27): if you can read this, Freddie and I are okay

Almodovar_Amata (04:27): I hope you find Dr. Parker… stay safe

—Messenger Date: 8/30/77—
Almodovar_Amata (00:27): Winona?

Almodovar_Amata (00:31): Winnie?

Almodovar_Amata (00:36): please answer me

Almodovar_Amata (00:36): please

Almodovar_Amata (02:09): I wish you were here

Almodovar_Amata (02:11): you would’ve been able to stop Wally

---Messenger Date: 9/20/77---

Almodovar_Amata (13:41): I know that you’re too far away and the messenger doesn’t work anymore

Almodovar_Amata (13:41): but I miss you... I think about you every single day

Almodovar_Amata (13:50): I hope you’re okay

Almodovar_Amata (13:51): I love you

---Messenger Date: 10/03/77---

Almodovar_Amata (07:12): my birthday’s coming up and I wish you were here for it

Almodovar_Amata (07:12): it feels so selfish to think about that right now with everything else that’s going on

Almodovar_Amata (07:13): but you’ve never missed my birthday, even on that year you got food poisoning

Almodovar_Amata (07:13): do you remember that?

Almodovar_Amata (07:14): you were singing happy birthday and bolted out of the room in the middle of it to throw up

Almodovar_Amata (07:15): I spent the rest of the day taking care of you and you felt awful about it for weeks no matter how many times I told you I didn’t mind

Almodovar_Amata (07:15): ...I’d laugh about it right now if I could

Almodovar_Amata (07:16): I wish you’d send me a birthday wish like you do every year

Almodovar_Amata (07:16): I don’t know how you pulled that off when you were always so terrible with consistency

Almodovar_Amata (07:17): I mean are

Almodovar_Amata (07:18): ARE terrible with consistency
Amata plugged in another message to send off as she quieted her sobbing—knowing that they, too, would go unread but she couldn’t bring herself to say it to the walls.

—Messenger Date: 10/10/77—

Almodovar_Amata (21:01): I want to tell you something I never thought I’d tell you

Almodovar_Amata (21:02): not because I didn’t want to, but because I always thought it was something you knew

Almodovar_Amata (21:02): and it’s killing me to think that you may not have

Almodovar_Amata (21:03): but when you were around it was easier for me to be brave and do the right thing

Almodovar_Amata (21:03): you always knew what to do even when you were scared and you never let yourself get backed into a corner like this

Almodovar_Amata (21:04): but now that you’re gone, I’ve been so lost and scared

Almodovar_Amata (21:06): I have nightmares about Wally all the time, and when I’m not having nightmares about him, I’m having nightmares about Stevie

Almodovar_Amata (21:06): I don’t know what to do and I feel like I can’t trust anyone, like I’m running around in circles

Almodovar_Amata (21:07): I can’t see the point of anything anymore

Almodovar_Amata (21:07): I think Susie might have something to do with Mr. Gomez’s death and I don’t know how or why

Almodovar_Amata (21:07): there’s no food or water and I have all these people who look up to me to fix their problems

Almodovar_Amata (21:08): so many people died after you left… some days I think they’re the lucky ones

Almodovar_Amata (21:08): I know if you could read these I’d never send them because I wouldn’t want to scare you or make you worry about me

Almodovar_Amata (21:09): Winnie I don’t know what to do and I feel like I’m killing myself trying to see what I’m doing wrong and what I could do right

Almodovar_Amata (21:09): how would you stop my father and make him see that it doesn’t have to be like this and that he’s hurting us?

Almodovar_Amata (21:09): please tell me what to do

Almodovar_Amata (21:10): I just want to help everyone but I don’t know how, I want the suffering and the fighting to stop
“You alright in here, princess?”

Before Amata could send the final message, she turned back toward the voice which startled her, and saw the outline of a figure hovering within the front door to look in. When she recognized Butch’s lazy lean into the broken doorframe, she quickly wiped her face through her sniffing, as if he didn’t already know she was sitting on the floor in the dark and crying alone, and turned back on a hand to look at him.

“Were you following me, DeLoria?” She inquired instead of answering, and he ushered a dubious snort while stepping into the apartment in his cool-guy swagger with his hands in his jacket pockets.

“Might’ve,” He answered casually as he stood beside her, just within the circle of light her Pip-Boy gave off and she tuned up the brightness so they could see each other better, practically illuminating Winona’s entire bedroom. “Lucy’d blow a gasket if she knew you left the floor without sayin’ diddly shit.“

“Then let’s just keep this between us. The last thing Lucy needs is to be worrying about me when she’s got enough on her mind.” Amata declared as she got up to her feet and brushed off her backside.

 “…Not like it ain’t any of my business, but what’s with the sneakin’ around, anyway? It’s not like ‘ya need permission t’go somewhere.”

Silence was Amata’s only answer as her dark eyes roamed across the bare walls and the unfurnished space as if she were seeing something he couldn’t. He tried to remember what Winona’s apartment looked like before it got trashed, but the only memory he had of it wasn’t a very good one (the day Wally dragged him and Paul down there). He realized it wasn’t so long ago that he was moving her things out so he could replace him and his mom there, but when she had her seizure, moving was the last thing on his mind. It didn’t seem to matter now anymore now that the infirmary was their home for the time being, and it looked like the Overseer got to the rest of Winona’s things before he could, anyway.

Knowing he might’ve been the last person to get ahold of everything pissed him off, but Butch hoped he moved out all the important stuff while he had the time to; not that he could tell what was important or not from her mountains of crap, though. At least he had the chance to clean the writing off the walls when he did, because Amata didn’t need to see any of that about her best friend. It was too fucked up.

“I guess I just wanted to—… slip away for a little while, with no one knowing where I was. With no one coming to look for me.” Amata admitted faintly, and Butch was suddenly very aware of how he was intruding. Shit. “I thought coming back to Winona’s apartment might give me insight on a few things… like—like being closer to her would help me figure out what to do.”

“‘Bout what? Your old man?” He asked.

“…About everything.” It was said so calmly, so diplomatically, so matter-of-factly—didn’t he just walk in on her crying two seconds ago? “I keep thinking that if she were here, she’d know how
to help everyone, wouldn’t she?” A broken laugh escaped her, causing a hairline crack in her otherwise collected demeanor. “She’d probably come up with some wildly brilliant idea in getting everyone the food and water they need, and would know how to help Stanley downstairs to keep the vault together, and she’d know the exact words my father would need to hear to stop all this.”

Amata forced herself to grow as cold and silent as the walls, as if fearing if she allowed herself to talk for so much longer she’d show something vulnerable—something she tried to keep to herself before his sudden arrival—but Butch already saw enough to understand how she was feeling, in a way.

A pitiful sigh escaped her as despair filled her eyes as she confessed with finality and shame in her tone. “I just—… I just wish she was here to tell me what to do…”

Butch could only clear his throat with an awkward pan of his eyes around the room, just to avoid direct eye contact. Of course, he never knew she was struggling like this, but he couldn’t say he was surprised Amata kept it to herself. Hell, it’s what dutiful citizens did in the vault; you kept your head down, your problems and sad, sappy emotions to yourself, you didn’t let anyone in past the curtain and you didn’t break the illusion that everything was apple pie and everything nice. He desperately hoped Amata wouldn’t start getting all teary-eyed because his track record with crying women wasn’t exactly spectacular, and a crying Amata felt like a whole different monster. Was being honest the right thing to do? Did she need to hear the hard truth, or did she need the sugar-coating, and fluffing up, and the apple pie and everything nice routine?

Shit, he wasn’t good at sugar-coating, either, and the apple pie never did shit for anybody, anyway.

“Lo- Look, Amata, we got dealt a shitty hand. So what? Yeah, Parker’s full’a bright ideas, but you ain’t so bad yourself. Folks ‘round here wouldn’t be lookin’ at you if they didn’t think you couldn’t turn this shithole around. You actually give a shit ‘bout them! They can see it, and that’s a helluva lot more than your old man’s done in years. They expect their three squares and maybe a hot shower once in a while, not a God damn miracle—’ya know what—forget what Parker’d do, what would you do?” He declared as he gave an encouraging little backhanded pap to her shoulder. Or, well, he hoped it was encouraging. Fuck, you put him in a room with a moody broad and he suddenly doesn’t know the definition of ‘cool’.

At least it seemed to work, because while Amata regarded him with a strange look for his—…”encouragement’, a gracious smile broke on her face. It didn’t reach her eyes, but shit, it was something at least.

“…Butch, that was—” She paused, trying to find the right word. “Almost inspirational. Maybe even nice.” She decided with a teasing smile.

“Haven’t ‘ya heard? Butch DeLoria doesn’t do ‘nice’.‘” He grumbled in a playful remark.

“I think he can. When he wants to. So—… thank you.” Amata said with a similar backhanded pap to his own bicep, clearly making fun of him. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. It’ll be our little secret… just the two of us.”

“Plus one.“

The two froze and turned towards the voice in the doorway, with Butch shoving Amata protectively behind him upon recognizing the intruder—clean-cut and rigid, and tall with a flattop haircut. The bouncing, sickly green glow of Amata’s Pip-Boy stretched across the floor to reflect off a pristine pair of Security combat boots, and something in the intruder’s hand that Butch couldn’t quite make out. His heart seized up in panic at all the possibilities as his terrified
imagination spiraled and made him see things that meant bad endings for the two; he saw a baton, and a can of military-grade pepper spray, and a combat knife, and a gun all at once.

Amata’s trembling hands dug tightly into the back of his jacket and he knew she saw it, too. Somehow it didn’t seem to matter what the intruder was holding, because whatever it was, all they could see was Wally Mack holding something like one would hold a weapon, with grim purpose in his eyes.

Butch could only stare at his ex-best friend, his face twisting into seething anger at the coolness in Wally’s own expression. There was the slightest tug of a smirk on his lips, with enough control that it was almost unnoticeable if Butch hadn’t known what it looked like. He realized that the last time they saw each other was at the meeting, but the last time they were this close, Butch got a knuckle sandwich to the jaw and Wally got his nose bent. A frothing fury boiled up in the heart of his stomach, and he felt how it expanded inside him until it threatened to burst and consume him inside and out in hellfire.

He thought about the last things they said to each other; he thought about the way Amata looked when Susie dragged her into the clinic the day he attacked her; he thought about Paul dying without Wally even around to care; he thought about the way Wally looked clean through him at the meeting like they were perfect strangers… or something even less, but much more insulting than that.

The good memories ran away from the rage until Butch’s mind was void of them as he looked into Wally’s eyes, and he knew—he knew it like a condemning cosmic truth the stars had aligned for them millennia ago—that nothing was redeemable or forgivable between them. The gang leader was so certain of this that he knew, too, if he had the chance—

*I might actually fuckin’ kill him.*

A pang of violence cut through him, all claws and blood-encrusted teeth and pulsating red behind his eyes.

*I might actually kill this fuckin’ prick.*

“You’ve got some fuckin’ nerve, showin’ your bird shit face ‘round here.” Butch hissed wrathfully.

“It’s funny you say that, as if you have any liberty over the territory around here… do you still think you own this vault?” Wally remarked patronizingly, as if he found their interaction amusing and it only made Butch angrier. When Wally took a step forward to block the doorway (and the only exit out), the Tunnel Snake could see more clearly what was in his hand—a standard issue baton condensed to the handle.

But there was something about the way he held it, with a heavy consideration about him as he followed Butch’s line of sight to the weapon, that made him feel like Wally was ready to use it. It proved his concerns correct when Wally snapped his wrist and the baton extended to its full length in a series of harsh clicks that made the tension more suffocating.

Wally’s gaze then turned to Butch once more, glaring and sharp.

“You should’ve stayed in your cozy little shithole downstairs, where the rest of us could have the luxury of forgetting about you.” Wally went on, and Butch tried to pretend it didn’t cut him at all. “How’s your mother doing, by the way? Is she down there with the roaches like the rest of you, or did you turn your back on her like you did everyone else?”
“Don’t you talk ‘bout my fuckin’ ‘ma!” Butch boomed immediately with a dangerous step forward, and it took all of Amata’s strength to haul him back by his arm, though she was too frightened to warn him with her mouth clamped shut—hands still trembling around his bicep as she remained hidden behind him. “And you’re fuckin’ one to talk about turnin’ backs! I didn’t think you’d be enough of a God damn moron t’go and join Security after all the shit they put us through! ‘Ya know what that bastard’s like, Wally, with the kinda shit he made us do!”

“You act like you were innocent in all of that, like you weren’t itching to play ‘big kid on the playground’... but now, unlike you, I’m not a kid anymore, Butch—and I’ve seen the Big Picture. Some of us have a responsibility to this vault. Some of us have a sense of pride, and duty, and loyalty in protecting us and ours,” Wally gestured to the badge pinned to his chest and snorted out a gritting laugh, pretending as if he tried to stop it from coming out but it felt fully intentional as he shook his head. “What am I saying, though? It’s not like you’d know a damn thing about any of that! You only ever cared about yourself and what people thought about your stupid fucking jacket. You’re just a coward who thought he was a man.”

“You shut the fuck up before I come over there and make ‘ya swallow your nose!”

“Are you threatening an officer?” Wally whistled low, smiling condescendingly as Butch went on.

“I don’t give a shit who ‘ya are, I’ll still knock you on your ass, Mack! You act like you’re all changed and above everyone else, but you’re still talkin’ alotta shit like ‘ya always did! ‘Ya never say anythin’ but pretentious bullshit I know ‘ya don’t believe, and now you keep runnin’ your mouth at me about all this ‘traitor’ shit!” Butch couldn’t stop himself through his ranting as his vision went red and his gut tightened and churned. “I didn’t turn on you, asshole! I didn’t turn my God damn back on nobody!”

“I think Paulie would say differently… thanks to you, though, it looks like he isn’t saying much anymore, is he?”

The moment Paul’s name left his mouth, Butch felt something unhinge inside him and he went flying at Wally with an enraged roar. Amata couldn’t hold him back this time, and her terrified screams begging him to stop were lost to the heavy pulsing in his ears as he swung wildly. He could feel in the brunt of his knuckles the hits that landed across Wally’s jaw, into his ribs, aiming for any opening he had as if possessed and barely noticing through his adrenaline where the hot-sharp pains of the baton rod struck him in return. He felt one or two to his shoulder and arm, one strike just grazing the side of his head when he jerked away, and the two continued grappling and punching and slamming into one another with every ounce of strength they had.

Butch finally had Wally pinned up against the wall from his unending assault, but left himself open and vulnerable. It wasn’t until he felt Wally’s weapon lashing him across the stomach did he lose his momentum, and his breath, in a single hit. The strike sent him crumpling to his knees, heaving and struggling to take in any air as he wheezed out a sick noise while holding his midsection—his lungs burning for mercy as Amata stayed behind him, half crying and half screaming still.

Wally’s boots stepped into his vision and the gang leader could hear him panting, out of breath himself. Butch only had enough strength to lift his head, blood filling his inner lip, just to look him in the eyes out of spite.

“O- Of course you’d worm your way back into that cunt Parker’s apartment,” He spit raggedly as a blow to his brow spilled what looked more like oil than blood down the side of his face, everything muddy and tinted green from Amata’s pip-boy light. “I can only imagine why… should’ve seen the si- signs early on that it was only a matter of time before you would turn on me—and for what?
For her? Because she felt sorry for you and your sad sack of shit self thought it meant something?

Wally struck him across the face with the handle of his baton without warning, sending Butch’s bloodied spittle across the wall as the Tunnel Snake dropped to the ground, moaning painfully, and his body began aching everywhere at once as the adrenaline dried up and abandoned him on the floor. Butch didn’t want to think about Winona like that—to send himself back to the moment where she kissed him, and wonder if it was an empty gesture and not what he thought it was, wished it was—shit, Butch couldn’t muster even the smallest amounts of energy to tell Wally to go fuck himself on his own nightstick.

Just as his bloodied teeth and split lips parted to form the curse, the weight of a boot bore down on the back of Butch’s head and slowly applied pressure until he gave a weak groan instead, his jaw throbbing.

“And I bet you miss her, don’t you? I bet she hasn’t even thought about you once since she left. I mean, why would she? Look at you! You’re fucking pathetic, and pitiful, and you always have been!” Wally laughed over him until his voice dropped to a dangerous and truth-bearing tone, and Butch’s chest truly felt heavy at the thought, at the doubt that filled it. “Honestly, I’d almost feel sorry for you if it wasn’t for the fact that I’ve wanted to beat the living piss out of you for a very, very, very, long time.” Wally ground his heel down into the back of Butch’s head until he was yelling in pain, and then finally eased off when he was satisfied. The Tunnel Snake could hardly bring himself to blink away the blurriness in his vision, struggling to concentrate on making the faint ringing in his ears stop.

“And you,” Wally went on as if bored, and Butch could hear Amata’s crying stop immediately as if she were holding her breath. He felt Wally breeze over him in a side step to cross Winona’s bedroom, his footfalls slow and predatory, like he was stalking. “You and I still have unfinished business, don’t we? You still haven’t told me where your little bitch friend’s gone!” He sang. “Don’t you worry, Amata… we have all the time in the world until the lights turn back on. All the time in the world to get what I want out of you, and to make up for all the years of humiliation—the insults—the way you’d look down on me like I was a puddle of vomit in your way… yeah, we’ve got time, and Parker isn’t around to save you this time, either. Just like before.”

When the full realization of Amata being in imminent danger bore down on the gang leader, the need to protect her cramped his chest and gave him enough strength to lift his head, to push himself back up onto his hands and knees, his blood and spit stringing from his cheek to where it had pooled on the floor to lift his gaze from his hands and knees position. Wally was taking his time with each step he took to come closer to her, ensuring that each move was calculated so she couldn’t get past him or escape successfully if she even tried. Amata looked so small and terrified as he cornered her, trembling and quietly sobbing—looked even smaller than she did that day in the clinic, when Butch barely recognized her in the doorway.

The memory was enough to make him force himself up to his knees from his hands despite his dizzied vision making it a Herculean task; and ignore that what he was about to do would probably get him fucking killed, though he couldn’t bring himself to link the now thoughts to the after thoughts. He didn’t care in that moment, he just had to get Wally’s attention off Amata.

“You’re just like your old man.”

Wally stilled the moment he heard the words croaking out of his ex-brother, snapping back over his shoulder as if he couldn’t register that Butch had really said it, and so condemningly at that. The Tunnel Snake smiled gleefully despite the copper in his mouth at the way the words settled in
Wally’s eyes, how it hurt him just to hear it, how it angered him, and how the look of it isn’t true, but what if it is? was all over his face. Butch continued on as Amata stayed in the corner, her eyes wide and fearful.

“Ya heard me, Mack! You’re just like Allen, man… look at ‘ya!... A spittin’ image of the biggest piece of shit that ever walked the vault—and that maintenance guy, George, tried cozyin’ up t’little kids!” Butch congratulated mockingly as he rocked himself up to his feet to get to a better tactical position, but otherwise tried to reserve his strength. “Can’t imagine how scared your poor ‘ma is of ‘ya the moment ‘ya walk through the door.”

The moment he mentioned poor Gloria Mack being afraid of her own son, Wally’s bird-face screwed up into an ugly grimace, his beady eyes set aflame in horrific fury as he turned back to face Butch fully, leaving Amata immediately forgotten in his redirected ire. He was already walking back to Butch with white and tight knuckles shaking angrily around his weapon as the Tunnel Snake kept talking, his thoughts working endlessly to find an opening to get the upper hand.

“Ya ask me, though, I think you’re more of a bastard than even he is! ‘Ya carry on the family tradition, yet? Maybe smack your ‘ma ‘round a little bit? Your hands itch like Stevie’s did?” The taunt continued as he spit out the blood in his mouth, but it kept running from his nose and slicked his teeth more.

Wally’s baton abruptly swung down upon him with such force it cut through the air with the sharpness of a knife despite its blunt impact. His wrist impacted with Butch’s forearm as he threw his arm above his head to block the oncoming blow, causing intense pain to radiate down his arm—but his other fist was ready, and delivered a devastating punch to Wally’s groin.

The weapon dropped from Wally’s hand with a shocked yelp at the pain, clasping himself as he dropped to his knees and doubled over, retching sickly with his forehead touching the metal flooring. Butch fumbled for the baton on the ground with how his hands shook and his body swayed and fought against him to stay upright. Once it was firmly in his grasp, and he knew he’d have the energy to use it as he had to, he turned back on Wally and swung; hitting him across his head to disorient him so he went sprawling to the floor, bleeding out, and Butch kept swinging until Wally was crawling away from him to the doorway to find an escape from the torrent.

It only provided Butch with a wall to hold on to so he could drive power behind his kicks as he planted them repeatedly into Wally’s side.

The baton was immediately forgotten, dropped to the floor behind him. Eventually he had Wally curled up into the foot of the wall in the fetal position, protecting his head with his arms as much as he could while Butch alternated between stomping and striking him with his own fists just to satiate his rage when the nightstick didn’t deliver the sounds he wanted to hear, when it didn’t deliver the crunch he wanted to feel under his ruptured knuckles. The Tunnel Snake didn’t care how he or the situation looked, didn’t care how fucked up it all was, how angry he felt, how much he thought he deserved to do this to Wally—he only felt uncontrollable and yet more powerful than ever, wanting nothing more than to beat the shit out of his ex-best friend until he stopped moving… until something higher than God felt He had to pray for Wally’s sorry fucking soul.

Butch never knew he could hate someone so God damn much, until it made him sick.

“Butch—! Butch, stop! Stop!” Amata had intervened long ago, but the boiling wrath in his ears (or was that the ringing still?) drowned her in and out of hearing. Eventually Butch felt hands latching around his waist to yank him off a battered Wally, and he momentarily broke free to deliver
another swift kick that made him groan and writhe weakly.

“The fuckhead deserves it!” Butch boomed, spitting and livid, and that was definitely his ears ringing. “He deserves it! I figured you of all people’d wanna go at him!”

“Don’t you assume this is what I want, that this is anything close to what I want!” Amata barked back at him and he went still, jaw tight at the tortured look in her eyes as the last of her tears rolled down her face. Her mouth opened and then clacked shut as if she thought to explain herself and then decided she didn’t have to, but then her eyes went past him and all the color suddenly drained from her complexion.

Butch turned back in alarm at her reaction to see Wally struggling to push himself up from the ground, his free hand gripping the 10mm that was holstered to his belt seconds ago. The moment Butch’s memories took him back to Tom Holden wheezing out his last breath, his thoughts finally linked to a flittering spark of pure instinct and he shoved a petrified Amata into the living room and out the front door.

“Go, go! Run!” Was all he could yell as the two went hurdling down the hallway, Butch too terrified to look back as he tried to keep his swimming vision on the way ahead. The corridor seemed to stretch in their escape, pulling longer to unfathomable distances with the stairs moving further and further away from them despite every pounding footstep they took towards it. Each passing second felt like a year going by as time slowed and echoed its strain in the pounding in his head, feeling as if his legs were sinking into mud he couldn’t see, pulling back on each burning calf with each slow step he took—could his legs go any fucking faster?!—

POOMB.

RA-TING.

Amata turned the corner and went tearing up the stairs as the deafening sound tore through the small space, seeming to ricochet in volume off the walls in the same instance that Butch felt a searing heat shred through his right ear, sending him stumbling forward with a hand clutched to the side of his head as liquid warmth spread between his fingers. It immediately planted his boots to the ground as fear stilled him into place when he pulled his hand away to find blood spilling across his palm and registered the way it dripped down his neck, warm and surreal.

Butch finally looked back.

In the thin light of the blackout, he could make out Wally standing at the opposite end of the hallway, his face contorted, and bruised, and bloodied and gruesome with his smoking 10mm held between his unsteady hands. Butch remained frozen as he heard the hammer of the gun hitch back, the sound as equally loud as the bullet that just clipped his ear to bounce off the forward wall, and despite feeling how the dwindling seconds of escaped him—despite knowing he was literally staring Death back in its skeletal face—he couldn’t move, he couldn’t breathe, his body and his mind betrayed him and locked up against all instinct as he stared down the gun’s barrel.

Wally was swaying himself, suddenly colliding into the wall to get some support under him as he breathed raggedly, his eyes unable to pin themselves on Butch long enough to let the second bullet fly, and his demeanor changed when a whirring within the bowels of Vault 101 rumbled under their feet. Butch could see realization dawning in his eyes, as if he had suddenly remembered himself in the situation, and just as the first few lights of the living quarters flickered into bright life, the gun was retired back into its clip before they could even burn in their full brightness.

Butch didn’t have the chance to process the shift as the two only stared at each other, pained and
defeated, and he didn’t have to look Wally in the eyes to know that this wasn’t over. This was only the start of something nuclear because Wally never forgave and he never forgot… especially not now, when he was clearly convinced Butch had committed the most atrocious crime against him of befriending Winona Parker.

The gang leader was the first to break away and fall back in a cautious back step, ensuring the gun wouldn’t come back out and Wally wouldn’t follow before turning his back to bolt up the stairs after Amata with a hand clutched to his bleeding ear, slipping on a step on uneven footing in his escape as his vision doubled again, his pounding head catching up to him. Wally remained in the hallway, seething as he gripped his side and sagged down the wall he’d been using to keep himself up until he met the floor, his eyes rolling shut as he swallowed the blood filling his mouth—and he stayed like that, for he didn’t know how long, until he had the energy to drag himself up to his feet.

When Wally could finally limp away, he spat hateful curses under his breath, filling his mouth with venom despite the blood already there, and he was furious at how the situation got so out of hand; how it fell out of his favor the moment he let Butch get under his skin, and the bastard always knew how to. When he vowed to go after Butch, he also vowed that he’d never again fall prey to his antics. He wasn’t a 9-year-old that got upset by being called chicken anymore… he wasn’t a 9-year-old that found amusement in stupid pranks and name-calling anymore.

Not when he could do so much worse.

In his haste to leave before the cameras turned back on, he didn’t bother to clean up the only evidence left behind of their encounter ever having taken place; the blood smears remained on the floors and walls of Winona’s abandoned apartment, nothing more than additional secrets taken into the chrysanthemum wallpaper to never be spoken again; silently bearing accusation unto the nightstck that was also left behind.

The hospitality floor was quiet. Though the lights had since turned on in the shortest blackout the residents ever witnessed, bewilderment quickly overtook the relief of the power returning when Amata spilled into the room with Butch slung around her shoulders to help keep him upright. Most of his remaining energy faded in their escape down the final staircase to the infirmary, as his vision swam and waves of dizziness crashed upon him, his feet outright refusing to cooperate. In his barely conscious state he could barely see how the awake residents looked on with dreadful faces at the sight of him, battered, his face covered in blood, spilling scarlet down the front of his jumpsuit.

“Lucy! Lucy! Somebody get her!” Amata cried out desperately, further rousing a commotion out of the spectators craning their necks over the crowding of heads to see what was going on. Lucy walked out of the main infirmary at the cry of her name with Andy gliding out to follow.

“Oh, my goodness! What happened?” She exclaimed, flying over.

“Mister DeLoria, what a shame! He usually seems in better spirits—” Andy droned, chipper and unaware of the urgency of the situation.

“Yes, just help him!” Amata interrupted sharply.

The elderly woman moved quickly into action and took up Butch’s other arm to sling it around her as Andy puttered behind, attempting to be helpful but clueless about why everyone was panicking. As if Butch could tell he was finally safe, his legs responded accordingly and finally went slack, buckling out from under his body. The only thing that kept him from plummeting to the floor were the women on either side of him, carrying him off into the clinic. They passed the bedridden
patients toward the back office and came upon Ellen DeLoria—who had been sitting on her own cot, poking glumly at her mostly uneaten dinner while waiting for her son to join her—until she heard Amata’s cries and was quick to receive them.

“Butchie! Oh my God—my poor sweet baby—! Stop, stop—Amata, give him to me—I’ve got him—!” Ellen proclaimed as she gently maneuvered herself into Amata’s position under Butch’s shoulder so the latter was freed, and then assisted Lucy in carrying him to the back office where Dr. Parker’s old desk was jerry-rigged into an examination table. Christine was already preparing the medical cart nearby with her bandaged hands.

Before Amata could usher another word to either woman, the door rolled shut in her face with the lock clicking shut, keeping her out. The last she saw of Butch was his gaze fringing on dazed and unconscious, his body draped bonelessly across the examination table, with Lucy hunching over him to reflect a penlight in each of his eyes and Christine laying a towel to catch the blood coming from his chipped ear. The shades were pulled quickly down over the office window to keep prying eyes from looking in as residents collected around the Overseer’s daughter, and she felt their eyes on her back despite the way their murmurs died to stifling quiet. Amata forced her chin to stop wobbling despite the fresh tears coming forth as she looked down into her shaking hands, only to see Butch’s blood streaked across her palms and she hurriedly tore them away from her immediate vision.

“Alright, show’s over, folks! Let’s get everyone back in bed, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.” Came a voice over the whispers. It was Mr. Brotch—Edwin—shooing the others away. The onlookers begrudgingly broke away to return to bed as he hobbled up to Amata’s side. “I see that Mister DeLoria still can’t stay out of trouble for long… at least some things don’t have to change around he—oh.”

The old teacher finally took notice of the blood on her hands, flaking red in the grooves of her skin riding along the edges of her fingernails, and when he touched her shoulder, Amata flinched with her expression breaking in pained disbelief and a strangled sob escaping her. She couldn’t look at her hands any more than she wanted to think back on what happened in Winona’s apartment, and yet her mind violently restrained her and forced her eyes open to replay every punch, every kick, every strike of the baton and splatter of blood marring the floor in vivid yet rushed detail; like a movie on constant fast forward, rewind, repeat that she couldn’t stop. It clutched her dizzying thoughts with clawing hands and sinking nails she couldn’t rip herself free from.

It never occurred to her that anyone could, or would, fight for her the way Butch did to fend off Wally by taking his attention away from her with no care for his own safety. Amata wasn’t stupid, the moment the taunt left Butch’s mouth she knew exactly what he was doing in berating Wally—and while it made her furious that he’d do something so reckless, it also made her feel so, so guilty. Because it was all her fault, wasn’t it? That Butch tried to protect her, and now he was lying in the infirmary, half-alive with a concussion or worse? He was shot, for Heaven’s sake! Amata heard the bullet ping off the wall and was too terrified to look back, because all she expected to see was Butch’s body dropping behind her, and God it wouldn’t have been a scene she would ever recover from. Seeing him climbing up the stairs after her was the most relief she’d felt in a long time, but like anything good in the vault as of late, it was short-lived when he confirmed he’d been shot (verbatim, “I think the motherfucker shot me”) and pitched forward into her.

Amata felt if she had at least told him she needed time alone, or if she hadn’t gone at all, none of this would have happened to either of them; if she could have acted instead of running away to hide amongst her memories of Winona and crippling fears of failure, they all would have been better off
for it… and now none of them were winning.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” Edwin muttered calmly to her, his hand still upon her shoulder. Amata nodded in solemn agreement, though her thoughts were too frayed to reply consciously, and he led her out of the infirmary and back onto the floor. Together they stepped around those trying to settle back into bed for a second time that night, and met with the stairs which led deeper into the hospitality wing for the public bathroom on that level.

The walk was silent, almost grating aside from the clunk-step of Edwin’s lop-sided gait on his crutches. When they arrived at the women’s bathroom, Amata went in and he followed suit, unflinching of his own intrusion in the space as the opposite sex when the stalls turned up empty. He stood near the sinks as she stooped over the washing bucket in the corner to scoop out a meager cup of clean water; as the Overseer cut the taps and showers weeks ago, the bathrooms held a tall plastic bucket of water for hand washing, face scrubbing, and teeth brushing just to keep themselves sane. They made do otherwise with quick, cold sponge baths to combat the body odor of many people in their small clinic space, or at Lucy’s suggestion, used whatever wet wipes they could scrounge up for baths.

Bringing the cup to the sink, Amata took several generous pumps of soap leftover in the adjoining dispenser and spilled the water sparingly into her hands, turning it and the vigorous suds a nauseating shade of red that marred the porcelain white of the sink bowl. When she could bring herself to look in the adjoining mirror, a smear of Butch’s blood under her chin made itself known, and scrubbed it furiously until her own skin was a screaming red. Edwin remained silent beside her, leaning against the wall to keep his weight off his crutch as Amata dried her face with a handful of paper towels and looked to her blood-streaked clothes in the mirror. It’d long since crusted into the thick, industrial fabric of her jumpsuit, and turned into such a gloomy maroon shade it was almost black.

She remembered the way it dripped down Wally’s face in Winona’s apartment—it looked black, too, back then—made him look positively inhuman and she shut her eyes at the memory with a stabilizing intake of breath.

“We’ll see about getting you a clean replacement,” Edwin finally spoke, seeming almost reluctant to given her current state—like a single word would shatter her. “…Are you okay?”

“I will be, once I hear from Lucy that Butch’s okay, too.” She declared firmly while unzipping her jumpsuit to her waist to shimmy out of the sleeves, tying them about her hips to hide Butch’s blood as best she could.

“Well, the boy’s got a skull thick enough to make up for his lack of self-preservation, so I wouldn’t worry about him too much… although he looked pretty serious coming through here. Care to share what happened?”

“Wally happened.” The explanation came to his apparent surprise, as his brows arched toward his hairline before dissipating to uneasy acceptance with a heavy sigh and a head wag. “There’s been bad blood between the two since Winona left—”

“The fuckhead deserves it! He deserves it! I figured you of all people’d wanna go at him!”

“—and I’d rather not go into any more details than that.” Amata concluded, which Edwin accepted with an understanding nod. “For now, I’ll let Lucy and Christine and his mother worry about him until I have to worry about him.”

“That makes it sound like there’s more pressing matters on your mind now.” His inflection was
questioning and yet his tone sounded all-knowing, his brows furrowing over his eyes.

The Overseer’s daughter was momentarily silent as she leaned her weight against the sink and put her attention into her Pip-Boy, opening up the messenger interface she last logged into and pulled up a name to the top she hadn’t messaged in months—a name she had deleted weeks ago, in fact, and typed out two quick message to the recipient;

——Messenger Date: 10/10/77——

Almodovar_Amata (21:53): we need to talk

Almodovar_Amata (21:53): come to the clinic’s women’s bathroom right now

“Amata?” Edwin called when she still hadn’t answered him.

“I’m inviting someone to join in on our meeting here,” Closing her Pip-Boy, she went to the bathroom door and locked it from their side to secure their privacy. “You’re right... about something else being on my mind right now. Actually, there’s a lot on my mind, and there has been for weeks now. I’m floundering here, Edwin, I need help.”

“All you need to do is say the word. Anything I can do to help, just tell me what you need.”

“First, I want to focus on how to get everyone the food and water they need, which means securing a reliable and ongoing supply source... but for that I’ll need an absolute team effort from everyone in the infirmary who can help. It’ll be hard for many of us to put in the kind of work I have in mind, so I want them to know I’m hearing them and they’re being taken care of.” Amata folded her arms loosely over her stomach as she propped her shoulder into the door, keeping an ear to it for when her message recipient arrived. Hopefully, he was still awake. “My second initiative is to expand out of the clinic so we can accommodate more people and give everyone the room they need. We all have to share a space and it hasn’t been easy, so I’m hoping the extra room could make things less territorial around here.”

“A cure to vault-wide hunger,” Edwin clucked with a brief laugh. “As if that wasn’t already ambitious... for more space, I’d recommend falling back to the classroom. It’s only the next level down and we have direct access to it from the back end of the infirmary here, and I still have authorization over the space so I can open it up for us. We can secure the hallway on the opposing end that leads out to the main wing and seal it off, maybe turn the classroom into a bunk room by unbolting the desks to move them out. Getting a food and water supply going, however—… that’s a tall order to fill, and we can’t just make either out of thin air.”

Something seemed to click in the teacher’s eyes at the sentence, as he stroked his chin and ideas began tumbling rapidly in his eyes.

“Edwin—? What’re you thinking?” Amata prodded eagerly.

“Science project.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Let’s think back to middle school science, here. I can’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before, but we can build condensation collectors. They pull moisture from humid air into a water drip we can bottle up, and would be a more archaic design of Andy’s own collectors.” He detailed as he looked around the bathroom to find somewhere comfortable to sit so he wouldn’t have to keep standing.
Having to resign himself to the only seating available, he clunked himself over to the nearest stall, set down the lid of the women’s toilet seat, and lowered himself onto it with a comfortable sigh. Amata hovered around the stall door just to be in his field of vision. “Make no mistake, proper showers still won’t be an option and I suspect rationing will need to be kept in place with, hopefully, fewer restrictions. It’s at least *doable* if we can build the collectors and find a place to plant them.”

“The maintenance levels *could* work for a humid place… but what about the greenhouses? The decommissioned ones?” She suggested. “They’re not growing food anymore, anyway, and they shut the rain systems off before this all happened, but they’re individually temperature and moisture controlled.”

“It’s a start, if there’s still power flowing through them and if we can get them back on for our purposes.” He agreed.

“It’s *definitely* a start. *But*, while food, water, and space will make things easier on everyone, the struggle won’t be worth the fight if we lose the vault itself.” Amata lamented as she kept her arms folded loosely over her stomach, stepping back on a leg in front of his claimed stall.

“…You seem to know something the rest of us don’t, don’t you.” Edwin inquired, though it sounded more like a statement than a question, to which she nodded.

“Our most important asset to the vault right now is struggling downstairs, and he needs *help.*” Amata explained with a troubled look. “I’ve been talking with Christine about Stanley, and she’s told me he’s being overworked to drop-dead exhaustion between keeping the reactors cool and other general maintenance work. With Floyd and Paul—*gone*, along with Winona, it’s just him and one or two other people down there doing work meant for a 6-person team. I want to send people downstairs to help him in any way we can.”

“That’s *extremely* alarming news, Amata, and I commend your taking initiative, but how do you plan on sending *untrained hands* downstairs to help when Stanley wouldn’t have the time to train them, anyhow? The only one amongst us who’s maintenance-trained is Freddie, but he’s a *jukebox mechanic.* Hardly vault technician material.”

“Well, a jukebox technician is better than nothing,” She concluded. “I’m not saying any of us could do what Stanley can, but if he had a larger team to take the burden off him, maybe he could focus squarely on keeping the vault together while our people take care of the smaller repairs. Training manuals can go a long way and I’m sure there’s people around here willing to volunteer if it means helping.”

“I *sincerely* hope you’re right and it’s not just misplaced, though well-intended, optimism.”

“That’s part of the change, Edwin. *Everyone* will have a part to play in bringing us *all* to a better place, which is why I said I want them to know they’re being taken care of in exchange for their flexibility and service, and I need them to know that they’re also protected here, from the radroaches and Security and my father.” Amata explained.

“The roaches are an easy, though risky, fix.” Edwin began as he took up his Pip-Boy to tap through the menus. From where Amata stood, she couldn’t see what he was searching for. “I’ve been thinking of this one for some time and so I’ve kept tabs on the open positions your father’s made—there’s still two pest control positions available for pest control technicians, and whoever applies will be compensated with extra rations and water.”

Amata came over when he offered his wrist up, and she brought his Pip-Boy closer to better read
the job application, her brow knitting in thought the longer she read. “He updated it yesterday to include shower tokens, too. He’s getting desperate.”

“If we can get at least one resident to volunteer and land the jobs, it could give us more food and water to share if they’re willing to split it, and as a show of good faith they can keep the shower tokens for themselves in exchange for the cut. Getting two residents to volunteer, however, would be even better.” Edwin agreed with a certain nod.

“But would it be a good idea, sending our people up if he still plans on taking the infirmary?”

“That’s another problem in itself, isn’t it?” He said thoughtfully, seeming to stare off into a distance Amata couldn’t see as he tried to think of a solution—as if the damage the Overseer’s hands had done could have a solution. “You’re right in that we’ll have to find some way to protect ourselves against him if he arrives with Security at his back… we lose the infirmary, we lose everything we have here and we’ll never have a chance of recovery let alone survival. We’ve been able to connect with one another in a way we hadn’t before, where we’ve rebuilt a life all our own in a safe space where his word is no longer our law. We’ve broken free of Vault 101’s cycle and are coming into an identity he no longer has control over, and if he’s a smart man, that alone should scare him.”

“Then that just makes us even more of a target,” Amata pointed out worriedly.

“We still have no idea why he hasn’t led his attack yet?”

Amata only shook her head in the negative, just as a timid knock came at the locked bathroom door. She swiftly flew over and called firmly out despite the metal between her and the intruder.

“Who is it?” She asked.

“Amata, it’s me.” A small voice responded, partly confused, partly anxious, and she unlocked the door to let her message recipient in. Freddie Gomez’s eyes nearly popped free of his head when he saw her suit covered in blood, despite her best attempt in covering most of it. “Holy crap—!”

“It’s not mine,” She quickly reassured with the waving of her hands in front of her. “It’s—… It’s Butch’s. He was attacked.”

“What? Is—is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s going to be fine,” Amata replied despite the dreadful uncertainty that filled her heart, and pulled Freddie inside so she could shut and re-lock the bathroom door.

“Freddie—? What’re you doing here?” Edwin addressed, confused by his unexpected presence as he walked the bathroom with a blush in his cheeks, obviously uncomfortable at being in the women’s bathroom.

“He- Hey, Mr. Broth.” He greeted with a meek wave and looked to the Overseer’s daughter apprehensively. “Honestly, I’m not really sure why… but I’ve found out the hard way before not to be on Amata’s bad side when she tells you ‘we need to talk’.”

“The past doesn’t matter given the current circumstance… you didn’t tell Susie you were coming, did you?”

Freddie shook his head, still blatantly confused. “No, no, I was with my mom when I got your message and she was already asleep so I just snuck out. What’s this all about, if it’s not about Winona?”
“I don’t really know how to open this conversation delicately, or explain everything in a way that’ll make complete sense, so I’m just going to jump into it,” Amata admitted as she looked to Freddie. “I need to know everything that you might know about the Security armory and how to break into it.”

It was a long moment of Freddie and Edwin staring at her, gob smacked and speechless, where the two exchanged shocked looks with one another before pivoting back to her.

"Amata," Edwin began worriedly. “Why would you ever need to break into the armory for?”

“This is the ‘explain everything in a way that makes sense’ part I mentioned…” She sighed, reluctant to speak or turn back to the events of the night when she just wanted to look toward the future. “When Wally attacked us, Butch gave back just as bad as he got. Wally will need medical help, which I am not willing to give if it means he has to come down here or be around everyone else, but he can’t show up to the rest of Security in his state without finding some way to explain his injuries to them and my father. I think he’ll pin it all on Butch.”

“What—I—he—” Freddie sputtered, uncertain of how to process all the information just loaded onto him. “What’s this got to do with the armory, though?”

“Although we’ll argue self-defense, it’s still violent assault of a Security officer. Wally will fabricate some story about Butch attacking him first, or being belligerent or some other story, which they’ll absolutely believe because of Butch’s past. He’ll get twisted into being the villain in all this and to make matters worse, my father could still be planning to reclaim the infirmary. I’m worried that whatever story Wally makes up could push my father into going through with taking the territory and give him the opportunity to arrest Butch in the process… we can’t lose the clinic, and Butch’s an invaluable asset. We cannot afford to lose him, either.”

_I can’t afford to lose him_, Amata tagged on mentally, but wasn’t so keen on saying so aloud.

“You want to steal Security’s weapons so we can defend our space,” Edwin realized, his expression understanding yet conflicted by the solution.

"And to show my father he won’t be able to push us around any longer.” She added determinedly.

“I- Isn’t this all based on if Wally would even _go_ to the Overseer and tell him Butch attacked him though? Maybe he won’t, an- and your dad won’t come?” Freddie interjected hopefully, wringing his hands nervously in front of him at the idea of a violent confrontation taking place.

_He will._ It’s what Wally does, he does awful things like this and then manipulates and twists the situation to get what he wants and gets off scot-free,” Amata seethed. “It’s how he got Winona arrested months ago, for that break in into the private archives—that was _him_—and it’s how he got the job in Security despite what he did to me! And now he’s going to twist this situation, too, and convince my father he didn’t do this, either. I _know_ how my father will react, Freddie… he _will_ come looking for Butch and he _will_ have Security with him to arrest him and force the rest of us out.”

“Then we don’t have any time to waste, we need to make preparations to receive him. Arming ourselves really might be the only option we have.” Edwin declared as he held onto the toilet paper dispenser in the stall to pull him up to his feet, taking hold of his crutch once more to help him keep his balance.

“Are you both _crazy_?!” Freddie cried out in panicked disbelief, his eyes flicking back-and-forth between the two of them. “You can’t just—! _Steal guns_ and stand off against Security! Have you...
both forgotten about what happened to Mr. Holden?”

“It’s because of what happened to Mr. Holden that we have to take a stand! For him, and Mrs. Holden, and all the other people we’ve lost or who’ve been wronged because of people like my father, and because of those on Security who’re opportunistic and using martial law to target us instead of protect us!” Amata responded emotionally, throwing her hands out at her sides in an exasperated manner. “This is for Jonas! This is for—for Christine’s mom and baby sister, for Jim and Janice’s parents—for Winona and Dr. Parker—for your dad, Freddie! If I had any other choice to stop my father and get Security to leave us alone, I’d do it, but this is the only option we have to put a stop to this before it gets even worse and we lose more people. This is the only option we have for right now if we want to survive this.”

Freddie stood tensely with his hands clutched at his sides into shaky fists, unable to lift his eyes to Amata nor Edwin, though his expression was twisted by conflict, and fear. In his eyes Amata could see him struggle to make the right decision, struggle with what to even say, and somehow, Amata saw herself there; she saw everything in him that she had spent the last few weeks fighting within herself, and she sympathetically laid a hand on his shoulder that made his gaze finally connect with hers.

“I know you’re scared, Freddie… I know you want to do the right thing, and I know you’re probably asking yourself what your dad would’ve done if he were still here.” Amata mumbled with a reassuring squeeze to his shoulder. “You think ‘if only he was here, he’d know what to do’, because he always seemed to know the answer, didn’t he? And even if he didn’t, he was good at finding a solution and fixing the problem.”

Freddie’s face crumpled into heartbreak with his eyes tearing up quickly as he resolved himself to a weak nod.

"…When I was a kid, he told me it was his job—fixing all the bad things and making people happy, and making sure they knew as long as he was around, they’d be safe. He said it was important that people knew he cared about them, and that when I was older, he wanted me to show people I cared about them, too. Just like him.” He confessed tearfully. “…It’s like when he died, everything went to Hell. I miss him more than anything.”

“We miss him, too, Freddie. Your father was a great man, and to know him as I did was an honor.” Edwin reassured with a confirming nod.

“And you’re not alone in the way you feel,” Amata agreed with her hand dropping from his shoulder to gesture to herself. “I’ve felt the same way about Winona. She always seemed to have an answer for any problem, and I—… I looked up to her in a way I couldn’t even look up to my own father. I kept telling myself that if she was here, I’d know what to do because she would know what to do, but then I realized I’m in her place, now, where people are looking up to and expect me to have all the answers to their problems. I have a responsibility to do right by them, even if I’m scared of making the wrong decision, because I have to put trust in the faith they have in me. I have to trust myself that I know the answer.”

With that, Amata gave a back-handed pap to his shoulder that had his stare blink between her and the connection of her hand as she recalled Butch’s earlier (awkwardly placed though well-intended) encouragement to her.

“So forget about what your dad would’ve done… what would you do, Freddie?”

Freddie’s face flooded with reverence for Amata’s question as absolute clarity formed in his eyes on the exact answer to that. He seemed to know almost immediately what he had to do, and while
she was jealous of how quickly he reached such certainty, it also relieved her. When he took out a beat up wallet out of his back jumpsuit pocket, held together by raggedy stitches and duct tape, he flipped it open to show a photo in the window slot that Amata easily recognized as Freddie as a young boy in a baseball uniform, sitting in a diner booth with Mr. Gomez’s arm slung around his shoulders—a proud smile overtaking the whole of his face with half-eaten meals sitting in front of them both.

Leafing open the back most pocket of the wallet, Freddie produced a printed keycard with Mr. Gomez’s stoic face on it.

He offered it to Amata, who took it gingerly as if it were a delicate item of great importance to him.

“Mr. Wolfe gave me this after they found my dad… the wallet was his. I kept it with me and was supposed to give this card back to Security, but I kept forgetting and nobody ever came around to collect it. It’s standard protocol that when a guard dies, his family has to turn over everything he used for work—weapons, clearance cards, even uniforms.”

“This was your dad’s Security clearance card?” Edwin inquired, perplexed, as Amata examined it.

“Yeah, and it’ll give you access to anywhere in this vault that only Security’s allowed into, so their headquarters, the prison, the armory, even the Overseer’s office. All you’ve gotta do is swipe it at the door, and the code to all the weapons lockers is 5291 unless they changed it.”

“Freddie, this is brilliant!” Amata declared, causing a deep, sheepish blush to come to his cheeks as he hooked a hand to the back of his neck and gave a casual shrug.

“I know you told me to forget about what my dad would’ve done, but deep down, I know he would’ve done something like this if he was still here. He’d protect everyone, even if it meant turning on Security and his friends there.” He said with no amount of uncertainty, his deep eyes showing hope in that his dad could’ve been proud of him. “I want things to get better, too… I want to help you protect everyone, and if there really isn’t any other option, then I’ll do what I have to. Especially if it means bringing Winona back.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Do you mind if I hold on to his card for now—?” Freddie shook his head, mumbling out that he didn’t mind at all, and Amata tucked it into the ankle of her boot to conceal it safely. “There’s a long road ahead of us, but I think we’re off to a wonderful start. Tomorrow morning, I want to host an after breakfast meeting to talk about our plans and see what the others think. I want to open the floor for feedback, concerns, or even other ideas if anyone has any. I refuse to go through with something as dangerous as stealing from Security without warning them first, so if they want to leave, they can. However, I want to make it clear to them that they’re still welcome to stay and we’ll still protect them. I’m tired of people who need help the most being left behind, and I won’t allow it to happen here. Not now, not ever again.”

“Then we have the whole night on our side to work,” Edwin reprised, with both Amata and Freddie shooting him with a surprised look. “What, you think they built Rome in a night? This vault won’t rebuild itself in a night, either, and we need to ensure we have a proper and full plan to present to the other residents tomorrow… it’ll help convince them that working in maintenance and killing roaches is a good idea.”

“Well, what about the roaches—? And maintenance—?” Freddie guffawed, to a startled laugh from Amata at their old teacher’s response. “I mean, I’m all for whatever plan you’ve got, but maybe a little explanation would be nice—?”

“Then we’ve got no time to waste,” Amata reaffirmed valiantly. “Let’s get started.”
Works inspired by this one:

Nowheresville by Jeepers_Creepers, Lovers Lament by TheFaerieChild, Yuletide Yearnings by TheFaerieChild

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