Si vis amari, ama

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Summary

Four months after the Institute’s defeat, an odd caravan comes to Sanctuary.

Notes

Title means "if you want to be loved, love".

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Chapter 1

Preston’s on the roof of a house when the caravan arrives. At first, he thinks nothing of it.

“Hey, Preston! We have visitors!” Sturges shouts, almost making Preston drop his hammer. Preston straightens and peers over the roof edge, carefully stepping around the boxes of nails to look down at the new visitors. He inwardly frowns. They’re running out of room in Sanctuary for the settlers, and have been sending people to Tenpines Bluff or the Drive-In while they expand. He hates having people travel even further, but it’s unfortunately necessary.

He’s surprised to see two carts pulled by Brahmin, guarded by a handful of guards. There are around five or six people that don’t seem to be particularly well-armed, some of them wearing lab coats. One catches his eye, a tall man wearing a small plasma pistol at his hip. He seems deep in conversation with a similarly tall woman whose face is hidden by a wide-brimmed hat.

“On my way down,” Preston calls out, carefully climbing down from the roof. He runs a rag over his sweaty face and grabs his Minutemen hat from the workbench, placing it back on his head as he walks up to the group. A few other residents of Sanctuary have gathered, Codsworth curiously floating over from the water purifier.

“We’re sorry to disturb you,” the woman says. “My name is Lynn. These are my companions.” She introduces the others, but all of the names get blurred in Preston’s head after the first couple.

The man next to her is named Arcade, and that’s all he remembers. Part of the reason is that he’s exactly Preston’s type: tall, handsome, and intellectual-looking. Of course, part of the reason is also the fact that said man is trying very hard not to stare at Preston, an obvious blush across his cheeks. Preston realizes that he’s still shirtless from working on the roof.

“Where are you from?” Preston asks, inviting the group into the main house of Sanctuary, a multi-story building that currently serves as the Minutemen’s western HQ. “You look like you’ve travelled far.”

“We have,” the man, Arcade, says, stripping off his lab coat and draping it over a chair, leaving him in a short-sleeved shirt that looks like it’s seen better days. “We’re from New Vegas, in Nevada.”

Preston whistles in amazement. Nevada? That’s a long journey to make on foot. “What are you guys doing all the way out here, then? What business could bring you ‘cross the country?”

“Honestly, a lot,” Lynn admits. She takes out a folded piece of paper, adjusting her cracked glasses. “Have you ever heard of the Institute?”

Sturges and Preston warily glance at each other.

“Yes…” Preston says, deciding to take the lead on this conversation. He wishes that Julia was here. Preston isn’t that much of a “people person”. Sure, people seem to like him, and he can successfully lead negotiations and coordinate the Minutemen’s efforts. But still...he wishes that Julia hadn’t chosen this time to go on a tour of all of their settlements to make improvements and upgrade all of the water systems in preparation for the summer drought. She would know what to do.

Their guests pick up on their discomfort. Lynn clears her throat.
“So the news that we heard was true,” she says. “We recently had an Institute-related problem out by us, and we just wanted to come over and make sure that you all weren’t living under some terrible totalitarian regime.” The relief in the room is palpable. “Alright, how about the Brotherhood of Steel?”

Another awkward silence.

“They’re still around,” Preston quickly says before the newcomers can think that they destroyed them too. “They aren’t really...welcome around here because of their...views. Rumor has it that they’ll be peacefully moving on in a few weeks, but they’re still at Boston Airport if you need them.”

“I hate it when Ronnie’s right,” Lynn mutters, half to herself. “Thanks for the information. I’ve got some messages from the Western chapter of the BoS for Elder..well, whoever’s in charge.” She leans over the paper in her hand, scratching out something with the nub of a pencil.

This causes part of her hair to move to the side, and Preston can clearly see a pockmark of scars across her forehead. Two are round like bullet holes, the other ones thin and straight like incisions. He’s tactful enough not to ask. Everyone has their past, it’s not his place to be dredging that crap up.

Lynn frowns down at the paper. “Is there any government here? We need to get in touch with someone about setting up an outpost for the Followers of the Apocalypse.”

Since the Commonwealth group doesn’t know who that is, they explain. Preston immediately takes to the idea, citing several locations where outposts or clinics could be set up. He doesn’t think that Diamond City would have room, nor would they appreciate the couple of ghoul members of the party. But he’s almost certain that Hancock, despite his own chem use, would welcome such a philanthropic group, and the Castle would probably be the next best settlement. Bunker Hill too, if they had the room.

In exchange for an explanation of the Follower’s goals, Preston explains the delicate balance of power between the independent cities and the Minutemen.

All too soon, he looks up at the window and notices that night is falling. The newcomers are invited to stay the night. They sleep together in Preston and Sturges’ rooms, while the two men take Julia’s space, explaining the situation to Codsworth. Preston is secretly glad that Julia had taken Shaun with her. He likes the kid, but sometimes he creeps him out.

It’s good to have some adventure in his life. Preston’s just glad that he’s made it this far to enjoy it.

In the morning, the group splits up.

“We don’t want to strain your resources,” Arcade explains. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay here and start studying your plant life. See if I can’t make your crops a little harder.”

Lynn pats his shoulder. “Don’t get too lonely without me,” she teases. “I’ll be back and forth. I’m thinking the Castle first, then the airport, then maybe Goodneighbor.”

Preston gives her directions to those locations. The other members of their group leave for the Castle too, planning on stopping at several settlements on the way to give medical equipment and attention. He was surprised to learn that many of them were licensed doctors. Preston didn’t even know that there could be professionally trained medical personnel anymore. Every doctor he had ever met just read a couple of books and declared themselves doctors. The only place that had
some actual scientific training was the Institute, who decided to hide that information and use it for evil. But this new group...

He thinks he’s going to like these Followers.

Arcade Gannon is also a doctor, Preston learns. But unlike the others, he doesn’t focus on medical studies.

“I can perform those duties,” he admits one dark night in Sanctuary. Sturges had broken his leg climbing on a roof to fix their solar panel array. Hence, no power tonight in the settlement. “Hold still,” Arcade snaps at Sturges, who’s squirming around.

Sturges just laughs. “I can see why. Not the best bedside manner, doc.” He winces as Arcade pokes particularly hard at one spot on his leg. “Ow!”


Preston wonders at such luxury, that an organization like the Followers can have someone who had time to learn science, math, languages. “I wouldn’t call history boring ,” he good-naturedly says. “We have much to learn from the past.”

Arcade shoots him a wry glance before finishing his ministrations. “ Bene diagnoscitur, bene curatur.”

“Latin?” Preston’s eyes widen in surprise. “Where’d you learn that?”

“Around,” he dismissively waves his hand. “Books, medical studies, old holofilms. It’s not much use anymore, I’m afraid.”

“Anything’s useful,” Preston argues. “If it can bring you even a moment of satisfaction, it’s worth it. Useful isn’t just putting bullets in raiders’ heads and building houses. We need more people like you, Arcade, people who can make other people happy, teach them things that make them feel like the world has meaning again.” Arcade is staring at him, and he blushes, glad for the dim light and his dark skin. “Sorry, that was sappy as hell.”

He clears his throat, turning back to Sturges’ wound, though he’d already finished dressing it. “It’s fine. Most people don’t pay attention to what I do; sometimes, even I forget that it’s important to somebody, somewhere.”

“Well, it’s important to me- to us,” he insists. Arcade has made improvements to their farming methods, making their crops hardier and more likely to survive the burning heat of summer and the cold bite of winter. They’d already passed on the information to other settlements, and are looking forward to a 10% increase in their crop production. “You’re doing important work here, Arcade.”

He shrugs, shoulders stiff, uncomfortable with that kind of attention on him. “Thanks, Preston. Now if we’re done extolling the virtues of my dirt research, I’m going to bed.”

Preston knows now that he’s deflecting, self-deprecating humor hiding his true passion for his work. “Good night, Arcade.”

Preston’s awoken by the siren, shrill and shrieking in his ears. He’s up on his feet within seconds, old habits kicking in. His rifle in his hands, extra fusion cells shoved into the pockets of his
sleeping pants, feet in his shoes, Stimpacks tucked into his waistband, and he’s out the door.

“Supermutants across the river!” Someone shouts above the rattle of the turrets. Preston’s glad for their planning when it comes to attacks like these: there are already well-armed guards in the watchtowers, sturdy turrets set up at strategic points. All of the younger settlers, or those that cannot fight, have been taught to stay inside and hidden, and everyone else arms themselves.

They’ve even got floodlights to illuminate the settlement even more than it already is. Preston hits the appropriate switch on his way to the river, the bridge and shallow banks been flooded with light. He can hear the supermutants roar as they’re blinded by the light, while the defending settlers have the advantage of not facing the lights.

Preston takes position behind a chunk of rock wall, winding his musket before popping out and nailing a supermutant in the arm, ducking back to wind up again, a practiced strategy.

“Interesting weapon,” Arcade comments, sliding on his knees to join Preston behind his cover.

“Thanks, I built it myself,” Preston says, rising to shoot again, getting one of the supermutants in the head, which explodes in a shower of gore. “It’s not the most efficient, but it does a lot of damage and doesn’t require much upkeep.”

Arcade ducks around the corner of their cover and fires his pistol, which shoots bright green plasma. Preston wouldn’t have pinned him for the fighting type, and is surprised to watch him fight with efficiency and poise, easily reloading his gun. He doesn’t spare much time watching the curve of his arms when he expertly picks off another supermutant, or the way the floodlights accentuate the slope of his bare shoulders, though he notices, because Preston notices these things about Arcade.

“What about you?” Preston asks, keeping an eye on an enemy that’s getting a little too close. “Don’t see a lot of plasma weapons around here.”

This question apparently startles Arcade, who nearly dives behind cover too late, a few bullets grazing the stone next to their heads, sending a shower of dust down on them. “They—they’re not so rare back in the Mojave. It was passed down to me.” Since Preston seems content with that answer, he relaxes, and their combat regains its earlier efficiency and coordination.

There were a lot of supermutants this time, but with the combined forces of the entire settlement, they’re quickly eliminated. Preston dismisses most of them back to their homes to get a few hours of sleep before sunrise, while he goes to work inspecting the perimeter, noting any spots in the bridge that will need repairs. Arcade joins him.

“Are all of your supermutants like that?” He asks, his pistol tucked back into the waistband of his pants.

“Like what?”

Arcade shrugs, leaning on the railing and staring across the water at the distant lights of Red Rocket. “Mindlessly violent. Disorganized. Kind of weak, if I’m to be honest. And where did they even come from? I didn’t think the Master’s forces had spread this far east.”

Interesting. Super mutants must not be the same everywhere. “Rumor has it that the Institute made the supermutants, for some reason.”

“I’m starting to really love this Institute.”
Preston laughs. “Join the club. And we do know one supermutant that’s not so bad, who has become relatively educated. But Strong’s an exception. Most of them are like what we fought tonight. Why, what are like Mojave supermutants like?” His inspection of the bridge over, he starts fiddling with the turrets, checking them for serious damage.

“Oh, you know, living in ski lodges and keeping to themselves. You don’t really see them outside of their own settlements, and they generally don’t go around attacking human settlements anymore. As for the worst ones, they host god-awful radio stations or knit you sweaters.”

“You’re joking,” Preston says, giggling slightly at the thought. “Supermutant radio stations?”

Arcade tells him a story about rescuing a ghoul cowboy from the top of a mountain, and Preston laughs at all of the parts he finds unbelievable, but Arcade, leaning against his shoulder next to a campfire, their repairs long finished, insists that it’s true, every word, even the part about the robot. When he finishes the story, Preston follows it up with his own, a tale about a ghoul living in Goodneighbor.

“You should go visit him sometime,” he suggests. “Kent loves company.”

“Maybe I should pay Goodneighbor a visit soon. It sounds like an...interesting place. And it’s one of the places me and Lynn should check out for a Followers outpost, you said?”

“That’s right. I might as well go with you. We can make a trip out of it: stop by Diamond City, Bunker Hill, and then I’ve got some business to catch up on at the Castle.”

Arcade smiles at him in the flickering light, a ghost of a grin that is almost too quick to catch. “Sounds like a fun road trip. I’ll pack my mixtapes. How does heading out in a few days sound?”

Somehow, they’ve tacitly agreed that it’s just going to be the two of them. Preston nods, letting the warmth of the fire wash over him. Early summer days may be warm, but the nights are still chilly. “It’ll be fun, except for the hordes of supermutants and feral ghouls we’ll have to wade through to get to downtown Boston. But I think we can probably manage just fine.”
They get to Diamond City without incident, sneaking past raider camps and supermutant clusters until they reach the gates.

“I can see why you didn’t suggest this place,” Arcade mutters, frowning up at the Upper Stands. “It’s not the sort of place that would welcome the Followers. They don’t really have room either, cooped up in here. You said that there was a doctor here, though?”

Preston is briefly distracted by Nat, who hands him the newest copy of Publick Occurrences, and he drops a few caps into her hand, despite her protests that’s he’s a friend, and friends don’t need to pay. “Yes, Doctor Sun takes care of most medical needs.”

Doctor Sun is more irritable than normal today, frowning at them as they approach. “If you’re not injured—” He sees Arcade’s lab coat and frowns even more deeply. “I don’t have any room for another doctor here, I can handle it just fine. You’ll only get in my way.”

“Wow, rude,” Arcade jokes, folding his arms. “I’m just passing through, and I don’t handle patients anyway. But if you’re in need of supplies or extra training, the Followers are in town now, you only have to ask.”

“The Followers?” Sun sneers. “Thanks, I’m plenty trained. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got business to attend to.” He turns on his heel and ducks into a back part of his clinic.

Arcade looks like he’s about to argue, but lets out a frustrated huff of breath instead. “Well, if all of the Diamond City residents are like that…”

“Unfortunately, you’re not far off,” Preston admits, slinging an arm around Arcade’s shoulders, ignoring the prickle of admiration at Arcade’s broad shoulders. “Come on, there’s a couple other people we should stop and see. First things first, do you need any supplies?”

They stop by Commonwealth Weaponry and pick up some extra ammunition for Arcade, as well as browse their armor selection. Arcade has a light set of leather armor under his lab coat, and though he considers something heavier, he abandons the idea. He’s not in the habit of getting into combat zones, after all.

Their next stop takes them through a few cramped streets of the market, turning down a small alleyway next to a neon pink sign.

“Valentine?” Arcade comments, the pink light reflecting off his skin, giving a glimmer to his cheekbones that Preston finds his eyes drawn towards, wonders how it’d feel to run his hand across that strip of light. He shakes himself from that thought; he and Arcade are friends, that’s all. No sense getting attached to someone who doesn’t reciprocate those feelings.

“An old friend. He’s who everyone turns to for information around here. If anyone needs the kind of specialized help that the Followers can provide, he can direct them there. Be warned, he’s a little...eccentric. Although judging by some of the stories you’ve told me, that won’t be much of a problem.”

Eccentric is a good word to describe Nick Valentine. He’s not weird, but there’s something about
him that doesn’t fit in. A lot of somethings, in fact. Arcade is staring openly at those somethings, his eyes wide behind his glasses, and Preston quickly nudge him, reminding him of where he is.

“Nice to meet you, Mister Valentine,” Arcade says, shaking Nick’s flesh-covered hand.

“A pleasure,” Valentine drawls, leaning back against his desk. “We don’t have too many medical problems here, but there are a few folks with conditions that good ol’ Sun can’t wrap his head around. It’ll be nice to know that there are other options.” He nods at Preston. “Give my regards to Julia and little Shaun, tell her to stop by every once in a while. We get a few investigations once in a blue moon that I could use an assistant on.”

All in all, a good visit, and a stark improvement to their last interaction. Preston’s glad that someone could give Arcade a good impression of the Commonwealth, better than the suspicious residents of Diamond City, and better than he knows Goodneighbor will be.

Arcade grabs Preston’s arm, his hands warm, his long fingers tapping once, their signal to stop for a second. They’re crouched behind a bus, keeping a wary eye on a supermutant nest down the block.

“A library?” He whispers. The Boston Public Library ruin hulks above them. “Any luck clearing it out?”

“Julia’s done it once, and I don’t think much has moved back in. Why?” Arcade’s hair brushes his neck when he turns to look up at the building, and he shivers.

Arcade hums, squinting at the library in the fading light. “It’s just a thought. Let’s move on. You said that Goodneighbor is close? I’d prefer not to be out in the wastes when dark hits.”

“Ah, I understand why you suggested Goodneighbor now.” Arcade tries not to wrinkle his nose. “I’ve seen worse, but not by far. What kind of resistance would we get to setting up here?”

Preston leads them towards the Hotel Rexford, nodding at Daisy and Kleo. “Not much. And don’t worry about Kleo,” he assures Arcade, not sure how familiar with Assaultrons he is. “She’s great unless you piss her off. Now, let’s book a room at the Rexford before it all fills up. Friday night, you know how it is.”

After settling into their hotel room, Preston gives Arcade an informal tour of the settlement. They stop by the Memory Den to visit Kent, though they don’t stay for long. Then it’s down to the Third Rail for a drink to relax before they head out tomorrow on the long and dangerous trek to the Castle.

“. .cause baby, it’s just you…” Magnolia’s voice drifts up. The prospect of live music brightens their spirits.

The Third Rail is packed full of drifters eager to celebrate another week of survival. Smoke and the heady scent of every chem that could be bought or sold permeates the room, laughter and friendly shouts bursting forth from groups of people, though never too loud as to drown out Magnolia.

“A glass of bourbon, please, on the rocks if you’ve got ice,” Preston requests, managing to draw Whitechapel Charlie’s attention. Whitechapel Charlie just seems relieved to be dealing with a coherent and polite customer. Preston glances up at Arcade, who’s pressed up against his side in the crowd. “Do the Followers drink?”
“Not often,” Arcade replies with a wry smile. “But it’s been a long road. What’s your beer selection?” He ends up ordering a Gwinnett pilsner, and the two of them find an empty couch tucked in a corner, just big enough for the two of them. They’ve got a good view of Magnolia.

They munch on a squirrel on a stick, and Preston starts to fully relax, the heat of the bourbon sinking into his bones. The couch cushion is soft, worn from centuries of use, squishy and lopsided from too many inexpert repairs, and he finds himself leaning against Arcade’s side, their legs touching. It’s intimate but not scary, accidental enough that they don’t have to bring it up. It’s comfortable, warm, and almost peaceful, just the two of them watching Magnolia sing, Arcade’s gangly legs propped up on a low table, his arm across the back of the couch, just inches from Preston’s shoulder.

A cheer raises from the entrance, and Magnolia doesn’t stop singing to raise a hand and lazily wave at the door.

“Who’s your boyfriend, Garvey? Don’t think I’ve seen him ’round these parts before.” Hancock materializes out of the crowd and plops down on Arcade’s lap, draping his legs over Preston. Well, it’s too late to warn him now.

“Not my boyfriend,” he mutters, hating himself for the flicker of bitterness that creeps in.

“Ache of the way, Hancock, the mayor,” Preston says, craning his neck to see the door, catching a snatch of the distinctive voice. “He’s the one you should talk to about setting up an outpost here. He’s a little...attached to his chems, but he cares about his people enough that he’d consider it.”

The hullabaloo dies down a little, the party returning to its normal volume, which means that Hancock has started making his rounds. He likes to greet everyone, making friends out of his enemies, and making new friends out of total strangers. Maybe Preston should warn Arcade-

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“Hancock, meet Arcade.”

Arcade doesn’t quite know what to do with his hands after unexpectedly finding himself with a lap full of bony ghoul. Preston can see him internally fighting not to stare at Hancock’s outfit, and Preston can see him losing terribly. In this rising heat, Hancock had forgone his shirt, only wearing his bright red coat over his bare chest. It’s a look, one that Hancock pulls off all too well. As if the citizens of Goodneighbor needed another reason to adore their mayor.

“Even better,” Hancock chuckles, trailing a finger down Arcade’s chest and giving him a grin. “You wanna come over my place, specifically my bed, sunshine?”

Arcade squeaks, a bright flush down his neck. And Preston wouldn’t consider himself to be a prude, but Hancock always takes things to the next level. Even knowing that Hancock doesn’t get emotionally involved with anyone he sleeps with doesn’t stop a nugget of hot jealousy from forming in Preston’s stomach. He grits his teeth and Hancock notices, raising a knowing eyebrow in his direction.

“Come on, darlin’, you don’t have to say yes, I’m not into forcin’ folks to do somethin’ they don’t wanna.” Hancock encourages Arcade to reply, resting one gnarly ghoulish hand on the back of his neck, just above his collar. “In this world, it pays to be direct about your feelings.”

Ouch. That is definitely directed at Preston, and he winces.

“I-It’s not that I’m not of that persuasion,” Arcade stammers, raising one hand to push up his glasses, which have slipped down his nose, “because I am, it’s just that I, I guess I’m,” he glances up at Hancock, who nods at him to continue.
“You’re not going to hurt an ol’ ghoul’s feelings by saying you’re not interested,” he says. “What you in town for, Arcade?” He shifts up on the couch so he’s sitting on the arm, his feet cushioned in the dip between Arcade and Preston’s thighs.

He regains his professionalism, clearing his throat. “I’m with a group called the Followers of the Apocalypse. We’re looking.” He pauses, lips pressed thin as Hancock takes some Jet, exhaling slowly. He obviously wants to say something, but decides against it. “We’re looking to set up an outpost to help—”

“You wanna help, you’re alright in my books,” Hancock says. “Come suss out the details with me tomorrow mornin’ at the State House.” He pats Arcade’s shoulder and shoots Preston a smile, getting up from the couch, his dark eyes squishing and giving his round face a friendly aura. “See you cats later.”

“That’s just how Hancock is,” Preston comments once he’s gone. “You’ll get used to it.”

Arcade seems still slightly in shock. This is obviously not how he expected the mayor of Goodneighbor to be. “You did say that Goodneighbor would be a good idea, right?”

They end up staying another night in Goodneighbor. It’s too late for them to travel after their meeting with Hancock. When the mayor says “morning”, he really means early afternoon. They make a lot of progress, discussing possible spots and needed equipment, personnel and services offered. Arcade leaves a lengthy letter for his companion Lynn detailing the progress he’s made, and Hancock promises to start cleaning out a building for them to operate out of.

Their next day is spent travelling to the Castle, ducking around anything they can’t fight by themselves.

“Behold, the Castle.” Preston dramatically bows, throwing one arm out in a sweeping gesture. It makes Arcade laugh, a quiet amused huff, and Preston wishes he had a holotape around to just record Arcade laughing, because it makes something in his heart flutter like he’s a kid.

“Not the glorious chateau I was expecting, but impressive nonetheless.” Arcade pushes back the large hat on his head. He was particularly sensitive to the sun, Preston had learned, though the Commonwealth summer sun was apparently nothing compared to the Mojave heat.

“It does have running water, a blessing we can appreciate.”

Arcade smiles over his shoulder, already walking towards the entrance. “What are we waiting for, then?”

But before they can enjoy the luxury of non-radioactive water, a voice calls to Preston across the courtyard.

“You’re back! You’re back!” Shaun runs down a set of stairs from the walls, almost tripping on the last one but catching himself at the last moment. Preston scoops him up in a hug.

“Is Julia here?” He asks, putting Shaun back down. It was still a little uncomfortable having a child that was actually a synth, and who might never grow up. He waves at Arcade. “This is Arcade. Arcade, this is Shaun, Julia’s son.”

“Yes, she’s here, she’s up at the cannons.” He points up at the top of the Southwest wall, where two figures are standing around a cannon. “Nice to meet you. I’m going to go read now, Preston. Bye!”
When they climb up onto the wall, a cool breeze is blowing off the water, plucking at their clothing and threatening to blow away Preston’s hat. Arcade, looking out to sea, trips on a rock, and Preston grabs his arm to steady him.

“Did he say cannons- oh. You have actual literal cannons.”

Julia turns at their approach, waving and saying something to her companion, who straightens, and Preston can clearly see the woman, Lynn, that Arcade had been travelling with. They take care of introductions before the wind whistling in their ears forces them back into the walls, where they sit in the conference room with bottles of water and Nuka-Cola. Arcade fills Lynn in on their progress in Goodneighbor, while she shows them around the room they’ve got in mind for a Followers outpost, doctors and builders already hard at work.

Preston feels a warm glow of satisfaction and pride in his chest. In less than a year, the Minutemen had become something he could be proud of, something that made getting up in the morning worth it, no matter how hard it was. They had built something real, a force that could actually protect people, and not just with force. These Followers are inspiring him to come up with more ideas to help the citizens of the wasteland, ideas that they might actually be able to realize, with enough time.

For the first time in a long time, Preston feels hope in his heart, hope for a better future and for a thriving home. Hope for something amazing.

Chapter End Notes

Why are all of the doctors so rude in Fallout 4...Also literally none of them are professionally trained, which makes me feel less safe with them poking in my internal organs or rearranging my face.
Hancock doesn't see any point in playing games: if he thinks Arcade is hot, he's going to tell him that and not waste any time being coy.
Chapter 3

The cool wind ruffles Preston’s hair, and he shivers, a blanket draped over his shoulders and bare feet dangling off the edge of the Castle walls. The ocean below his feet is tumultuous, the sharp waves highlighted by the faint light of the moon, promising a storm in their future. Hopefully rad-free, but there’s no telling this early. If he waits and watches a little while, they’ll know whether or not to start making the necessary preparations.

He yawns. He thought that these insomniac nights were behind him, but once in a while it creeps back, a problem beyond his control.

“Mind if I join you?” Footsteps behind him, soft on the brown grass, and Preston turns to see Arcade. His blond hair, silver in the odd light, is getting long, sticking up every which way in an endearing way.

“Go ahead.” Preston pats the stone to his right. “Here, you’ll freeze,” he fusses, unfolding one edge of the worn blanket, and Arcade takes the fabric and wraps it around his own shoulders.

They sit in silence like that, staring out at the sea and listening to the noises of the Castle: guards in the watchtowers shuffling and checking their equipment, the wind whistling through the gaps in the walls, the distant skittering of Mirelurks far down the shoreline, the chatter of the night shift radio operator, and the lap of the water below their feet.

“Do you ever get the feeling that nothing you do is working, that none of it matters?” Arcade asks, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

“When we lost Quincy,” Preston says without giving himself time to think. He doesn’t look at Arcade. “And then when we lost more and more people, until there was no one left but me. A million ways things could have gone, and it had to go the worst way.”

Arcade leans into his shoulder, kicking his heels against the wall. “And what about now?”

He smiles, thinking about Concord, thinking about how much his life has changed since then. “Better, now. Things are changing for the better.”

“What if it’s not enough?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that maybe we’ll never be able to fix things. There are too many people to help, too much to set to rights, and we’re not miracle workers, Preston.” He sighs. “We’ll never be able to bring things back to the way they were.”

On an impulse, a stupid impulse brought on by Preston’s garbled brain at 2 o’clock in the morning, he grabs Arcade’s hand and squeezes it. “Maybe we can’t bring back the past, but who says we have to? Maybe we just need to make something good out of what we’ve got now, and stop looking back at the past.”

Arcade laughs, sudden and surprised. His laugh turns into a soft chuckle that fades into the darkness. “How do you always know exactly the right thing to say, Preston?” He looks to the side,
pointedly not looking at their joined hands. “Let go. Begin again.” He laughs again. “You sound just like Lynn. She said the exact same thing to me, once, and I guess I never really learned it, huh?”

He doesn’t quite know how to respond to that, so he settles for putting his other hand over Arcade’s, rubbing it once before settling their intertwined hands between them on the dirt.

There’s a distant rumble, and clouds start rolling in, a sickly green color that taints the sky. Preston shakes himself.

“We’d better batten down the hatches,” he says, letting go of Arcade’s hand and shrugging off the blanket. He stands and shivers, suddenly cold. “Radstorm’s blowing in.”

“Of course I do,” Lynn says. She’s sitting on the floor. Shaun and Julia are on the lower bunk bed, Preston and Arcade on the upper one. The entire population of the Castle is packed into the safest room, one of the general sleeping rooms, which is not meant to accommodate this many people at once.

Preston leans forward, eager to see pictures of someplace that Arcade has often spoken to him about. Since the radstorm would last a few hours, they had plenty of time to kill in this small room.

Lynn shows them pictures of the Strip and the Mojave desert, shots of cacti and neon signs. Then comes the pictures of of people, the names written on the back. The Kings, the Boomers, the Jacobstown mutants, Raul, Boone, everyone they know. There’s even a picture of Julie, which makes Julia laugh at how similar their names are but how different they look. Arcade occasionally offers commentary, teasing Lynn about their many mishaps, sharing stories of their adventures.

“And that’s Veronica,” Lynn quietly says, hesitating before handing the picture up to Preston to see. “My girl.”

It’s a candid shot of a woman, her head thrown back in a laugh, the grime smeared across her face not obscuring her beauty. Preston glances next to him at Arcade, who’s gone as quiet as Lynn, both of them probably feeling the weight of the distance between them.

And Preston can’t even imagine what it’d be like to travel so far from those that you loved, with the knowledge that you might never see them again. How long were Lynn and Arcade planning on staying? Did Lynn say goodbye to Veronica, both of them aware that it could be the last time? He wonders if Arcade left anyone special behind. But from the way he talks, Preston doesn’t think so. Selfishly, he certainly doesn’t hope so.

“Tell me about her,” Julia quietly says, and Preston recognizes that look in her eyes. It’s the same one she gets sometimes when she looks at Shaun, or when she gazes out across the water at some distant landmark.

Lynn brightens, taking the picture back from Preston. “Oh, you’d love her. She was part of the Brotherhood of Steel, but that BoS is quite a bit different than this one sounds.” She launches into a story about vaults and plant monsters and lost scientists, which prompts Arcade to tell a story about the NCR, a group that Preston doesn’t quite like the sound of, which leads Julia into the tale of how she first met Nick Valentine. Preston is content to sit quietly and listen, laughing at the funny parts and laying on his stomach with his arms dangling over the side of the bed like he’s at one of those “sleepovers” that Julia sometimes mentions.
Shaun has fallen asleep long ago, a blanket tucked over him lovingly by Julia. The storm still rages outside, pounding on the roof and tainting the air with the faint tingle that only radstorms can bring.

Lynn interrupts herself in the middle of a story. “Quick, Preston, give me his glasses before they fall off,” she urgently whispers, and points up to Arcade, who Preston hadn’t even realized had fallen asleep. He’s laying on his side with his head propped up on his hand, legs stretched out over Preston’s, his cheek slowly slipping off his palm and threatening to fall onto the bed.

“Here.” Preston gently takes off Arcade’s crooked glasses and hands them down to Lynn, who sets them on a side table. He then takes Arcade’s head and lays it down on a pillow, saving the man from what would have been a terrible neckache the next morning. His blond hair is soft, his slow breaths quiet and even. Arcade looks cute even in sleep, more peaceful and relaxed than Preston’s ever seen him, his concerned wrinkles smoothing out.

Julia’s looking up at him knowingly, and he shakes himself, returning to his earlier position with his elbows on the railing of the bed, Arcade’s heavy legs still trapping his. Oh well, it’s not like he’s got anywhere he needs to be.

“Nordhagen Beach is having a problem with their gourds,” Julia reports one morning, listening to the radio. “I thought maybe I’d go over and see what I can do to help. And bring extra food, to tide them over until it gets taken care of.”

“Good idea,” Lynn says, her feet propped up on a table. “You said that the Boston Airport was near there? I still need to deliver some letters to the Brotherhood, so I’ll go with you.” She looks over at Arcade. “You want to come take a look too?”

He nods, squinting down at the map. “Sure. At least it’ll be a there-and-back trip, not longer than a couple of days.” He gives Preston a sideways glance. “You want to come with in case it’s not?”

He sighs. He’s got work to do here, directing Minutemen in the daily tasks that need to be done. He opens his mouth to say that, but Julia beats him to it.

“Ronnie Shaw can take care of things for a few days,” she says. “Come on, Preston, you know little Suzie adores talking to you about the Minutemen. And we’ve got a lot of work to do at the Castle, so we’ll be here for a couple of weeks. There’ll be plenty of time later to work.”

“Okay, fine,” he concedes, laughing a little at how determined Julia is to get him to go with them. She’s good at making sure he’s not getting too deep into his own head.

“Ugh, really?” Arcade grumbles, shading his eyes to look up at the hulking monstrosity that is the Prydwen. “This is what the Brotherhood is up to? Flying around in a giant death blimp?”

Julia laughs. “Yeah, just don’t tell that to Elder Maxson. He’s real proud of it. Boasts all day about their vertibirds, oh they’re so fast, oh we have helicopters with machine guns, aren’t we cool killing machines.”

“Technically, I think most of their vertibirds are Enclave,” Preston notes, remembering some bit of news from the conflict down in the Capital Wasteland, something about a Brotherhood-Enclave war. He notices Arcade stiffen, his hands tightening around the straps of his pack.

“Technically, all of their vertibirds are E-Enclave,” Arcade says, tripping over the name and keeping his eyes on the cracked pavement under his feet. “The Brotherhood hired someone to steal
the blueprints a long time ago.”

Lynn falls back from her forward position and claps Arcade on the shoulder. “I forgot about that. Think I should say something? Most of them probably don’t know. It could be fun.”

He shrugs. “Why antagonize them? They’re leaving anyways.”

“And good riddance,” Preston mutters, low enough that he didn’t think that anyone had heard, but Arcade shoots him a grin, bumping shoulders with him.

While Julia and Lynn go up to the Prydwen, Preston and Arcade decide to wait in a small shack that Lynn has constructed just outside the airport, complete with a bed and a few couches around a small table. The furniture has been dragged in from the airport itself, the couches old and torn up. But it’s comfortable enough after a long day of walking. They wait in silence until their companions come back.

Lynn’s quiet on their short walk to Nordhagen Beach, but it’s a frustrated quietness. She doesn’t elaborate until later that night, when the four of them are huddled around a small campfire on the beach.

“Something about Elder Maxson reminded me of him,” she says without warning, staring down into the fire.

“Of who?” Julia asks. “I thought that you said that the western chapter of the Brotherhood was different.”

“They are now. They’ve had to adapt, had to change their ways to survive. But before, they held some of the same views. Humans first, everyone else second.”

Arcade bitterly laughs. “Hell, sometimes not even that. Technology first, humans second, everyone else can go fuck themselves. Reminds me of a certain other group.”

Preston doesn’t like the hint of self-loathing that creeps into Arcade’s voice. He reaches out and takes his hand. He’s never been great at knowing what to say, but he can acutely feel when someone needs a bit of physical comfort.

“If Maxson had been there at Helios One instead of Elijah,” Lynn spits the unfamiliar name like a curse, “or if he’d been at the Big Empty, or the Madre, he wouldn’t have hesitated to try and use those things either. Technology first, then humanity, then everyone else.”

Julia pipes up, somber. “He ordered me to kill one of his closest friends, my mentor, all because he was a synth. A traitor, they’d said. Like he wasn’t still the same man, like he wasn’t their friend.” She shifts, uncomfortable. “I didn’t do it, of course. Officially, Maxson told the Brotherhood that I had killed him, but he’s perfectly safe, hiding out at Outpost Zimonja until the Brotherhood leaves.” She sighs. “Like something like that even matters. Danse didn’t do anything, he was never actually a part of the Institute. Just because he was born- or made, I guess- different, they almost killed him. I was almost on their side too, had the wool pulled so far over my eyes, until that happened. Then I couldn’t look Maxson in the eyes anymore, knowing what he almost did. What he would do.”

Across the campfire in the silence after Julia’s done speaking, Preston catches a look pass between Lynn and Arcade. Lynn nods and gives him an encouraging smile. Arcade opens his mouth to say something-

The siren goes off.
“Gunners!” A guard shouts. They jump to their feet, their conversation already pushed to the side in favor of grabbing their guns and readying themselves for battle. After the fight dies down and they go to bed, Preston doesn’t even remember that Arcade had been interrupted, and he doesn’t wonder what he was going to say. When he’s drifting to sleep, it feels like he’s missed something, but he shrugs it off. There’s a lot in his day that preoccupies him; dwelling on it before bedtime will only keep him up at night.

Chapter End Notes

There’s a lot of Brotherhood-related angst that I didn’t realize my characters (and me) had, until I wrote this chapter. Also, I think about that darn vertibird fun fact every time I step on the Prydwen. The BoS couldn’t even steal the information themselves, they had to hire someone else (the Chosen One in Fo2) to do their dirty work.

Just two guys, very platonically holding hands. Bros being bros. Jk.
The beach is shrouded in early-morning fog, the sand damp beneath their shoes, making their steps slow but nearly soundless. They’d stayed for a day at Nordhagen Beach, helping to shore up their defenses and figuring out what the crop problem was: bad water. Easily fixable, since Julia had parts for extra water purifiers and generators stashed away at every settlement.

Now the group was on their way back to the Castle, though they’d be taking the long way around, stopping at County Crossing and Bunker Hill on the way.

Lynn throws out an arm, a signal to stop. She crouches and peers through the scope of her sniper rifle, frowning at something further down the beach. “Something’s crawling out of the sand down there, I think.”

“Mirelurks,” Julia says, not even needing to look to confirm it. “Do you have Mirelurks where you come from?”

“No, we have Lakelurks, but that’s it.”

Preston unshoulders his rifle. “Their shells are tough, but if you can hit the soft underbelly, they aren’t too hard. They’ll rush you, though, watch out for that.”

“I can just hit it from here. I’ve got armor-piercing bullets in this right now.” Lynn holds her breath, her whole body going still while she takes the shot. There’s a quiet pop from the silenced weapon, a sigh of relief from Lynn, and the whole group breathes easier. That’s one less threat to deal with-

A rumble shakes the sand. Julia stumbles, cursing. “A Queen, get to cover!”

Cover, what cover? They’re on an exposed beach. Unlike the Castle, there are no walls to duck behind, no inside corridors to take shelter in. The Mirelurk Queen rises up from the sand, showers of dirt and silt raining down on them. It towers above them and roars in their direction.

They scatter: Julia and Lynn to the left, Preston and Arcade to the right. Preston gets off a good shot to the abomination’s face, and it roars again, skittering towards them and opening its mouth, preparing one of its deadly attacks.

Arcade is frozen in shock, his wide eyes staring up at the Queen, his limp hand half-reaching for his pistol. Preston tackles him out of the way of the Queen Mirelurk’s poison attack, both of them hitting the sand and rolling.

It’s like there’s sand in his ears, because Preston can’t hear more than warped distant sounds, voices screaming his name. There’s a burning in his chest. He weakly coughs and tries to get up, but his shaking arms fail him. Only the vague awareness that they’re in the middle of a battle forces his eyes open. He’s being dragged along the sand on his back. His body’s going numb, but he can still feel a pair of hands under his armpits pulling him along the sand. The sky is clearing, the morning sun chasing away the fog. There are clouds up there, wispy white things that have some kind of fancy name that Julia mentioned one time, something-nimbus.

His view of the sky is interrupted by something. He blinks, his vision blurry, the world dizzily
shaking around him. No, the ground is shaking. The world is spinning. He can’t see the sky anymore. It’s a boat, he realizes, overturned and providing them some cover.

His view of the boat is interrupted by Arcade’s face, which hovers above him. His mouth is set in a grim line, but his eyes are panicked, sand and dirt caking his glasses and his face, his handsome face.

Preston opens his mouth to say something and starts coughing. He can’t breathe, something is choking out his lungs, burning and heavy, stabbing pains shooting up and down his chest and squeezing his ribcage. The Mirelurk poison was doing its work.

Arcade shoves something into his mouth. It’s bitter and he tries to spit it back out, but Arcade holds his jaw shut until he’s forced to swallow it. Preston slumps back down, exhausted, his throat burning, his cheek pressed against the rough sand.

He blinks and Arcade is peeking over the edge of the boat, firing his pistol and ducking back down to reload. Another blink, and Arcade’s whispering an apology and stabbing a Stimpack deep into Preston’s chest, covering his mouth again, though this time to muffle his scream. Stimpacks were supposed to be applied gently and shallowly, usually to a large vein. But in these cases, where the injury was to the core internal organs, a different and far more painful application method was required. Feeling is returning slowly to his fingers and toes, the pressure on his lungs easing enough for him to suck in a few salty breaths. Arcade shouts something and dives down next to him as a barrage of foul-smelling attacks batter the boat.

The Mirelurk Queen. Still a threat. And while his friends are in danger, Preston’s not about to stand by and do nothing. He coughs again, spitting out sand and rolling to a sitting position. He’d dropped his rifle when he fell; he can see it, several feet away, half-buried by sand. He grasps the sleeve of Arcade’s coat and tugs, pointing at the weapon. Judging by the way the Mirelurk is shrieking, they’ve almost got it now. One good charged shot from his musket will finish it off.

Lynn and Julia are pinned down behind a shipping crate, Lynn popping out to get in shots with her sniper rifle, Julia keeping the Mirelurk hatchlings at bay with her baseball bat. Neither of them are even close, none of them are doing enough damage to finish the beast.

“Cover me?” Arcade asks, passing him his pistol, instantly understanding his plan. He peeks out from cover, the nods and turns back to Preston, helping him rise to his knees and steadying his shaking arms against the wood of the boat. “Three, two, one.”

Arcade rolls out from under the boat into a low sprint. He slides to his knees and scoops up the laser musket, clumsily winding it before raising it and hitting the Queen in the head. It roars one final time and falls, dislodging a shower of sand.

Now that they’re out of danger, the dizziness returns. Arcade’s pistol slips from Preston’s hands, the gun still hot from his wild shots to distract the monster. He slumps against the wood of the overturned boat, blinking rapidly to clear his vision. Mirelurk Queen poison was a nasty thing, tearing up your insides and paralyzing your lungs. People have died from getting splashed with a drop of it. It’s a miracle that he’s still alive after taking such a direct hit.

“Don’t ever do something like that again!” Arcade snaps, kneeling at his side and scooping him up, propping him up against the boat more comfortably. “What the hell were you thinking, you could have been killed.” Under the anger in his voice is a sharp undercurrent of concern.

“I’m fine,” Preston protests, weakly. Arcade grits his teeth against whatever he’s going to say. He rolls up Preston’s sleeve, his fingers gentle while his eyes are not, and expertly injects a Stimpack
“Preston, are you okay?” Julia, breathless, slides to her knees on the other side of him. Lynn follows, picking up Preston’s fallen hat and shaking the sand out of it.

“I’m feeling better already,” he says, sitting up straighter with less effort than before, his lungs feeling lighter and clearer. “What’d you give me, Arcade?”

Arcade’s not looking directly at him, his eyes averted, his brow furrowed and his shoulders tense. “A universal antivenom we crafted up a few years ago. Didn’t heal you completely, but it slowed the poison enough to give us more time.”

“Maybe we should turn and go back to the Beach,” Lynn suggests. She tosses Preston’s hat in his lap before taking out a Stimpak and inserting it into her arm, wincing. The shallow cut on her cheek starts closing up. “You should probably rest before travelling.”

Julia helps him stand, a hand on his arm to steady him. “County Crossing’s not that far. If we make it there, it’s just a short walk to Bunker Hill, where we can stay the night more safely. They’ve got medical supplies too.”

Preston’s legs shake, but his head’s cleared. “I can make it that far,” he promises. His body decided to take that moment to hit him with a bout of dizziness, and he would have fallen if not for Arcade’s arm around his waist keeping him upright. “Really, I’m fine. Give me some water and I’ll get there.”

“If you say so,” Lynn says, handing him a bottle of water. Arcade is still silent at his side, an angry silence that creates a thick tension between them. “But let us know if you’re not feeling well, and we’ll stop. Don’t keep going when you’re not feeling good, okay?” Her tone is light, but her dark eyes are serious.

This is no time to play the hero. Preston promises to let them know if he can’t go on. Though if the going does get bad, he’ll probably just pass out, and that way he doesn’t have to tell anyone anything. Confrontation has never been his strong suit.

The walk to County Crossing seems to take days, though it’s less than an hour. Arcade glowers in every direction but Preston’s, despite the arm that’s still around his waist and the way he slows down every time his tired feet drag. Preston doesn’t know how to begin to address this new tension between them, so he sighs and focuses on his feet, one of his hands fisted in Arcade’s lab coat just below his shoulder.

They take a rest at the small farming settlement before moving on. Their journey gets more difficult the closer to Boston they get, the buildings growing in size around them and the streets narrowing. They have to duck around raider encampments and pockets of feral ghouls; they’re in no shape to fight right now.

Thankfully, Bunker Hill comes into sight soon enough. They trudge into the settlement, Julia peeling off to talk to Kessler, the rest of them walking through the marketplace to the back of the trading town, where Julia has a room. They pick up an extra mattress on their way. Stars are starting to twinkle in the corners of Preston’s vision, and he’s not walking so much as Arcade is half-carrying half-dragging him along.

Arcade’s persistent angry silence is starting to make Preston regret having to share a bed with him. Maybe he should have picked Julia to be his sleepover buddy.
“Sit down and take off your shirt,” Arcade gruffly orders, kicking off his shoes and pulling out a medical kit from his pack. “I want to make sure you’re healing properly.” He’s still not looking at Preston, glaring at the wall behind him.

He bites back an “I’m fine” and sits down on the mattress, folding his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt, folding the thin fabric neatly and placing it next to him. Lynn mutters some excuse about going to find some food, leaving them alone in the shack, closing the door behind her.

Arcade’s nimble fingers splay across his rib cage, pressing at certain points. Preston can see first-hand his rough bedside manner in the way he says nothing beyond a few mutterings, mostly to himself, about internal wounds and lingering side effects of the experimental antivenom. He listens to Preston’s breathing, instructing him in a tight voice to take a deep breath in, now hold it, now out. His cool hands press against the side of Preston’s neck to check his throat and his pulse, and he shivers as they brush his ear. Finally, Arcade huffs and declares him on the mend, “but not for lack of trying.”

“Arcade, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he snaps, then he softens, his arms wrapped around himself. “You almost died today because of me, Preston, and I don’t want to talk about it.” He turns to face the wall, his back to Preston. “Just go to bed. You need the rest.”

Preston sighs “Alright. Good night, Arcade.” He curls up on the mattress, his hat next to him on the floor, not arguing about the fact that it was just past noon.

“Good night,” Arcade whispers, and Preston thinks, as his eyes close, that he hears a snuffle from that corner of the room before he hears the door slam, and he’s alone.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no, angst!

I took some liberties with Mirelurk poison, since in-game all you really need is a Stimpack, and you're good. But it is poison, and I'm assuming that there would be some nasty side effects. Also, that specific spot just north of Nordhagen beach and south of Revere Station is a Mirelurk Queen spawn point.
Preston wakes to the feeling of arms around his waist and a soft breath in his ear. Which is weird, because he certainly didn’t fall asleep like that.

He cracks his eyes open. On the other mattress in the cramped shack, Julia and Lynn sleep back to back, both of their hands on their respective weapons. It’s dark outside, only the faint glow from the Bunker Hill lights filtering in through the gap under the door. Preston’s been sleeping for a long time, then. He yawns, the last remaining aches of the Mirelurk fight wiped away by a good long rest.

Maybe he should check on his equipment; everything he owns is probably coated with sand. He moves to sit up and the arms around him tighten. He turns his head as much as he can to look behind him.

Arcade is curled around him, one hand fisted in Preston’s shirt above his stomach, his other palm flat over his heart. His glasses are sitting on top of Preston’s tricorn hat. His face is tucked into Preston’s shoulder, his hair tickling the back of his neck.

This is confusing. This is something Preston doesn’t want to face. His heart jumps at the closeness, at the warm arms around him, clutching him tight like Arcade’s scared he’s going to leave. He and Arcade have shared beds before out of necessity, but they’ve always slept like Lynn and Julia are now: back to back, no parts of their bodies touching unless by accident.

But this. This is emotional, and this is messy. Too intimate, too close for comfort. This isn’t just flirting, this isn’t casually holding hands when they’re alone, this is something big. Preston thinks back to Hancock’s advice: be direct about your feelings.

Preston’s faced down Gunners and Mirelurks and Deathclaws and the Institute, but nothing feels scarier than telling Arcade how he feels. He closes his eyes and goes back to sleep.

When he wakes, he’s cold. He rolls over and tamps down the disappointment that rises in him when he realizes that Arcade’s gone, like he was never there in the first place. Did he just dream the whole thing?

“Good, you’re awake. Feeling better?” Lynn asks, poking her head in the door.

He stretches and yawns. “Yes. What time is it?”

“You’re back to normal. Just past seven. Julia’s grabbing us some breakfast, then we’ll hit the road. Arcade’s discussing things with Kessler, talking about setting up a Followers clinic here.”

“Good.” Preston stands, and Lynn grabs his arm gently, but not to steady him.

“Listen,” she says, her eyes boring into his own behind her glasses. “I need to talk to you about Arcade.”

He swallows hard. “Alright.”
She cracks a smile. “Calm down, Preston, I’m not about to threaten you. I just wanted to let you
know that Arcade’s prickly, but he cares, he really does. But he’s scared of getting hurt. So he’s not
going to make the first move. If you’re serious about something happening between you two, you
are going to have to do it yourself.”

Great. Like Preston’s any better at taking initiative. “I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I ask. Now how about that breakfast?”

It’s good to be back at the Castle.

Preston throws himself into work as soon as they get back. At first, he does it to avoid Arcade.
They haven’t spoken since Bunker Hill. And it’s not like there isn’t plenty of work that needs
Preston’s personal attention: the Minutemen have dozens of settlements under their protection, and
all of that takes an enormous amount of coordination.

But as one day turns into two, three, four, Preston buries himself in work to avoid the loneliness.
Then that loneliness turns into bitterness. What is he thinking, ruining the one good thing he’s got?
He can’t even get this right. A simple confession, that’s all it would take. But knowing him, he’s
mess that up too.

Julia finds him late one night in his office, head bent over a desk and squinting at diagrams in the
dim light. He shares sleeping quarters with Arcade out of necessity, so he waits until he knows the
other man will be asleep before going back.

“You’re not being subtle, Preston,” she says, leaning against the doorway. “And I think we need to
talk about your self-destructive tendencies again. This is what, the third late night in a row?”

He shrugs. “I’m just busy.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” She perches on the edge of his desk, her voice soft. “You can’t
avoid him forever, Preston. And this is one case where absence doesn’t make the heart grow
fonder.”

“Fine.” He sighs, throwing his pen aside. “What do you want to talk about first? How I’m ruining
my life and every meaningful relationship I’ve ever had?”

“Fuck,” Julia hisses, and he doesn’t think he’s ever heard her swear at all, let alone twice in one
minute. “Give yourself more credit, Preston. Arcade’s not mad at you, he’s worried sick. And now
I have to deal with him going into an anxious spiral too, because he thinks that you hate him. And
he doesn’t express his emotions like a healthy person either, apparently, because he’s snapping left
and right, driving half of our people up the wall and the sending the other ones into meltdowns.”

Now Preston just feels guilty. He’s creating more problems for Julia and Lynn because he can’t get
himself together-

“And stop that pathetic shit.” That’s three times now; either he’s hallucinating this conversation, or
he’s even worse off than he thought. “All you need to do is talk to him. It’s been almost a week,
Preston. And if it all goes south, at least you’ll know that you tried. That’s all you can do.”

“If you say so.” He sighs, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his eyes. To be truthful, he’s
getting sick of this too. “I’ll try.”
He wakes with a gasp, an already-forgotten word on his lips, disoriented in the dark. There are hands on his shoulders, shaking him.

“-just a dream, Preston, wake up-” He can make out Arcade’s face over him, shouting at him, eyebrows furrowed thick. He sits back when he sees that Preston’s awake.

Preston has always thought it odd that he never remembers his dreams. He can guess what they’re about, though, and Julia’s woken him up from more than one where he’s been screaming, names and places and meaningless babble.

He clears his throat and rubs his cheek. “Thanks,” he croaks. The first words they’ve spoken to each other in a week, and it’s in a situation like this.

“No problem,” Arcade mutters. With a jerky motion, he stands up.

“Wait.” Preston sits up and grabs his arm, pulling him back down to sit on the bed. His words fail him. He wants to say so much, he wants to confess it all in a hot rush of emotion. But Preston has never been one for hasty words. Instead, he wraps his arms around Arcade and buries his head in the other man’s chest.

Arcade hugs him back, his arms warm and heavy, one hand awkwardly rubbing Preston’s back, the other one cradling the back of his head. “Preston,” he murmurs with a sigh.

And this. This is everything Preston could have ever wanted, wrapped up in one confusing bundle of emotions. He burrows deeper, squirming so he’s in Arcade’s lap. This is everything he could let himself have. It gives him the last scrap of courage he needed. He pulls back and wipes away tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

“Arcade, I need to tell you something.”

An explosion shakes the building.

The moment is broken, and Preston inwardly curses, disentangling himself and grabbing his rifle, Arcade following suit. The siren starts to scream. Preston’s starting to really hate the sound of that siren.

They’re the first ones out into the courtyard, since they weren’t asleep at this late hour. There are flashes of laser weapons and turret fire from the front entrance. Then a hiss in the air above them, a shrill whine, and a missile crashes into the wall above their heads, almost hitting the radio tower.

Gunners, and well-armed ones. The one with the rocket launcher is standing farther away, protected by ten others. One has a minigun. One has a plasma rifle. They’re all wearing armor, sturdy pieces. The ones with the rocket launcher and the minigun have rough power armor. This is bad, worse than supermutants, worse than ferals, worse than normal raiders.

Preston gets one weaker Gunner with his rifle, and Arcade takes down another before they’re forced back by another missile.

There’s a soft pop next to them up on the wall, and Preston catches a glimpse of Lynn before she ducks down to avoid minigun fire. Julia rushes past them in power armor, her strongest suit, one of those bug-eyed ones that the government used to use.

Arcade flinches, his eyes drawn to Julia, his pistol half-raised towards her before he sees her distinctive baseball bat crack open a Gunner’s skull. Distracted, Arcade doesn’t notice the grenade thrown at his feet. With a shout, Preston shoves him out of the way and into the corridor of the
Castle. There’s a sharp pain in his leg, but he ignores it, coughing up dust from the explosion.

There’s another blast that shakes the floor. Preston drags them away from it and into the eastern bastion, past his and Julia’s office. He’s limping, leaning heavily on Arcade, breathing through his nose. They need to get up onto the wall to pick off more Gunners, but when they get to the base of the stairs, another explosion rocks the building, and there’s a loud crack from above them.

“Watch out!” Preston shouts. He tugs Arcade down the stairs leading to the tunnels, both of them tripping on the stairs and rolling, slamming into the door at the bottom.

The ceiling collapses with a crash.

Preston covers his head, curled up against the wall, Arcade pressed against his side doing the same as rock and dirt rains down on them, the centuries-old construction giving way under the barrage.

When the dust settles, all Preston can do is cough. He can hardly see but for the dust in the air, thickly coating his tongue and throat. With a hand on the wall, he pulls himself to his feet, leaning on the stone with a grimace as the pain in his leg makes itself known.

“Arcade? Are you alright?”

He can’t see anything, the small passageway completely dark, but he can feel a hand grab his arm to steady him. “Am I alright? Am I- you’re asking if I’m okay -”

“Try the door,” Preston interrupts Arcade’s descent into hysterics. The space they’re standing in is so small that Arcade doesn’t have to walk away to tug on the handle. The door doesn’t budge. That doesn’t surprise Preston much; he remembers Julia saying something about a Radroach infestation down there, so she had kept it locked, and Preston didn’t have the key. Neither of them have anything to pick the lock with, either, and the door is too solid to break down.

The pain in his leg is starting to make him dizzy. He slumps against the wall and slides to the floor. Something bumps against his leg, and he reaches out and feels the smooth handle of his rifle. Perfect. At least something’s going his way.

A low red light fills the space, and Preston can see how stuck they really are. There’s a few feet of clear space in the arched doorway, and then a floor-to-ceiling pile of rubble. Even the sounds of combat are muffled. The dust motes hang still in the air.

“I can’t believe you,” Arcade growls, and the tranquil moment is broken. Arcade kneels at his side and glares at him. He doesn’t look injured beyond a few scrapes and bruises, but there’s a spiderweb crack in the left lens of his glasses. “Why are you like this, Preston?”

Preston is sick of his attitude. “Like what? If you’ve got something to say, then just say it!”

Arcade angrily rolls up his pants leg, tearing off strips as he goes. “Fine, you really want to know what I think?”

“Yes, just get it all over with, before I lose my goddamn mind down here.”

He gives his rifle another crank, and light brightens a little so Arcade can see his wound better. He could give it more, but he doesn’t want to run out of fuel cells.

“I hate that you put yourself in danger,” Arcade starts quiet, his voice growing in intensity as he speaks. “You throw yourself in front of bullets and grenades like your life means nothing, and it makes me sick. You’re important too, Preston, more fucking important than anyone else.”
“What else am I supposed to do?” Preston hisses as Arcade puts pressure on his wound, wrapping strips of fabric around it. There’s something lodged in his calf, shrapnel from the grenade. “I’m supposed to protect people. It’s my job.”

“Not this. Not like this. There’s protecting people, and then there’s this.”

Preston grits his teeth. “Any other bold truths you want to tell? Any dark secrets you want to confess?” Arcade’s comment hurt him in an unexpected way; he thought he was past all that. His bitterness and hurt shows in his voice.

“Yeah, why not? Fuck it!” He throws his hands in the air. “My father was in the Enclave!”

“Who the hell cares?” Preston retorts. “I led the Minutemen to its destruction! I’m a failure!”

“No you’re not! You think nothing of yourself, but you’re easily the best thing that’s happened to this world! Hell, you’re the best thing that’s happened to me!”

Why does Arcade have to say things like that? His hands curl into fists. “Stop lying, I hate it when people patronize me!”

“You stop lying! I’m not patronizing you, I’m telling the truth. Quit tearing yourself down, Preston!”

“No, I’m unfit to be a leader and everyone knows it.” Preston coughs, his eyes watering from the dusty air. “I was suicidal when I met Julia. I shouldn’t be leading anyone, hell, I shouldn’t even be in charge of myself!”

Arcade sounds close to tears, or maybe that’s just the dust in his throat. “Stop saying these things, Preston, I hate it. I hate that you feel like this and you won’t let anyone help you!”

“Well I hate fighting with you, I just hate it! This sucks, this is the worst week of my life!” Their shouting match echoes off the walls. If anyone’s looking for them, which is unlikely, they’ll be able to hear them from a mile away.

“Well I love you, how about that?”

Preston rears back as if been struck. “What?” He gasps, voice faint. His anger fizzes out as quickly as it had sprung up.

Arcade is silent, his face stricken. His hands on Preston’s leg stop moving. “Nothing-”

Preston grabs his face and kisses him. He probably tastes like sunshine and sharp herbs, but right now all he can taste is dust and anger. Arcade wraps a hand around the back of his neck, deepening the kiss. Breathless, they break apart.


“Yeah, well, I’m sorry too.” Arcade ducks his head, but there’s no way to deflect from this. He ties off the bandage around Preston’s leg, then he sits down heavily, sighing. “That’s good. We’re good.”

“No witty Latin quotes for that one?” Preston teases, leaning against his shoulder and taking his hand, squeezing it once.

Arcade sighs. “Sure, why not. We’ve got time to kill. They probably won’t realize we’re gone until
the battle’s over.” He leans his head on Preston’s shoulder. “Amans iratus multa mentitur. An angry lover tells himself many lies.”

“I like it. Another one,” Preston urges. He kisses Arcade’s cheek, a giddy feeling rising in his heart. Or maybe that’s just shock: his leg is starting to feel numb.

“Amantes sunt amentes.”

“What does that one mean?”

He chuckles. “Lovers are crazy. Sound like a certain someone?”

“Hey!” Preston weakly slaps his arm, but without any real anger behind his hand or his voice. “If all you’re going to do in your fancy doctor talk is insult me, I don’t want to hear it!”

“Alright, here’s a good one: Te amo.” Arcade is looking at him now, cupping his chin.

“What’s that one mean-”

He cuts Preston off with a kiss, and he has a pretty good guess.

They’d dozed off between one kiss and another, between one whispered word and the next. Preston’s awoken by a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank god we found you,” Julia says, scooping him up as Lynn shakes Arcade awake. “We found your hat and Arcade’s pistol half-buried up there, thought maybe the worst had happened.”

“Castle’s going to need some repairs,” he mumbles. “Whole ceiling fell in.” Through half-open eyes, he sees the dark slimy walls of the tunnels.

“You’re going to need some repairs,” she retorts. “Go back to sleep, Preston. We’ll give you some Med-X so you don’t wake back up while we’re digging that nasty shrapnel out of your leg.”

He wakes up later in a bed, his leg neatly bandaged. There’s a warm presence next to him, and he turns his head to see Arcade sleeping next to him, his scrapes and small wounds bandaged too. Preston reaches for him and trails his thumb along his cheek, marvelling at how well the situation worked out, if you skipped past the week of angry pining and their emotionally intense confession session.

But now. He’s a lucky man, having Arcade by his side. What has he ever done to deserve this? You think nothing of yourself, but you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Arcade had said. Preston thinks back on his life. Maybe he’s done a lot to deserve this.

“I love you,” Preston whispers. Arcade, still asleep, doesn’t answer. Preston repeats it again, and it gets a little easier each time, a little less like it’s going to all fall down around him. He stares at Arcade before ducking his head and yawning. They’ve got a lot to talk about, a lot to work out, but at least they’re together.

Preston reaches down for Arcade’s hand and intertwines his fingers with his own.

At least they’re together.
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