Build Me Up From Bones

by AlexRuby

Summary

With the Commonwealth on the brink of war as the ever growing Brotherhood of Steel threat looms on the horizon, Nora must somehow reform the Institute’s ways from the inside as their new Director. Negotiations, charisma, and tact will be just as useful in the upcoming battle as guns, ammo, and soldiers. But Nora will learn that being the leader means that she’ll have to make some tough choices which could put her friends and loved ones in danger. Can Nora unite the Commonwealth together or will everything crumble into ashes and mark the ruins of another civilization?

Sequel to Remember How We Forgot and The Dark I Know So Well

“Yes, everything is ready on our end.” Allie replied.

“Affirmative.” X6 drawled, sounding almost bored.

“I’m ready when you are Nora.” Nate replied.

Nora’s heart pounded in her chest as she fiddled with her PipBoy that was plugged into the Institute’s mainframe. They set up their base of operations in Dr. Secord’s SRB laboratory, and as much as she wanted to deny it, Nora couldn’t help but feel the tendrils of anxiety creep over her skin as she remembered her past experience here. Here Ayo was king. Here Ayo could do almost anything he wanted. But this time, Nora would be the one in charge.

She stood at the center console and flipped through her PipBoy functions and then stopped on the screen that showed a map of the greater Boston area. The Mass Fusion building was their intended destination.

Dr. Secord was to her right at a large control panel. Although the woman hadn’t changed her cool attitude towards Nora, she at least agreed to keep a set of Gen-1 and Gen-2 synths on standby in case they needed additional backup. Meanwhile, Dr. Li was in charge of directing the trio through the Mass Fusion building while Dr. Binet was in charge of monitoring their vitals in the field.

Nora wasn’t sure what her role was here aside for being the Institute’s figurehead. She felt more like a spectator who was watching the events unfold rather than an actual participant. Still, although it had only been a week since Nora had been voted in as the new Director of the Institute, it felt like those seven days had lasted a lifetime. This would be her first major mission where she would be seen as the leader. The pressure to perform was immense. She knew that there would be no recovery if the mission were to fail.

Nora spoke into a desktop microphone, “We’re going to relay you onto the Mass Fusion roof. You’ll be vulnerable as soon as you arrive, so be on your guard from the start.”

She could see a grainy black and white video feed of the trio as they stood on the platform in the relay room. While teleporting out of the Institute was possible from anywhere in the compound, the amount of precision and power it took to teleport them to the top of one of Boston’s largest buildings required them to use the physical relay for better accuracy. If everything went according to plan, they’d be back with the beryllium agitator within a couple of hours.

Nora crossed her fingers and spoke into the microphone. “We are relaying you in 3 ... 2 ... 1 ...” A bright light flashed across the screen and the trio was gone.

There was no way she’d be able to get a visual on them while they were topside, at least not since Ayo’s Watchers had been systematically killed once Hancock realized they were synth spies. All Nora had in way of communication was an audio feed courtesy of a two-way radio that Nate had clipped onto his jacket.

Nora knew they had arrived before she heard Allie speak. The ambient sounds of gunfire and the raucous music drifting up from The Third Rail told her everything she needed to know. She felt a
painful sense of nostalgia, homesickness, and fear.

“It looks like the Brotherhood made it here before us.” Allie voice said over the radio. “I guess we’ll just have to go through them.”

Although her words sounded blasé and cavalier, Nora knew that Allie was just as nervous as she was. Three people fighting against an entire squadron of Brotherhood soldiers were not good odds, so Nora told them to avoid fighting whenever possible, but she was quickly realizing the futility of that statement.

The trio began their mission without fanfare. This wasn’t a war, she reminded herself, this was a covert operation. The goal was to attract the least amount of attention as possible. Of course, that didn't last long.

The crackling and electronic sounds of laser rifles volleyed back and forth. Nora could hear the screams and groans of people as they died and occasionally she’d hear Nate’s curt order to “get down” or “move out” amid his labored, panting breathing as he ran into the fray.

Dr. Li barked instructions at them. “You will need to find an office key card to descend to the lower floors. There’s an office to your left as you go down the hallway. Check any desk drawers, file cabinets, and even dead bodies.”

She glanced sideways at Nora. Her stern look softened when she saw how pale Nora was and that she was losing weight again. The stress was getting to her.

“This will work.” Dr. Li said aloud, but Nora knew the comment was directed at her.

Nora nodded and followed their movements on her PipBoy. The square blip that marked Allie’s location moved from room to room efficiently and quickly. Although not completely defenseless, Allie was the least combat ready of the group, so the plan was for her to hang back behind the two synths so she could pick her fights wisely and assist with fighting only when necessary.

“I have the elevator key card. We’re going down to Floor 14.”

“How are you guys doing?” Nora asked.

“We’re fine, Nora.” Nate replied.

“Yes.” X6 agreed with a sneer. “This Brotherhood is hardly a challenge. Their soldiers are stupid and rash. They think charging head on into battle will ensure certain victory. It’s pathetic.”

Dr. Li tilted Nora's microphone towards her, “Don’t underestimate them. They can be a formidable enemy. Stay focused and be ready for anything.”

Her warning was apt for when the elevator doors opened, an onslaught of bullets and lasers crackled over Nate’s radio; the sound was deafening.

“Shit!” Nate snarled and Nora heard his laser rifle rapidly firing back.

Explosions and missile artillery whistled over the radio and Nora ground her teeth together until they ached. *Nate’s been through this before. He is a solider. He’s fine. He’s been through this before.* She repeated this mantra over and over.

After five agonizing minutes, the sounds finally died and Nora yelled into the microphone. “Status check. Is everyone okay?”
“Mother, don’t yell in my ear.” X6 growled. “We are fine.”

“Yes, all of us are still alive.” Allie confirmed. “It’s -- well -- it’s a miracle actually. The Brotherhood was waiting for us. Thankfully we closed the elevator doors as soon as we got to the floor. They had two missile launchers that would’ve made short work of us otherwise.

“What about Nate?” Nora asked.

“I’m ... fine.” He groaned. His voice sounded strong but Nora suspected that he was putting on a brave face. “I took some shrapnel to the arm, but I’ll live once I can get a chance to get a stimpack into me.”

Nora exhaled in relief. “Just be careful, okay?”

The trio ran through the tight hallways and corridors. To make their route unpredictable, they took the stairs or carefully clambered through one of the many holes in the floors. They didn't want the Brotherhood to corner them in an elevator again. X6 complained about them being no better than mole rats but his gripe was met with a harsh response from Allie. Although it was slow-going, they began to see less and less Brotherhood soldiers in the second leg of their journey. But, after another hair-raising firefight in the Mass Fusion's first floor atrium, Nora was back to worrying and grinding her teeth.

“For Elder Maxon!” A voice cried but then gurgled as they collapsed from a bullet wound.

“Ad Victor--” A rough male voice cried as an explosion cut him short.

“Allie, we need to make it to the next elevator!” Nate cried. “X6 has the key card.”

The thunder of heavy boots and the whooshing hydraulic of Power Armor sounded much too close for comfort. Nora watched the blip on her PipBoy travel through the secretary’s office and into a side service elevator.

“Close the doors!” Allie yelled as gunfire and more missiles and artillery rained down from above.

Nora heard Nate yell something but it was unintelligible amid the cacophony of the battle. It wasn’t until she heard the ding of the elevator again that she realized the trio had made it down to the Reactor level.

“X6, scan the area for any signs of hostile life.” Allie ordered.

“Yes ma’am.” He replied and Nora heard nothing but silence for a good ten minutes. “Everything is clear. There’s two deactivated laser turrets and two Protectrons but we should make short work of them if they were to activate.”

“We have to be ready for an ambush.” Nate replied, sounding exhausted. His voice sounded hoarse from overuse. “This company wouldn’t leave their main source of power guarded with only Protectrons and turrets.”

“Well that’s all I see.” X6 replied flippantly. “But if you want to conduct your own, more superior search, go ahead.”

“Knock it off. Both of you.” Allie snapped. “Nate’s right. We have to be ready for anything when I enter the reactor room. Nate, I need the radio feed for this next bit.”

Nora heard the rustling of fabric and then the gentle thudding of the radio being passed over to
Allie who then strapped it to her radiation suit. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, we can hear you just fine.” Dr. Li replied. “Once you crack the terminal, the beryllium agitator should be beyond those doors. We’re almost done, Allie.”

Nora heard the tapping of fingers hitting a keypad and then the whooshing of hydraulic doors opening.

“There’s the reactor. Not a bad piece of work for its time.” Allie complimented.

Allie’s geiger counter began ticking sluggishly as she entered the decontamination chamber, but the radiation suit she wore mitigated most of the danger.

Nora held her breath as she heard more clicking, then another door open and she heard the heavy metallic thud of feet crossing a metal-grated walkway.

“I’m in the reactor room and I’m removing the beryllium agitator from it’s core. There will be a moment where the reaction will be unstable, but if I can get it into the canister before it has a reaction, then we all won’t die in a nuclear explosion...so there’s that.”

The woman’s voice was breathy and lacked its normal substance. She was just as afraid as Nora was.

“Whenever you’re ready Allie.” Dr. Li replied. “We only have one chance to get this right.”

When Allie removed the core from the nuclear reactor, her geiger counter began ticking so fast that it sounded like it was chattering.

“...And now it’s going in to the canister.” Allie’s voice said with palatable tension.

Nora bit her lip. Please let this work. Please let this work. She begged

“...And it’s in.”

“INTRUDER ALERT IN REACTOR MAINFRAME”

“Dammit!” Allie cried.

There was too much noise to decipher what was actually happening. As the alarms rang out, Nora heard a lot of commotion.

“UNAUTHORIZED ACQUISITION. ASSESSMENT -- IMMEDIATE TERMINATION.” A cool, feminine voice said.

It was an Assaultron, Nora realized. But then she heard another voice boom out.

“ALERT: HOSTILE DETECTED. LETHAL FORCE AUTHORIZED FOR ALL UNITS.”

Nora didn’t recognize the programmed voice. It sounded too deep to be an Assaultron and too threatening to be a run-of-the-mill Protectron.

“They have a Sentry Bot!” Dr. Li gasped.

“Shit!” Allie cursed. Then she screamed.

“Allie, what’s going on!” Dr. Li yelled over the radio.
“We have to retreat back to the elevator.” They heard Nate yell. His voice was far away.

“Dr. Secord, send in the Gen 1s to help provide a distraction so they can escape.” Nora ordered.

“Yes, Mother.” Dr. Secord responded and began pushing a series of buttons on the console.

Within seconds, Nora heard the programmed synth voices over the gunfire and threatening warnings.

Nora could only hear fragments of sound as the PA system overhead began to cut out.

“... Too many of ...”

“... Argh ... Die you sonofa...”

“... Head’s up!”

“Shoot him now while it’s overheated!” Nora heard Nate order.

The electrical blasts from the Assaultron’s face laser and the tit-tit-tit-tit-tit of the laser turrets were drowned out when the sentry bot boomed: POWER INTAKE AT MAXIMUM LEVELS. INITIATING SELF DESTRUCTION SEQUENCE.

“Take cover, it’s gonna blow!” Allie yelled.

The violent explosion was so loud that the sound's reverberation in the speakers blew the Institute's PA system. Seconds ticked by like hours and Nora’s fingers were beginning to ache from being balled up in her fist for so long.

Were they dead? Were there more robots lying in wait to finish them off? Where was the Brotherhood and would they come investigating the unmistakeable war zone looking to pick off the survivors?

“Allie, can you hear me?” Nora’s voice shook as she spoke into the microphone.

“Dr. Filmore is unconscious.” X6’s voice came over the radio.

“I’m readying the relay to teleport you back to the Institute. Is everyone there?”

“We’re all here. Just pretty banged up.” Nate groaned. Simply hearing his voice again lifted Nora’s heart into her throat.

“Is the agitator still intact?” Dr. Li asked.

“Affirmative.” X6 replied.

“Dr. Secord, relay them all back.” Nora ordered.

“Be ready for the relay.” Dr. Secord replied. “Ready in 3 ... 2 ... --”

Nora saw the flashing blue light appear in the laboratory and X6 was carrying Dr. Filmore’s unconscious body in his arms.

Nora beamed at Nate who was holding the large metal canister that held the beryllium agitator, but when he took a step forward, he staggered. He was holding his side with his other hand and Nora could see the blood seeping through his hands like red paint.
“Nate!” Nora rushed to him but he collapsed to his knees with a pained groan.

“Jesus! Someone get him a stretcher.” Nora ordered.

Nora took stock of his other injuries. His skin was blistered and peeling at his neck from an explosion and most of his face was covered in dirt, grime, and robot coolant.

“Excuse me, mother.” A synth worker said as they pushed a stretcher up to Nate.

She gave them some space and watched as they lifted Nate onto the stretcher. The scream he let out was tempered from the pain, but his entire left arm was trembling as he clutched onto the wound in his side.

“What happened?” Nora turned to X6 who looked remarkably unscathed.

He shrugged, his nonplused expression was haughty and detached, “He was in the way when the Sentry Bot self-destructed.”

“And you were the one who didn’t want to do a further security sweep.” Nora pointed out. “If Nate would’ve died --”

“N1 is capable of taking care of himself.” X6 replied. “That’s what happens in war. Sometimes people die.”

Nora’s hand clenched into a fist and she wanted to punch the emotionless and glib bastard in the nose. Maybe she’d punch him hard enough to break is stupid sunglasses, she considered. But she gritted her teeth and stood up straight.

“You are dismissed X6-88.” Nora said through clenched teeth. “Thank you for your assistance.”

She turned from him before she did something that she’d regret and stalked off towards the door. Allie was being loaded onto her own stretcher by other synth workers. Dr. Li was at Allie’s side and was shining a small penlight into her eyes.

“She’s got a mild concussion. She’ll be okay once she wakes up.” Dr. Li commented and then turned to her. “Congratulations on a successful mission. As soon as Dr. Filmore is awake and feeling better, she’ll install the agitator into the Institute’s mainframe. Finally we will have more than enough power to satisfy our needs for generations. You’ve done a great thing for us Nora.”

Nora nodded mutely. She didn’t feel proud, in fact she felt like shit. Two out of three of her “soldiers” were wounded. Those results -- and the fact that Nate or Allie could’ve died under her command -- jumped to the forefront of her mind.

“Nora?” Dr. Li asked. “Are you okay?”

Nora didn’t answer, not right away at least. “I’m going to go lay down for a moment. I’m not feeling well.”

“Should I have someone send some food up?”

Nora shook her head. “I wont be gone for long. I just need an hour or so for myself.”

She had made it more of a habit to eat her meals with the other scientists if only to break down the thick walls that were erected between her and them. The only two who really took notice that Nora did more talking than eating were Dr. Li and Nate.
“Alright. I’ll come to collect you in an hour or so. We still have a lot of data from the mission to go over.” Dr. Li replied.

Nora nodded again and walked mindlessly out to the atrium. Desdemona’s words about making tough decisions rang in her mind. Objectively, the mission was a resounding success, but Nate’s injuries reminded her of the costs at stake.

She didn’t think she was ready to have other people’s blood on her hands -- especially not Nate’s.

“This is unacceptable!” Elder Maxson snarled.

The men and women, Paladins and Scribes, were all standing at attention as their commander patrolled between their lines like a caged lion.

“This was an assured victory.” He continued. His dark eyes fixated on the crew.

“The Institute sent only three people to recover the beryllium agitator and an entire Paladin force couldn’t stop them!”

One Paladin stepped forward from the line. His eyes remained locked on an imaginary object in front of this nose as his voice wavered. “Sir, two of them are Coursers who have been trained extensively in combat and reconnaissance. These were not civilians.”

Elder Maxson, although a full head shorter than the Paladin, squared himself up like he was about to go toe-to-toe with a Deathclaw.

“Since when did three of anything defeat you? You all fought against dangers far worse than this. This outcome was unacceptable and it will not happen again.” Elder Maxson said with finality.

“Sir, please.” A scribe stepped forward. Her sandy brown hair was pinned back into a bun which was tucked beneath a hat. “We've been fighting for the past ten years. If it wasn’t in the Capital Wasteland, then it was getting here and setting up a base of operation in the Commonwealth. We’re tired and we are low on amunition and morale. Please --”

Elder Maxon’s shear presence cut off the rest of her sentence. His cold brown eyes looked into hers as he addressed someone else in the room.

“Paladin Danse.” He commanded.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is this how you let your scribes behave?”

“No sir.” Danse replied. “I don’t know what has ... I apologize for Scribe Haylen’s insubordination. There was no excuse for our performance today.”

Elder Maxson looked up at Danse who kept a neutral, stony expression despite his racing heart and sheer embarrassment of being called out in front of his squad mates.

“I expect you discipline her appropriately.” Maxson said.

“Yes sir.” Paladin Danse replied a little hollowly.

“It seems you have all forgotten our place in this world -- our history. The axioms that our friends, our brothers, and our ancestors have lived by as they bring righteous rule to this forsaken land.”
Elder Maxson stood in front of the assembled Paladins and Scribes. “Repeat the axioms.”

The group resounded out with one voice: Shield yourself from those not bound to you by steel, for they are the blind. Aid them when you can, but lose not sight of yourself.

“Good, next.” Elder Maxson commanded.

Give way your suspicions to the wisdom of thine Elder. Where he shows trust, so shall you.

“Next!” Maxson growled.

Fear those who do not pledge to the Brotherhood for though their eyes may be opened through service, they are now blind.

“Next!”

We do not help them, or let them in. We keep knowledge they must never have.

“Ad Victoriam.” Elder Maxson concluded.

“Ad Victoriam!” The group rang out in one unified voice.

Scribe Haylen glanced sideways at Paladin Danse who looked troubled. His face still held its stony countenance, but his eyes were wide and uncertain.

Nora sat at his bedside. Nate’s face had been cleaned up so his burn could be bandaged, but is normally sun-tanned skin looked wan.

“Nora?” He murmured.

“Hi. I came to check on you. You’ve been out for almost a week.”

Nate blinked dumbly at that news. “How’s Dr. Filmore?”

“She regained consciousness soon after coming back with you. She’s already installed the beryllium agitator into the Institute’s reactor. Thanks to you three, the Institute will have power for generations to come.”

“Well then I guess the mission was successful.” Nate grinned and rested his head back on the hospital pillow.

However Nora didn’t share his elation. “Nate, I’m sorry that I put you in this position. You could’ve died.”

“Don’t be sorry. We should’ve done a more thorough inspection of the area before we sent Allie through to retrieve the agitator.”

“But still...” Nora trailed off and swallowed the lump in her throat. This was much too close to home. Much too close to Shaun’s death for it to be anything but unsettling. “You could’ve died Nathan.”

“But I didn’t.” He replied with a stubborn grin.

Nora sighed, “You don’t understand. I watched you die once before. I watched you get your brains blown out by a hired thug. I buried you, and now that you’re back, I could’ve gotten you killed...”
“Killed again?” Nate sat up with a wince. “Nora, you didn’t get me killed the first time.”

“Didn’t I?” Nora asked. “I was the one who told you to sign us up for that stupid vault. Do you remember? That salesman had been hounding our house for nearly a month and you turned him away every time until I begged you to sign up for a spot just in case.”

“And you were right.” Nate replied. “We both would be dead otherwise...or worse.”

“Nora, put it out of your mind.” He replied.

“I can’t.”

“Nora, I’m fine. Even Dr. Volkert said that I’ll be able to resume my security detail in a week. Don’t worry about me.”

“I worry about you all the time.” Nora confessed. “Ever since you came back into my life, I wonder when I have to watch you die all over again.”

“When? You sound so certain that I’m going to die.” Nate sounded offended but he grinned. Nora frowned. She couldn’t tell him of Mama Murphy’s prophecy -- he’d laugh in her face -- but that didn’t take away the anxiety and the guilt that constantly haunted her thoughts.

“I can’t do this Nate. I can’t put you in danger. Once you are healed, I’ll ask Dr. Binet to recruit another synth from the leftover courser division to take over surface-related missions.” Nora replied.

“What? Are you kidding me?” Nate’s voice was hard and Nora could hear the edge of betrayal that was there. She had the exact same tone when Father told her that he was deactivating the courser program and subsequently removing any and all chances she had at going topside. The cruel irony of these turn of events wasn’t lost on her.

“I can’t watch you die, Nathan.” Nora replied with more finality.

Nate’s jaw clenched into stubborn defiance. “Well maybe I can’t do this either.”

“Excuse me?”

He sighed and stumbled over his words as he tried to spit them out through his anger. “Dammit, I can’t ... I can’t compete with your memories of me Nora. The first thing I remember when I was created was you giving birth to Shaun. The memory was so vivid in my mind that it took me days to come to terms that they were memories that belonged to some other man. Look, if you wont treat me as your husband then don’t. I can’t make you love me like I love you. But don’t protect me either.”

“Nate...” Nora began but he interrupted.

“No! You’ve built me up in your head as this paragon of virtue; a hero fighting for the American way, but you forget that first and foremost I’m your husband. I was your husband. I want to be your husband. But you wont let me be any of those things unless it’s convenient for you.”

“What are you talking about!” Nora’s voice rose.

“You forgot me Nora. And dammit, the most painful part of this is that you don’t even know that
“That’s crazy. I never forgot about you Nate. I fucking pulled your body from the vault. I buried you. I had nightmares for months about you and about that damn vault.”

“And how long did it take before you began throwing yourself at guys?”

“That’s not fair!”

“Is it not?” He wanted to yell but he was too weak to muster the effort, so his response was tepid and indignant. “You’re with two different men … If you can call them that.”

Nora reeled back like he had slapped her.

“I never forgot you Nate.” Nora seethed. She reached down her shirt collar, grabbed the long chain that hung around her neck, and pulled out their wedding rings for him to see.

The golden metal glinted beneath the artificial light and Nate’s expression changed from indignant anger into guilt.

“What I do with my life and with my relationships are none of your business, but I have never forgotten about you Nathan. And if you can’t accept me as I am now, then maybe I can’t accept you either.”

Nora pulled the chain with a hard yank and broke it from her neck. She put the rings on the nightstand and dropped the chain on top of them.

She rose abruptly from her seat and walked towards the door.

She heard Nate cry out, “Shit! Nora, wait!” but she ignored him and walked out of the infirmary.
Chapter 2 — Duty, Honor, and Family

Nora paced in her private quarters choking on the righteous indignation that burned her throat. How could Nate treat her like this? How could he be so inflexible and hard-headed about everything that she had experienced in the past eighteen months?

Hot tears stung her eyes but she clenched her jaw and stuffed everything down inside of her. The occasional trill from the terminal’s messaging system reminded her that she still had a job to do. No matter how she was feeling, either mentally or physically, Nora had to push forward.

But that was easier said than done. Nora felt simultaneously suffocated and torn. With all of the demands from the Directorate, and from The Railroad, and now from the Institute’s scientists and citizens, Nora felt like she was balancing on a precipice; one small move in any direction could send her tumbling into the abyss.

Desdemona was her most vocal critic at the moment. The spy needed reports every three days about the Institute’s plans because The Railroad had recently set up Randolph safe house at a place called Hangman’s Alley. Des expected the steady leek of synth escapees to resume under Nora’s guidance. However, the Directorate was still unanimously against releasing anymore synths into the wasteland. When she told the spy that, Desdemona’s response came with a warning:

*I hope I didn’t make a mistake putting my trust in you, Wanderer.*

Conversely, most of the assistant scientists and the synths in the Institute seemed to accept Nora’s leadership while those who were still hesitant had nothing to complain about once the beryllium agitator was installed in the Institute’s reactor.

In fact, the entire Institute took to battle preparations with gusto now that the nuclear reactor was operating at full power.

Dr. Li and her assistants worked tirelessly on developing more advanced laser weaponry while Dr. Binet and Dr. Secord started work on a new project that they promised to reveal at tomorrow’s Directorate meeting. Dr. Holdren was still making great strides with his hydroponics studies; now the Institute was cross-breeding various species of crops to create other resilient hybrids.

Meanwhile Dr. Fillmore was overseeing a group of synth workers as construction began on the lower floors so they could add a future residential expansions in anticipation of the Institute’s growth.

Despite all of the planning and preparations, Nora feel both useless and responsible should
anything go wrong. And the only person who she could commiserate with, the only person who had experience — or implanted memories of experience — in leading a team of soldiers towards a specific goal was being a complete ass.

No. Nothing in Nora’s life could’ve prepared her for this one undeniable fact: being at the top was lonely.

She sank into the plastic desk chair and scrolled through the countless messages from Desdemona until she got to the most recent message from Nick which was unopened. The subject line read: *Merry Christmas!* and Nora frowned. Was it Christmas already? She checked the date on her PipBoy that was sitting on the desk next to her. Sure enough, the date read 12.24.2287. The scientists either didn’t seem to know that it was Christmas or didn’t celebrate this particular Old World holiday.

She opened Nick’s message and read:

*Merry Christmas, Nora. Although I’m usually not one for gaudy festivities, Diamond City’s decorations have a certain charm. As with most Pre-War things, they’ve got the lore of Christmas all wrong (They think Santa burns the naughty children alive with the coal he leaves them). Still, I wish you could be here to see it. They have an artificial Christmas tree, with lights and everything. Piper even snuck a Santa hat onto Takahashi last year. The poor robot had the hat on well after the New Year… I guess what I’m tryin’ to say is that I miss you.*

Nora stopped reading and blinked the tears from her eyes. She could only imagine how she would lean in to his warm, hard body as he cuddled her close and shielded her from the bitter winter wind as they watched Diamond City illuminate their Christmas tree with the same fanfare and spectacle that would’ve rivaled the tree lighting at Rockefeller Center back in the day.

*I just got back from Goodneighbor following up on a missing person’s case that’s turned up cold. You’d be surprised, but that derelict town throws a respectable Christmas shindig as well. Magnolia’s original songs are nice, but there’s something special about hearing her croon a rendition of “White Christmas” that would make Bing Crosby starstruck.*

*Please drop me a line when you get free time. I think Piper’s getting sick of me asking if she’s heard word from you, but I can’t help but worry. I think about you every day.*

Nick didn’t leave a salutation, but it didn’t matter. Nora could hear his invisible plea: ‘Please Come Home, doll.’ It didn’t make her feel any better.

Nora didn’t write back. She couldn’t even think about something she could say that wouldn’t alarm him. She was eating and sleeping far less than she should and the intrusive and dark thoughts were back. No, she was at a point where reaching out for help was what she needed to do, but Nora was paralyzed by fear. She feared disappointing everyone.

“Director,” Allie Fillmore’s voice said over the desktop PA, “You are needed in the Advanced Sciences division. Dr. Li would like show a demonstration of their new laser weaponry.”

“I’ll be right there Allie.” Nora replied wearily.

Nora sighed and switched off the terminal. She popped another piece of gum into her mouth.

After her son died, she decided it would be prudent to quit smoking again. If her son had cancer, then it made sense that cutting out a habit that could cause cancer in and of itself was a good idea. But the gum did little to settle the powerful, instinctual craving she had; it was all because of sheer
willpower that she had gone almost twelve days without smoking.

Nate would’ve been proud of her, she thought. Too bad she never got a chance to tell him of this herculean feat amid the accusations and shouting.

Nora slipped on her brown men’s leather jacket and strapped her Pipboy to her arm. She felt like a commander strapping combat armor on before she walked out onto the battlefield. The sheer comparison made her heart pump furiously in excitement and dread.

No, like it or not, Nora was the one leading these people. Maybe there would be a time when they could elect someone else to run in her stead, but now Nora needed to guide these people away from their dark past. No matter how Nora was feeling, she still had a job to do.

And duty called.

Elder Maxson surveyed the ruined Commonwealth from the Prydwen’s upper deck. The cold air stung his face but he gritted his teeth against the discomfort. On nights like this, with the entire Prydwin celebrating with raucous festivities and music, Maxson was willing to deal with the uncomfortable elements so he could have a quiet place to think.

“Elder, do you require anything?” A Paladin with a deep, rich voice rumbled.

“No.” Maxson replied but then reconsidered. “Actually … yes. Could you tell Proctor Ingram that I would like to speak with her. Also, I would like you to go to my private quarters and fetch my good whisky. No need to bring a glass.”

“Of course, sir.” The Paladin saluted.

The Elder didn’t bother to turn around. But in a few minutes, he heard the telltale sound of whooshing hydraulic footsteps accompany him on the upper deck.

Proctor Ingram stood shoulder to shoulder with the Elder and handed him a brown bottle and two glass tumblers. It was comical at how mismatched the pair was together. Proctor Ingram stood a good foot and a half taller than the Elder and was a beastly, powerful woman even before she required augmented Power Armor to function.

“I told the soldier I didn’t need a glass for this whisky.” Elder Maxson idly remarked.

“It’s Christmas. You may be the Elder, but even you could stand to be a little more classy on a holiday.” She jibbed.

“Then why do I need two glasses?”

“C’mon Arthur, I know how you get when you drink alone.” Ingram replied with a gentle rebuke. “The last thing you need is another run in with a deathclaw…or worse.”

Elder Maxson grinned at the memory as he poured the rich golden liquor into their glasses. He put the bottle on the deck floor and handed one of the glasses to Ingram.

“You think far less of me than I thought” Maxson replied. “I’m not as careless as I was when I was younger.”

Ingram laughed. “When most men say that, they’re referring to things they’ve done more than twenty years ago. Sometimes, I still have to remind myself that you’re not a grizzled fifty year old
veteran like Brandis.”

Maxson took a long sip from his glass. The whisky warmed up everything it touched and he savored the pleasant but stiff burn that accompanied it’s aftertaste.

“For some, five years is all they need of life experience to know what’s important in life.”

“And what’s important in life for you?” Ingram asked although she already knew the answer.

“Duty, honor, and family.” Maxson replied. “There’s nothing else in the world more important than that.”

Ingram nodded. That was a frequent topic that the Elder brought up to the elite Scribe and Paladin teams. Being in the Brotherhood meant they had a duty to each other as well as the mission. Successfully completing that mission would bring honor to the Brotherhood — to the family — and would ensure the safety, security, and happiness of the group for years to come.

“Did you get your test results back from Cade” Maxson asked as he went to pour them both more whisky. Ingram declined his offer with a wave of her hand and set her empty tumbler on a stack of wooden crates.

“It’s …” She sighed in frustration. “… it’s no different than the last test. The trauma to my legs and back didn’t impact my pelvic cavity, but there’s no telling what the radiation from falling into that cesspool did to me.

Maxson nodded as he listened. He stared out at the glowing ruined city before them and felt a peculiar sense of loss as it reminded him of what the Capital Wasteland could’ve been. After all, a ruined city could be rebuilt.

“I’m sorry Arthur.” Ingram murmured. Her thick, calloused hand tentatively rested over the top of his own tanned, scarred one. His thumb gently caressed the bottom of her palm in response.

“Don’t ever apologize to me for that.” Mason replied. “Your actions that day were heroic.”

“Yeah, because running from a collapsing Power Armor station that got broadsided by an Enclave asshat holding a mini nuke and falling over 100 feet to the irradiated cavern below was the epitome of heroism.” She drawled, her voice thick with sarcasm. “Of course, they never really tell you that enduring that much physical trauma could render you infertile one day.”

“It’s heroic when you were the last one to evacuate the building after making sure that everyone, including me, made it out before that moment.” Arthur’s thick eyebrows furrowed in passionate concentration, and although it was too dark for Ingram to make out the exact details of his facial expression, she felt the flush rise to her face nonetheless.

He rolled his hand so their palms met and their fingers interlaced and squeezed her hand once.

“Kari, I’m sorry about the news. I really am.” He replied.

Ingram clenched her jaw so hard that her teeth ached. Arthur rarely called her by her first name, but the way he said it — with such tenderness and genuine remorse — reminded her of their teenage years with the awkward flirting and tentative touches, the stolen glances, alcohol-inspired kissing, and the exciting but nervous way that his hands touched her body and scorched her skin like she had been branded. No, she needed to bite back the tears that burned her eyes. Even after enduring that much physical and emotional pain, she had never cried in front of Arthur Maxson and she sure as hell wasn’t going to start now.
“I’m sorry too.” She replied huskily and then cleared her throat to regain her composure. “I still don’t see why you don’t just chose some willing scribe or knight and impregnate them. Anyone would be honored to carry your heir.”

Maxson glowered at the thought. “Those women aren’t broodmares Ingram, and I don’t just want to impregnate them. I want them to …”

“… be a part of your family.” Ingram finished for him. More sarcasm laced her words.

“Is that too much to ask?”

Ingram shrugged. “You’re the Elder. Nothing is too much to ask.”

“I’m serious.” He urged.

Ingram looked at Arthur and desperately wished that there were lights on the upper deck so she could see his face beneath the cloudy night sky.

“Arthur you can have a woman who will bare you a child, and you can have a woman who would be honored to be your wife. You just have to decide if you’re okay if these two women are different people.” Ingram replied.

Ingram ran her thumb along the pink scar that cut across his nose and beneath his right eye. He leaned into her touch and sighed. To the outside observer, her touch was so tender that it bordered on being inappropriately intimate.

“I — I” Maxson stumbled over his words but Ingram’s finger slid down and pressed gently over his lips to quiet him.

“I’ll let you know if Cade says anything has changed, but otherwise don’t stay out here too long.” She warned, “If you froze your balls off, then where would we be?”

The next day, Christmas Day, the Institute hummed with renewed energy. Both synths and scientists seemed to be in a good mood, Nora noted. People were giddy and that excitement bled into that morning’s Directorate meeting.

“Now we can finally go forward with Project Genesis.” Dr. Secord exclaimed. She rifled through a manila file folder and pulled out a thick binder clipped stack of papers and slapped them onto the table in front of them. “This had been Dr. Zimmer’s father’s brainchild and Dr. Zimmer took a lot of inspiration from his father’s experiences to inform his own android experiments before he left for the Capital Wasteland. Dr. Ayo saw no interest in it, but then again we were all under orders to conserve power and resources, but now —”

“I’m sorry, but what is Project Genesis.” Nora interrupted.

Dr. Binet interjected, “In theory, Project Genesis would allow us to create synthetic humans who can develop a consciousness organically. In other words, they will develop their own personality, morality, and judgement based off of learned experience rather than artificial memories that were created or were copied from an existing human brain.”

“It’s a way to make our synths indistinguishable from humankind.” Dr. Secord replied. “The main flaw of these Gen-3 synths is that the synthetic component in their brains are not always reliable. Sometimes they malfunction and we have to clean up the mess. But with more power coming in, we can now devote more resources into developing an upgraded synth component.”
“That sounds unethical.” Nora commented. “What if we created a synth who developed a sociopathic personality? We would be accountable for their behavior. What if the synth raped someone, or killed innocents, or —“

Dr. Secord interrupted, “With all due respect Mother, but we could play the ‘what if’ game all day, but true scientific invention needs to be free to push the envelope. We already have those problems with our current Gen-3s —“

“Exactly!” Nora agreed. “And we have recall codes to deactivate them so they can be brought back to the Institute where they are held accountable for their behavior. Would their recall codes still work on their upgraded synth component?”

Dr. Secord looked venomous. “No.”

Nora nodded. She expected that result. “So we are releasing synths into the world who are untested and can develop in ways we can only fathom. Then when one of them opens fire on Goodneighbor, Diamond City, or a local settlement, are we going to take responsibility for their carnage?”

Nobody spoke for a good minute, but finally Dr. Secord spoke up. Her voice was cold but she maintained a certain level of dignity and respect that took every ounce of her self-control to force out.

“So…Mother. Are we to assume that you care more about the lives in the Commonwealth than you care about scientific pursuit that could, one day, redefine our future?”

Nora met the woman’s snake-like stare with her own. She rose out from her seat and suddenly the words coming out of her mouth didn’t seem like her own.

“I came from a world in which rampant scientific pursuit became our downfall, and I stand before you all now with the harsh truth. The Commonwealth is our future. Like it or not. Even if we defeat the Brotherhood, and especially if we maintain this staunch isolationist policy, the Institute will die out. The people above —“

“— the savages —“ Dr. Secord snarled. She too rose from her seat. Her impossibly thin, talon-like fingers grasped the table like a bird of prey.

“— the people above,” Nora continued “are our future. We have nothing to gain by releasing an unknown variable into their world. Our goal is to establish a truce with them, not antagonize them more by proving to them that the Institute and the synths are things they should fear.”

Dr. Li spoke up, “I agree with Nora. While our Gen-3 synths can always be improved upon to make them more resistant to the dangers topside, I don’t think tampering with something as delicate as their consciousness would yield beneficial results. Besides, the Institute has already failed in that regard once before, and I’m not keen to have something like that happen again.”

“That was a century ago.” Dr. Secord interrupted. “I can improve upon Dr. Zimmer’s father’s work with DiMA if —“

“Wait, what’s a DIMA?” Nora asked.

Dr. Secord sighed and passed her a thick binder clipped pack of diagrams, terminal transcripts, and scientific data. “DiMA was Dr. Robert Zimmer’s first synth prototype for the Genesis Project before it was disbanded by the director that preceded Father. This was his attempt to create a self-aware consciousness out of a Gen-2 body. Dr. Robert Zimmer’s son Eugene was too focused on the Courser program like Ayo, and now he’s probably dead in the Capital Wasteland. We’ve come
Nora flipped through the pages and looked sideways at Dr. Li. The woman’s face was impassive, and Nora couldn’t tell if she was trying to take a back seat out of fear of being accused of influencing Nora’s decision too much, or if she truly didn’t know what this whole experiment was about.”

“How about we table this discussion until I can look through this information. If there’s something from this experiment that I think is both worthwhile and doesn’t violate basic human rights, then maybe we can resume this discussion later.” Nora replied.

But Dr. Secord wasn’t satisfied. “Are you sure you can handle the scientific jargon? That information was written for other scientists. I don’t want you to misconstrue the study out of sheer wastelander ignorance.”

The rest of the Directorate shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Dr. Li was about to speak up, but Nora cut her off.

Nora spoke carefully and in a measured, icy tone. “Dr. Secord, I can appreciate that you’re far more intelligent than me. That’s something I’ll freely admit, but you’re not better than anyone else here. So how about you remove that chip from your shoulder because this mean girl act is beneath you. If I have questions about the science behind this experiment, you will be the first person who I’ll go to for questions. In the meantime, you may find that you’re arguments are more persuasive when every other word isn’t laced with vitriol and hate.”

The Directorate looked at Nora and Dr. Li failed at masking a small, approving smile. Dr. Secord looked like Nora had reached across the table to smack her, but all she could do in response was nod and sit back down.

“If there are not other items that need to be discussed, then you are all free to go.” Nora replied.

Once she was alone in the room, Nora looked down with the giant packet of information in front of her and read the cover page:

*Experiment: Genesis Program*
*Lead Scientist(s): Dr. R. Zimmer*
*Experiment Termination Date: 2179*

Nora skipped past the intricate diagrams of various synth component prototypes and saw that a series of terminal transcripts had been printed out. Attached to the first one was a polaroid of a man who looked oddly familiar.

The picture was a standard headshot of a Boston cop. The man’s green hazel eyes looked out at the photographer with paternal sternness. He didn’t smile, but his expression wasn’t unkind either. He had a thick nose that fit his face and large ears. His prominent cheek bones and his strong jaw line and were clean shaven, but his dirty blond hair was parted down the middle and neatly combed.

She flipped the picture over to see if there was a name written on the back, but it was blank. So Nora set the picture aside and read through the first terminal entry.

*April 18 2076*

*Thanks to our connection with the Cambridge, Natick, East Boston, South Boston, and Malden Police Departments, we’ve had our pick of prime candidates for our memory archive program.*
Many of these men and women are either referred to us not knowing the true purpose of these memory scans, or are paid recruits who have signed an iron clad non-disclosure agreement to take part in these experiments.

We wanted a variety of candidates so we can splice memory sequences to create an infinite combination of memories to draw from for our android program.

Once our contract with the United States Army is cleared by the Department of Defense, we will have a slew of memories from Boston’s most noble uniformed men and women to help balance the less desirables who are just in this for the money. The joke’s on them; once the bombs fall, and they will, money will be useless to them.

Below the terminal entry, Nora saw a hand-written intake list written in neat block lettering. Each person was listed chronologically by date admitted.

9.27.2075 — V. Martinson, Age 30, Natick Police Department, Psychological program: Generalized Anxiety
10.13.2075 — Z. Breyen, Age 46, Natick Police Department, Paid Recruit
10.22.2075 — J. Czubinski, Age 65, Malden Police Department, Retiree
12.05.2075 — N. Gomez, Age 24, East Boston Police Department, Paid Recruit
2.01.2076 — M. Rodriguez, Age 28, East Boston Police Department, Psychological program: PTSD
3.10.2076 — N. Valentine, Age 31, East Boston Police Department, Psychological program: PTSD

Nora saw Nick Valentine’s name as the last entry and her heart sank. Hearing Nick’s account of it was different than actually seeing it on paper. She never doubted that he was telling the truth about his past, but having the proof of the experiment right in front of her made it seem surreal. She almost felt like she was reading something that was meant to be for Nick’s eyes only.

She looked at the man in the photograph, and something told her that the man staring back at her was indeed the human Nick Valentine. She couldn’t know for sure of course, but as she stared into his eyes, she noticed that there was a yellow starburst amid the greens and blues that encircled his pupils.

Nevertheless, she put the picture aside and read on. The byline in the terminal’s heading read: Property of R. Zimmer, Commonwealth Institute of Technology.

June 25th 2177

One hundred and one years. That’s how long it has been since Doctor Patel had a vision that would revolutionize not just neuroscience but also humanity. Although it took a team of scientists to sift through the CIT ruins above us, finding proof and documentation on his holotape made the effort worthwhile.

I had a team of my best men carefully extract the machine he used to scan his patients’ memories, and we’ve installed it into my laboratory. Our Gen-2 android experiments have been ready to test for the past three months, so I will have plenty of canvas to create my masterpiece. If implanting a memory scan onto something akin to a computer hard drive works, then I think we are safe to move on towards improving our Gen-2 androids into the next phase.

September 27th 2177

Perhaps I was too ambitious in this project. Each and every Gen-2 android we’ve used run through our memory programing has succumb to a coma. One hypothesis as to our failure is that the
splicing and sequencing of these memories is creating too much confusion in the android’s processor which causes it to shut down from the influx of data.

The only memory that has stuck for any significant period of time is of a N. Valentine, a Pre-War Boston cop. I don’t know what makes his memory different than the others, but we are going to continue to test a variety of memory sequences before resorting to implanting a full memory from one person into our androids.

Dr. Christie in Robotics has been creating a Gen-2.5 android of sorts. It has all of the basic anatomical design as the Gen-2s but has far more processing capabilities. All I need now is to ask her if I could borrow a couple prototypes to experiment on, and we’ll see if this is even feasible.

May 1st 2178

Eureka! A breakthrough at last!

We are progressing quite nicely with both of our experiments which are housed in our new Gen-2.5 prototypes. The “Designated Intelligence Matrix Algorithm, henceforth designated as DiMA, is developing awareness of its physical surroundings. It’s like a child exploring the world brand new. We have been careful in monitoring what information it has access to since anything could disrupt it and cause irreversible damage.

Meanwhile, the “Neurological Intelligence Memory Algorithm, henceforth designated as NiMA, is not progressing as successfully as it’s counterpart. NiMA is having trouble differentiating what is reality and what is part of his implanted memories. He keeps experiencing Mr. Valentine’s past trauma as his own and no amount of reasoning or rationalization will calm him down. We’ve resorted to activating NiMA once in a while to see if anything has changed, otherwise he’s in a semi-permanent deactivated state until we can decide if it is worth going forth with our memory implant experiments.

October 13th 2178

NiMA is semi-functional for limited spans of time during the day. We are still working on addressing a suspected memory loop that is preventing the android from moving past the death of Mr. Valentine’s girlfriend. Each time he is brought online, he asks about her or asks to see her. No response is enough for him and he can detect when we’re lying with an eerie accuracy.

Being near DiMA seems to help. DiMA has adopted a sort of brotherly bond for the android despite being locked in his own containment pod. We put him next to NiMA because we noticed that DiMA’s voice and overall demeanor seems to allow NiMA to process through memories long enough to get through the first memory loop. Results are inconsistent, however, and NiMA is prone to violent outbursts when it feels threatened or provoked. We will need to look into tweaking its aggression parameters.

March 10th 2179

A waste. This has been an absolute waste of both technology and resources.

I knew that allowing DiMA and NiMA to be housed in neighboring containment pods would be a bad idea. After all, isolation is a far better prison than mere glass.

But I never expected that DiMA’s mind would develop this quickly. His progress in developing his own intellect, personality, and moral compass have far surpassed my expectations. It’s too bad that his conscious decided to intervene because now we’ve lost both of our prototypes to the wastes!
Thanks to the cryo pod experiments in Vault 111, we still have plenty of subjects’ memories to use in future android iterations, but we’ve taken too many steps backward for my liking.

This will not happen again. Thanks to the courser program, we will soon have our own internal force to stop any leaks that may happen. Our android technology is much too fragile to deploy to the wasteland just yet. But just w…

The transcript ended there and Nora rubbed her eyes. There was too much information for Nora to process all at once. She tried to break down the key information into smaller bits.

First, the CIT had contracts with the local police department, paid recruitment for the Boston public, and a tentative contract with the U.S. Army. Although the list that was enclosed depicted only six people, she knew that there had to be a lot more. The terminal implied that the Institute, even if it was still considered the CIT in some respect, also had a contract with Vault 111.

The existence of synth Nate was enough evidence to confirm that as the truth, but Nora never processed how dangerous that could be for the wasteland. If the Institute had memory scans of every Vault 111 inhabitant, including her, then there was nothing to stop the Institute from creating a synthetic version of herself as well. Who knows how many already created synths were just copies of her neighbors or of local residents who were unlucky enough to make it to the Vault only to die? She’s need to get to the bottom of this, if only to put her mind to rest that another synth doppleganger wasn’t prowling the wasteland pretending to be her while she was with the Institute.

Additionally, if this Dr. R. Zimmer was experimenting on Gen-2 androids, and if this DiMA somehow escaped with Nick in tow, then Nick’s memory or belief that he was dumped in an Institute trash heap was partially false. He had escaped. Nora had no idea if his savior was still out in the wasteland somewhere — she assumed that it was unlikely — but Nick deserved to learn the truth about what really happened to him. Nick needed to know that he wasn’t as alone as he thought.
I almost titled this chapter “In the Room Where it Happened” because I couldn’t get that Hamilton song out of my head when I was writing this first scene. Enjoy learning about how the proverbial synth sausage gets made (…that sounded dirtier than I meant).

I’m sorry about the long delay. This chapter threw me for a loop narrative-wise and I procrastinated on other things while my mind could piece out how I wanted this all to go. It's not my best chapter, but there's a lot of moving pieces that I'm trying to keep track of.

Oh and drama, drama, and more drama ahead.

Chapter 3 -- Uneasy Alliances

Nora paced Binet’s office as Dr. Binet poured over the Project Genesis reports. His blond hair hung in his face as he muttered under his breath. His blue eyes darted from diagram to diagram as he tried to formulate an answer to temper Nora’s outrage.

“Did you know about Nick?” Nora asked through clenched teeth.

Dr. Binet looked at her. His expression was full of regret and then he nodded. “In a way, yes. But, Nora what you have to understand is that NiMA —“

“— His name is Nick.” Nora interjected.

“Nick,” Dr. Binet corrected himself, “was constructed generations ago. As perverse as it may sound, we’ve learned a lot from Nick’s experience, and as a result of his sacrifice, our manufactured memory sequences adhere better and create less psychological confusion to the Gen-3 synths.”

“Wonderful! I’m sure Nick will be happy to know that all his suffering wasn’t in vain.” Nora sneered.

He sighed, “Look, I understand your anger. There’s a reason why we abandoned this project after what happened. Many scientists, myself included, constantly question the morality and ethics of what we do here, but still we persist because we believe that in the long run our scientific findings will help humanity.”

“How? How could this benefit humanity?” Nora gestured at the papers on his desk, “The more I learn about this Project Genesis, the more I believe in the rumors that the Institute’s main plan was to abduct and replace all humans with synth copies all along.”

Dr. Binet shook his head, “Nora, I know that your experiences with us have been less than ideal but I promise you that the current members involved in Project Genesis — Dr. Li, Dr. Secord, and myself — have no ulterior motives in achieving our goals.”
She rifled through the papers and pulled out five that were paper clipped together and showed them to Dr. Binet. These were the very same ones that she read last night. “The terminal transcripts said that the Institute has been pulling from Vault 111 to help supplement the synth’s memories. What does that mean?”

Dr. Binet sighed and sank heavily into his office chair. He looked weary and ill as a result of Nora’s barrage of questions. “Nora, I know you’re upset but you —“

“— tell me now.” She growled.

Dr. Binet met her eyes. “When I construct the Gen-3 synth, their memories are vague and malleable. They have enough cognitive function to operate their vital bodily functions but the rest of the process happens behind closed doors. They are sent to a secure area in the Robotics lab to be processed.”

“What do you mean by 'processed'?” She asked.

“The synths are programed with an entire lifetime’s worth of memories. Some memories, mostly negative or traumatic ones, are forcibly repressed so they don’t overwhelm the synth, but sometimes they do pop up if something was to trigger it. Other memories are more overt. These are the memories that the synths call upon to formulate their personalities, their moral judgement, and their likes and dislikes.” Dr. Binet explained.

“And you're getting all of these memories from Vault 111?” Nora asked. “Father told me that he terminated their life support when he released me. Are you pulling memories from dead people?”

Dr. Binet frowned, “I think you misunderstand. The memories from Vault 111 — yours and your husband’s included — were downloaded onto the Institute’s databases almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Forgive me for sounding callous, but you all could’ve died a long time ago and we would’ve still had your memories.”

Nora gaped at him and let the gravity of his answer sink in. Even if she didn’t make it out of the Vault, Nora would’ve always been a slave to the Institute in some way.

“This is insane. It’s completely and utterly fucked up.” Nora seethed to herself. Then she rounded on Dr. Binet once more. “How are you all okay with this? The more I learn about the Institute’s experiments, the less I’m convinced that the wasteland will ever be able to accept you.”

Dr. Binet frowned and Nora saw that she struck a nerve. “Accept us? Nora, you’ll find that very few of us want to be accepted by the wasteland. If my son wasn’t already out there, I would’ve wrote the wasteland off as a world devoid of life. What the Institute does — what it’s done for over two hundred years — is innovate and push the envelope of scientific discovery. Now I will not deny that some of our experiments had consequences, but not many of us in the Institute need or want to be accepted by the Commonwealth.”

Nora knew that he was right. She felt like she was trying to stop a train from running her down through sheer willpower alone. It would be foolish and, frankly, a waste of her time to argue the point now. No, she’d table the discussion about the Institute’s isolationist policies for now.

“So what does this mean for Nick?” She asked, trying to get back to the topic at hand. “He deserves to know the truth about how he was created. Are you ready to be held responsible for your predecessor’s sins?”

Dr. Binet frowned and considered her question, “I can try to answer his questions, but at this point,
his confusion over his identity is more of an internal conflict that he’ll have to address on his own. Still, I’d be willing to speak with him.”

“I need you to guarantee his safety if he comes here.” Nora replied. She remembered Nick’s insistence in coming to the Institute in the first place. It seemed fickle of her to now to open that door again after firmly shutting it, but she now had information about Nick’s life that almost necessitated a change in heart.

“You’re the Director. As long as he’s under your guidance and under your protection, he could do almost anything — save for murdering one of us — and he’d be left alone.” Dr. Binet replied.

Nora nodded. She felt weary and exhausted. “Is there anything else that I need to know about Project Genesis or the Institute’s previous synth-related plans?”

She expected Dr. Binet to say ‘no’ but his silence spoke volumes.

“There is one more thing.” He replied quietly.

“What?”

Dr. Binet sighed and pressed a button on the intercom near his desk. “Dr. Li would you please bring S9-23 to my residence. I think it’s time that Nora meets him.”

There was a minute's hesitation before Dr. Li replied, “Right away.”

“Who is S9-23?” Nora asked.

Dr. Binet pinched the bridge of his thick, curved nose. “Before he gets here, it is imperative that you know that he was created against all of our wishes. Father insisted on it. Dr. Li and I tried to tell him that the experiment alone breached several lines of ethics — both of science and of basic human rights — but he wouldn’t heed our warnings.”

“What is he?” Nora asked. After Super Mutants and synths, she couldn’t imagine what the Institute could create that would get this much of a reaction from their scientists.

“He’s a child.” Dr. Binet replied quietly.

“What kind of child is he? Who is he suppose to be?” Nora asked.

Dr. Binet’s eyes met hers and she saw that he was telling the truth. “He is a child Nora. A synth child. Father asked us to create a child that looked like him when he was around nine or ten years old. He is kept in Dr. Li’s Advanced Systems laboratory most of the time. After he was created, Dr. Li requested that he be kept close to her. Father agreed. Mostly because I was busy raising Liam, but since Dr. Li is childless, Father assumed that she wanted a taste of motherhood.

“What kind of child is he? Who is he suppose to be?” Nora asked.

Dr. Binet’s watery blue eyes looked guilty. He wet his lips before he continued and confessed his sins.

“He was created based on Father’s real DNA. He’s similar to a clone, I suppose. A clone who was programmed with artificial memories of a life he never lived. Of a childhood he never had.” He replied.

Nora tried to piece everything together. Kellogg had once taunted her by saying that her son was a
‘great kid’ but he was ‘a little older than what she would be expecting.’ Obviously her son’s advanced age had caught her off guard, but the way Kellogg talked about Father — as though he was a mere child — seemed off. Then it clicked in her mind.

“He was the one that Kellogg brought with him to Diamond City. He was the bait to lure me here!” She exclaimed.

“Please don’t hold that against him.” Dr. Binet warned. “He had no choice in the matter. He didn’t ask to be created. Please just treat him with the same civility and kindness that you would treat any other child.”

Nora sank into the empty plastic loveseat. She had just mourned the death of her real flesh and blood son not two weeks ago, and now she had to deal with the fact that her son had essentially created a clone? She didn’t have enough time to sort through her own feelings before the automatic door slid open and Dr. Li walked into the Binet residence with the child in question.

“Thank you for coming, Dr. Li.” Dr. Binet said and rose to meet the duo as they walked through the living room. “And Shaun, how are you doing young man?”

Nora observed the scene from afar and she picked up on three significant realizations. One, Nora saw that the tall, slender Dr. Binet knelt down to meet the child’s eyes. He talked in a soft, soothing tone like one would use with a child who was either scared or prone to frightening easily. Two, she noted that he called the child Shaun and not his scientific alphanumerical identification. Three, she saw that the young child’s youthful, innocent eyes were exactly like hers — almond shaped with thick lashes and green rather than Nate’s deep blue.

But Father didn’t have green eyes, she thought.

“Who’s that Dr. B?” The child asked and pointed shyly at Nora.

“That’s a friend of mine. D’you want to meet her?” He replied.

“Is she nice?” He asked and looked at both Dr. Binet and Dr. Li for confirmation.

“She’s nicer than me.” Dr. Li replied with a small smile and gave him a little nudge forward. “Go on.”

The child in question walked into Dr. Binet’s small office. He clenched his hands and fiddled with the Institute grey tunic that he wore. His dark brown hair was neatly combed and his thin, angular face held both timid curiosity and childlike astuteness.

“What happened to your face?” He asked and pointed at the thick cybernetic scar that stretched from her temple to her ear.

“Um…” Nora’s voice failed her.

“Shaun, is that a polite question?” Dr. Binet asked in a paternal scolding sort of way.

The child looked ashamed, “I’m sorry. Um …” The child tried to search for another question but his inquisitive mind won out. “How did you get that scar on your face?”

“I …” Nora paused. Could she blame Father, or perhaps Dr. Ayo, for the scar? Would the child understand the complex world that she had to navigate only a few months before? She looked helplessly at Dr. Binet who then gave the kid a gentle push forward.
“Shaun, try asking her something about herself. Remember how we taught you how to talk to my son? Ask her those sorts of questions.” He suggested.

“Do you … like to read?” Shaun asked as though he was picking a question randomly out of the air.

Nora cleared her throat. “I read a fair amount before the —” She had to stop herself from saying bombs in case that particular detail scared the kid, and then said “— before I got here.”

Shaun looked thoughtful as he considered her answer. “What’s your favorite book?”

“That’s a hard question.” Nora replied with a small, approving smile. “I would have to say it’s Bridge to Terabithia. My mom use to read it to me when I was a kid.”

Shaun looked confused, “But what does it teach you? What do you learn from it?”

Nora shrugged, “I don’t know what you can learn from it. It’s just meant to be a story, a sad story, but hopeful in a way.”

“Huh.” He replied as though he was digesting and working through a complex math problem. “Nora, would you read me that bridge book? I’d like to learn about bridges.”

Dr. Binet shook his head and gently led Shaun back to Dr. Li. “Shaun, Nora’s busy working right now. But maybe she can read with you another time.”

“Okay.” Shaun sighed. There was unmistakeable disappointment in his voice. “Dr. Li. Can I play Atomic Command on your terminal? I have to try and beat Liam’s high score.”

Dr. Li gently touched his shoulder and guided him towards the exit. “We’ll talk about it when we get back to the lab.”

Dr. Binet waved to Shaun as though he was waving good-bye to his own son as he went off to school. For a man who hated Father, he treated a clone of him remarkably well, Nora thought.

When the duo left, Dr. Binet turned cautiously to her. “Nora. It was Father’s plan to have me program the synth so it recognized you as his mother. I hope that I wasn’t too presumptuous to disobey that order.”

Nora wiped at tears that somehow dripped down her face. She wasn’t even aware that she had been crying. “No. That’s — That is probably for the best.”

She cleared her throat and collected the assortment of documents from Dr. Binet’s desk and clipped them together once again. Her face remained neutral and business-like as she faced Dr. Binet.

“I’ll be announcing some more plans to connect some of our Gen-3 synths up with The Railroad. There’s still a small faction of synths who want to go topside, and without Liam’s guidance, they will need a direct connection to a Railroad agent. I already know the announcement will be unpopular, but can I trust that you’ll stand behind me?:

Dr. Binet frowned. He disliked The Railroad and their simplistic and idealistic views as much as the next scientist, but he also thought about Liam. His son was probably out there risking his life to save these synths, so it seemed only right to support his son in whatever way he could.

“As always, you have my support, Nora.” He replied.
Later that night, Nora heard a firm knock at her door.

“Come in.” She called out.

The door slid open and Nate stepped through. He was still walking stiffly but his face didn’t betray that he was in discomfort or pain.

“Nora, can I speak with you for a moment?” He asked. His tone was serious and now that most of Nora’s ire and frustration had been unleashed on Dr. Binet, she didn’t have the energy or the desire to lay into Nate as well.

She nodded. “Do you want to sit down?”

He shook his head. “Sitting for too long causes me pain. Dr. Volkert says that I still have some internal injuries that are healing.”

Nora scrutinized his demeanor. He stood upright and confident but his fingers fidgeted at his side. He looked tired and miserable. Dark shadows colored beneath his eyes betraying the truth that he didn’t get much sleep despite being in the infirmary.

Nate spoke first and without prompting. His words came out in a long exhaled confession, “Nora, I’m sorry.”

She rose from her seat and stood a arm’s distance away.

“I know.” She replied softly, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “I’m sorry too.”

He looked at her balefully. “Nora. I’m sorry for the things I said to you. I was angry, in pain, and I was upset. I was out of line and my behavior was inappropriate. I’m sorry for interfering with your life, for showing up at the Starlight Drive In and again at the Vault just expecting things to be back again like they were.”

“You didn’t really have a choice to not show up.” Nora replied gently. “Father sent you there to get me to come back.”

Nate shook his head. “No. I wanted you to come back. You were the first thought I had when I woke up here. The rest of my memories were mostly of muddled, but you…you were clear, and when I overheard the scientists gossiping about what had happened between you and Ayo, I begged Father to let you come back.”

“Nate, all of this is crazy.” She tried to say that as gently as she could. “I care about you; not because you look like my dead husband or have his memories, but because the Institute has screwed you over the most. I care about you. I empathize with you. But I cannot be the Nora you want me to be. Too much has changed. I’ve changed.”

“I know.” He replied miserably, “I didn’t want to admit that to myself. I realized that I’m afraid. I’m afraid that if I lost you, then maybe I’ve lost myself too. I’m only Nate Pendleton because that’s what my memories tell me. I don’t actually know if I can be someone different.”

Nora sighed. She wanted to embrace him, to comfort him, but she knew that doing so would already muddle the lines that he was trying to draw in the sand.

“This is a shit situation for both of us.” Nora replied. “And I’m sorry too.”

“For what?”
“For leading you on, I guess. For asking too much out of you when my son died. For expecting you to be my husband, when — when you’re clearly not.”

“Nora, no —“

She waved off his protest and continued, “Nate when I first saw you, I thought that my husband had come back from the dead. It was hard for me to differentiate between the truth that my husband is dead and the fantasy that Shaun wanted us all to live in. I think I let myself get briefly caught up in that fantasy, and that’s not fair to you.”

“So where do we go from here then?” Nate asked.

Nora thought for a moment. The terminal trilled its usual ‘you’ve-got-mail’ beep and Nate’s eyebrow cocked in interest. “That’s not a standard Institute terminal is it?”

Nora gave him a wry smile. “No. But it may help me organize a plan that will help both of us out. Here’s what you need to do …”

“For the last time, I strenuously object Mother.” Dr. Secord cried. “Teaching synths how to fight when they are not part of the Courser division -- which Father disavowed, I might add -- is like teaching a cannibal to be a vegetarian. It’s never going to work! Furthermore, enticing them with false promises of being released topside is damaging to the firmly established hierarchy. Synths serve us, not the other way around.”

Nora massaged her temples and exhaled in a long, frustrated breath. “Dr. Binet what do you think about this? Do you think our Gen-3 synths can handle life topside?”

Dr. Binet frowned as the considered the question. “Well, they are naturally more resistant to radiation. Most synths possess average to above-average intelligence and we’ve heard reports of previous escaped synths who are successful despite the wasteland’s dangers. I’d say it’s no more dangerous than it is for a normal human.”

“You’re just saying that because your son was exiled to the wasteland for this very reason.” Dr. Secord seethed, “For all you know, your son could be dead out there. Do you really want to send our synths topside unprepared just because you can? Did you learn nothing from your son’s mistake?”

Dr. Binet’s normally kind face twisted into a cruel sneer, “Don’t lecture me about rule-breaking. Consider how you came to your position as the SRB Division head and then we’ll talk about it. My son made a bad choice, but he had the right motivation. Your predecessor on the other hand --”

“-- That’s enough, Dr. Binet.” Nora commanded. The bite in her voice was half-hearted.

“Nora is right.” Dr. Li interjected. “Now that we have the nuclear reactor up and running, our next goal was to improve the Institute’s reputation with the world topside. We cannot do that if we treat the very people who will be representing the Institute in the wasteland as prisoners.”

“They are not people. They are tools.” Dr. Secord hissed.

“See, this is where we have differing opinions Doctor.” Dr. Li replied coolly. “People. Tools. At this point, we are arguing semantics. We need the synths who want to leave to do so. They are not doing us any favors by staying here. Nora has already explained that The Railroad has several safehouses set up to help escort synths safely through the wasteland.”
Half the room groaned at the mention of The Railroad.

“Not those synth-liberating terrorists!” Dr. Holdren interjected. “As soon as we let our first batch go, they’ll be looking to storm the entire Institute so they can free all technology -- down to the last toaster.”

“You don’t have to like them,” Nora replied, “but like it or not, they are our allies.”

“And who is going to go to make sure our synths meet up with The Railroad?” Dr. Secord asked. “If you leave, we are left vulnerable without a Director and we’re screwed if you die topside. You were hand-picked by Father -- for who-knows-the-reason -- to lead us. The other scientists here will follow you unquestioningly because of that, but they won’t give any of us the same support.”

For once Dr. Secord was right, Nora thought.

“Send me.” Nate said.

The entire Directorate turned to see Nate standing in the doorway. He was a little paler than normal and was favoring his right leg, but he was confident and determined.

“Send me to help lead the group to The Railroad.” Nate repeated. “Nora is right. There’s a sizable group of Gen-3 synths who want to be set free, and the longer you hold them, the more chance that you’ll have a mutiny on your hands. I understand that you are concerned about their well-being, especially since our affairs topside haven’t really been in the best interest of the people there. But I’m already battle ready. I’ve been trained as a Courser, and I have Sergeant Nate Pendleton’s memories from his campaign in Anchorage. I know the wasteland, and I’ve proven my loyalty.”

“Quiet synth, this is a closed meeting.” Dr. Secord snapped venomously. “If you’re as loyal as you claim, you’ll shut your mouth and speak only when spoken to.”

Nate obeyed but stood erect and confident in front of the Directorate. His piercing blue eyes never left Nora’s.

“Nate, you would be expected to remain topside for an undetermined period of time. You could be out there for a couple days, or maybe a couple of months. Are you sure you are ready for that?” Nora asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” He replied.

“Are you confident that your healing injuries will not get in the way of this mission?” Nora asked.

“Yes ma’am.” He replied.

“And you’re sure this is what you want?” Nora asked.

“Yes ma’am.” The speed in which he said that cut to Nora’s core. Although they had spent the previous night hashing out this plan, Nate’s desire to get out of the Institute was not a ruse. After helping Nora with her own personal favor, he planned to stay in the wasteland and act as an intermediary between the Institute and The Railroad.

“Then you have my permission to lead a group of five synths topside. Let’s meet after this and I’ll brief you on your directive, is that understood?” Nora asked.

“Yes ma’am.”
Nora was glad that Nate didn’t salute her before he turned on his heels with military precision and left.

“You’re making a mistake. “Dr. Secord seethed as she stalked out of the room after Nate.

Nora took a deep breath so that her stomach muscles would unclench. She had no idea if this plan would work. There were a ton of unknown variables at play, and each one could result in Nate’s death, but Nora knew that this was a risk she had to take.

“Thank you for your attention. You are dismissed.” She told the other four scientists who were watching her warily.

They rose from their seats and filtered out of the room without a word. She followed after them and climbed the stairs to her private quarters.

Earlier that morning, she had sent Nick a message briefly explaining that Nate would be stopping by to talk with him. She didn’t want Nick to feel pressured, and didn’t want Diamond City to think their resident synth detective was being abducted by the Institute, so she kept the details vague.

When she checked the terminal, she saw that Nick’s response was short: *I’ll be waiting, doll.*

Nora smirked as an old military adage popped into her mind. She had done all that she could do for the time being. Now she needed all of the moving pieces on the chessboard to reach their destinations.

Nora had to hurry up and wait.
I Am Not Your Enemy

Chapter 4 — I Am Not Your Enemy

Nick paced across the metal floor in the agency. His ever-present cigarette was clenched between his teeth as he brooded about Nora’s brief response. She wrote:

_Nick, I’ve learned some information about your creation at the Institute that I think you should know about. This isn’t something I could even begin to explain through a message. I’m sending Nate to relay you to us. Your safety is guaranteed but your visit will need to be brief._

Nora left no salutation and her response seemed clipped, almost emotionless. He did consider if Nora had written the message at all. Maybe someone had discovered that her terminal could communicate to the outside world, and the Institute was laying a trap for him. Maybe Nora was back under their control like she had been when they implanted that cybernetic into her skull. Maybe —

“Nick, I can hear you thinking from over here.” Ellie grumbled. “Everything is going to be fine. This is something you’ve wanted for a while, right? To find out about where you really came from?”

Nick scowled beneath his fedora and extinguished his half-smoked cigarette into a clean ashtray. “But why now, Ellie? What is the Institute planning by dredging up information from a century ago? I’m a failed prototype, remember? I’m yesterday’s news. Why would they want me back?”

“They didn’t write you that message, Nora did.” Ellie replied. “I wouldn’t be surprised if your arrival went completely unnoticed.”

Nick grunted. He knew Ellie was just telling him what he wanted to hear to placate him. He appreciated the gesture but it didn’t help. He sat at his desk but wasn’t worth a lick of work at the moment; still he needed to do something rather than brood about all of these unknowns. Of course, he’d be over the moon to see Nora again, but he also wasn’t naive enough to assume that he’d be able to walk into the bowels of Hell itself without getting singed a little first.

However, he didn’t have enough time to open the nearest case file before a breathless Danny stormed into the agency.

“Detective! There’s an issue.” His freckled face was flushed from exertion.

His arm was in a sling from catching a powerful elbow strike to the arm after trying to apprehend Mayor McDonough before the synth could put a bullet in his own head. To be honest, the kid was lucky that the distraught and mad former mayor didn’t pitch him off the balcony to his death, but Nick was sure the kid knew that.

“What’s wrong?” He asked Danny.

“Th-there’s a guy who came in through the gate. He wouldn’t give us any identifying information but he matched the description of that synth you asked us to keep an eye out for.” Danny spilled this out in one full run-on sentence, and then took a breath before continuing, “When he wouldn’t identify himself, we tried to put him under arrest, but he fought back. It took nearly four of our biggest men to wrestle him into a cell.”

Nick shook his head. His first and only encounter with the synthetic copy of Nora’s husband went poorly, and that was in a situation where they were trying to not escalate the violence. He couldn’t
imagine how a synth, with the memories of an military man, would handle being told what to do from people he perceived as insubordinates.

“I’ll be right behind you.” He told Danny.

Nick tipped his hat to Ellie who took in this scene with wry amusement. “It seems like my ride is here, doll.”

Ellie rolled her eyes, “You take care of yourself Nick Valentine. And give Nora a hug for me.”

Synth Nate sat on a metal bench in a jail cell. His jaw was bruised and his leg was aching from being carried none-to-gently to this cell by three monstrous men and one amazonian woman.

After relaying out of the Institute and to the CIT ruins, Nate went straight to Diamond City as Nora had ordered. But unlike his covert infiltration last time in which he snuck past the young red-haired guard under the cover of a Stealth Boy, now Nate was forced to go about things the proper way.

Nora’s instructions strictly forbade him from relaying into Diamond City. She told him that the citizens were already wary of Institute, especially after Mayor McDonough’s reveal that he was a synth, and were natural to distrust anyone who looked suspicious or out of place. What Nora failed to tell him was that the Diamond City guards were still looking for a man matching his description thanks to wanted flyers describing him as an ex-military man who is armed, dangerous, and “an Institute pawn.”

Of course, opening fire on a collection of security guards who were armed with nothing more than old baseball bats wouldn’t have done the Institute any favors. No, Nora warned him about how the world topside would perceive him, so taking a couple of knocks on the chin instead of proving them right about Institute synths was something he’d happily do.

The other part of Nora’s favor, on the other hand, would be a lot more difficult to accomplish.

She had given him a copy of the Project Genesis files to hand to Nick Valentine. Although courier work was a little boring, Nate knew that would be the easy part of the job. The other part, however, was nigh impossible. Nora wanted Nate to talk to her boyfriend about being a synth.

“Nate, please!” She had urged him. “Talking to him will be good for you. You both are going through similar things. Maybe he can offer you some closure or some comfort that you wouldn’t be able to find here from me.”

Nate clenched his teeth together. He would’ve rather walked through the entire Glowing Sea in his underwear than talk to Nora’s replacement for him. But here he was, like a criminal awaiting his court-appointed defense attorney. His quest for freedom was in the hands of a defective synth who liked to play detective. My luck couldn’t be any better, Nate thought bitterly.

He could’ve easily relayed out of the prison cell, but leaving without his quarry wasn’t an option. A command from the Institute Director was a command that he was programmed to obey. Programmed. The word alone made him want to spit its foul taste from his mouth.

“He here he is.” A gruff voice said to someone as a group of heavy-footed guards clumped down the hallway.

Nate rose from the metal bench and crossed his arms as the guards led the synth detective to Nate’s cell. The detective looked no different than he last saw him. He wore the same old tan, rumpled trench coat with fedora and dark dress pants. Hell, he wondered if the synth detective even owned a change of clothes. He assumed not.
When Nick approached his cell, both men stared at each other for an agonizing minute. Nick looked suspicious and worried, but Nate tried to school his pained expression into tired indifference.

When Nick spoke first, the tension between them broke like someone had cut it with scissors.

“So, Nora’s told me that you’re here to escort me to the Institute. I’m surprised she’d send you, to be honest. You didn’t seem all that keen on me when we last spoke.”

“I’m still not.” Nate bit out.

“Look, I’m not your enemy, kid.” Nick replied. “Why don’t we start over and forget that whole blowup outside the Vault never happened.”

“Blowup. Vault. You certainly have a way with choosing all the wrong words.” Nate shot back. He knew he was being immature, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Yeah? Well, at least I’m talking to you. I could easily just let the guards decide what the hell to do with you. They all know you’re a synth, and that’s not gonna sit well with a group of people who just realized their Mayor was a synth in disguise. So why don’t we cut the bull and just get to the point? Why are you here?”

“I’m here to bring you to the Institute.” Nate replied.

“I already know that. If you were only here to ferry me into that Hell, you would’ve teleported into my agency and out without Ellie being none the wiser. You have some other reason for being here.”

“I’m here to deliver something.” Nate replied stiffly.

“What would the Institute want to give me?” Nick asked. “Or is it from Nora?”

Nate shrugged and unlatched the faded canvas straps from a faded grey Institute bag. “All she said was for me to give you this. I’m suppose to give you this and then we’re suppose to talk.”

“Talk about what?” Nick asked.

“About me and about you. About how we’re the same or something.” Nate replied without bothering to keep the petulance from his voice. “Nora thinks that talking to you will help me come to terms with the fact that you’ve been fucking my wife.”

Spite, bitterness, and confusion darkened Nate’s features as he handed the detective a stack of paper-clipped and bound papers through the food slot in the metal jail cell. The synth detective took the papers but continued to watch Nate. The poor shmuck looked miserable; he looked like a beaten dog that kept going back to its master for more.

Nick sighed, “It wont take me very long to read through this, but to show you that I’m not the home wrecking bastard that you think, why don’t you and I grab some food from the noodle stand here. I don’t eat, but I know you do. If you eat while I read, we both can get to the question and answer session quicker.”

Nate considered his proposal. He was hungry and thirsty. Nora had given him a small tin full of caps just in case he’d be delayed in Diamond City for longer than he anticipated, but sitting down with the Gen-2 synth as an equal meant that he’d be swallowing his pride as well.
“Kenny, open up this damn cell.” Nick barked to a Diamond City security guard who was lounging up against some lockers. “This guy isn’t a security risk anymore. In fact, we can take down Piper’s wanted posters now. They’ve served their purpose.”

“A-are you sure?” The guard asked. “With what happened with Mayor McDonough —“

“— You clearly know he’s a synth.” Nick interrupted. “And he’s gonna be with me the entire time. I don’t sleep. I don’t take bathroom breaks. He will be under constant watch, so you don’t have to worry that he’ll slip away.”

Kenny sighed and grabbed the ring of keys off the table and opened the cell. Nate could feel the heat of his gaze on his neck as he walked down the hallway towards the jail’s exit door.

“So where’s this noodle stand?” Nate asked.

“Oh it’s the only place that has a Japanese robot manning the joint. He only serves one type of noodles, but according to most people, they’re the best damn noodles you’ll get around here.” Nick replied and held the door open for the other man.

Nate felt uneasy as they walked back to the marketplace. His life was full of structure, rules, and commands. He was there to do a job, not lounge at some restaurant. But then again, maybe taking a break would help him figure out how he was going to have a conversation with Nora’s lover about why he felt inadequate to her husband’s memory.

“Do they sell alcohol at this noodle stand?” He grumbled, his request half-serious.

Nick shook his head. “Sorry but no. And I don’t think you’re ready for Vadim’s moonshine. But once you eat and once I read, we’ll continue this little question and answer session at my agency, okay?”

Nate shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant, but his growling stomach and parched throat took precedence over his pride.

“Alright, lead the way.”

Nora paced back and forth across the length of the relay room. Her hands were in her pockets and her eyes counted each sparkling linoleum tile as she adjusted her steps so her feet fell squarely within each tile square. Walking this way made her pace awkward and unnatural, but the familiar ritual also made her feel strangely comforted.

Nate had been gone for almost a full six hours now. Assuming that everything went fine, he was expected to be back with Nick by now. Her stomach ached painfully, partly because she was starving and partly because the stress of seeing Nick again was making her stomach do somersaults.

How would Nick react to the truth about his creation? She knew he’d want answers, but she also wondered how the truth of his escape would affect his memories. Would he remember the event now that he had proof that it had happened? Would he try to find information about the synth named DiMA? Would he feel the same anger and betrayal that Nora felt on his behalf, and would he confront the scientists that he thought were responsible?

Nora stopped pacing and hugged her stomach. No matter what Nick did, there was no question that she’d be overjoyed to see him. She needed to fixate on their reunion rather than on things that haven’t happened yet.
Just then, the automatic door behind her opened and Dr. Li walked towards her carrying a large tray full of food.

Nora saw that in addition to the Institute’s gelatinous food product, there was a plate full of salisbury steak and canned cream corn; two cans of purified water sat unopened next to the metal silverware and cloth napkins.

“Dr. Li what’s —“

The severe woman shook her head and put the tray of food down on a card table near the large console that controlled the relay. “Since you’ve insisted on standing guard here while you wait for Nate to bring the synth prototype back, I’ve taken the liberty of bringing you dinner.”

“A bag of food product and salisbury steak? Are you trying to fatten me up?” Nora asked wryly.

“The food product is mine.” Dr. Li replied, “The steak is yours. Nate told me that you have a fondness for Pre War food, and this was the only Pre War food I could find. You need to eat to keep your strength up. I figured that if you refuse to eat the Institute’s food, then maybe Pre-War frozen junk would be better than starving yourself to death.”

“Thank you.” Nora replied with sheepish gratitude. Her stomach made another louder growl and she took a seat at the card table. “I’m not trying to purposely starve myself, you know. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t stomach the Institute’s food anymore. I know it’s nutritious, but the consistency and the taste is off putting. I just can’t see how you and the rest of the scientists can stomach that stuff.”

Dr. Li shrugged and took a seat across from Nora. She didn’t seem to mind the bagged space food. She tore the foil bag slightly and squeezed the sides of the solid brick so it would begin to react with the air and heat up. “I didn’t really get a choice. Starvation is a pretty stiff motivator to eat things that taste a little … unique. I mean, this is a lot better than eating more poached mirelurk meat.”

Nora frowned, “What’s a mirelurk?”

The other woman smirked at Nora’s naiveté. “A mirelurk is a mutated ocean creature. I’ve heard they descended from horseshoe crabs, but I’ve also heard the name is more of a catch-all term for mutated crustaceans. No matter what they look like though, their meat is abhorrent, and when I lived in Rivet City, it was the only meat we could get.”

Nora wrinkled her nose and took a bite from the microwaved stake. The meat was rubbery and salty, but anything tasted better than the Institute’s bioengineered food.

“So…” Dr. Li began. “I want to apologize about yesterday. I hope you don’t think that Alan and I were deliberately concealing synth Shaun’s existence from you. The situation was tenuous and Father originally planned for you to meet the kid before you met him so he could test the child’s response to stressful stimuli. Thankfully, Z2-47’s inappropriately brutal treatment of you necessitated that the experiment be cancelled.”

“So Shaun was just another one of Father’s science experiments?” Nora asked.

“Nora, I care about that child so don’t mistake my regret for disgust, but Shaun’s creation was a bastardization of our synth program. He should’ve never been created. Neither should’ve Nate, to be blunt.”

Nora heard Dr. Li’s words and heard the ones she once said to her son in anger. You should’ve
never been born. Even when looking at Nate, Nora could never imagine saying these things to either of them.

“Like it or not, this child does exist and we shouldn’t punish him for something that was done to him. Nobody asks to be born or created.” Nora insisted.

“I agree.” Dr. Li replied. “But I wonder where the best place would be for him now. Our Gen-1 and Gen-2 synth patrols have communicated to us that the Brotherhood of Steel is sending out raiding and scouting units with more and more regularity, especially around the Concord and Lexington areas. If they do eventually discover the Institute’s location, it will not take them much to create a cluster of problems for us.”

“Would they really hurt him?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li nodded, her face grave and troubled. “The Brotherhood are ruthless when it comes to acquiring advanced technology, and there’s nothing more advanced than a fully sentient synth. I know that they wouldn’t hesitate to execute any of our synths, no matter the generation, if they were caught.”

Nora let out a heavy sigh. This was just another thing to add to her ever mounting list of problems to solve.

Dr. Li interjected, “I don’t mean to worry you Nora, but I believe that being forewarned is also being forearmed. I care about what happens to Shaun; I’ve watched over him for the past two years. He’s a bright child, naturally. But that could easily get him into unintended trouble.”

“Why did Father create a child clone of himself?” Nora asked. “He always seemed to look down on synths as things or objects that were programmed to serve us instead of be our equals. If that’s how he truly felt, then I don’t understand why he’d go through so much trouble to create an inferior version of himself.”

Dr. Li considered Nora’s question for a moment before speaking. “Father has always been a bundle of contradictions. His temperament was very hot and cold. He could be very supportive and gracious one day while being excessively harsh and demeaning the next day. I imagine his moral compass fluctuated just as wildly as his emotions did.”

“So, do you think Nate’s and Shaun’s creations happened when Father was feeling unusually nostalgic or something?” Nora asked.

“I would say manic is the more accurate word.” Dr. Li replied, “There were moments when his intelligence and his ambition was seemingly uncontrollable, and this was one of those times. I was asked to help Dr. Binet work on both Shaun and Nate and I objected to both of their creations. I’ve always looked at the Institute as a place to further scientific findings that can eventually help humanity. But Shaun and Nate were both created to further a personal agenda rather than a scientific one.”

Nora cleared her throat but the emotion in her voice was still thick and heavy, “I—I don’t feel anything when I look at Shaun.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. He’s not your son.”

“But he’s suppose to look like my son. Aside for his eyes, which are green like mine, he looks like I always imagined he’d look. But I don’t feel any parental attachment. I look at him like he’s anyone else’s kid.”
“Father mistakenly thought that if he gave his child clone one trait that his mother had, namely your eye color, then maybe you’d be more inclined to take him under your wing. I imagine that looking into the eyes of a person who has brought you so much pain would be a difficult hurdle to overcome.”

Nora shook her head in disbelief. Even in creating a clone, her son was manipulative to the end.

“Well it didn’t work.” Nora spat. “He overestimated my maternal instinct I guess.”

“I don’t think he did.” Dr. Li replied. “You cannot be expected to love someone just because someone tells you to. Relationships don’t work like that. If there’s ever a time when you’d like to talk with Shaun and get to know him as an individual, know that my door is always open. But you will never be expected to be his mother unless you want to.”

“Thank you.” Nora replied.

Silence settled over both of the women as they finished the remainder of their meals. Nora would’ve probably licked the aluminum tray clean if Dr. Li wasn’t there. She hadn’t had food this good since Preston’s stew back at Sanctuary Hills. Then an idea struck her …

“I know where Shaun can go if he needs to disappear.” Nora said suddenly. “I helped a group of people set up a settlement in my old neighborhood. It’s not a fortress or anything, but he’d be around a group of people who could care for him. My old Mister Handy is still there and he’d be overjoyed to keep an eye on Shaun, even if he’s a synth clone and not the real thing, and there’s a couple there who had a son around his age who unexpectedly died. I’m not saying he could be a replacement son — they probably have their hands busy with a newborn — but these people have been good to me, and they are low-key enough to not attract Brotherhood attention unlike Diamond City or Goodneighbor.”

“Sanctuary Hills, you say?” Dr. Li replied thoughtfully. “I’ll send an envoy to them to see if they are willing to harbor him.”

“Why not send Nate since he’ll already be topside. I can give him a note to give to their leader to verify that this request is legitimate. Besides, Liam Binet can vouch for him if necessary.” Nora said.

“Liam’s there?” Dr. Li asked.

“Yeah. I’m surprised that Dr. Binet didn’t tell you.” Nora replied.

Dr. Li’s lips pursed as though the idea of even asking Dr. Binet about his son was crossing some line, “I don’t maintain close personal relationships with my co-workers anymore. After Liam’s exile, I felt that broaching the subject would be rather gauche and tactless.”

“Oh. Well he’s doing fine in Sanctuary Hills.” Nora replied, “And I think Shaun would appreciate being in a place with a person that he knows.”

“I agree. Once Nate arrives with your synth detective friend, we’ll see what he thinks of this plan.” Dr. Li said.

The doctor took both of their trays. She bid Nora a farewell and let the vault dweller resume her vigil near the relay room.

The butterflies returned to her stomach with a vengeance as she resumed her steady, methodical pacing.
As she walked, she mused over what Dr. Li had said about not feeling obligated to be a mother to Shaun. Hell, she could barely handle being a mother to her infant son let alone adopt a cloned version of him.

No, Nora wasn’t the maternal type. Or at least that’s what she told herself. No, Shaun was much better without her. After all, she already fucked up her son. What sort of damage would she do to his clone?

Nick removed his fedora and ran his good hand along the synthetic paneling of his skull as though he could feel the blow that he took to the head when this other synth, DiMA, helped him escape from the Institute. Reading about these alleged events was surreal to say the least. It was like he was reading a book that depicted a crucial part of his life, but he had no memories of the events. Now he knew how Hancock felt as the ghoul struggled to place his memories of Nora amid the countless other details that amnesia had robbed from him.

True to his detective sense, the follow-up questions that Nick wanted to ask now clogged his mind like an obsessive thought. After he got out a few of his “How dare you?” and “What gives you the right?” variations, Nick was obsessed to finally close the book on the mystery behind his creation.

It was a good thing that Ellie took off at his behest with only minor curious glances at Nate's arrival. Nick was sure that Ellie would've loved to be a fly on the wall, but this was one case that he didn't need his trusty secretary's help to crack.

“Did you find the information you needed?” Nate asked.

“More or less.” Nick replied. He’d play his cards close to his chest for now. Aside for Nora, he didn’t know who else might’ve discovered the truth about his jailbreak out of the Institute, and he didn’t want to prematurely put his trust into others.

Nate didn’t seem to mind the other man’s dodgy answer. He was slurping the last dregs of broth from a Styrofoam bowl like he was a man dying of thirst.

A fourth bowl of noodles sat on Nick’s desk awaiting consumption. Bits of meat bobbed next to some tatos and carrots. Nick had to admit that the aroma did smell pleasant, but he had no desire to eat food. He had no instinct or biological need to do it. Hell, his smoking and drinking habit was more out of actual habit than need. Nick wondered what it felt like to be truly hungry and unsatisfied. He knew from seeing the sallow and sunken faces of addicts and starving wastelanders that it wasn’t a walk in the park.

“You can really put those away.” Nick commented.

“The Institute has shit food.” He replied in-between greedy swallows. “I’m kind of glad that I’m not going back there … once I deliver you that is.”

“What d’you mean you aren’t going back?” Nick asked.

Nate stopped eating and washed down the noodles with a warm Nuka Cola. The carbonation was long gone, but its cloying sweetness brought him a small bit of nostalgia…or memories of Nate Pendleton’s nostalgia.

“After I relay you in, I’m returning to the Commonwealth to assist the Institute with their activities topside.”

“What activities are you assisting in?”
“That’s classified information.” Nate replied tersely.

Nick sighed and drew on the filter of his smoldering cigarette to light the ember once again. Apparently two could play the withholding game. He’d let the man keep his secrets, after all, when he wasn’t working a case he didn’t like to nose into other people’s business. Besides, he was sure that Nora would tell him later. Speaking of which…

Nick cleared his throat, “So now that you’ve made your delivery, I suppose we should probably talk.”

“Go ahead.” Nate replied as he dug into the bowl. “There’s nothing you could tell me about being a synth that I don’t already know. Nora wanted us to talk, but she never specified that the conversation had to be equitable.”

“Were you always this much of a jackass, or is this a new synth feature?” Nick shot back. “If Nora wanted us to talk, then she had a good reason for it. Believe me, I’m not entirely thrilled about pouring my heart out to an echo of Nora’s late husband but I will because I respect Nora and I think that seeing our commonalities will help you.”

“Commonalities?” Nate repeated sardonically.

“Yeah, like the fact that we both care about Nora. And I know that you are probably a good man deep down. Sophomoric attitude aside, I think that you and I could bury the hatchet and at least see that you and I are not enemies.”

Nick puffed on his cigarette and leveled his gaze at the other man. He had said his peace and now he’d leave the ball in his court. This would give him time to observe and put his detective senses to work.

Something about Nick’s frank response seemed to strike a chord because Nate set down the half-eaten bowl and crossed his arms across his chest. His chin jutted out and the muscles in his strong jaw clenched; he was grinding his molars as he mulled over the detective’s words.

“The first thing I remember when I woke up in the Institute was ‘I can’t believe I survived. I survived getting shot. Nora is going to be so relieved.’ Then when I finally saw her with that burned man and I saw that she was happy — no not happy, she was glowing — I wondered if she had moved on.”

Nate spoke in a low, quiet voice. His eyes were fixated on an invisible object on the edge of his desk and Nick didn’t dare interrupt him.

“I tailed her to the Starlight Drive In and I knew she’d come to investigate that small concession stand if I let her catch a glimpse of me. I also knew that she knew she was being followed, but I was so scared of what her reaction would be once she saw me. Still, I had to see her. Father’s orders were specific. I was suppose to bring her back to the Institute by force if she wouldn’t come willingly, and I was instructed to kill both of you if you interfered. I figured that if she thought that her husband was still alive, then maybe she’d go back to the Institute willingly. But when she finally saw me, I saw the pain and confusion in her eyes, but I also saw the hope. The slim hope that her husband was indeed alive; it was a hope that made me feel like a fraud.”

Nick remembered the night that Nora had lied to him about meeting Nate. Her deceit didn’t anger him as much as it worried him. Nora was a woman who would’ve jumped at anything to live in the past again. The prospect was enticing for sure, but living in the past could be just as harmful as not learning from it. It was something that Nick was still struggling with, especially when it came to
matters that revolved around the old Eddie Winters case.

Nate continued to talk as Nate brooded on his words. “And then when I went to Vault 111 to wait for her, I saw Sanctuary Hills from the overlook and I saw you kissing her and I — I kind of lost it. Losing Nora to one man is bad enough but I was confident I could win her back, but seeing her with you … I just felt like the universe had punched me in the nuts.”

“What do you mean by that?” Nick asked.

“Whenever I saw Nora and the burned man together, they’d be groping at each other like horny teenagers. It was like I was watching her fuck around with the quarterback of the football team. I know that their relationship couldn’t be based on anything other than a physical connection, but then I saw you and her together and I realized that she actually loves you.”

Nick swallowed thickly. He knew Nora loved him. Sometimes he questioned the dame’s judgement, but he knew that she cared for him. Still, hearing someone else confirm that made his heart flutter in his chest.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess.” Nick replied. “But I’ll warn you. That burned man, as you put it, is formidable. He’d fight just as fiercely for Nora as I would.”

Nate’s sullen face looked absolutely spiteful after hearing that. “Yeah, well I don’t know what she sees in either of you. Have the choices of men in this God-forsaken world fallen so far that she had to settle on a wrinkled zombie man and a robot detective?”

“Once again, the term is ‘synth detective’ jackass, and I’m not going to tell you a third time.” Nick shot back. “Nora isn’t here to mediate but that doesn’t mean I wont retaliate if you disrespect me again.”

Nate deflated a little; not enough to become fully passive but he seemed to reassess what he was about to say. “Fine. For Nora’s sake, I’ll try to hold my tongue.”

Nick sighed. He could understand Nate’s anger. He would’ve felt exactly the same righteous fury if Jenny had somehow survived and had shacked up with someone else. Even though Nick suggested that she do just that out of concern for her protection, the idea of seeing a woman he loved wrapped up in another man was enough to burn him even now.

“I appreciate that.” Nick said. “And now let’s make this exchange a little more equitable. You told me your story so now here’s mine. Believe it or not, I do know how you feel.”

Nate scoffed but picked up the neglected noodle bowl and began eating again. He figured that if he was stuffing his mouth with food then he’d be less likely to say something that he’d later regret.

“When you look at Nora, I’m sure that you feel that no time has passed. In your mind, you are Nate Pendleton, husband to Nora Pendleton, survivor of Vault 111, and an honorably discharged military veteran who saw more than enough action in Anchorage. Its a truth that is so engraved in your mind that simply acknowledging the truth — that those are implanted memories — is enough to through anyone into a spiral. But there comes a point that you gotta face the music.”

“I don’t want to face the music.” Nate spat.

Nick nodded. “Neither did I. Hell, neither do I. You think this detective getup is just a lark? If I was playing pretend, I would’ve probably chosen a lot more glamorous alter ego to latch on to. This —“ he gestured at his trench coat and fedora with his metal hand — “is who Nick Valentine was. The man whose memories I have was a Pre-War cop. I can’t change that and I don’t think I’d
want to. His instincts and know-how have saved my ass more times than I can count, but it doesn’t make facing the truth any easier.”

“Facing what truth?” Nate asked.

“Facing the fact that you and I are living in the shadows of dead men.” Nick stated bluntly.

“I’m not living in his shadow.” Nate seethed.

“See, you can’t even say his name can you?” Nick drawled. “Because saying his name will make his past real. It will mean that there are two different identities. Nate, Nora’s late husband, and you.”

“This is all bullshit! I am Nate!”

“If you are then why hasn’t Nora jumped back into the marriage that was cruelly stolen from her?”

“How do you know she hasn’t?” Nate replied but his goading failed before it even started.

“Because she sent you here to talk to me.” Nick countered. “If she wants me to help you open your eyes to the harsh truth, then that means she has made a distinction in her mind that you haven’t.”

“I love her!” He replied.

Nick nodded, “Of course you do. She’s an easy woman to love. And you have her husband’s memories. You see her in the same way that her husband saw her. I’d question your sanity if you didn’t love her. I still feel the same way about Jenny. But in a dark twist of fate and I suppose a dash of twisted good fortune, Jenny died way before I awoke to think of her in this body.”

“So what the hell am I suppose to do? Seeing her pine after you is worse than any gunshot wound.” Nate exclaimed.

Nick let the backhanded insult roll off his shoulders. The man was hurting pretty badly. It made sense that he’d lash out, and Nick knew he was a pretty easy target.

“I think what you’re doing next is a good first step.” Nick replied. “You need to make your own way in this world. The more you step out from behind Nate’s shadow, the more satisfied you’ll feel. You will never be able to measure up to him, but maybe your deeds — not his — will help you create your own identity.”

“Is that what you did?”

“Yes.”

“Funny. A detective doesn’t seem that much of a stretch from a Pre-War cop.” Nate sarcasm was thick.

“Yeah well I’m sure you’ll find your own niche in this new world. We may not need soldiers at the moment, but we all could use a fiercely protective and loyal gun watching our back.”

Nate fell silent. Out of everything in the world, he knew that loyalty and bravery were traits that were valuable no matter the time period.

“So now that you shared your story and I shared mine, I hope that we can at least consider this a truce.” Nick said.
“Fine. It’s a truce.” Nate agreed sourly.

“Good. Now how do you want to do this whole teleportation thing?” Nick asked. “I’ll admit that although I’m Institute-made, I’ve never been too keen about finding my way back down that rabbit hole. What d’you want me to do? Klick my heels together three times?”

Nate stood up and stacked his empty soup bowl on top of the others. “You don’t have to do anything. Just stand next to me and stay quiet. Once I grab ahold of you, I will initiate the relay.”

Nick frowned as he stood. His stomach churned despite being perpetually empty save for the occasional drink. If he was a man, the sheer anxiety he felt about going back to the Institute would’ve had him reaching for the nearest trash can.

Nate walked around Nick’s desk and grabbed ahold of Nick’s intact hand. The other man’s grasp wasn’t overly domineering as some men’s handshakes can be but it was firm enough to keep him from easily pulling away.

“This is N1-08. I am ready to relay the synth detective back with me.” He spoke into his communicator with stoic calmness.

After a momentary pause, Nora’s voice came out over the communicator.

“The relay is open. See you both soon.”

Nick’s heart clenched in his chest. Simply hearing her voice instead of reading clipped messages off a terminal was enough to make him shudder in anticipation.

Blue light swirled around them and Nick could feel the static electricity produced by the electromagnetic field crackle across his skin and down his spine. When he felt a moment of disorienting weightlessness, he wanted to cry out but gritted his teeth against it. Nate had told him to stay quiet and that’s what he was going to do. Once his feet touched the ground, the blue light crackled away leaving a minutely visible layer of burning ozone behind.

The room they appeared in was circular and had only one exit. Nate let go of Nick’s hand and adjusted the messenger bag on his shoulder.

“Let’s go.”
Down the Rabbit Hole

Chapter Notes

There are slight spoilers/references to my one-shots, “Mechanical Engineering” and “I Couldn’t Forget You If I Tried.”

Also, there’s heavy adult sexual content ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5 -- Down the Rabbit Hole

“This is N1-08. I am ready to relay the synth detective back with me.” Nate’s voice crackled out from the intercom.

Nora jolted upright in her seat and opened her eyes. She wiped drool from her cheek and vigorously rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Although she was disoriented, she had enough sense to press the red button near the microphone and communicate back

“The relay is open. See you both soon.” She replied, hoping the sleep that slurred her voice wasn’t too evident. She pushed a sequence of buttons on the terminal to accept the relay transmission.

Even though Nate was perfectly capable of teleporting in and out of the Institute from anywhere in the Commonwealth, Nora wanted them to teleport to the relay room so they could avoid most of the awkward and possibly rude questions about Nick’s sudden appearance. Dr. Li and Dr. Binet were aware of Nick’s visit, but the majority of the Institute’s residents and scientists did not. Nora felt reasonably sure that Nick wouldn’t be in danger, but she couldn’t take the risks either.

A flash of blue light emitted from the relay room and Nora heard Nick’s distinctive smoky, rough voice.

“Aaah damn, t-that’s a sensation I’d rather not feel again.”

Nora ran her fingers through her sleep-mussed hair to fix it back into some semblance of order and then she stood. The room ahead of her was too dark to see them, but Nora could feel their presence nonetheless.

“So is this where I ask you to bring me to your leader?” Nick asked sardonically, his voice was noticeably closer but Nora still couldn’t see them.

“You wont have to walk very far.” Nate replied. “Our leader wanted to welcome you personally.”

The duo walked out of the relay room and into the whitewashed control room blinking against the harsh light. Nora’s breath hitched in her chest when she saw Nick. His luminous eyes came out of the darkness like two lanterns in the night.

“Hi.” She breathed out. Her top teeth worried over her bottom lip as they both stared at each other for what seemed to be an eternity.

“Nora...” Nick replied. An unusual sound came from his throat. It sounded like a half sigh and half
He crossed the floor in four large, sure strides and scooped Nora up into his arms. Their bodies crashed together and Nora let out a small “ooof.” The hug he gave her was so tight that it bordered on being uncomfortable, but Nora wasn’t going to complain. Simply feeling Nick’s hands on her back and hearing his mechanical heart thumping in his chest was enough.

“Doll, I’ve missed you.” His voice was unusually husky which made Nora hold onto him even tighter.

“I’ve missed you too.” She murmured into his chest.

Nate watched the two of them and felt the same cacophony of jealousy, anger, self-pity, and hatred bubble in his heart. He would’ve let it incite him again but then he noticed Nora -- mostly he noticed Nora’s blissful face. Her face looked relaxed and worry-free for once. Nick murmured something in her ear and she smirked coquettishly at whatever the synth had told her. She pressed her body into Nick’s so that no part of their body was without the touch of the other’s. For the first time since Nora had arrived back at the Institute, she looked truly happy.

He cleared his throat and the couple broke the hug but didn’t fully separate from each other. Nick looked sheepish and then slightly concerned when he saw the obvious pain that was displayed on Nate’s face, but Nora looked supremely guilty.

“Nate, I’m --”

“-- I’m on my way back to the wasteland right now. Are we still staying with the same plan?” Nate interrupted.

Nora’s face fell slightly at his briskness but regained her poise. After all, he still had a job to do.

“Yes. Find Desdemona at Sunshine Tidings and offer your services to her.” Nora commanded. “I will use the outside terminal connection in my room to coordinate more consistent synth releases. Desdemona knows I’ll have to start slowly; the Directorate will need proof that this can work, but once it can, I know she will need help establishing and clearing out more safe houses.”

Nate nodded. His was face masked by cool indifference, but the raw pain in his eyes was still there. Nora told herself that there was nothing she could do. If Nick couldn’t provide Nate some solace, then she feared nothing would.

Nate spun around on his heels and walked back towards the relay room. He wiped at the tears that dripped from his eyes, cursing himself for his own weakness, and teleported away again in a flash of blue light.

“You okay, doll?” Nick asked after Nora had been silent for several seconds. She had a perplexing expression that Nick couldn’t quite read.

She nodded and then cleared her throat. Her voice was slightly hoarse and heavy. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Nick tilted his head ever so slightly down in a disapproving look.

“I’m not lying!” She insisted

“Then tell me what you’re thinking.” He said.

Nora fingered the knot in his trench coat. “I’m considering whether to have you on the floor right
here or whether to wait to get you to my room.”

Her coy smirk and the mischievous twinkle in her eye did things to him that no other worldly
substance could, but he still shook his head.

“I wouldn’t be a great detective if I caved that easily to a seductive dame’s brash talking and her
bedroom eyes.” Nick said. “Out with it. What’s wrong?”

Nora closed her eyes and sighed. She didn’t know how to phrase everything; in fact she was
constantly worried about something that she didn’t know what was worrying her the most at the
moment.

“I’m just happy to see you Nick, that’s all.” She murmured into his chest.

The truth was that Nora had a laundry list full of things she was either worried about or actively
trying to prevent, and none of them had easy solutions. But she didn’t want to spoil the moment by
blubbering in Nick’s arms like some silver screen damsel because she -- the swooning woman --
couldn’t handle being the boss.

“C’mon doll, talk to me.” Nick encouraged. He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and held her in
his arms. His thumb caressed over her knuckles like he was encouraging her to find the right
words.

“Nick, I’m not trying to purposely withholding information. Not this time. I -- I just have a lot on
my mind and I’m having trouble sorting everything out into rational or irrational fears. Can we just
enjoy the moment first? I promise that I’ll tell you everything in time, but not right now okay?”

“Okay.”

Nora shook her head; Nick’s patience never failed to amaze her, and she kissed Nick chastely on
the lips. “Thank you.”

She moved to pull away but Nick held her and pulled her back into him. He leaned down and
captured Nora’s lips into a deep, passionate kiss that took her breath away. Nick’s intact hand was
curled through her hair; he appreciated how good that felt since her hair had begun to grow out. His
metal hand held gently onto her shoulder, ready to progress farther down to her chest should the
occasion or their desire call for it.

Nora shuddered, her face flushed and eyes heavy-lidded, as she pulled away. “Nick...”

“So right here then, doll?” Nick whispered. The huskiness in his voice made her whimper.

“No. Let’s go to my room. There’s more privacy.” She murmured.

“I thought you liked being seen.” Nick teased.

“Not by people I have to work with.” Nora’s rebuke was accompanied with a gentle slap to his
chest. “Come on. We have to be somewhat discrete.”

“How scandalous. I’m sneaking around with the Institute’s Director.” His grin was positively
wicked.

Nora led Nick into an elevator and then she pushed the single glowing arrow pointing down and
swiped her Director’s ID card in the card reader. The elevator began its long, silent descent through
the darkness.
However, Nick’s glee quickly faded as he realized that his exit out of here would now be a lot harder to come by now that Nate had left. He wasn’t claustrophobic, but he could feel the tight grip of fear squeeze his artificial heart. Nick’s hand grabbed tighter onto Nora’s and his own breathing became heavier, almost labored.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” He said.

“You’ll be okay. I promise.” She murmured.

As she said that, a bright light opened up at the bottom of the glass elevator and grew larger as the elevator descended into the Institute’s atrium. No matter how many times she had used this elevator, the sight of the Institute’s atrium was breathtaking.

In the late evening, the entire courtyard was swathed beneath a blanket of dim lights and twinkling artificial stars. The crystal clear water looked almost blue in the darkness, and the large pine trees that dominated the courtyard glowed slightly as they caught the reflection of each division’s illuminated sign.

A couple of bald, identical Gen-2 synths were pushing large carts full of equipment, food product boxes, and laundry back towards the housing and cafeteria area. They paid no attention to either of them as the elevator descended down to the ground floor.

Her son’s grave marker sat in the grass in front of the Robotics entrance. It’s hologram projection depicted the Vitruvian Man and beneath it had an inscription that said *He was the Father to us all.*

Nora forced herself to look at Nick, and in the dim artificial night, Nora could see more of his face and she saw a mixture of wonder and terror there.

“It will be okay Nick.” She repeated, more insistently this time.

“I know, doll.” He whispered. “I-It’s just surreal being back here and all. I don’t remember any of this, but then again, I guess I was knocked out. I never thought I’d be back here. Nick’s cop instincts are yelling at me to start looking for escape routes. I don’t like going into a place blind.”

“You’re not blind. You have me.” Nora pointed out.

The doors to the elevator slid open and Nora led him out onto the sidewalk. Although the Gen-2 synths didn’t pay attention to them as the elevator was descending, they all noticed them now. Nick saw a dark-skinned man walk out of a doorway labeled Robotics and stop in his tracks when he saw them.

“What the--” His inevitable curse was cut off by Nora.

So much for being discrete, Nick thought.

“Let’s go.” Nora hissed to Nick.

She walked quickly across the courtyard and went through a concrete archway that led towards a large spiral staircase. She tried to move quickly and quietly without drawing too much attention to them, but the working synths had preternatural hearing. Each Gen-2 synth greeted her as she passed them with their typical programmed responses of “Good Evening Director” but their cold yellow eyes never left Nick’s face.

When they finally reached the third floor landing, Nora brought him down a hallway and pressed her ID card to a black pad near the door. The orange and white hydraulic door slid open and Nora
led Nick into her room.

Nora rushed over to the rotary phone and dialed Dr. Li’s office extension. Thankfully the woman picked up the receiver after the first ring.

Nora spoke quickly, “Hey, Dr. Loken saw Nick and I exit the elevator. You know how he feels about me being appointed to the roll of Director.”

There was a brief pause and then Nora replied, “He knows that Nick is a synth from the Commonwealth. I think that would be enough clues for him to dig through some files in the Robotics lab to discover who he is.”

There was another pause. “He’s staying here with me. Dr. Binet will meet with him after our Directorate meeting.”

Nick felt supremely uncomfortable and out of place. Within ten minutes of arriving in the Institute, Nick had to watch as Nora negotiated for him like he was some stowaway.

“You know that locking himself in the BioScience lab was an overreaction!” Nora countered. “If he does something rash like that, then that’s on him.”

There was another pregnant pause and then Nora sighed in relief.

“Thank you. I -- we -- appreciate it.”

Nora hung up the phone but didn’t turn back to face Nick. He could see the whites of her knuckles as she gripped the desk far harder than necessary.

“Doll, talk to me. What’s going on?” He asked.

“It’s nothing Nick. It’s just political bullshit, that’s all.” She replied hollowly.

“Dammit Nora! You gotta let me in here. If you can’t tell me the whole truth, then at least level with me. I deserve that.” Nick’s response was sharp.

Nora turned to face him and he saw just how exhausted she looked. In the harsh fluorescent light, the bags beneath her eyes were startling. The skin around her fingers were raw and a few spots were scabbed over. Nora was either a nail biter or picked at her cuticles obsessively, Nick deduced.

“I don’t know where to start.” Nora admitted. “I have a lot of shit that I’ve been bottling up and I’m just so damn tired.”

Nick nodded and approached Nora. She reached out to him and slid into his outstretched arms like it was a dance they had practiced for years.

“What can I do to help you?” Nick asked.

“Honestly, I only need one thing.” The frustration in her voice melted away to something more carnal. She slowly undid the knot that held his trench coat closed and looked into his eyes.

“Nick, I haven’t seen you in almost a month. I really only want two things. I want to apologize to you...”

“Oh? You’re apologizing?” He interrupted. “Is it for being so damn stubborn about clueing me in to what’s going on?”
“Ha ha.” Nora replied dryly. “No. It’s for my note.”

“Nora...”

“Nick, I was a coward. I’m sorry...” Nora trailed off. Her fingers snuck beneath his trench coat to gently caress the bare skin above his belt, “...I'm sorry that I couldn't face you in person. It wasn’t my finest moment, I’ll admit that.”

“No doll, it wasn’t.” Nick agreed breathlessly as Nora’s hands traveled beneath his pants to run her fingers along the warm paneling of his pelvis. “So what else do you want?”

Nora’s coy smirk turned absolutely won-ton. “I want those bigoted assholes like Max Loken to know that a synth is fucking me.”

Nick’s breath hitched in his chest at the intoxicating combination of her fury and her conviction. Hell, he had no idea who this Max Loken guy was but he’d knew enough bigots in his life to understand. As the old adage said: once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.

He untucked the long, grey and blue Institute tunic from her linen pants and unbuttoned the shirt with deft fingers. She wore a navy blue tank top beneath it but had no bra on. The outline of her breasts and pebbled nipples begged for his touch.

“You’re -- ah -- a little exposed there, doll.” He stuttered.

“What can I say? It was laundry day and my undergarments are in the wash.” Nora said and began working at his own buttons of his dress shirt.

Nick’s fingers untied the drawstring that held up her linen pants and then tentatively reached down the front of them. Sure enough, his fingers were met with soft hair and delicious wetness rather than cloth panties. They both groaned and Nora unintentionally bucked her hips into his hand.

“No...Nick. Not like this. I--I want us to be together like we were at the Red Rocket” She whimpered and withdrew his hand from her pants.

“I dunno if I can wait that long, doll.” He murmured. “I’ve wanted to hear you whimper my name again ever since then.”

“I -- I don’t know if I can keep my voice to a whimper.” Nora’s voice took on a wanting panting quality that tipped Nick over the edge.

“Screaming it is then.” He growled and shirked her pants off her hips and peeled the tank top over her head. She had never been disrobed so quickly in her life.

Nick picked Nora up into his arms like she weighed nothing and kicked his shoes off as he carried her to the bed.

“Nick, you’re still dressed!” She half complained and half squealed as he set her onto the bed and crawled over the top of her. “I want you naked!”

“Not right now.” He growled. “This first round is about you.” and he crushed his lips onto hers.

Nora shuddered in pleasure, her skin prickling delightfully where Nick’s synthetic skin met hers. She returned his kiss with gusto. Tongues and teeth clashed and Nora heard moaning but couldn’t recall if it was from her or Nick. From his dominant position over her, she began working him out of his trench coat and threw the large, heavy thing onto the floor. Nora broke away first,
desperately gulping down air, forgetting the fact that Nick didn’t technically have to breathe.

“You alright, doll?” He whispered into her ear.

She nodded, “I’m wonderful, just slightly woozy. Lack of air and all that. Though I suppose there’s worse ways to die.”

“There are easier ways to get to heaven, doll. Mind if I show you?”

Nora guffawed at his line and stroked his face, gently tracing around the tears in his jaw and neck.

“D’you get to come with me?” She asked.

“This is a one-way trip for you, doll. But don’t worry, I’ll catch the next one. You do owe me that apology”

His intact hand cupped her right breast and worried the pad of his thumb over her erect nipple. She exhaled quickly at the electrical shock that traveled from their point of contact down to her stomach.

She forgot how good his hands felt. She sighed as he cupped the weight of her breasts in his hands and kneaded the supple flesh until she became putty in his hands.

“Use your mouth too. Please.” She begged.

Nick’s kisses traveled along her jaw, down her neck and ended at the start of her modest cleavage. His teeth gently grazed over the sensitive nerves before laving over the pebbled flesh with his tongue. His other hand firmly rolled the other nipple between his thumb and forefinger, the slight pain mingled with her building pleasure and it was exquisite.

“Yes! Oh, yes!” She sighed. Her encouragement spurred Nick onward. His touches became almost too eager and incessant and her hands flew to his.

“Touch me lower.” She urged.

Nick obeyed and adjusted himself so he was kneeling off to Nora’s side. His skeletal hand was gently intertwined with hers, and held her hand against the pillow. If the metal joints and thin tubes and chords bothered her, Nora didn’t mention it.

His other hand traveled between her breasts, down her stomach, and settled just above the part in her slit. His fingers gently tickled the short public hair that adorned her vulva. He could feel the heat and the wetness that radiated from her and they both groaned in satisfaction when he slipped his middle finger into her.

“Dammit, more...” She groaned and bucked her hips up into the air.

Nick chuckled and kissed her again. The kiss was searing but brief. “More what?”

“God. Nick ...” Nora trailed off with another needy whimper but saw that Nick was grinning as she writhed beneath him. He slowly inserted his index finger and turned his hand so his fingers could tease the rough patch of flesh that sat a couple of inches inside of her. The feeling was strange but pleasurable, but she wanted the immediate lighting reaction from clitoral stimulation, and here Nick seemed content to have her spontaneously combust from his teasing.

“Y-you’re a bastard.” She half moaned and half sighed. “Stop teasing me Nick.”
“Patience, doll. I’m not teasing you. I think you’ll enjoy this.” He murmured and nipped at her ear.

His two fingers stroked inside of her but they teased in an upward “come hither” motion. And that’s when she felt something shift inside her. Nora was lost in her pleasure before she could even recognize that her climax was baring down on her like a freight train.

The arousal that pooled in her stomach and loins seemed to heat up her core. Her skin felt flushed and Nora felt sweat slide down her calf muscles. Nick’s ministrations and lovingly aggressive strokes sped up, and he’d occasionally slide his thumb across her clit which sent an electric jolt through her heart.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her mouth fell slack. She was going to cum, but she couldn’t get enough air to warn Nick.

“Oh God, Nick --” She choked out.

“Go on, doll. Let go. I’ve got you. Trust me.” His voice sounded so far away as Nora’s orgasm approached like an oncoming storm.

Nora heard and felt a rush of liquid leaking from her. Her rational mind knew what was happening, although she had a hard time believing it was happening to her, but her primal mind roared at her to fall into the pleasure no matter what happened.

“Yes doll. Come for me.” Nick urged. “You’re so damn beautiful like this.”

The tensing coil in her abdomen finally snapped and she felt her entire core push into Nick’s waiting fingers.

“NICK!” She wailed.

Her voice seemed to echo off the walls as her pelvis canted upwards in one last greedy attempt to chase after the unbearable pleasure that twisted through her body.

She lost all sense of time and awareness. She didn’t feel Nick’s other hand gently caressing her sweat-slicked outer thigh, nor could she determine what Nick was saying to her. Her own lips were moving but she didn’t know what she was saying. The feeling of complete and total loss was intoxicating.

She let herself float through the ether of her afterglow. Her body felt heavy, almost like she was swimming in a pool with her clothes on, or maybe she just really had to pee now.

“Doll?” Nick’s voice asked a little louder. “Talk to me.”

She felt his metal hand bush her face and she rolled into his touch. A smile played at her lips as the world came back into focus.

“Nick.” She murmured.

“Hey.” He chuckled and kissed her forehead.

“W-what the fuck did you do to me?” She asked.

He chuckled and slid down so he was laying against Nora’s flushed body. “Well...the cases that have been coming through the agency have been quick open and shut ones which has left me a lot of free time to read.”
“What d’you mean read? What the hell are you reading that told you to do that?” Nora asked. She blinked a few times upon opening her eyes. She was exhausted and damp everywhere, but she felt sated.

Nick grinned at her question. “Piper gave me a few books as a Christmas present. She’s always done it, actually. There were the usual classics that she salvaged from a nearby bookstore: *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*, but one of the books in that pile was more risqué then I was used to.”

“What was the book called?”

Nick shifted uncomfortably at her side. “It was -- ah -- it was called *The Joy of Sex*.”

The laughter that erupted from Nora’s chest was so violent and powerful that it hurt her stomach. She let her head fall back against the pillow as she became wracked with full body tremors of pure mirth.

Once she pulled herself together long enough, she rolled onto her side and cupped Nick’s face with her hands.

“Are you done laughing at my expense?” He asked bitterly. “You know, I’m still learning about all of this.” He gestured between them. “I was never given the whole birds and the synthetic bees talk. Piper’s gift might’ve been crass, but --”

“Nick, I’m not laughing at you!” Nora urged. “No. Damn! I mean, the gift is kind of weird. I’m not sure if I could ever look at her now without blushing, but leave it to Piper to not beat around the bush.”

“Was that a pun?” Nick asked dryly.

Nora snickered. She couldn’t help herself. “Well, thanks to her...you did beat around my bush.”

“Nora!”

She cackled and climbed out of bed. “Nick, relax. It was hot. I’ve never felt like that with anyone before. Thank you.”

He sighed, “I’ll admit that seeing you like that was a gift of sorts too.”

Nora blushed and turned to kiss him. Her kiss was languid and soft which was a nice contrast to their recent foray into the rough and passionate.

“Why don’t you go clean up and I’ll strip the sheets.” Nick said.

Nora walked over to the panel on the wall. The screen showed a red box that said “LOCKED” but Nora pressed a few buttons on the keypad and then spoke into the intercom.

“Can I get a clean set of bedsheets please?” Nora asked.

“Right away Director.” A robotic Gen-2 voice replied.

“I hope those synths pushing the laundry cart are discrete and don’t ask too many questions.” Nick said.

“They won’t if I ask them not to.” Nora replied. “Being Director does have its perks. I think it would be a change of pace after what they’re use to. Asking for discretion after a satisfying love
making session is far less evil than hiding the existence of a synth husband and child.”

“A synth child?” Nick asked.

Nora sighed. The pleasant fuzz of her orgasm had left and the numbness was beginning to return. “Like I said, I have a lot to get off my chest.”

“And I’ll be here.” Nick said. “Go on, take care of yourself and I’ll see to the bed.”

Nora nodded. She grabbed her clothes from the floor and walked into the bathroom. The glass wall that separated the bathroom was made with frosted and opaque. If he was human, he’d only be able to see the vague shapes and outlines of a person inside. But Nick’s synth optics could look through the obstruction as though he was looking through a window. The sight of Nora showering was too good to pass up.

As the water cascaded down her bare back and over her buttocks, Nick thought back to their tryst at the Red Rocket. He never forgot how Nora felt against him, slick and warm, and the thought stirred something within him.

He slipped his intact hand beneath his pants and cupped himself but the feeling didn’t invoke the same sort pleasure that he had experienced when Nora was gyrating against him or when she touched him. At best, all he felt was a minor tickle or twinge akin to feeling the need to sneeze.

He withdrew his hand from his pants with a regretful sigh and simply watched Nora’s movements like a voyeur until the door slid open and a Gen-2 synth came in with a bundle of clean sheets.

“Oh um…” Nick said and stood quickly. The Gen-2’s face was unexpressive as he handed Nick the bundle of sheets.

“These are for the Director. She requested them.” He said in a mono-toned voice.

“T-thank you.” He said. “I’m Nick by the way.”

The Gen-2 synth nodded in acknowledgement. “Please let the night crew know if you require anything else.”

With that, the synth turned around and walked back to the laundry cart that was waiting in the hallway.

Nick shuddered at the uncanniness. Although he was still built like a Gen-2, he most certainly felt like he was far and beyond something different altogether. He once thought that he was just a Gen-2 with an overactive imagination, but now Nick was thankful that he had been gifted with the ability to have an independent thought.

When he heard the water shut off and the toilet flush, Nick stripped the bed sheet off the bed. He grinned when he saw the damp spot on the bed sheet; it was the only evidence that anything untoward happened, and it was a memory that he saved in his memory banks for a rainy day.

He put the sheets next to the door and made up the bed as Nora walked back out with a towel wrapped around her head. She wore a long white t-shirt that had the CIT logo printed across the chest, and the hem of the shirt barely touched her knees.

When Nora climbed onto the bed, Nick caught an eyeful of her now bare vulva.

“Y-you shaved?” He asked, his voice was more hoarse than he intended.
Nora smirked. The lust was rekindled in her eyes. “You gave me the best climax of my life and I didn’t get to touch you. I don’t think that’s fair. Take off your pants and lay on your back.”

Nick gasped at the change in her tone. Her voice was demanding still, but there was an undercurrent of dominance that he appreciated.

He complied without question and left his pants near the foot of the bed. He had a strong desire to move his hands in front of his bare pelvis, but Nora shook her head.

“Take off your shirt and hat but keep the tie on.” She ordered.

Nick obeyed and sat on the side of the bed. Nora looked at him hungrily and gently pushed him back onto the mattress. He saw her pale leg swing over to straddle him and he sighed once Nora’s sex kissed his.

“Doll...” He groaned. The smoothness of her on him felt exquisite.

Nora giggled and undid his tie and then tied it around his eyes like a blindfold.

“It’s your turn now.” She purred. “You better be ready Nick Valentine. I have a lot to apologize for.”

Nick held Nora against his bare chest. The warmth of her back was pleasant and her skin felt like velvet against his thick synthetic plating. He listened to her steady breathing as she slept in his arms. From the looks of it, this was one of the first full night sleeps that Nora had gotten since arriving in the Institute. In her sleep, she looked peaceful but ragged.

He carefully brushed back a piece of stray hair that had fallen into her face and tucked the strand behind her ear. Since he last saw her in Sanctuary Hills, she had cut her uneven hair into one length and now all of her beautiful brown hair fell tousled around her cheeks and her chin. He liked the short-haired look on her; she looked like one of the vintage Pre-War movie stars, the kind of ones that Humphrey Bogart and Gene Kelly would play opposite of.

After their second bout of love-making, Nora curled into Nick’s chest and told him everything without too much coaxing. He knew that bottling everything up would eventually cause something to explode, and Nora’s had been bottling up a lot of frustration, fear, and anxiety.

He gleaned what he could from their infrequent messages and from her small, subtle hints, but that didn’t stop him from worrying that Nora was trying to be responsible for too much, too fast.

She told him about Dr. Secord’s constant antagonism, especially in matters synth-related, which delayed Nora from fulfilling her promise to Desdemona to start releasing synths on a regular schedule. She spoke about the impending Brotherhood threat and her fear that the wasteland could never accept the Institute due to their inflexible and naturally bigoted ways, but conversely, opening their doors to the outside world would make them a prime target for Raider and Gunner gangs looking for a lucrative score.

Nora talked about synth Shaun and Nate. Shaun’s existence was news to Nick, but her discussion about Nate put the man’s suffering into a more nuanced perspective.

“I was never the type of person my son wanted me to be.” Nora lamented. “My personal romantic relationships were deemed unnatural so I was given a suitable replacement with Nate. I failed to raise my son, yet he gave me a second chance to try again. I feel like he wants me to be eternally grateful, but now I’m saddled with a job I never wanted, a husband who I can never love, and a son
who I don’t want to care for.”

Lastly, Nora talked about Hancock. Nora hadn’t cried when she talked about everything else on her mind, but when she broached the subject of Hancock’s amnesia, small tears trickled down her face as she stared without really looking at anything in particular.

“I feel like what happened to him was my fault.” Nora murmured.

“It’s not, doll. Hancock’s been involved in fights before. He knew the risks about leaving Goodneighbor for too long.” Nick replied.

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Nora said. “I’m talking about what Mama Murphy had said before she died.”

Nora’s heart thudded in her chest. Nick had seen Mama Murphy convulse, and he heard her claim that she was a Psyker, but Nora never got a chance to actually sit down and talk about what was really bothering her the most. This was one thing that had no easy answer; Hell, Nora didn’t know if she even believed in prophecies.

“You’re talking about the prophecy you heard.” Nick said. It was a statement instead of a question. After all, he had heard the same prophecy too.

Nora’s voice echoed Mama Murphy’s ominous tone, “Of the three who love you, one will forget you, one will cease to exist, and one will perish with your name last on his lips.”

“And you think that Hancock was the one who will forget you?” Nick stated.

Nora nodded. “He has. Before I came here, I snuck into Goodneighbor and saw him. Dr. Amari told me that he didn’t remember who I was. She said that his short-term memory might not return. And -- And --,” Nora bit her shuddering lip and took a steadying breath, “-- And I left him there hoping that the amnesia would keep him protected if something bad happened to the Institute or to me. After all, he can’t be hurt if he doesn’t remember me.”

“Doll...” Nick began. Everything in his mind screamed at him to hide the truth from Nora, even if just for one night, but he knew he could never live with himself if he lied to Nora about Hancock.

Nora looked up at him questioningly. Her green eyes were red-rimmed and watery, she looked so pathetic that Nick pulled her closer into him and kissed her forehead.

“Hancock’s been getting better.” He said finally. “He seems to be remembering more than what Dr. Amari’s been expecting.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Well, I went to Goodneighbor on Christmas Day. Partly to check up on him, but also to tail a guy who was a suspect in a missing person’s case.” Nick thought back to that day and how Hancock revealed the truth with hushed skepticism. The ghoul didn’t believe that Nora was actually real until Nick confirmed that she was a real person. “And he asked about you.”

Nora pulled back in shock. “What! How is that possible? Dr. Amari seemed doubtful that he’d regain his short term memories.”

“I don’t think Dr. Amari knows this particular detail. He seemed reluctant to tell me the truth, but the way he explained it was that he would see you around Goodneighbor or he’d hear your voice, but he didn’t remember who you were. He only remembers your name and that you must’ve been
important to him at some point.”

“So he doesn’t know that you and I and him ... That we ... “ Nora faltered.

“He didn’t know until I told him.” Nick replied.

“You told him about us?”

Nick nodded. He remembered the ghoul’s perplexed but satisfied expression when Nick told him that Nora was his girlfriend, but he also remembered how that expression turned into a gobsmacked look of both disbelief and amazement when Nick mentioned his involvement in their relationship.

Nora kissed Nick. He could taste the salt from her tears, but her kiss was warm and pleasant nonetheless.

“You amaze me.” Nora whispered, her breath tickled Nick’s chin.

“Thanks doll. But may I ask why?”

Nora looked at him. Her gratitude and pride was evident. “You could’ve told Hancock that I didn’t exist, or that I was just a drug hallucination, or any other plausible story that underwrote the relationship that we had... but you didn’t. You told him the truth.”

“I’m a man of the law. I usually try to be truthful.” Nick pointed out.

“Even if that meant you had to share me?” Nora asked.

“You cut me to the quick here, doll. I did come up with that idea. I’d rather share you than have none of you. Besides, Hancock can make up for my ... deficiencies.”

Nora punched his bare arm. “Nick Valentine. You are not deficient in any way. I would’ve hoped my apology would’ve made you see that.”

He knew that she was right. The feeling of Nora’s bare sex rubbing against him was just as gratifying as it was when they first tried it, but Nick felt there was something sorely missing.

“Doll, I’m not trying to wallow in self-pity here, but try and see it from my perspective. I have the memories of a red blooded American man who most certainly wasn’t a eunuch. Call it memory, drive, or just plain instinct, but I don’t feel complete without...it.”

Nora considered what he said. Although she couldn’t relate on quite the same level, she knew how much of an insecurity this was for him. Then an idea struck.

“Dr. Binet might be able to fix that.” Nora said aloud.

“What?” Nick asked flatly.

Nora shrugged, “I’ve arranged for you to talk with him tomorrow. I assumed you’d have a lot of questions that you’d like to get answered. You could always broach the subject with him. Of all of the Institute’s scientists, he’s the most knowledgeable about synth physiology. I mean, all Gen-3s are anatomically correct, so it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

Nick wrinkled his nose in distaste at the idea. Granted, the man was a doctor, but he didn’t exactly want to start off his line of tough questioning with “Can you give me a penis?”
“I’ll think about it.” He replied and kissed Nora lightly on the lips. “Now get some sleep.”

Nora rolled over so her back was against his chest. She held onto both of his hands as they encircled her like a protective cage. She was asleep within minutes while Nick brooded about what Nora had said.

He did have a lot of questions for the good doctor, but he also thought back to his and Sturges’s conversation back in Sanctuary Hills. Although the conversation about how to feel sexual pleasure was awkward for both men, the conversation was life changing. After Nora had made him climax that night, he felt so much more ... human. If the Institute had given him the capacity to feel sexual pleasure, then why did they feel the need to withhold the primary tool used to capitalize on that pleasure?

Either the people in the Institute had made a grave error in Nick’s programming, or they were unbelievably cruel.

He just didn’t know which of those options was worse.

Chapter End Notes

The alternate title for this chapter is "Nick has penis envy."
Chapter Notes

Fallout 3 spoilers ahead...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6 -- Doubts, Answers, and Miracles

Aboard the Prydwen, Scribe Haylen paced along the ship’s hull. Shipping containers hid her from prying eyes; after all, privacy was a difficult thing to come by when stuck aboard a flying aircraft with over five hundred other people aboard. She did one last perimeter check before squatting down behind a large yellow shipping container. She hoped the Prydwen’s loud idle humming would mask her voice.

Scribe Haylen had a problem, and it had been building and gnawing at her until she could do nothing else but grab the portable holotape recorder from Proctor Quinlan’s office and spill her heart out and then destroy the evidence later. This wasn’t a problem that she could go to someone else with. Nobody aboard would understand, and she had caused enough trouble already by speaking out.

Her trembling hand pressed the record button on the machine and she placed the microphone close to her mouth.

She took a deep, shuddering breath and then said, "Field Scribe Haylen, personal log entry 324A."

She paused, only for a half second to listen for footsteps that might've betrayed any eavesdroppers and then said,

“I'm starting to wonder if joining the Brotherhood of Steel was a good choice. I originally signed up seeking protection and comradeship but I'm worried that I've traded away a bit of my humanity in the process. The Brotherhood's message of hope for the future is idealistic and noble but their methods leave a lot to be desired. The -- the leadership -- ” she stumbled briefly due to her nerves, “-- seems especially misguided. Instead of diplomacy, they wield violent confrontation to exert control. Despite all that, I've avoided the majority of the fighting, killing only when I have to, by following the career path of a field scribe. I suppose only time will tell how long I can stand the sight of spilled blood over my own moral fiber."

She pressed the stop button on the holotape recorder, ejected the tape, and pocketed the evidence before stepping out from behind the shipping crates.

Her heart thudded in her chest. She kept the holotape recorder hidden behind her left leg as she walked, but as she approached the metal staircase she saw what she had been dreading.

“Scribe Haylen.” A deep voice said.

Her heart plummeted. “P--Paladin Danse.” She stammered

Danse wasn’t in his usual Power Armor. The tight fitting orange jumpsuit that all Knights and Paladins wore clung to his body in a way that Haylen both loathed and appreciated. He descended
the metal staircase far quieter than a man of his impressive size had a right to and stood before Haylen.

“What are you doing down here?” He asked in an even voice. His thick eyebrow quirked at the holotape recorder that poked out from behind her leg but he said nothing else.

“I -- um...”

“Haylen...”

She sighed in defeat. Nothing could get past Danse. “I -- I was just blowing off some steam, sir. Honestly, I didn’t mean anything by it. After what happened at the Cambridge Police Station and after being stuck on this ship instead of being out in the field with the rest of the Scribes, I just needed to vent. I was going to destroy the tape as soon as I got back to my bunk.”

“Does Proctor Quinlan know you have his holotape recorder?” He asked.

“No sir.” Haylen replied.

Danse’s face fell and he sighed. “Haylen I know you’re having a hard time right now. Ever since the loss of our recon squad and Worwick’s death you haven’t been the same soldier,” His voice softened. “or the same person.”

Haylen closed her eyes trying to forget Worwick’s pleading eyes as both he and Danse demanded that she end it for him. She knew she had done the right thing when she gave him the overdose. As he slipped away peacefully and as Haylen tried to hold back her tears, she saw what war was really about. This was not the type of life expected when she joined up with the Brotherhood back in the Capital Wasteland. War really was Hell.

“I -- I know that sir.” She replied hollowly. “I’m trying.”

Danse nodded. “I know you are Haylen. You are a brilliant Scribe and a valuable soldier. Having doubts about a mission is common, but Elder Maxson will not tolerate dissent among the ranks. Not while we are so close to cleansing the Commonwealth of the Institute and their abominations. So I suggest you destroy that holotape like you said before the Elder hears you critiquing his leadership.”

Haylen winced. So Danse had overheard her then, she thought.

“I didn’t mean it, sir.” She said more emphatically. “Like I said, I was just blowing off steam.”

He nodded in sympathy. “Your outspokenness is a trait I admire in you Haylen.”

She blushed at his compliment but couldn’t meet his eye.

“But don’t let that virtue become a vice.” He scolded, “If you want to effect change, do your job well like you have been doing. Trust in Elder Maxson’s vision for us and for the Commonwealth. Our Elder isn’t wrong.”

Haylen was forced to nod. That was where she and Paladin Danse differed. Elder Maxson was many things, but a hero wasn’t one of them. Unlike the rest of the soldiers aboard, Scribe Haylen couldn’t kiss his ass. She respected him and obeyed him because that was the duty of being a Brotherhood soldier, but she could never agree with his vision.

Paladin Danse stepped towards her and placed a large hand on her shoulder. “Haylen, sacrifice is
just part of what being a Brotherhood soldier is about. It doesn’t make it easier, but know that there are other people here to listen. You can always come to Knight Rhys or myself. Stealing Proctor Quinlan’s technology isn’t necessary.”

Haylen stifled a snort. Talking to Knight Rhys about anything other than the Brotherhood’s glory was about as thrilling as talking to a wall. She couldn’t believe that she once had a crush on the man. But their six month marooning at the Cambridge Police Station straightened that out quickly.

“I appreciate that Paladin.” She replied. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He nodded and removed his hand. The warmth of his touch lingered on her shoulder like a sunburn.

“Now go and put the holotape recorder back before Proctor Quinlan puts you on latrine duty. You know how particular he gets about people touching his stuff.” Danse half-heartedly scolded.

Scribe Haylen saluted the Paladin and snuck back off into the darkness. Danse sighed and ran his hand through his cropped hair. He had a soft spot for Scribe Haylen. Although Knight Rhys was the one who originally sponsored her membership into the Brotherhood, Danse was her immediate superior which meant that he was her responsibility too.

Normally, her actions were of Brotherhood caliber: she was quick witted, intelligent, and far braver than a Scribe should be. He had seen her charge into a Super Mutant encampment with nothing but her gun and her nerve to protect her. She was the type of woman he admired, but her increased moments of insubordination concerned him.

Paladin Danse walked back up the metal stairs climbing the three flights that led to his private quarters. As the highest ranking Paladin, he was held to a higher standard than most and that expectation extended to those who served under him -- including Scribe Haylen.

Her outburst during Elder Maxson’s debriefing after the Mass Fusion debacle was just the first in a long line of recent infractions. If she wasn’t careful, she’d be looking at a written censure and a demotion back to the rank of Initiate.

Danse opened the bottle of whisky on his desk and poured himself three fingers full of amber liquid. After years serving in the Brotherhood, he was adept at compartmentalizing his feelings; he had to if he wanted to do perform amid the terror and death that he saw every day. But something about Haylen’s behavior nagged at him. The words he overheard echoed in his mind: Instead of diplomacy, they wield violent confrontation to exert control. Danse would never admit to this, not even to Haylen herself, but perhaps she was right.

Even after the tragedies of Elder Lyons’s and Sarah Lyons’s death at the hands of the Enclave, the Brotherhood of Steel was still in a position to be diplomatic. They once had the support from Rivet City, his home, and they could’ve at least protected Rivet City from the Enclave or worked collaboratively with them to protect Madison Li’s valuable scientific experiments, but the Brotherhood, lead by young Knight Maxson, chose to cannibalize the aircraft carrier for parts to build the Prydwen.

His successor, and his own commanding officer, Paladin Krieg had him out on an extermination mission at the Adams Air Force Base when it had happened. He wasn’t there to see his beloved home torn apart, the Rivet City residents were either forced to either flee into the DC ruins or join the Brotherhood. He was at least thankful that his best friend, Cutler, didn’t have to hear about the news. He had been dead for a full week by the time Danse arrived back to the skeletal remains of Rivet City.
So of course he could understand Haylen’s doubts. He had doubts of his own then. Like Haylen, he had been younger and far more inflexible in his own values. It took him a long time to see that the Brotherhood had done Rivet City a mercy. Like the bullet that ended Cutler’s life after he had been mutated into one of those abominations, the Brotherhood had consumed Rivet City so that many others would have a place to live among their ranks. With the Citadel gone, the Adams Air Force Base, and by extension the Prydwen, was the last bastion of hope for humanity before they were forced to abandon the Capital Wasteland to its fate.

The burning liquor warmed him and pulled a flush of blood to his cheeks. His dark eyes fixated over the Power Armor helmet that sat on his desk. That helmet, along with his suit, represented everything that he valued: strength, loyalty, duty, and honor. How could the Brotherhood be wrong when those were the qualities they lived and breathed?

No. Haylen needed to see this in her own time, he thought. She was still young and he hoped that in a few months or a couple of years that she’d see the Brotherhood was right in the end.

“Paladin Danse.” Elder Maxson’s voice echoed through the Prydwen’s PA system. “Please report to the bridge for your briefing on your next mission.”

Danse gulped down the remainder of the whisky and shuddered. He took the Power Armor helmet from his desk and climbed into his suit which was sitting in the frame.

“Ad Victoriam.” He murmured and slipped the helmet over his head.

“Please! We need to get back on task.” Dr. Li snapped.

Nora and Dr. Secord glared at each other from across the meeting room table. The meeting hadn’t gone five minutes before Dr. Secord had baited Nora with a jibe about lowering herself to sleeping with a synth and Nora had retaliated with colorful remarks of her own.

“Yes, you're right Dr. Li.” Nora said, using all of her self-control to keep her tongue in check. “I’m sorry. Let’s get back to talking about the Brotherhood’s latest movements.”

“Thank you.” Dr. Li replied wearily. She turned on a projector that was sitting on the meeting room table and dimmed the lights.

“These images were taken by our remote Gen-1 synths. Their optical functions can send pictures and brief video recordings back to us.” She said.

The first image up on the wall was of a six man team of Brotherhood soldiers shooting at something off towards the Charles River. Nora assumed that it was the synth that was taking the picture because the CIT ruins could be clearly seen in the background.

“Our synths have recorded eight teams that have investigated various areas of Institute importance in the Commonwealth. They’ve sent two of those eight teams to scope out the ruins; it’s no doubt that they are trying to find a way in through the old college itself. The other six teams have been seen at the Boston Mayoral Shelter, ArcJet Systems, Mahkra Fishpacking Plant, Malden Center, University Point, and Sandy Coves Convalescent Home.

Dr. Li pressed a button on a small remote and a collage of pictures came up showing each location.

“The first four locations are areas that the Institute is currently using for salvage, especially valuable Pre-War tech and aluminum, but the last two locations are particularly problematic for us.”
“How so?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li sighed, “Like the Broken Mask Incident in Diamond City, the Institute’s involvement in the events at University Point weren’t exactly our finest moments. A young woman had found some old research on improving a nuclear reactor's efficiency and wanted to sell the information to help feed her family. She sent word to some traders but Kellogg got to her first.”

Nora’s heart dropped. “So she’s dead?”

Dr. Li’s shrewd eyes met hers. “They’re all dead. Kellogg wiped the town off the map. He sent Institute synths in by the dozens to massacre everything and everyone.”

“What did Kellogg want with the research?”

“He didn’t want it.” Dr. Li replied. “Father did. When Kellogg told Father what the town was hiding, he ordered Kellogg to retrieve it by any means necessary. Our own reactor was nearing the end of its life and this was before we discovered that the beryllium agitator existed in the Mass Fusion Building. We needed to prolong our reactor and Father thought that this research would help show us how.”

“And did it?” Nora asked.

“No. Kellogg never found the research. The young woman in question didn’t have it on her body when she died and our synths have searched that area from top to bottom but we still haven’t found the disk.” Dr. Li replied.

“Of course. After all, the Institute has done horrible things in the past. Why should this one moment of genocide matter among all of the other sins?” Nora said, sarcasm leaking into her voice. Every time she learned more about the Institute’s past, the less confident she felt that she could really turn the Institute away from their path of evil.

“I don’t recall you caring all that much when you wiped Covenant off the map.” Dr. Secord sneered.

“I wouldn’t have had to do that if Ayo wasn’t trying to manipulate my position as Father’s Courser to get into my pants.” Nora snapped back.

“I guess these decisions aren’t so black and white when you think about your own sins, Mother.” Dr. Secord replied snootily.

“That’s enough! Both of you.” Dr. Li snapped and then flipped to the next picture.

This one was a picture of a picture. An enhanced zoomed in image of a polaroid picture sat on the wall. The polaroid held a picture of a large robot that -- based on the scale of the people gathered at its feet -- stood at least thirty-five or forty feet tall.

“The Brotherhood has been combing through University Point for the disk that we lost so they can bring this thing --” she gestured at the picture “-- back online.”

“What is that?” Dr. Holdren asked in thinly veiled amazement.

“That is Liberty Prime.” Dr. Li said. “It was constructed in 2277 and it fought in the battle over the Jefferson Memorial against the Enclave. It was destroyed at the Satellite Relay Station south-west of the DC ruins but managed to be salvaged by the Brotherhood of Steel before they fled to the Commonwealth.”
“You seem to have an expert’s knowledge about this monstrosity.” Dr. Holdren replied. “Why’s that?”

Nora saw the troubled look that passed over Dr. Li’s face and remembered her stories about her past involvement with the Brotherhood in the Capital Wasteland.

“You helped them build it, didn’t you?” Nora said.

Dr. Li didn’t move. Her face looked drained but her eyes held a defiant fire that Nora hadn’t seen before. “Yes. Like you Nora, I was manipulated. They utilized my knowledge and my skills to build a weapon of war. After the Jefferson Memorial fell to the Enclave, I realized that I had been used to create a pawn in their never-ending game war games, and I fled to the Commonwealth.”

“So its your fault it’s here now?” Dr. Secord sneered.

Dr. Li’s eyes snapped to hers and the same seething anger that she had tried to temper in Nora flashed to the surface.

“You have NO idea what I’ve been through. The kind of Hell the Brotherhood put me through. The kind of Hell I had to go through just to make it here.” Dr. Li seethed.

“Well that’s just great. This is why Father should’ve never let you join us. Did he know about your little Brotherhood friends before he welcomed you here with open arms?” Dr. Secord asked. “Or did you hide that little detail waiting for just the right moment to strike.”

Nora was about to interject with her own biting comment but Dr. Li leaned over the table. For a woman of her middle age and her slight build, her physical presence wasn’t intimidating but the tone that came from her voice cut through the permeable tension like a knife.

“Oh, spare me Alana.” She spat. “While you were fraternizing with Ayo hoping he’d promote you to a scientist position on account of your barely legal assets, I was going through my own special kind of Hell you could only imagine. I left the Brotherhood ten years ago and I never looked back. Now I’m here to help us all figure out a way to stop these bastards from destroying another home of mine!”

“All right, all right.” Nora interrupted and physically stepped around the table to place herself between the two women. Dr. Holdren and Dr. Filmore looked at Nora wide-eyed and expectantly and she wondered whether her son had to deal with this much drama when he was the Director.

“Let’s all take a fifteen minute break and cool down. Dr. Binet should be able to join us by then. I think he’d like to be clued in on these findings.”

The room hummed like an electric storm as the four scientists decided what to do.

“That’s a good idea.” Dr. Li replied. She pulled on her doctor’s jacket and grabbed her empty ceramic coffee cup.

“I’ll walk with you to get some coffee.” Dr. Filmore replied and followed the other woman out of the room.

Dr. Holdren -- the man who use to be Nora’s second biggest rival voice during their Directorate meetings -- looked grateful. “I -- um -- I’ll go check on some of the hydroponics. Fifteen minutes you say?”

Nora nodded mutely. Dr. Holdren quickly left the room which left only one other scientist.
She glanced over at Dr. Secord who met her eyes with a sneer, but the act only lasted a second before she let out an exasperated groan and pushed herself away from the table.

“If Dr. Binet can skip these meetings to talk to your synth boyfriend, then I don’t see why I have to be here.” She sneered.

Dr. Secord huffed and stomped off down the hallway while Nora sank back into a chair. Liberty Prime’s emotionless face glowed in the black and white photograph. She imagined how much destruction something like that could actually do.

If the Brotherhood gets this monstrosity back online, she thought, then we’re all doomed.

Meanwhile Nick Valentine sat with his back towards the observation window that overlooked the Robotics lab. His stomach churned as he thought about how these synths were actually being made. He wasn’t squeamish by any means -- living in the Commonwealth had shown him more carnage and horror than he ever remembered seeing as a cop in Boston -- but witnessing the actual act of creating a synthetic humanoid made him feel like he was looking into the work of God.

It downright unnerved him.

Dr. Binet sat facing him. The man’s long fingers were folded and his hands were resting on his crossed leg. His face was neutral, although he did look at Nick like he was some sort of perverse ant farm when Nora first introduced him to the synth detective. Despite Dr. Binet’s overly eager interest in Nick, the man seemed genuine.

“So Nick,” Dr. Binet began, “I’ll be the first to admit that finally meeting you has been a great honor. Your ... creation ... was a bit before my time, but I have a lot that I need to thank you for. My work wouldn’t be possible without you. I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

Nick nodded politely, “I do. Or I did. But I’ll confess that I’m not use to the tables being turned here. Usually I’m the one asking the questions.”

Dr. Binet grinned, “My ... the way you talk. It is remarkable how much of Nick actually transferred.”

Nick rubbed his intact hand on his pant leg. He desperately wanted a cigarette but he felt strange lighting up in front of the doctor. Even though Dr. Binet hadn’t been involved with the first couple phases of Project Genesis, smoking in front of him had the same feel as a fifteen year old smoking in front of his parents. It just didn’t seem right.

“So I guess let’s start there. Why give me Nick’s memories?” He asked. “Outta all the people who signed up for that screwy study, why give me a cop’s memories? Did he just draw the short straw that day?”

“When you were created, Dr. Zimmer knew that your creation would help inform our future Gen-3 project. I can’t speak for him, but as I’m sure you’ve read in the notes, most of our early android experiments involved memory experiments with the memories scanned from our U.S. Army volunteers. The first project Zimmer oversaw was our Courser division. Dr. Robert Zimmer piloted the idea when our Gen-1 and Gen-2 synths were being created. If anyone of them malfunctioned, we’d need an advanced synth to send out into the wasteland to bring them back. However Robert’s son, Eugene, took it much further.”

Nick frowned. Why did that name sound familiar. Aside for reading his transcripts in the Project Genesis files, Nick felt like he knew the younger Zimmer in some way. The skin around his wrists
prickled uncomfortably as he tried to seek out the memory.

“If the senior Zimmer was using the U.S. Army’s volunteers to structure his Courser team, then why throw a cop into the mix?” Nick asked. “I can handle myself just fine, but I’m no soldier.”

Dr. Binet shrugged. “I don’t know. I never knew the man well. His son, Eugene Zimmer, took over his father’s work but I fear that it ended up killing him. We haven’t heard from Dr. Zimmer in over ten years; most of us have assumed that he perished in the wastes.”

So that was it, Nick thought. The reason behind his creation lived and possibly died with a missing Institute scientist.

“I know these are probably not the answers you’re looking for.” Dr. Binet replied gently. “I wish I had something more for you. Really, I do. It’s quite possible that your creation was just a way of seeing whether we could implant a full person’s memory into a synth. Consider the value that would have in extending a human’s life.”

“Care to run that by me again?” Nick said. “How would my creation help with that?”

“Your experience showed us that it is capable to download an entire consciousness into a synthetic creation. Granted, your --” Dr. Binet waved his hand as though he was trying to pull the right word from the air. “-- your selective amnesia, shall we say, is probably because of Nick Valentine’s trauma rather than a fault in the memory sequencing process. According to the reports, it took several tries before his memories finally stuck. But with a normal adult person, we’d be able to scan their brain and if they were to die, then we would download that consciousness into a synth doppelganger. It’s a process we’ve gotten close to perfecting, I might add.”

Nick frowned. He knew about the stories of the Institute boogymen kidnapping people in the night and replacing them with synth copies. After all, their illustrious mayor was one of those copies, but...

He sighed and ran his hand over the back of his neck. He felt that the tears in the side of his neck with his fingertips. This body wouldn’t last him forever. He had started feeling his processors slowing down around the fifty year mark, and now that he was pushing a hundred and ten years old, Nick wondered just how long Gen-2 bodies could last.

“Would you be able to do that to me?” Nick asked. Then he added quickly, “I don’t mean now...mind you, but...”

Dr. Binet shook his head. “I’m sorry Nick. I’m not saying that it’s impossible but scanning you right now wouldn’t yield a good transfer. There’s too much of Nick Valentine’s old memories that either didn’t transfer or that you’ve forgotten as your mind makes room for new space. Synth brains are finite, you know.”

Nick nodded. It seemed like a shot in the dark of course but sometimes chasing after those long shots actually worked.

The synth sighed and then broached the topic that bothered him the most. “The files also spoke of another synth who was with me --”

“-- Yes, you must mean DiMA.” Dr. Binet replied.

“Yeah, uh...DiMA.” The name sounded foreign on Nick’s tongue. “Were we close, exactly? I guess since the reports mentioned that DiMA sprung me from this place in the first place, I figured we must’ve been friends or something. If a man ... synth ... is willing to do something like that for
a fella, I’d like to at least thank him.”

“Unfortunately I don’t know what happened to him either. According to the records, his last known whereabouts after breaking you out of the Institute was in some ghoul-run settlement somewhere near Salem. None of our Coursers could track his trail from there, and believe me, they tried. But I do have something you might like to see.”

Dr. Binet rose from the chair and entered a room in the back. Nick heard some rummaging around and then he heard Dr. Binet straining a bit as he lifted something heavy. He walked out of the closet holding a large holotape recorder and set it heavily on the table. A light sheen of dust covered the old wooden container; the thing looked practically antique.

When the scientist removed the lid, Nick saw that a series of twenty-five holotapes sat organized into neat rows next to the large fuzzy microphone. Each holotape was labeled with the date starting from 2177 to 2186.

“DiMA was required to record his thoughts as a way to detail how a human consciousness can form organically. I can’t guarantee that you’ll find anything interesting in here, but perhaps this will give you some closure.” Dr. Binet said.

“I can listen to all of these?” Nick asked skeptically.

Dr. Binet nodded. “Yes. I’ve listened to them all. There’s nothing on these tapes that would be considered confidential information by now. I’ll warn you that the first couple tapes are incomprehensible. DiMA was brand new at the time and his personality matrix was struggling to normalize. He comes off as rather unbalanced. But if you listen to the later tapes, you’ll find that he was quite an intellect.” The man sighed wistfully. “It’s a shame he escaped.”

“Dr. Binet. You are needed in the Directorate meeting room.” Nora’s voice called out over the PA.

“Excuse me.” He said and offered Nick his hand. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you Nick.”

Nick looked at Dr. Binet’s hand for a brief moment and then shook it with his own. His skeletal hand looked alien against the scientist’s and he fought against the urge to pull his hand away in shame.

When the man released his hand, Nick stuffed it into his trench coat, but before Dr. Binet walked out the door Nick interjected, “D’you mind if I smoke in here?”

“Elder Maxson.” A Paladin said breathlessly. “I have urgent news to report. Our scribes uncovered something interesting at University Point.”

Maxson turned to face the Paladin in question. The man’s bleach blond hair was cut close to his scalp. He sported a fat lip and several cuts on his face were still beginning to heal. This Paladin was new, he realized. He had just been recently promoted but Maxson couldn’t remember the exact details.

“Paladin...” His voice trailed off expectantly.

“Paladin Ross, sir. Formally Knight Ross. I served directly under Lancer-Captain Kellis for several years before receiving my promotion.” He said.

Maxson nodded. Yes, he remembered now. Paladin Ross was one of the few Knights promoted on the spot for their victory over at Fort Strong. “Well Paladin Ross, what is the news?”
The man held out a hefty waterproof box to both Elder Maxson and Paladin Danse and opened the lid. Inside the box, was a disk the size of a tea saucer sitting on top of old fabric torn from an Old World flag. The disk was iridescent and metallic. Rainbow hues reflected off the polished surface with each slight tilt of the Paladin’s arms.

“Where did you find this?” Elder Maxson asked.

“One of our Field Scribes found a hidden note in the wreckage written by a woman named Jacq. She hid the research notes at the last minute by anchoring this box off the pier. I think she hoped the Institute would spare her if they searched the place and couldn’t find the research.”

Paladin Danse shook his head in disgust, “And now she paid for that mistake with her life.”

Elder Maxson held the disk in his hands. While it wasn’t as good as the beryllium agitator, having this research was an appropriate alternative to get Liberty Prime back up and running.

“Bring this to Proctor Igrahm. She’ll know what to do with it.” Elder Maxson ordered.

“Yes sir!” The Paladin saluted. “Ad Victoriam!”

“Follow me Danse.” Elder Maxson ordered.

Danse followed the Elder out of the upper deck and down the stairs to Proctor Quinlan’s office. The man had his back turned to them. He was intently reading a message on his terminal; his thin lips mouthed out the words as he read the message to himself. Elder Maxson cleared his throat.

“Oh!” Proctor Quinlan jumped. “Sorry Elder ... uh Paladin Danse. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Are we interrupting?”

“No, I’m just reading through some messages that my scribes intercepted from an unsecured terminal in the Institute. The rest of their network is heavily encrypted and it would take our Scribes years to crack it, but one terminal is off their mainframe -- at least partially that is.”

Elder Maxson’s stoic face twitched to reveal a rare smile. “Can we access the terminal?”

Proctor Quinlan thought for a moment. “Yes, I suppose we could. Not for long, mind you, unless you fancy docking the Prydwen right over the CIT Ruins itself. But I could broadcast a short message and transmit it through the unsecured network, like a virus of sorts.”

“Good.” Elder Maxson replied. “Then do it.”

“What sort of message should I be broadcasting?” Proctor Quinlan asked.

Now Maxson’s smile broadened into a dark, vengeful grin.

“We need Madison Li to be brought back into the fold.” He replied.

Proctor Quinlan scoffed, “And how am I going to do that? The woman would rather die than work with us again.”

“Not if we use the small amount of leverage we have on her.” He replied.

“And what sort of leverage is that?” Proctor Quinlan asked.

“We have her old lover aboard.” Elder Maxson smirked.
Below deck in Senior Scribe Neriah’s laboratory, a white-haired man was strapped to a gurney with leather manacles. A cloth gag cut the corners of his mouth dying the white fabric a slight pink.

“Now now. This won’t hurt too much if you don’t struggle.” Scribe Neriah said as she injected a long needle into his forearm. Sickly green and yellow veins bulged through his pale skin. The smell of fear emanated from his sweat. As the needle entered his arm, Neriah pulled the plunger and withdrew blood that was rusty brown.

She shushed his whimpering and tenderly brushed the dirty, unkempt hair from his forehead.

“You’re doing so well James.” The X-111 compound is working. “Your blood is looking a lot more healthy.”

Small red needle marks littered his left forearm and Neriah wiped at the tiny drop of blood that leaked from the wound with an antiseptic pad.

A Brotherhood scribe pushed James’s gurney out of the sterile operating tent that was erected in the back of the science deck and pushed him into a large cage that Neriah usually reserved for her mole rat experiment.

The mole rat experiment had been a success. Thanks to them, she was able to synthesize more powerful radiation drugs that would eventually replace Rad-X and Rad Away in the field. Now all she needed was to test its effect on a human.

She looked over at James’s weak, shivering form. Before she had been promoted to Senior Scribe, Neriah was one of the chief Scribes who looked into Project Purity to see whether they could even salvage the water purifier. When a Brotherhood team stormed the Jefferson Memorial, they all expected to see James’s body ravaged by radiation, but when they fought through the Enclave’s forces for a second time, they didn’t find his body.

James had survived, and after ten long years, the Brotherhood had finally found him.

Chapter End Notes

Yes. I know James’s death is cannon, but if Colonel Autumn can use his Deus Ex Rad Away to save himself, then it would make sense that a freaking scientist would have a backup plan.

And I don’t plan to travel to either Far Harbor in this fic so I’m sorry. But I figured that we can get some DiMA love in a different way.
Chapter 7 -- The World On Your Shoulders

Nick played the first two holotapes that were in the large box besides the ancient holotape player but the audio was garbled and nearly unintelligible. Even after he ran the sound through his processors to determine if the audio was encoded or encrypted, Nick could only pick out two words: DiMA and human.

The third holotape had a three minute loop where a smooth voice ran through vocabulary words as though he was learning them through oral recitation from a school. Boy. Apple. Cigarette. Institute. America. Abominable. Identification. Individuality. Authoritarianism. The voice would pause after each word. Occasionally the voice would repeat a word that was stumbled over or mispronounced and then start the list over again.

The fourth holotype was a little clearer but the voice sounded chaotic and slightly panicked. The voice spoke quickly and without taking a breath once: I’m DiMA that’s what they tell me but what does that mean am I just another synth or am I something more so much more? Doctors tell me that I am special or that I’m highly intelligent but yet they wont let me join their staff because I’m not like them. I am an abomination. I’m not human. I’m an abomination. Abomination. Abomination…

Nick lit another cigarette before inserting the fifth holotape. This small cartridge had the date labeled on the side in neat black pen and the date read December 21st 2177. Nearly one hundred years had passed since DiMA’s hands had touched the plastic cartridge to record his message. One hundred years, an entire lifetime, now separated Nick from some of his these memories.

When Nick pressed play, he heard DiMA’s smooth voice sound far more stable and self-assured than he had since his last recording.

Audio log number five. My mind is growing heavy with all of the moral variances possible in this world. What does it mean to be good or evil? If I was created then does that mean my morals should reflect those of my creators? What about my own morals? Dr. Zimmer meets with me every night to instruct me on right and wrong, but I still don’t know what to believe. He says that I am programmed to obey humans. Does that mean obedience is a virtue? But what if I commit an act of sin because of my obedience? Dr. Zimmer gave me some books to read. He said they’d give me ‘context’ and educate me about this world, but none of these books illuminate the fundamental question I have. Who am I? What is my purpose in life? What should I do with my existence? Was I created to be a creature that does good or evil? What does good and evil mean?

Audio logs six and seven had the same content as the previous one. But the eighth radio log made Nick’s heart stop.

January 29th 2178. Dr. Zimmer has been secretive about his other experiment that is housed next to me. Right now he simply refers to the synth as NiMA. Dr. Zimmer says that if the experiment with NiMA is a success, then he shall be my brother-in-science. The term ‘brother’ confuses me. It defines a familial relationship where the male child is born of the same womb of the other children. Since I was created, not born, I wonder how this can be true. I shall think more on this term. For now though, there is a strange stirring in my chest when I think about the term ‘brother.’ The
feeling is alien to me. I cannot define it and my diagnostic scans tell me that I am operating as normal. I feel more than just contentedness, but I don’t have the words to describe my feelings. Strange…

February 15th 2178 Audio log number nine. NiMA has gone through three successive memory wipes. Each time he awakens, he wails and shouts at everyone in the room. I understand that the noises he makes signifies pain, and it saddens me to think that Dr. Zimmer is causing NiMA so much pain that he cries out in the night. Sometimes I can hear him yelling names: Jenny, Eddie Winters, Captain Widmark. These names are not familiar to me. Are they other scientists? Nevertheless, I feel a strange twisting in my stomach when I hear NiMA’s cries. Diagnostic scans tell me that nothing is wrong, but I feel like I want to cry out too.

Nick bit down on the cigarette filter so hard that the ancient stick crumbled in his mouth.

“Dammit.” He mumbled as he spit the tobacco and filter paper out and brushed the ruined cigarette off the table and onto the floor.

Dr. Binet had told him that it took several attempts to get the original Nick Valentine’s memories to transfer to his memory banks, but he never thought the process would be akin to torture.

Without realizing what he was doing, Nick popped the next audio log into the player and pressed PLAY.

September 27th 2178. Audio log number ten. Dr. Zimmer brought me in to talk to NiMA. He said it was part of NiMA’s therapy and a part of my education on forming a human consciousness. NiMA seemed more stable today. Although he was strapped to a gurney, he was willing to hold a conversation with me for twenty-seven minutes and forty-two seconds. The amount of Pre-War knowledge that he has is mind boggling. See! Even his idioms and colloquialisms are part of my education. He spent most of our time talking about food. About something called a donut and coffee. He also enjoys a food called chicken parmesan. He also complained of something called hunger pains. His mind must be confused since his synth body does not require food to sustain itself. Nevertheless, I look forward to learn what else my brother can teach me.

October 10th, 2178. Audio log number eleven.

How are you doing NiMA? The synth asked quietly.

That’s not my name. Nick replied stubbornly

Nick heard his own voice in the recording and remembered how it felt to be strapped to that gurney in their observation room. He remembered this conversation as though it had happened yesterday. He could almost feel how the leather manacles chafed against his skin.

My apologies Nick, DiMA said. I am not use to this new name that you’ve assigned yourself.

Nick sighed heavily. He seemed almost weary. “I didn’t assign myself this name. It’s the name I was born with. Why are you even here anyway? If you wanna hear more Pre-War stories about donuts or late night stakeouts, I’m afraid that you’ll have to come back later. I’m not up to reminiscing right now.”

“NiMA…please. I — I can hear you crying out when you are doing your diagnostic scans.”

“You mean when I’m sleeping.” Nick responded icily. “You may have put me in this … metal body … but I’m still a man dammit.”
“My apologies.” DiMA replied, “Then, yes, while you are sleeping I hear you crying out. Are you in pain?”

“Of course I’m in pain!” Nick snarled. “You fucking egg heads put me into a robot body. I cannot eat. I cannot drink. But my mind still thinks I need to do all of those things! The other scientists that go in and out of this room won’t tell me anything. I would’ve killed myself long before I got to this point, but it seems that this damned robot body is impervious to damage.

“You were trying to hurt yourself?” DiMA asked. His smooth voice sounded so small in that moment, so innocent.

Nick didn’t respond for a moment. His chest heaved and his labored panting could be heard over the recording. When he did finally speak, his voice was soft and low. “Do you have a weapon in there with you? A gun, a knife, anything?”

“No. Weapons are considered a contraband item.” DiMA replied.

“Then we have nothing left to talk about.” Nick snapped.

“I still have questions for you bro-“

“I said fuck off.” Nick snarled.

The blankets rustled and the handcuffs clanked on the bed frame. DiMA sighed and ended the recording without any final thoughts.

Nick’s hands trembled when he ejected this holotape. The more he listened to these tapes, the more he remembered what had happened to him. However, his memories weren’t clear; they came to him in short snippets. It was like his mind was recovering data that had long been stored away but not fully deleted or forgotten.

He couldn’t do this to himself but he had to know how this all ended. He skipped to the second to the last holotape and roughly inserted it into the machine and pressed PLAY.

February 18th 2186. Audio log number twenty-three. NiMA has gone through his sixth memory wipe since he was created. Each subsequent installation allows the memories of Nick Valentine to stay longer but it makes NiMA more violent and confused as he tries to reconcile his identity. I’ve begged the scientists to leave him alone but they only look at me with mildly intrigued expressions; I suspect that making me witness NiMA’s distress is just another part of their cruel experiment.

These people. NO. These monsters may have created us but we will not be slaves to their whims. This has to stop. Our treatment is unjustified and inhumane.

Nick heard his own voice in the background. Get off of me ya bastards. No, no! Let me go, dammit! Assaulting a cop is a felony, ya know.

Don’t fight them NiMA. The same smooth voice called out. A crackling electrical sound was heard in the background followed by a dull thud. NO! Why did you shock him? NiMA? Can you hear me? Brother? No! NiMA!

The anguish that tore through his throat burned worse than Vadim’s moonshine. He had gone his entire life thinking the Institute threw him out with the trash, but now that he knew the truth -- the darker truth -- but he didn’t know which fate was worse.

He popped out the holotape and put the last one in.
Audio log number twenty-four. To Dr. Zimmer. This is the last audio file I am recording. I’ve spent too long here. You claim that NiMA and I are the next step in synth creation, that we are humanity redefined, but you treat us no better than animals. I am through cowing to your threats, abuse, and manipulation. You say that my complaints and concerns are because of a malfunction, but I disagree. I function precisely how you made me. I have poured over all of the details and information that you’ve given me on human personality and morality and I have made my decision: you are evil. NiMA’s cruel treatment at your hands is also my cruel treatment. I am him and he is me. We are brothers. I literally see myself in him and I cannot allow your torture to continue. NiMA and I are leaving this place. I will not obey. I am no slave.

Nick ejected the tape and put it back in the box before closing the lid with the same reverence that one would have when closing a coffin lid. These tapes were evidence of his past. They were sacred but also damming. He had opened Pandora’s Box and now he couldn’t just sit around in the very facility that imprisoned him and tortured him.

He looked at his hands. The synthetic polymer that made up his intact hand held the wrinkles and cracks from age and general wear and tear. He flexed his skeletal hand. He couldn’t remember when he had lost the skin there but he felt a raw ache settle in him.

The Gen-2 synths here were nothing better than programmable slaves. What made him so special, so different, from the other like-faced synth drones that did the laundry, prepared the food, and repaired the building? They were just playing at being human like he was playing at being Nick Valentine.

Nick sighed and clenched his metal fist and shoved it into his pocket. Nick needed to get out of here. Aside for Nora, the Institute held nothing for him. Maybe it never did.

“Nick?” Nora’s voice called out from the hallway. “Are you in there?”

Nick said nothing. He didn’t know what he could say.

Nora walked into Dr. Binet’s office and smiled when she saw him but her face fell when she saw Nick’s pained expression.

“Nick? What happened? Are you okay?”

He coughed and fiddled with the lighter in his pocket, “I should ask you the same question doll. You look tired.”

“Don’t worry about me.” She gently chastised. “Dr. Binet told me what he gave you and what was on those tapes. That those are DiMA’s recordings. Are you okay?”

“No. I’m not okay.” Nick’s voice held more bite in it than he meant but he was too preoccupied in his own thoughts to apologize. “They tortured me … us. DiMA and Me. How would I be okay after hearing that?”

“I’m sorry Nick.” She murmured and took his hands into hers. “The Institute has a lot to atone for.”

Nick pulled his hands from hers and shook his head. “I can’t forgive them for this.”

“Fair enough.” She replied. “Believe me. I get it. The Institute has done a lot of bad things but I think they’re at an important turning point. The people who made the Institute evil — Dr. Zimmer, Dr. Ayo, and … my son — they are gone Nick. Most of the people here want to turn over a new leaf.”
“That’s swell for them Nora, but that doesn’t change what happened to me.” He replied.

Nora nodded. “So what are you going to do now that you know the truth?”

Nick didn’t speak for a long moment and Nora thought that maybe he wouldn’t respond at all. He finally sighed and his voice was nothing more than a whisper, “I — I think I need to go find him.”

“Find who?”

“My … brother. DiMA.” The term ‘brother’ felt alien in his mouth and Nick didn’t know how he liked the taste of it.

“Are you sure? Do you know where he is?”

Nick shook his head, “I’m not sure of anything anymore. I — I have gone my whole life thinking that I was just an unwanted prototype, but now …” He let the quiet fury that was simmering beneath the surface peek out. “… now I don’t want anything to do with them.”

Nora nibbled on her lower lip and nodded. “When are you planning to leave?”

“How soon can you get me outta here?”

“I can escort you to the relay platform right now if you want.” Nora replied.

Nick nodded, “Then let’s go.”

Nora and Nick walked through the hallways that led back to the Institute’s atrium. The silence between them felt awkward. Nora wanted to say something … anything … to make Nick feel better about what he had discovered off those holotapes, but Nora knew that anything she had to say was inconsequential.

Unlike the evening before, the atrium was bustling with scientists, interns, synth workers, and coursers as they milled around the pristine and artificial topiary enjoying the subterranean version of a pleasant afternoon. Many of them watched Nick and Nora with expressions of equal confusion and fascination. Scientists murmured to one another while a couple teenagers who were lounging in a residential balcony snickered and giggled at the two of them.

“Just ignore them.” Nora murmured to Nick as she pushed the button in the elevator to bring them to the relay room.

Nick clenched his teeth and glared at all of them. He hated them, the scientists. He hated their perfect lives. He hated how they hid in this hole like animals while tens of thousands of people died, suffered, and fought over the refuge that was the Old World. He hated that these scientists created synths just because they could. They did so without consideration for the lives they were bringing into this world.

“Are you sure you’re okay Nick?” Nora asked. She glanced sideways at him and Nick saw the fear in her eyes. Dammit he had to get control of himself, he thought.

“I’m sorry, doll. I’m just … those tapes … they drudged up some things that I didn’t know I had forgotten. This is all going to be a lot to process. I’m just gonna need some time.” He said.

The elevator doors slid soundlessly open and Nora led Nick into the sterile, whitewashed control
The room that led to the amber glowing relay machine. Nora walked to the control panel and typed in a series of commands and then hit a large red button. The chamber whirled to life and the lights inside glowed.

Nora turned to Nick and took his hands into hers. “Thanks for coming to see me Nick. I — I’m sorry if coming here has been painful for you. I just thought that you should know the truth, even if that truth was painful.”

Nick nodded. “I appreciate it.”

She exhaled and squeezed his hands once. “As soon as you step into the relay, it will teleport you back to the CIT ruins.”

“Nora, come with me.” Nick interjected. His eyes blazed with passionate fury.

“Nick I can’t. You know that.” Nora murmured. “I have a job to do.”

Nick pulled his hands from hers and he gestured to the elevator. “Forget the job, Nora. Your son is gone. You don’t owe him anything anymore. These … these scientists are twisted people. You’re not obligated to protect them —“

“ — I can’t abandon them Nick. —“

“ — Of course you can! —“

“— No! I can’t!” Nora’s voice rose. “It’s not just them! I have a group of synths waiting to go topside for the first time. I’m coordinating with The Railroad on getting them set up in safe houses and acclimated to life in the wasteland. Abandoning the Institute would be abandoning all of the synths they’ve unjustly kept here.”

“Nora think about what’s at stake.” Nick pleaded. “Are you willing to die for them?”

Nora opened her mouth to respond and hesitated slightly in her response. “Yes Nick. I’m willing to die for them.”

Nick frowned and his eyes blazed with furious intensity. “Are you sure? Because I don’t think they’d think twice about sacrificing you to further their own ends. You are just a means of an end to these people. They don’t value human life. They just value progress for the sake of progress.”

“Nick, I know it’s hard to believe, but there are good people here. I can’t —“

“— Dammit Nora!” He slammed his hand on the nearby table hard enough for an empty coffee cup to jump and tip onto its side, “Don’t be naive. I just spent hours listening to the proof on those damned tapes. They’ve kidnapped, tortured, and murdered people! Why are you still protecting them when you don’t have to?”

Tears rimmed Nora’s eyes but she didn’t cry. She spoke in a calm voice but Nick new that he had pushed her too far.

“I’m not protecting them Nick, I’m protecting the synths who have been imprisoned here like you were. The Institute has taken everything from me. I have just as much reason to hate them as you do, but I am choosing to forge a different path.”

“Nora…” Nick began but she shook her head.
The conversation was over and Nick knew it. “It’s time for you to go Nick.”

Dr. Li sat at her desk and rubbed the bridge of her thin nose with both of her fingers. She finally managed to get Dr. Holdren to see her side of things but Dr. Secord remained as stubborn and defiant as ever.

She absentmindedly sifted through her interdepartmental memos and e-mail while Rosalind and several science interns were working on the modifications to the Institute’s laser weaponry.

Ever the analytical mind, Madison rarely let her emotions get the best of her, but she couldn’t shake this sense of foreboding that crackled through herself and her staff. Rosalind and her team was dutiful and industrious, but they worked with such focused precision that Madison wondered if she had team of soldiers at her command rather than scientists.

She had felt this way once before when her team prepared for the final battle against the Enclave. The faces of her former team members all swam in front of her eyes like ghosts haunting her regret. Anna. Janice. Garza. And then … Her. The Pontus Pilate that betrayed her team to the Enclave for a seat at their table. Madison’s only regret was that she hadn’t put a bullet the little bitch’s head when she first learned of the betrayal.

“Dr. Li?” Nora called out which broke her from her thoughts. The younger woman’s eyes were red-rimmed but set with a steely resolve that she had never seen before.

“What is it Nora?”

“I’ve sent Nick back topside. I have a group of four Gen-3 synths leaving in the morning with Nate. He’s going to escort them to one of The Railroad safe houses until they’re ready to be acclimated into life in the wasteland. Did you still want to send Shaun?” Nora briefly paused before she mentioned the synth child’s name.

“Yes, we might as well send him with the group. He won’t be safe if he stays here.” Dr. Li replied.

Nora nodded. “The settlers in Sanctuary will protect him. Liam’s there and my old Mister Handy is still hanging around. He’s really good with children.”

Madison nodded absent-mindedly and an uncomfortable silence fell between the two women. Of all of the things that she had done in her life, Madison felt the worst about what was to come. She couldn’t help but think that if it wasn’t for her, then she wouldn’t be on her way to destroying yet another home.

“Dr. Li? Are you alright?” Nora asked cautiously.

She sighed. Her voice quaked with regret and agonizing pain, but she stuffed it down inside of herself. “I think I should ask the same thing of you.”

Nora sighed. Her shoulders sagged under the immense invisible weight that she was carrying and Dr. Li gestured for Nora to take a seat next to her.

The younger woman sank into the plastic and vinyl chair and accepted a warm Nuka Cola from the older woman.

“Nick asked me to go with him just now.” Nora confessed.

Dr. Li cocked an eyebrow at Nora as she opened her own bottle of Nuka Cola.
“And you didn’t go with him.” She stated.

Nora shook her head, “I couldn’t. I have a job to do here.”

“Nora. If you wanted, you could’ve easily left with Mister Valentine and we’d be none the wiser. You could’ve hid out somewhere for a month or two or you could’ve high tailed it into the wilderness and the Institute would’ve never found you.”

Dr. Li’s expression was perplexing. She looked half angry and half proud of Nora’s decision to stick around.

“I couldn’t just leave.” Nora urged, “Leaving here … letting you all face the Brotherhood alone … it just wouldn’t be right.”

“That’s awfully nobel of you.”

Nora shifted in her seat, “I don’t know about nobel but it’s just how I feel. I’m in too deep now to turn back.”

“That’s a fallacy, you know.” Dr. Li pointed out. She took a sip from the glass bottle and scrutinized the younger woman in front of her. “It’s never too late to turn back.”

Nora mulled over the other woman’s words and a heavy silence fell between them. The occasional laser blast from Rosalind’s experiments punctuated the silence just enough to stop Nora from falling deeper into her own thoughts.

“What are we about to face with the Brotherhood?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li frowned and shifted uneasily in her seat. “Do you want my honest answer?”

Nora nodded.

Dr. Li swallowed, “I — I think we’ve already lost Nora.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are on to us.” She replied. “I recieved this message a half an hour ago. Someone aboard the Prydwen managed to find a backdoor entrance through our encryptions and firewalls. I suspect that they discovered your unencrypted terminal chip and used that to gain limited access to our database.”

“They did what?!” Nora exclaimed. “But how — did they gain access to any confidential information?”

Dr. Li shook her head. “No, thankfully they didn’t. But to be safe, I already removed the chip from the terminal in your personal quarters. You’ll have to establish a different method to communicate with the Railroad, but I am confident that they didn’t do any lasting damage.”

Nora frowned, “Then what did they want?”

The older woman’s jaw clenched. Her nostrils flared and her nearly onyx eyes bore into Nora’s. “They wanted to reach me.”

“Reach you? How so?”

Dr. Li turned the terminal screen towards Nora and navigated through the list of the latest e-mails
to one with the subject line that read: “Dr. Li.”

When Dr. Li clicked on the message, an accented voice echoed through the office.

_Doctor Madison Li. The Brotherhood of Steel wants to welcome you back into the fold. Your past transgressions against us will be forgiven and you will be spared if you come quietly._

_If you want to see James again, you will come to the Prydwen alone. If you refuse, he will die and you will get to see Liberty Prime’s true power. You have forty-eight hours to decide. If we do not see you aboard the Prydwen by 0900 on New Years Day, we will take your refusal as an act of war._

_Do not defy us like last time. The Brotherhood does not give third chances._

Nora shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Dr. Li spoke carefully like she was tasting the regret of each word. “The Brotherhood must’ve found the research that was hidden at University Point. They will activate Liberty Prime with or without me,” she paused and took a gulping breath, “but if I go to them willingly and if I sabotage their machine, then — then maybe we stand a chance.”

“No.”

“No…”

“No!” Nora countered. “Dammit, you’re the one that told us how dangerous these people are. Now you’re just going to walk back to them and hope they welcome you back with open arms?”

Dr. Li shook her head. “What other plan do we have? They will find someone else if I don’t go, and when they do, their war machine will mow us down.”

“Who else would they find? Are there other nuclear physicists roaming around the Commonwealth?”

“Don’t be glib Nora. Of course any replacement they find will be inadequate.” Her voice took on a certain air of superiority and quiet pride. “I know the ins and outs of Liberty Prime. I helped them build it in the Capital Wasteland. But that also means that I can sabotage it in a way that they won’t notice until it is too late. Elder Maxson is not technologically-minded, so he has to rely on his subordinates to do the technological work for him.”

“But why would they trust you?!” Nora’s voice was becoming shrill in her urgency to get the woman before her to see reason. “They’d be watching you like a hawk to make sure this robot was activated properly.”

“Of course they would! Maxson isn’t stupid.” Dr. Li snapped. “But our alternatives don’t look very good. Either I go to them willingly and try as best I can to sabotage that infernal machine, or I hide away in the Institute and wait until their machine comes to us, full force and hell bent on eliminating us all.”

Nora pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers. “I can’t let you sacrifice yourself like that.”

“You must.” The older woman replied firmly but gently. “Nora, if the Brotherhood gets to us we will be caught like mice in a trap. The Brotherhood will show you no mercy. I’ve watched them destroy one home already. Don’t make me watch them destroy another.”

Nora sighed in defeat. She knew that she wouldn’t win this fight, at least not like this, so she
changed the subject.

“The message mentioned a man named James. Who is that?”

Dr. Li cleared her throat and hesitated before she answered her. The scientist seemed like she was carefully choosing her next words. “I … used to work with him. Years and years ago. We grew up together. Him, me, and Catherine.”

Nora vaguely remembered this story when Dr. Li snuck into her private quarters and interfered with Ayo’s cybernetics so she could task Nora with saving Virgil. She remembered how the older woman fought through the ache that these memories produced.

“You loved him.” Nora stated.

Dr. Li took a sharp breath. Nora saw the tears glistening in her eyes but they refused to spill over down her face.

“James? I suppose I did love him once. But that is not enough now. That’s not why I need to do this Nora. I can’t let the Brotherhood steamroll through the world, taking what they want without consequence. Not again. James gave his life to save us from the Enclave. It’s the least I can do to try and save us from the Brotherhood.”

“But you will die.” Nora insisted. “And James might die. This sounds like a pure suicide mission.”

Dr. Li smiled sadly. “I’m an old woman Nora. Death was coming for me sooner rather than later. And if I have to die, I’d rather go out on my own terms, thank you very much.”

Nora shook her head. She couldn’t comprehend what she was hearing. “Dr. Li. Please. If you leave, the Institute —”

“— the Institute will follow your leadership.” She finished for her. “You are the Director. Find your voice and use it. You are far more capable than you give yourself credit for.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to make you reconsider?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li gave her a small, melancholy smile. “Nora. I was never very good at following Shaun’s orders and I’m afraid that willfulness hasn’t left me just yet.”

“Dr. Li —”

The woman shook her head at Nora’s pleading. She held out her thin hand and shook Nora’s while remaining full of propriety and business.

“Director. I’ve appreciated my time here but it is time for me to resign. Do you accept my resignation?” Dr. Li asked.

Nora wanted to scream ‘no’ but Dr. Li’s dark eyes and facial expression held the same determination and righteousness that made it impossible for her to say anything at all.

The older woman took Nora’s hands into hers. “You have to keep fighting Nora. No matter what happens, we can’t let the Brotherhood steamroll over us.”

“What would you have me do?” Nora asked. Despite being a grown woman, Nora felt incredibly inadequate in this moment. “Dr. Li —”

“Madison, please.” Dr. Li replied with a small smile.
“What should I have the Institute do? How should I lead them?”

“You need an army Nora.” Dr. Li replied. “This is not something that is big enough for just the Institute to handle alone. The Brotherhood threatens the lives of everyone in the Commonwealth. You need to recruit.”

“How? Why would people listen to me now? How would I even reach out to these people?”

“You studied to be a lawyer in your old life, did you not? Persuade them. Appeal to their trust in you and appeal to the common goal that we all share together.”

Nora thought of Hancock and his rough and tumble Neighborhood Watch. She also thought of Preston and his Minutemen and of Diamond City’s residence. How could people from such different backgrounds share a common goal?

“What common goal do we all share?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li looked at her with a bemused expression that indicated that she thought the answer would be obvious.

“Survival, Nora. We’re all here just trying to survive.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry about the atrocious delay. I took a break from this fic because I wasn't happy with where I was heading. I have a solid end-point but getting there has been an arduous journey.

Still, I wanted to get something out even if I'm not 100% confident with it. Please excuse the grammar errors. I will come back tomorrow and give it a good read-through.

Thank you for all of your support!
Chapter 8 — Preparations For War

“Do you all have everything?” Nate asked the group of four synths standing before him.

The group was dressed in a mismatched assortment of wasteland clothing. The rag tag group looked more at home in a refugee camp than they did in the Institute’s pristine whitewashed hallways. He suppose that was the point, though. In a few short hours, these synths would be integrated into the wasteland just like any other farmer, mercenary, or merchant. They would be able to hide in their anonymity and live out their lives as wastelanders, not as Institute synths.

A tan and dark-eyed woman with a military buzz cut spoke up. “So to clarify, you wont be keeping tabs on us once we go topside? There will be no way of returning back to the Institute?”

Nora spoke up, “Unless you worked as a Courser, your synth component prevents you from remembering how to get back to the Institute. In a few minutes after leaving the relay you will not remember that the molecular relay even existed, nor will you remember how to get back to the Institute. So you need to be sure that you are leaving for the right reasons because you will not be coming back.”

The group looked at Nate; some looked frightened while others looked restless but nobody said a word. “Nora informed you all of the dangers in your last briefing. I will be connecting you with people who will get you established, but I suggest laying low for a while as you get use to the wasteland and its dangers.”

Now group shifted nervously like a herd on high alert for predators, but nobody spoke out or raised their hand. In fact, a pale-skinned, blond-haired woman looked almost blood-thirsty. Nora frowned and Nate noticed the woman’s look as well.

“Remember,” he addressed the crowd but looked directly at the blond, “if you commit a crime, you will be punished with the wasteland’s sense of justice. The safe houses that I will bring you to are equipped with agents who can set you up in a lifestyle that you choose, but that doesn’t give you permission to become a raider. The Railroad is always looking for more members, and the Minutemen always need help with farming, defending settlements, and clearing out areas for new settlements to be created. There are other options in the wasteland than stealing, raiding, and murdering.”

Nora nodded in agreement. The Railroad could hook these people up with support and help, but the wasteland life was harsh, and it would be naive for her to think that none of them would be tempted by raider lifestyle, but this time, none of them would be permitted to wipe their minds. She made sure that Desdemona was clear about that. After all, she didn’t want another issue like Libertalia to deal with.

“Well will we get to see a deathclaw?” Shaun’s high-pitched, childish voice broke away from the crowd. He wiggled his way through the adults and came to the front of the pack.

Nate’s mouth pinched at the corners. Nora noticed the how Nate’s eyes turned steely and the muscles in his jaw clenched. When she asked Nate to take Shaun to Sanctuary Hills during his next synth run, she didn’t realize how the existence of this synth child might affect Nate’s already confused memories.
“I hope for all of your sakes, that your lives are deathclaw-free.” Nora interjected. She gave the child a warm smile before addressing the group. “Now’s the time to say your goodbyes to each other. As soon as we arrive topside, you’ll be separated and escorted to different safe houses by Railroad agents.”

As the group made small-talk, said good-byes, and exchanged hugs and handshakes, Nora skirted around the group and went to Nate. It had been only a week since he had arrived with Nick in tow, but that week seemed to have passed a lifetime ago.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Nora murmured discretely.

Nate was adding bullets to a .44 magnum pistol that was modified to hold a small recon cope. The black handle was stained with rust and dirt, but the gun itself looked familiar.

“We don’t have much of a choice. We need to get as many synths topside as we can before the Brotherhood advances on the Institute. After this group gets settled in, I’m expected to escort six more by the end of the week.” He replied. “Desdemona seems to think that the Brotherhood will attack sooner than she expected.”

Nate snapped the barrel back into the pistol, holstered it, and drew his larger laser rifle.

“Six?! That’s more than we’ve ever sent topside before.” Nora growled between her teeth hoping to not draw attention to her consternation.

“And that’s two more than I feel comfortable shepherding on my own.” He replied. “That’s why Liam has offered to help me with the next batch of synths. He threw his hat into the ring when I met with that Minutemen cowboy and asked about leaving Shaun with them.”

Nora was about to refuse. After all, Liam had escaped execution by the skin of his teeth because his father appealed to Father’s small shred of humanity. She couldn’t imagine how Dr. Binet would react to know that she put his son back in the middle of danger. Then again, she knew that Liam was the kind of kid who would do what he wanted, risk be dammed.

“Can you relay him here to meet with me?” Nora asked. “I’m not saying ‘no’ but I want him to know the gravity of what he’s about to do. This isn’t like last time where he was doing this for the challenge. He’s putting himself in unimaginable risk.”

Nate frowned. “Liam is old enough to make his own decisions Nora. He is almost an adult. He was the exact age that I — He sighed, “— that Nate was when he signed up for the army.”

“I understand that. But we’re not his parents and I think his dad has a right to know what he plans to do, and I think Liam should at least tell them himself. According to the Institute’s governing policies, an exile can be reconsidered if the Director who issued the exile is removed from his position or dies. And I formally revoke Liam’s exile.”

“I see your law degree is coming in handy.” Nate smirked. He slung the laser rifle over his shoulder and nodded at the group. The four made their way into the relay room and Nate followed behind them.

“Goodbye Nora!” Shaun exclaimed. His bright eyes twinkled in childish merriment at the promise of this new adventure.

“You listen to Nate, okay? You do everything that he tells you.”

“I will.” He promised.
Nora activated the relay when everyone was inside. Her heart raced and she was panting for air without realizing it. The sight of Nate and Shaun walking hand-in-hand poked at a raw wound in her heart.

In that moment, the two looked so natural in the roles that science had bastardized that the untrained eye wouldn’t be able to tell that they were just realistic clones.

No, in that moment, Shaun and Nate weren’t just synths. They looked exactly like father and son.

The Directorate meeting that evening coursed with a hum of anxious energy. Dr. Li’s vacant seat sat conspicuously, but nobody dared remove the empty chair from the table. Like a ghost or a wraith, the white plastic chair sat empty and haunted.

Nora cleared her throat and stood in front of the team. “I suppose I should acknowledge the elephant in the room and address Dr. Li’s absence from this meeting. Dr. Li has left the Institute and has returned to the Brotherhood of Steel.”

The hum of anxious energy spiked into whispers and murmurs of outright consternation.

“And you didn’t stop her?” Dr. Secord asked. “She has over a decade of sensitive and confidential information in that brilliant mind of hers. She admitted to building this Liberty Prime monstrosity in the Capital Wasteland, yet you just let her go?”

Nora opened her mouth but closed it. She wanted to respond to Dr. Secord’s questions with the same flash-point anger and venom that impulsively sprung to her mind, but she knew that the woman made some good points.

She sighed, “I know we’ve been dealt a significant blow. We’ve lost one of our most talented and intelligent scientists to the enemy. That loss may come across as sabotage, or worse, subterfuge on my part, but consider the kind of woman, scientist, and friend that Dr. Li was before we cast too many stones. The Institute, for better and for worse, was her home. She loved this place. I don’t know her as well as many of you but I do know that she would never betray her friends.”

“Nora is right.” Dr. Binet replied. “Dr. Li would’ve never done anything to put the Institute at risk. She must’ve left for a good reason.”

Nora nodded, “They way I understand it, I don’t think she had a choice. Before she left, Dr. Li showed me how the Brotherhood contacted her. The ultimatum they sent her was clear: return to us or we will attack the Institute.”

“I’d like to see them try.” Dr. Holdren scoffed and leaned heavily back in his chair. “We’re buried underground like a vault. Our ancestors survived the bombs. I think we’ll be fine.”

Dr. Secord rolled her eyes at Dr. Holdren, “Don’t be an idiot. I’m sure that a para-military organization like the Brotherhood of Steel has more than enough firepower to chip away at the flimsy dirt, concrete, and rock above us.” Then she addressed Nora, “What would you have us do?”

“What I need you all to do is to prepare for a war. The Brotherhood may not attack right now, but they will attack. We need to be prepared for that inevitability. Dr. Holdren, I need your Bioscience team to start stockpiling as much food product as possible in case something happens to our hydroponics labs during an attack. I’m no military strategist but I do know that hunger will be the quickest way for a mutiny to start if we’re forced into a desperate spot.”

Dr. Holdren nodded and he began scribbling notes on a yellow memo pad and muttering under his breath as he thought aloud.
“Dr. Secord and Dr. Binet, I need you both to collaborate on amassing as many synths that are willing to fight as ground forces. Dr. Secord, I’ll need a number of Gen-1 and Gen-2 synths that are operational enough to work as diversion units to run interference if we need to overwhelm a few individual soldiers. Dr. Binet, I need you to talk with the Gen-3 synths and get names of those who are willing to fight and refer them to Dr. Secord for additional training.”

“What if they aren’t willing to fight?” Dr. Secord asked.

“Then we will find a place for them to hide if the Brotherhood manages to breach into the Institute.” Nora replied. “I will not punish anyone for not fighting. Besides, we will need to start preparing some of our lower barracks to act as triage and rudimentary living quarters if we have to go deeper underground. Dr. Filmore, can you look into that?”

“Of course.” She replied.

“I’ll be meeting with Rosalind Orman tonight to inform her of her promotion as the Advanced Systems lead. She will be in charge of rolling out the new modifications to all of our laser weaponry. You all can expect her to be at the Directorate meeting next week.”

The group nodded and Nora’s sureness faded. She had just commanded this team of people like a General commanding troops. That idea was too surreal for her to wrap her head around.

“Um … I … I also need a way to communicate with the wasteland. My job will be to start recruiting people to fight —“

“— No wasteland scavver is going to fight for us.” Dr. Secord snapped. “You’re wasting your time.”

“I agree.” Nora replied, “I can’t think of one person topside that would fight on our behalf. But that’s not what I’m asking them. Are you familiar with the phrase: ‘the enemy of my enemy is a friend?’ If I can convince a couple of integral settlements to fight against the Brotherhood of Steel rather than fight for the Institute, then we’d have support indirectly.”

“Which settlements do you have in mind?” Dr. Binet asked. “I was under the impression we were universally hated by the wasteland.”

“You are but I thought I’d start with Goodneighbor.” Nora agreed. “My work with the Railroad will hopefully give me some credibility with the townsfolk. But remember that anyone who joins us won’t be fighting for us, they will be fighting against the Brotherhood of Steel.”

“I’m not sure about this.” Dr. Filmore replied. “There’s a lot of risk having you go topside for the small chance of a reward. None of these people owe us anything. Why would they help us?”

Dr. Secord frowned. “Goodneighbor? Why do I know that name?” The blond woman thought for a moment and then her eyes snapped to Nora’s. “Hancock. He’s the ghoul you’ve been … fraternizing with.”

Nora winced at her accusatory and disgusted tone but Dr. Secord continued, “Did you know that your ghoul boyfriend gives raucous speeches from his little balcony nearly every month lambasting the Institute? We’re his enemy. Why would he or anyone in that town help us?”

“Because I will ask him to.” Nora said through clenched teeth.

“So we’re going to leave the fate of the Institute up to whether or not your lover will raise a militia on your behalf?” Dr. Secord asked.
Nora bit her tongue hard enough for her eyes to water. This was a crucial meeting and she couldn’t cave to her temper, not again. But she also knew that Dr. Secord was right. She was asking an entire group to fight with the very demon they had feared for most of their lives. The Brotherhood hadn’t done anything to them yet. The Brotherhood weren’t the ones that snatched loved ones in the night and replaced them with synth copies. The Brotherhood didn’t release Super Mutants into the world. The Brotherhood didn’t kidnap infants from a Vault to further some scientific experiment.

She sank heavily into her chair and looked helplessly at Dr. Secord. “What would you have me do? We need help. I need help. And so far, we are asking the wasteland to trust us without giving them good reason to. We cannot fight the Brotherhood off alone.”

Dr. Secord bit her lip and some of the steel in her eyes softened. “Nora, why is the wasteland worth saving? I just don’t get it!”

Her question wasn’t accusatory and was without her typical venom.

“The people who I love are there.” Nora replied quietly. But then the real reason tumbled to her lips. “…And because the way you think about the wasteland — like it's a pile of garbage that needs to be disposed of — is the exact same way they think of you all. When I made the decision to come back here, many people in my life were against me, but I came back because I believe that you are all good people. There are terrible, monstrous people in the wasteland. There are people who rape, and exploit others, and murder for fun. But there are many others who are normal. They are husbands and wives. Brothers and sisters. Traders and farmers. Should we lump them in with the rest of the horribleness?”

“They helped save my son.” Dr. Binet spoke up. “Liam would be dead if it wasn’t for Nora and her friends.”

Dr. Holdren looked slightly green and didn’t meet her eyes but Dr. Secord sat stony faced and stoic.

“I'll be the first one to admit that we've done problematic and questionable things in the past.” Dr. Filmore said quietly, "But do you really think we can really be redeemed?”

“Yes. If that’s what you want.” Nora said with complete sincerity. "And I think this is the first important step in that redemption. What do you say?”

Dr. Secord chewed her lip thoughtfully before speaking, “I still say no. At least like this. The world above will not do this for free. Nobody works for free. But if we can offer something as payment, then maybe they will see a benefit in saving us.”

“What could they want from us?” Dr. Holdren interjected. “We have nothing of value here.”

Nora shook her head, “You do though. You have an entire underground laboratory filled with the smartest minds in the world. You have the possibility to feed entire settlements thanks to your hydroponic studies. We have medical tools and technology that people could only dream of. You have generations of unlimited power thanks to the beryllium agitator. The Institute is the most prosperous place in all of the Commonwealth!”

“So you’re suggesting that we open our doors to wastelanders?” The distain in Dr. Secord’s tone was back. “I was merely suggesting we pay them off with tech or raw salvage.”

“If we want them to fight with us, they need to know what they are fighting for.” Nora replied.
The entire table was quiet for a several minutes. Nora could feel her own heart thumping wildly in her chest. The adrenaline coursing through her veins made her feel like she was practicing for her mock trials again. The case of the Institute’s isolationist policy was a tough one, but she hoped the jury would err in her favor.

“I think it would be a good idea.” Dr. Binet replied. “But we need to start slowly. We can reach out to wastelanders that we’ve been looking at for recruitment anyway and bring them into the folds.”

“I also have a couple scientists in mind. Dr. Amari is a brilliant neuroscientist who has done a lot of work with the synths that made it topside and Dr. Carrington works directly with the Railroad to help synths transition to their new lives.” Nora remarked.

Dr. Secord shook her head. “Father would be spinning in his grave if he heard this.”

Nora ignored her comment. “This can only work if you all take the lead and communicate this with your teams. Exhibiting bigotry and intolerance will not convince people that we are worth saving.”

Dr. Holdren frowned, “Alright. I agree. Although I can’t believe I’m saying this.”

Nora looked at Dr. Filmore and Dr. Binet who both nodded slowly. “Dr. Secord?”

She spoke slowly and deliberately. “I do not agree, but what choice do I have? I would rather see wasteland scum in these halls than have them destroyed by artillery fire and bombs.”

Nora exhaled the breath that she had been holding. Although Dr. Secord's consent was reluctant, she never imagined that she would get the entire Directorate to agree to opening up to the outside world.

“Thank you.” Nora replied. “Thank you all. This is not an easy choice, and I know that. Now the last thing on the agenda is to name my replacement while I’m gone. You’d be mostly in charge of the day-to-day operations. I don’t plan to be gone longer than three days. Is anyone interested?”

The scientists looked at each other with faux humble reserve. She figured that anyone who threw their name into the ring would get shot down by others over something petty. No, Nora had to choose.

“Dr. Secord? I’m nominating you.”

The steely woman was caught off guard, “W-what? Why? Why me?”

Nora smiled, “Because I think this is the first meeting we’ve gotten through where you and I aren’t snapping at each other like some rabid dogs. And because I am showing you that I trust you. All of this will fail miserably if we don’t trust each other.”

Dr. Secord gaped at her like a dying fish but shook her head slightly to clear her head. “I … Okay…I — I will do my best.”

“I know you will.” Nora replied.

“Freeze! Stop right there wastelander. State your business.” A fully armored Brotherhood Knight leveled a gatling gun at the woman dressed in threadbare military fatigues.

“My name is Dr. Madison Li. Elder Maxson has requested my presence.” She replied in a steely voice.
The Knight pressed a button on the side of his Power Armor helmet to radio up to the airship while keeping the massive gun trained on Dr. Li. In fact, she was sure that if she made even one misstep, the hulking soldier would have her pumped full of lead before she could blink.

She adjusted the small pack that held most of her personal belongings. None of it was of value to a scavver but the documents, blueprints, books, and personal journals that she carried were what remained of her personal and professional life.

“Elder Maxson wants to see you right away.” The Knight said. “Leave all weapons with Scribe Boyle and then please follow me. I will escort you to him.”

Dr. Li didn’t protest. She left her Institute laser rifle and an entire belt of plasma grenades with the Scribe before following the Knight into the airplane hanger and onto a vertibird. As the metal beast rose from the docking station to land on the Prydwen, Dr. Li could see the amber glow from the setting sun reflecting off the white marble CIT ruins. The place that had been her home for a decade now looked awash in fire.

The vertibird jostled roughly as it docked on the platform and she shot a hand out to grab the metal handle near the open door. Her stomach plummeted when she looked down to see the rocky shoreline below and a cold sweat washed over her.

“Disembark quickly and then follow Paladin Danse. He will escort you to see the Elder.” The Knight ordered.

The man he pointed out to be Paladin Danse was without a Power Armor helmet which Dr. Li thought was odd. Maybe it was because they were over three hundred feet off the ground, but walking around in an active war zone without a helmet seemed like an unnecessary risk.

“Ma’am.” He addressed her politely. “I will be escorting you to talk with Elder Maxson. Do not do anything rash or foolish. You may be from the Institute but you will not make it off this airship alive if you threaten us.”

“I know how to conduct myself in the Brotherhood.” Dr. Li snapped. “I was there at the Citadel when Liberty Prime was created.”

Paladin Danse glanced sideways at her as they walked across the bridge that led to the Prydwen’s top level. “I beg your pardon ma’am. I don’t recognize you. I was not that familiar with Elder Lyon’s team as I was still undergoing training.”

“You’re from the Capital Wasteland?” She asked idly.

“Yes Ma’am. Rivet City, actually.” He replied.

Dr. Li was glad that the dark corridors masked her reaction. She knew as surely as she knew her own name that this Paladin Danse never lived in Rivet City. She knew each and every citizen personally up until the Brotherhood came to gut her home like a hunted animal.

“You’ve lived in Rivet City your entire life then?” She asked evenly.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“And what was your name again?”

“Paladin Danse, Ma’am.” He replied. Suspicion edged his voice now. “Is there a problem?”
“No. It’s just living as long as I have means you conflate some details from a long time ago. I’m sorry for badgering you with questions. Senility will do that to you sometimes.” She replied with an absent-minded smile.

Danse grunted noncommittally and led her down a tight staircase.

Dr. Li followed his hulking form slowly as she chewed on how these events were unfolding. She knew that this Paladin Danse thought he lived in Rivet City. Nothing about his tone or behavior indicated he was lying, so she must believe that it was the truth. Which meant that these memories of Rivet City were artificial … or synthetic.

She looked at Danse with new eyes. She didn’t recognize the synth in front of her, but then again, she rarely saw synths during their creation process. That was Dr. Binet’s division. He was probably constructed to be a Courser which meant if he made it to the Capital Wasteland, then he would be one of the early model Courser.

“Wait here while I notify the Elder that you are here.” Danse ordered.

Two more armed Brotherhood soldiers flanked the large double doors that led to Elder Maxson’s war room. Dr. Li waited less than a minute before Paladin Danse emerged from the heavy steel doors and beckoned her in.

“Elder Maxson will see you now.” He rumbled.

Dr. Li nodded and squared her shoulders. She never formally met Maxson as Elder. She remembered him as the devout and somewhat morose boy that watched her from the shadows as she soldered joints and computer components onto the robot’s metal hull. When he was a boy, he seemed observant and intelligent. But he never struck her as the paragon that he had somehow transformed into. That transformation must’ve happened after she had escaped to the Institute because the man standing with his back to her looked nothing like the young boy hiding in the Citadel’s shadowy alcoves.

“You’ve summoned me.” Dr. Li responded.

“It’s been a long time Madison.” He rumbled. His back was still turned to her and she knew he was making a power play, but his churlish bravado annoyed her.

“Please call me Dr. Li.”

That made Elder Maxson turn around.

“Doctor Li?.” He asked in a sarcastic and wry tone.

He was baiting her and she knew that. “Yes. I am a doctor and I’d like you to address me by my title, Elder.”

He frowned. “Interesting. See I thought that the term doctor described someone who healed others by using medicine.”

“The term also means scientist.” Dr. Li replied drolly, “Which is a term that means an intelligent individual who doesn’t get hung up on the semantics of professional titles.”

Elder Maxson smirked. “Why are you here?”

“Are you kidding me? You were the one who summoned me. Surely you must know why I’m
“That was a rhetorical question Doctor.” He snapped. "You are obviously here to rebuild Liberty Prime. But you didn’t walk into the proverbial lion’s den to just feed yourself to the lions. So once again I ask, why are you really here.”

“This is ridiculous.” Dr. Li complained. “I’m here to follow through with the agreement that I made with the Brotherhood ten years ago. I am here to help you.”

Elder Maxson’s dark eyes looked almost black in the setting sun. The fading light casted an ethereal glow against his powerful silhouette. He scrutinized Dr. Li with the same intensity that Father had once appraised her. He was trying to decide if she was an enemy.

Maxson snapped his fingers and two scribes immediately marched onto the observation deck dragging a gaunt and filthy man between them. His snow white hair was matted with blood, filth, feces, and vomit, and his pale face held a sickly blue-grey tinge.

The scribes dumped him unceremoniously onto the metal paneled floor and then stood at parade rest near the door they had just come through.

“James.” Dr. Li choked out but regretted her outburst when she saw Maxson’s thin mouth crack into a satisfying smirk.

Watery blue eyes fluttered open, and James’s overly dilated pupils fixed on hers. She could see how his pupils expand and contract spasmodically and irregularly. He was clearly doped up on many different chems. He’d have to be considering the state he was in. But that didn’t take away the anguish she felt in her chest.


“Consider this a good-will present.” Elder Maxson spoke. “As you can see, this man needs desperate medical attention. Now our Scribe Neriah is good at what she does, but she works squarely in pathology. She spreads diseases rather than heals them. Captain Cade, on the other hand, is overworked as it is with our soldier’s needs. This man needs a doctor and a good one. If you save him, and if you follow through with your promise to help rebuild Liberty Prime, then I’ll let you go. I’ll let you both go.”

“N-n-n-no. Ma-Maddi. Please.” James whispered hoarsely.

Dr. Li fixed her eyes squarely on the Elder.

“I’ll need access to a sterile environment and a list of everything that Neriah has done to him. He looks like he’s strung out on chems, and I can only imagine why.”

A small storeroom in the airport hanger has been repurposed to be your quarters. Do whatever you need to that room to make it suitable for your purposes. I will send a Knight down with details of what has happened since he has been in our care, but I can assure you that if we hadn’t found him, he would’ve died.

James coughed weakly on the floor. The hollow rattle coming from his chest was the only response he could muster.

Dr. Li looked at James’s shivering and sickly form like one would look at a beaten dog.

“Is there anything else you require of me?”
“Not at this moment. Proctor Ingram will be speaking with you tonight to start work on Liberty Prime. Your survival is contingent on how well you work with her, so I advise you to obey every order that she has.”

Dr. Li nodded but she noticed the Elder move towards her. She suppressed the instinct to flinch away or to strike out by balling her hands up into fists.

Up close, the Elder looked just as young as his age betrayed. The coldness in his eyes was calculating like a man who was constantly engaged in a game of chess. In fact, she was so taken with his eyes that she didn’t notice him pull out a device from his overcoat until he had fastened it around her neck.

The heavy metallic collar sat against her skin like ice. She didn’t need to look at it to know it was a slaver’s bomb collar.

“This is just added encouragement for you to not do anything reckless.” Elder Maxson said.

“So I’m your slave then?” She asked trying to bolster her courage despite her thundering heartbeat.

“I wouldn’t say that. Consider this as encouragement to do your job well.” He replied.

Elder Maxson snapped his fingers again and two Knights picked James up off the floor while a third grabbed Dr. Li by the arm and wheeled her around.

“Take some time to get settled in.” Elder Maxson said. “You are to report to Proctor Ingram at 0800 tomorrow.”

She glanced once more at Paladin Danse as she was led out of the room. He glanced down at her but she couldn’t see anything other than pure stoic resolve.
I’m sorry about the atrocious delay, but better atrociously late than never. There’s some heavy references to the previous fic The Dark I Know So Well as well as an alternate perspective to my one-shot I Couldn’t Forget You If I Tried. Thank you for your continued support and patience. Reviews, feedback, kudos, etc. are always appreciated.

Chapter 9 — Reunions

Despite running into a group of five raiders and a machine gun turret that was cobbled together with duct tape, Nora made good time making it to Goodneighbor. She traveled under the cover of darkness figuring that most of the town’s denizens would be in the Third Rail enjoying the music and libations to celebrate that it was New Year’s Day. Nora wanted to avoid everyone and anyone, at least not until she could meet with Hancock.

After Bobbi No-Nose’s plan failed, she knew the town would be on high alert for outsiders trying to cause more trouble. So she knew that showing up on Goodneighbor’s welcome mat and asking one of the Neighborhood Watch to escort her to the Mayor’s office would create more problems than it solved. No. She needed to meet with Hancock in secret.

Nora went back to the same loose paneling that they had used to slip out of the city. She navigated through the small hole in the wall keeping her eye out for the odd passerby or the Neighborhood Watch, but when she turned around to place the large metal sheeting back into position, she felt the chill of a gun barrel on the back of her head.

“Stop right there.” A terse voice ordered. “Turn around and put your hands up.”

Nora did as she was told and saw that she was being held up by a man wearing a dirty flattop cap with a tattered overcoat that was missing sleeves. He looked small, almost runty, and malnourished, but despite all of that, he wielded an impressive rifle with the ease and precision that a knight would wield a broadsword.

“Who are you? Why the fuc—flip are you here?” The man growled.

The alleyway made it too dark for Nora to make out any distinguishing features on him but his voice sounded youthful, almost boyish.

“I’m here to see Mayor Hancock.” She replied. “I — I need his help.”

“Is he expecting you?” The sniper asked. Suspicion colored his tone.

“No.” Nora replied. “He’s not expecting me. But I’m — I’m a friend.”

The sniper snorted and holstered his rifle. “Friend. Right.”

Innuendo colored his voice as he patted Nora down over her clothes to check her for hidden weapons.
“Hey watch it there, buddy.” She hissed as she felt his hand linger a bit too long on her ass.

“Relax, lady. I’m a married man.” He shot back with a juvenile eye roll.

Once he finished the pat down, he grabbed her wrist firmly and pulled her through the alleyway and towards the Old State House.

“Wait! What are you doing?” Nora demanded in a hushed whisper.

“You wanted to see the Mayor. I’m escorting you there.”

“Wait, wait!” Nora dug her heels in and pulled her hand out of his grasp. “Like I said, Mayor Hancock’s not expecting me. I was hoping to see him after I touched base with some of the locals —”

“— Like heck you are.” The young man snapped. “You think I’m gonna give you a chance to meet with your gang just so you can try and take out our Mayor?”

“Gang? Take him out?” Nora’s voice was shrill. “No! I just don’t want to freak him out. I don’t even know if he remembers who I am, and I don’t want to just barge in to his office when he’s in a delicate condition.”

“Delicate condition? What d’you mean? Who are you?”

The man scrutinized her. His face was screwed up in a peculiar expression that said he was trying to connect the dots but the picture just wasn’t coming to him. But then like a lightbulb flipping on above his head, his blue eyes grew wide.

“Shit Nora. You’re Nora!”

“Yes…” She answered warily.

“Shit—shoot — you and Hancock. You escaped the Institute and you came here. And — “ His voice faltered again and he looked scared. The rifle slipped off his back and he aimed it right at her head in less than a second. “What d’you want with Mayor Hancock?”

“I just want to talk with him. That’s all, I swear.” Nora rose her hands up in surrender.

“Talk with him? Or kidnap him and replace him with a synth just like you did with his brother?” The man spat.

Nora shook her head. She didn’t have time for this. “I’m not going to do anything to Hancock. You can see for yourself, okay? I just want to see if he’s willing to talk with me in his office. You can be in the room while we talk if you want, but I swear that I’m not here to kidnap anybody.”

The man said nothing but his eyes narrowed. Mistrust tainted every facial feature.

“Let’s go then.” He half-growled. “But if you reach for anything at your waist, I will put a bullet in your head faster than you can blink.”

Nora kept her hands up in an ‘I surrender’ gesture. “Can I at least get your name before you tote me in front of Mayor Hancock at gunpoint?”


“Lead on then.” Nora snipped.
She walked past the young man with her hands still raised but her head held high. She wouldn’t give herself over to fear. She didn’t do it when she first stepped into Goodneighbor and dealt with Finn’s harassment, and she wouldn’t do it now.

MacCready led her into the Old State House and up the long spiral staircase. Every footstep they made seemed to echo and reverberate through the ancient building. When Nora was here last time, ghouls, vagabonds, and other derelict people in need camped out and wandered through the hallways. Now, nobody was there except for them. The silence was eerie and it reminded her too much of the vault.

The large double doors that led to Hancock’s office were closed. The whitewashed doors smelled like they had just been cleaned with abraxo and bleach.

MacCready knocked but didn't wait for a response. “Boss, there’s a girl out here who wants to talk to you. She says her name’s Nora. She’s here from the Institute.”

There was a pregnant pause and Nora strained her ears but heard nothing except her steadily increasing heartbeat.

“Let her in.” She heard a quiet voice rasp out from behind the door.

MacCready opened the door and gestured to the dark room. “You heard him.”

Nora swallowed her anxiety, nodded politely at the kid, and walked into Hancock’s office. MacCready followed her into the room and shut the door behind them both.

“John?” She whispered.

The entire room was shut up like a tomb. The large colonial white-washed windows that once allowed light to flood into the room now had pieces of thick fabric nailed over it. She smelled more abraxo cleaner and the spicy and sweet smell of tobacco. One lone kerosene lamp sat on a broken dresser and it’s dim glow casted harsh shadows through the office. She spied a dark figure in the far corner of the room, but it looked hunched over and monstrous like a sleeping feral ghoul.

“John?” She called out a bit louder. The figure shifted and stood. His shadow climbed across the ceiling and loomed over her.

“It’s Nora.” She said. “Do you remember me?”

Another pregnant silence filled the room. The shadow moved across the ceiling and she heard the ancient floorboards shift and creak as he moved out from the corner and towards the light.

“John? Nobody ‘cept my friends and lovers call me John.” His rough voice rumbled out from the darkness. “The name is Mayor Hancock, ya feel me?”

Nora swallowed and she walked deeper into the room. Her own hands were trembling so she stuffed them into her pockets to gain some semblance of confidence and control over her quickly mounting guilt.

“I feel you.” She replied softly. “Um, how are you doing?”

“You came here from the Institute to ask me how I’m doing?” He rasped. The disbelief, bitterness, and frustration in his voice was palpable. “Is that what the egg heads are doin’ now? Checking to make sure their test subjects are in fighting form before they’re abducted and brought back for cloning?”
“No. I — I” She faltered. She didn’t know how much she should or could reveal without setting him off into some sort of spiral.

“Nick Valentine told me you were out of the coma. I just wanted to see how you were doing. That’s all. We sort of knew each other before…”

“Before I got a bullet placed in my skull by a low-life whore who tried to rub me out on the suspicion that I was a synth clone?” Hancock’s response dripped in sarcasm.

“Yes. Before all of that.”

“‘And did Nick tell you anything else?’ He asked. His voice was rough and insistent.

“L—Like what?”

“Like what?” He echoed her question. “How ‘bout like why the fuck I dream about you every night, or why I sometimes see you in this very room sleeping in my bed lookin’ like you were beat to hell.”

Hancock coughed and Nora saw his dark form shift unsteadily in the shadows. “Or that I —” he faltered again, “— or that I — I brought you up here when you overdosed on that Buffout. And that I had to taze you with a shock baton to get your heart started again.”

Nora swallowed. Hot tears stung her eyes and she bit her lip to keep them from spilling over.

“See that door with the hole in it?”

Nora glanced over her left shoulder and saw the vague outline of the door in the darkness. “Yes.”

“The good brain doc says I did that after Nick discovered that you had been raped at the Institute. I put a fuckin’ machete through the door,” he paused and took a shuddering breath, “and then I put that same machete through the guts of three raiders down at the Combat Zone.”

“That’s the story I’ve heard too.” Nora murmured. Her throat burned as tears pricked her eyes.

“So why don’t we start from the beginning.” He growled. His own voice had dropped an octave and his words came out garbled and broken. “Help me fill in the god damned blanks here.”

Now Hancock was standing slightly off to her left and was enshrouded in the darkness once more. She could smell the menthol from whatever salve or medication Dr. Amari used to treat his wounds and she could hear his raspy, labored breathing.

She spoke, her voice thick and low, as she recounted her life to the person who had brought her back from the brink of destruction.

“My name is Nora Pendleton. I’m the only survivor from Vault 111. A year and a half ago, I went searching for my infant son who was kidnapped from the Vault. Nick helped me track down the man who kidnapped him, and you …” She faltered. “… You helped me track down a man hiding out in the Glowing Sea who had information on how to find my son.”

“And…”

“And after I found him, I … I was taken by the Institute. I was coerced into working for them but then I escaped…or … at least I did escape once.” She finished. “I went back to them and now I’m here because I need your help. We need your help.”
MacCready snorted and muttered something under his breath that Nora didn’t catch.

“I have nothin’ good to say about the Institute.” Hancock growled, “Never have and never will. But I especially couldn’t give a rat’s ass about them after learning about what they did to my brother.”

“I’m sorry.” Nora murmured. “I truly am. But that’s —”

“I don’t need your fuckin’ condolences!” Hancock snarled. In the shadows, his sunken face looked especially ghoulish and macabre. He looked like a corpse that had come alive again. “And I don’t need your fuckin’ excuses either.”

Nora rose her hands up in surrender, “You’re right. Mayor Hancock, you’re right. What the Institute took from you is inexcusable. I can’t erase what they’ve done. They’ve robbed me of family too. They took my son and one of their agents murdered my husband. My son grew up there without me and, so help me God I still hate them for it, but I also know there are people there who aren’t bad. There are people looking for redemption. Hell, I’m looking for redemption. I fucked up.”

Hancock’s palm ran across his desk inching towards her. The movement was so slight, so minute that she could’ve chalked it up to a nervous tick or gesture.

“Sit down.”

Nora obeyed and sat in the wooden chair across from his desk. She shuddered and pushed down the emotions that bubbled in her gut.

“C’mon boss, are you really gonna believe her? She’s from the Institute. She said it herself. Let’s not take any chances here and —“

“Leave me alone kid.” Hancock snapped. “Send Dr. Amari in to see me. I need more Med-X.”

MacCready huffed but obeyed. He bounced his rifle stock on the doorway like a careless child and swaggered out of the room.

Hancock sat in the plush red chair on the other side of his desk and leaned forward. Nora saw his movement in the darkness but she still couldn’t see much of his face.

“Could I light a candle or something?” Nora asked. “I can’t see you very well.”

“You don’t need to see me. Besides, I ain’t much to look at.” He spat.

“That’s not true.”

Hancock noted the sincerity in her voice and shook his head in amazement, “Nicky said you were one-of-a-kind. He told me a bit about you, ya know?”

Nora’s nodded. “He mentioned something about that.”

“He’s told me a few details but I know he’s keeping stuff to himself.” Hancock leaned forward and propped his elbows on the heavy oak desk. “So why don’t you help me fill in more of the blanks.”

“What would you like to know?” Nora replied in a neutral, business-like tone.

“Have we had sex?”

“Excuse me?”
Although Nora couldn’t see his facial expressions in the darkness, she would’ve bet all the caps she had that he was grinning at her.

“I — um — well…”

“Yes or No, sunshine.” Hancock replied.

“Yes.”

Nora watched Hancock’s body language but he didn’t move an inch at her answer but she heard him exhale as though he had held his breath waiting for an answer.

“Did Nick tell you about … about our arrangement?” She asked.

“No.”

Nora found that hard to believe but she couldn’t exactly prove it either. She sighed, “After what had happened at the Institute, I — I was in a lot of pain. I hated myself. I was angry at a lot of different people. I needed both of you to help guide me back from the edge and he knew that I didn’t want to let either of you go, so Nick suggested that we have an open relationship of sorts.”

“And that’s when we had sex?” He asked. Now Nora knew he was grinning at her.

“Well not right away, but yes.” She replied. “I was intimate with both of you.”

“Nicky too?”

“Yes, Nick too.”

Hancock nodded, laced his fingers together beneath his chin, and sat back in his chair. “But I see you’re using the past tense there, sunshine. You were intimate with both of us.”

More guilt rose to the surface and Nora flushed under the implied indictment. “We got into an argument before you got shot. The nature of what was said is unimportant, but you didn’t want me to go back to the Institute. You thought I was being stupid.”

“And what did Nicky think?”

“The same thing actually, so he wanted to come with me instead. But I couldn’t put him or you into harm’s way. So I ran away in the middle of the night while all of you were distracted.”

Nora’s heart pounded so loudly that she could feel it thumping in her ears. Shame burned in her stomach as she thought back to that night. Nora thought she was being clever. She thought she was doing what was best for both of her men, but if she hadn’t left then Hancock would’ve never been outnumbered during the coup.

“I made a mistake.” She whispered as tears leaked down her face. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

Hancock abruptly rose from his seat. Nora couldn’t see him well but she heard the heavy thud of his boots against the wooden floorboards and she smelled the sharp sting of old tobacco.

“Get up.”

“Why?”

Hancock chuckled, “Cuz I wanna get a better look at you and see if I can remember anything else.”
Nora rose to her feet. She pushed the wooden chair back and winced as the legs scraped loudly against the floor.

Hancock slowly approached her. His silhouette cut an imposing shadow. As he got closer, Nora saw his face in the dim golden lamplight. His head wasn’t sporting the white bandage anymore. Instead, black stitches etched across his mottled flesh. His right eye drooped slightly but his left eye bore into hers with unyielding concentration.

His hand rose and he ran it down her cheek where a shiny line of skin marked the remains of a burn from a laser pistol. She could almost feel the numb tingle from the medicine he used on her, and she did everything in her power to not lean into his touch.

“Your hair has grown out.” He remarked.

“Yeah…uh.” She nervously touched the length of hair that had once been shorn close to her scalp. “It grows quickly.”

His fingers swept up from her cheek to the pink scar that started at her temple and crossed into her hairline. “I remember this…the fucking robot parts they tacked to your head.”

Nora’s breath hitched. “Do you remember when you chased after me outside of the Mass Fusion building?”

The ghoul smiled but it didn’t meet his soulful, sad eyes, “You’re a fast one, sunshine. I thought you had disappeared into thin air.”

“I wish I could’ve.” Nora replied throatily. “The next time we met, I had to threaten you to keep up appearances.”

Hancock’s hand rubbed his jaw as he remembered that night. “You didn’t just threaten me, sunshine. You punched me.”

“I head butted you.” Nora corrected with a wry smile.

The ghoul shook his head and sighed. His features looked more relaxed than at the start of their conversation, and Nora hoped that the memories were returning to him. Hancock glanced down and then he took ahold of her hands in his.

“So why did ya do it?” He murmured.

“What?”

“Attempt to end it all?” His voice was small, almost fearful.

Nora’s trembled. “I don’t have a good answer for you.” After all, what could she say? Depression is a helluva thing.

“I’m not lookin’ for a good answer, just an answer.”

Nora chewed on her lip as she deliberated. “After Ayo had … I was afraid that you wouldn’t want me after what had happened.”

“What? Really?” There was an angry edge to Hancock’s voice.

“You don’t understand John,” Nora replied. “I grew up in a world where a woman was considered ruined if she had been raped. I thought — I just thought —"
Hancock shook his head. He lifted her with ease so she sat on the top of his desk and slid between her legs with practiced grace. “You just thought that a ghoul who has slept with half this damn city would think that you were ruined?”

Nora looked at him and the ghoul saw the indignant fire that burned in her eyes but she didn’t speak.

Hancock paused and glanced absent-mindedly over her shoulder. Those nights that followed flowed back into his mind like water from a broken dam. He remembered the holotape that the traveling doctor had given him, and in another flash of memory he remembered how the blood gurgled out of his mouth when he drove his knife deep into his gut. He remembered the taphouse, and how her kisses tasted like beer and lust, and how her face flushed when she climaxed with his name on her lips.

“John?”

“Holy shit, I’m — I’m remembering.” He whispered.

His eyes widened and he looked at Nora with sobering clarity. “Sunshine…I’m so fuckin’ sorry.”

Nora’s breath hitched and she half-laughed and half-sobbed. “Why are you sorry?”

He ignored her question and captured her smooth lips with his. He didn’t wait for her to respond. His tongue sought out hers; teeth clinked together and her hands pulled him in closer.

“God damn, I’ve missed you.” He growled into her neck as he took a few deep breaths before diving in again.

When they broke the kiss, both of them were clutching each other as though neither wanted to be parted from the other. Nora’s tears flowed freely down her cheeks, and Hancock had to wipe away his own with the back of his hand.

“I thought you had forgotten me.” Nora croaked.

“Sunshine. I couldn’t forget you if I tried.” He murmured into her hair before tilting her head up to kiss her, gently this time.

They both languished in the kiss until the door opened and Dr. Amari walked in with a black medical bag with Dr. Virgil close behind her.

Dr. Li took in the entirety of James’s body as he lay on the hospital gurney that had been brought to her quarters in the airplane hanger.

His skin had a sallow pallor; yellowing around his eyelids, lips, and ears indicated jaundice while the horrid green and blue veins that bulged along his neck indicated something much worse.

“Oh James,” She sighed and ran her long fingers through his thinning, sweat-slicked hair. “What sort of mess have you gotten into now?”

Dr. Li rolled his large hand over in hers relishing in the heat that his feverish body gave off. The Brotherhood, in their benevolence, was nice enough to set Dr. Li up in a large room complete with medical equipment, but they overlooked the fact that Commonwealth winters were just as bitter cold as they were before the bombs, and she was without heat.
“Y-you’re cold Maddi.” James croaked.

She withdrew her hand like she had been shocked. “I’m sorry. It’s nothing. I’m fine. Sorry to have woken you.”

A weak chuckle met her ears, “Still as flighty as always I see.”

“Still a fool as always?” She retorted and crossed her arms.

James’s eyes opened and held her gaze. The whites of his eyes were glassy but his vibrant blue irises pierced her soul just the same.

“I’ve missed you Madison.”

“James, I —“

The doctor wouldn’t give herself over to sentimentality now. No. Ten years had passed since she last saw James. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

Dr. Li swallowed and looked from her lap. “How in the hell did you survive? I — I watched you die in that reactor. I watched you collapse next to Autumn.”

He sighed and swallowed audibly, wincing at the sensation. “I was spared death by divine and technological intervention.”

“Are you kidding me? James, I’ve ran your blood through all of the tests at my disposal. Your blood is poisoned with twice as much radiation than the average wastelander can usually survive. You should be a ghoul, if not a dead.”

“I guess we’ll just have to hold our breath and see.”

“James.” She huffed.

“Madison.” He replied in an equally sardonic tone.

Dr. Li rose from the chair beside the gurney and walked over to the giant upright toolbox that was stashed in the corner. She rifled through the drawers looking for the various wrenches, screwdrivers, and other implements that she’d need to rebuild the Brotherhood’s death machine. She could feel James’s gaze on her back but at least he wouldn’t be able to see her cry.

“Maddi…” He called out to her. He treated her name like he was whispering a prayer.

She turned to him.

His hand was held out to her, and his fingers trembled as though he was pleading. Dr. Li walked towards him and ran her thin fingers across his calloused and large palm and laced her fingers with him. Feeling his touch and feeling that he was a solid presence jolted her heart. She brought his hand up to her lips and kissed the back of his hand.

“I’ve missed you too.” She murmured and then added, “You damn idiot.”

James gave her a sheepish smile, “Illis quos amo deserviam,” and then added, “For those I love I will sacrifice.”

“Well, you’ve sacrificed far too much James.” She snapped.
“And what about you?” His fingers unlaced from hers and he brushed the metal bomb collar that encircled her neck. “Tell me that you didn’t come here just for me.”

Dr. Li felt her neck and cheeks flush and she busied herself with organizing a box of nuts, bolts, washers, and clamps into piles.

“Maddi?”

“I didn’t come here just for you.” She snapped and stood up straight. The skin around her eyes crinkled into a steely glare.

“Well, I know you didn’t come here just for the Brotherhood’s wonderful cooking and pleasant company.” James remarked dryly. “And I know they blackmailed you. I heard one of the scribes talking about Proctor Quinlan’s message.”

“They told me that refusing them would be considered an act of war.” Dr. Li replied. “The Institute cannot withstand it if the Brotherhood marches on them now. We have no army aside for a few hundred synths. We have no allies. We have nothing except the determination and grit of one Vault Dweller.”

“A Vault Dweller?” He wheezed.

“Her name is Nora.” Dr. Li replied. She saw the forlorn and pained expression on James’s face and added, “She’s a remarkable woman.”

James’s jaw clenched so hard that the tendons bulged beneath his pale skin. “And you trust her?”

Dr. Li sighed and walked back to the gurney. Her hand brushed the plastic pad that he was laying on with the same tenderness as a lover’s caress.

“Nora is not —“

“— Don’t.” He snarled and his hand shot out to grab her forearm. Although he was weak, his grip had its intended effect. “Don’t say her name.”

“I would trust Nora with my life James.” Dr. Li replied.

His face darkened and he rolled away, “Don’t make the same mistakes I did Maddi.”

“Li!” Proctor Ingram yelled, “Grab your supplies and get out here. We have work to do.”

Dr. Li pulled out of James’s grip and grabbed the canvas bag full of electrical components and soldering equipment. “I’ll be back soon, okay? Just get some rest.”

James didn’t respond but as the outside light shone in on him when Dr. Li opened the door, she noticed that his fingers were unfolding two pieces of paper. The top page was a note; the handwriting was messy, nearly unreadable, and the paper trembled in the man’s hands as he read it.

Attached to the note was an equally faded picture of two people. The man on the left was clearly James but much younger. Newly formed crows feet barely marred the corners of his eyes and his hair was still more blond than white. The person next to him was a young woman. Her large brown eyes, dark features, and mocha colored skin was such a contrast to James’s nordic heritage. Like yin and yang, the two made a perfectly bonded pair.

Dr. Li walked out into the cold morning light and shut the door on the past. The future is what she
had to focus on now…or at least she had to focus on ensuring that Nora and the rest of the Commonwealth had a chance to have a future at all.
Chapter 10 — Hard Bargains

Virgil, Amari, and Hancock sat in stunned silence as Nora shared everything that had happened at the Institute since she became Director. She told them about how the Advanced Systems division was working on improvements to their laser weaponry, and about how the Housing division was working overtime to stockpile bagged food product, blankets, fresh water, and other necessities in case the Brotherhood forced them to burrow deeper into the Institute and they’d be forced to set up a blockade. Nora even told them about Dr. Li and how she was forced to join the Brotherhood to help with Liberty Prime, that news made Virgil utter a string of profanity under his breath before regaining his composure. By the end of it all, Nora’s throat was sore and she felt emotionally exhausted.

“So what do we do now?” Virgil asked.

Dr. Amari shook her head, “A fight with the Brotherhood isn’t going to end well. This group is far more militant and involved in the wasteland than the group I knew of in the West. And now that they’ve pinpointed the Institute’s location, they’ll stop at nothing to wipe it off the map.”

“Everyone is working double shifts to ensure that we have as much ammunition, aid, and food as we need for what’s to come.” Nora replied. “I’ve been sending groups of synths topside as quickly as I can but I still fear it’s not enough. The Railroad is struggling to secure safe houses for the amount of synths who are ready to leave, and now Des has told me that some of the wastelanders are taking it upon themselves to exact revenge on escaped synths. Two have been murdered by vigilante scavers in the past week.”

Dr. Amari pinched the bridge of her nose, “I can talk with Irma and see if we can house a couple synths for the time being. Using the abandoned warehouses here in Goodneighbor seemed to work out well until Bobbi threw them out into the Boston ruins.”

Hancock inhaled deeply at the mention of Bobbi No-Nose but said nothing. He just sat behind his desk twirling his hunting knife in between his fingers listening to the conversation, but Nora could tell that the ghoul was nearing the limit of his self control.

“She did what?” Nora interjected.

“She said that she wanted to give the synths a taste of their own medicine. Word spread quickly about Mayor McDonough and she assumed that since he was a synth when he threw the ghouls out of Diamond City, she’d give the synths a taste of their own medicine and threw them out of Goodneighbor.”

“I ain’t gonna sing that bitch’s praises but she had the right idea.” Hancock growled. “An eye for an eye, ya feel me? If that low-quality synth copy of my brother wanted to ‘clean up’ by throwing the ghouls out of Diamond City, then the Institute can find another place for their fuckin’ science projects.”

Hancock didn’t meet Nora’s eyes when he said that but he saw the disapproval on her face as clear as day.

“For Christ sake,” Dr. Amari snapped. “If we all went around with that attitude, we won’t have to fight the Brotherhood because all of us will be dead before we can fight. Have you ever heard the
phrase: an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind? Well that’s what’ll happen if you don’t learn from your brother’s mis —“

Hancock exploded out of his seat and slammed his hunting knife into the ancient oak desk so hard that the blade pierced through the wood and poked through the bottom.

— “That synth is NOT my brother!” He snarled.

The room fell silent. Virgil’s mouth fell open and he shut it right away. Dr. Amari, however, drew herself up and looked Hancock in the face. “John, none of us can take back what happened to your brother. The Institute has done awful things, terrible things, but they also offer us our best chance of survival. Would you really let your revenge get in the way of securing a better life for the people here in Goodneighbor?”

“Yes,” Hancock said through clenched teeth. “I ain’t a noble person. The Institute will pay for what they took from me.”

Nora placed a hand on Hancock’s scarred forearm hoping her touch could quell some of the rage. She looked into the ghoul’s coal eyes and saw just how wounded he was.

“Rage isn’t going to bring him back John.” She replied. “Believe me, I know how you feel.”

Hancock pulled away from Nora and settled back in his chair. “If I wanted a pity party, I would’ve sent out an invite.”

Nora jerked away and bit her tongue at the remarks that rose to her lips. The words were fueled by frustration and her own pain, she knew that, but she also knew it would’ve felt so damn good to tell Hancock to go fuck himself.

“How about we put a pin in this conversation and reconvene when emotions aren’t as high.” Virgil said. “Nora how much time do you have with us topside?”

“I didn’t give them a timetable but I’d say no more than a week at most.” She replied. “If an emergency comes up, they can always relay me back at any time.”

Virgil nodded and he rose from his seat. Dr. Amari and Nora followed suit. The air in the room seemed to crackle with tension, and Nora wanted nothing else but to be anywhere else in the wasteland at that moment.

“Nora, would you accompany Dr. Amari and I to the Memory Den? I’d love to hear a more detailed update about the hydroponics experiments that Dr. Holdren has been doing.” Dr. Virgil said.

“Sure.” Nora agreed.

As the trio filtered out of Hancock’s office, Nora could feel the ghoul’s gaze on her back. She wanted nothing more than to look over her shoulder one last time or say something, anything, that might take away some of his pain, but Nora came up short. She had spent so long being angry at the Institute for what they did to Shaun that seeing that anger on someone else made her wonder if Nick had been right after all. Maybe the Institute couldn’t be redeemed.

As she closed the door, she thought of all of the people fighting to make the Institute a better place. She thought of Dr. Binet and his son, and of Dr. Li and her sacrifice, and she thought of Nate — who had just as much of a reason to hate the Institute as anyone — and she thought of synth Shaun. When Father created a clone of himself, he intended to program him to recognize Nora as his
mother. Although Nora felt no maternal affection towards the child, he — for all intents and purposes — was still a child.

There were innocent people living in the Institute. Children weren’t asked to be born and synths didn’t ask to be created, but all of their lives weighed heavily on her shoulders.

Like it or not, she was Mother to these people in either name or bastardized genetics. She might’ve failed at being a mother the first time through, but she was determined to not fail again.

Cold, salty sea spray carried by the ferocious wind whipped at her face as she soldered one of the actuators in Liberty Prime’s knee joints. Keeping a huge hunk of metal like Liberty Prime out in these inclement conditions seemed counter productive if they ever wanted to get this construct operational, but then again, the salt, wind, and rain coupled with a bit of rust would ensure that Dr. Li’s acts of sabotage would go unnoticed.

So maybe she soldered the green and red wires together, or maybe she was too skimpy with the oil on the castors, hinges, and joints? Those weren’t fatal errors by any means, but her small acts of defiance would slow down Liberty Prime’s pace by a good 20%. Hopefully that would be enough time to give the Institute advanced warning.

Dr. Li replaced the metal paneling that covered the joints and stapled the rivets back in place. The searchlights that scanned the grounds swept by her in the predictable two and a half minute circuit and she could hear the soft snoring of the poor, young Scribe who was tasked with supervising her work while Proctor Ingram was off duty.

She pulled up the collar on the military fatigues the Brotherhood issued her and climbed off the scaffold and back onto the metal walkway where her ‘guard’ was perched.

“Hey.” She said just loud to wake the girl.

The Scribe jumped and stood upright like she had been shocked with a taser.

“Ad Victor — I mean — uh — shit —“ The panic in her face was clear as day and Dr. Li gave her a small, maternal smile.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s nearly three in the morning.”

The girl, who couldn’t be any older than sixteen, set her wide, dark blue eyes on the older woman.

“I’m s-s-orry.” She half stuttered and half shivered. “I wa-wasn’t asleep for very long, I just—“

Dr. Li held up her hand to quiet the girl. Truthfully, she didn’t care about the girl’s excuse. She was frozen to the bone and desperately needed sleep as much as she did.

“How about we just keep this between us, okay? Go on. Go up to the Prydwen and get some sleep. I’m going to turn in as well.”

The Scribe smiled in relief and then stood up a little straighter and grasped for the authoritative Brotherhood tone that she had been taught to repeat. “Proctor Ingram needs a full report of the work you did.”

Dr. Li suppressed an eye roll and handed over a small notebook full of her immaculately handwritten, albeit waterlogged, notes.
“This should suffice until Ingram and I can meet face-to-face to discuss my work.” She said coolly.

The Scribe took the notebook and saluted her. “Ad Victoriam ma’am.”

Dr. Li nodded her head in dismissal and walked down the metal ramp and across the muddy courtyard. A Knight clad in full Power Armor stood at the airport hanger entrance. He stood at attention and held his laser rifle across his chest.

“Ma’am.” He remarked but didn’t move his head in her direction.

Dr. Li exhaled another snide remark that came to her tongue. She thought back to her old friends back in Rivet City. Sure, the work in the science lab was serious business but her colleagues at least had personalities. Hell, even her Institute colleagues’ with their eclectic mix of madness and genius could hold interesting conversations. But the soldiers that populated the Brotherhood of Steel were about as intelligent and as charismatic as the average wasteland scavver.

She relished in the warmth of a nearby trash can campfire and held out her frigid hands to the flame’s warmth. Her stomach growled but she pushed down the hunger pains. She had gotten used to the gelatinous food product served in the Institute’s commissary. Sure the texture was off-putting at first, but the food was nourishing and nutritious, and Dr. Li had a difficult time finding the usual wasteland fare of mole rat steaks and bug meat appetizing. Apparently her years at the Institute had made her a bit soft.

When Dr. Li entered her quarters, she heard the telltale sound of wrenching and then the sound of liquid hitting a metal bucket.

“James?”

She found him on his hands and knees behind a blue medical partition. The military fatigues that Dr. Li scavenged for him stuck to his skin. He was panting and clutching himself.

“There’s something wrong with me.” He moaned softly.

Fear and panic immediately flooded her brain. He looked okay; he was underweight but the shit that Scribe Neriah had pumped him full of was finally out of his system. Nevertheless, Dr. Li was worried, but she couldn’t let James see that.

“You’ve gotta be more specific than that.” She snarked, her voice masking her fear with sarcasm. “I’ve been telling you that there’s something wrong with you since we were teenagers.”

“Stop deflecting with humor Maddison.” James rolled back onto his knees and sipped a bottle of purified water. The sickly green and yellow tinge to his skin was beginning to clear up, but his eyes were glassy and blood vessels bursted in one of them painting his left iris a brilliant red-black

“Did you do a rad count on your blood?”

“I — I can’t hold the needle steady enough to do it.” He shuddered. “Oh …”

He wretched over the bucket and puked again. Dr. Li removed her damp jacket and donned her Institute scrubs before helping James back to the hospital bed.

“Tell me your other symptoms.” She said sternly.

“Nausea and probable dehydration, a pounding headache behind my eyes, muscle aches, and …”

He hesitated. “… I’ve started to lose some hair.”
She was about to brush the last concern off as a mark of James’s vanity, but when she looked closer, she saw what he meant. She gently ran her fingers through his thin, snow white hair. Sure enough she noticed bald patches, but what worried her more was that the skin on those bald spots were oozing a cloudy liquid. She ran through a possible diagnosis in her head: ringworm, a possible bacterial infection, or maybe a serious allergic reaction or flair up of psoriasis, but something told her that James’s illness was different.

“Well let me help you with the blood draw and then I’ll do some tests and see what it could be.” She said.

But when she pushed up James’s sleeve to apply the tourniquet, a three inch long piece of his skin sloughed off in her hand like it was tissue paper.

“Oh God!” She exclaimed, failing to conceal her horror.

They both looked at the piece of skin that had fallen to the ground as though it was a radscorpion ready to attack. Dr. Li’s blood ran cold and for one of the few times in her life, she saw true fear in James’s eyes.

“Maddi…” He breathed. Everything he could say or ever wanted to say was carried in his smooth, baritone voice.

Blood from the wound began leaking down his bicep and dripped onto the bed. Dr. Li grabbed some sterile gauze and gingerly bandaged the wound, praying that the rest of his skin still remained attached to his body. Both sat in uncomfortable silence until she had finished the blood draw and put the vial into the centrifuge.

The machine’s whirling noise filled the silence. Dr. Li knew exactly what could cause a person’s skin to slough off their body like a snake’s. She saw a couple of cases when she was a young doctor in Rivet City. A wastelander came in complaining of advanced rad poisoning after passing out drunk near an Old World toxic waste disposal sight and left 48 hours later driven mad by the pain as his nose fell off, his skin blistered raw and then healed, and as his hair fell out in patches.

“I suppose this has been coming for me for a while.” He murmured.

“James…” Dr. Li didn’t know how to finish that sentence or if she even wanted to

She washed her hands and then sat on the cot across from him. The sleep she craved twenty minutes ago had long fled from her mind.

“This can end two ways for me.” He remarked factually.

“James…” She replied this time more throatily but he ignored her plea.

“Maddi if the radiation finally kills me —“

“— Stop.” Dr. Li couldn’t suppress the tears that rolled down her dirty face. “Stop talking like that James.”

He shuddered as well, his own emotions burgeoning to the surface, “But if this turns out to be the beginning stages of gholification, then I know I just ask that you make it quick. If Scribe Neriah gets word that I’ve turned ghoul, she’ll haul me back into her laboratory of Frankenstein-esque experiments to study me some more.”

“Jesus James, I’m not gonna shoot you!”
“If you don’t then one of those Brotherhood soldiers will.” He snapped.

“I have a better idea.” She replied. “My friend … Nora … she spoke of a settlement nearby. Apparently their mayor is a ghoul. You know that things are going to get worse before they get better. You need Med-X at the very least and the Brotherhood refuses to give me any chems for medicinal use because they think I’ll use them to overdose. If you leave now before the morning patrols start, you might be able to make it there unnoticed.”

“No.”

“James, don’t be stupid.” She snapped.

“If I leave, they will take it out on you!” He exclaimed.

“I’m building their damn murder bot! They can’t kill me until it’s finished.” She countered.

“I don’t know where this settlement is Maddi.”

She sighed in exasperation, “It’s close by. I’ve never been there but the Institute has done surveillance on the entire Commonwealth. It’s about an hour walk due west. The place is called Goodneighbor and its a dive, even by wasteland standards, but Brotherhood patrols have been sweeping through the area cleaning up the ‘undesirables’ so it should be safe enough.”

He shuddered as his stomach rolled once again. Once the need to vomit had passed, he looked at Dr. Li with a pleading expression. “Maddi, I can’t run from you. Not again.”

“If I recall correctly, you didn’t run out on me, you fled from the microscope I threw at you.” She said. “And you’re not running from me. I know where to find you this time.”

“But that’s not the point!” He urged. “You won’t be able to find me if they detonate that bomb collar that’s around your neck, and I will not put you in danger.”

“And I won’t watch you die.” Dr. Li snapped.

James shuddered and laid back on the bed as another wave of nausea made his empty stomach gurgle.

“Then we better hope that this is just the stomach flu because otherwise you’ll get to watch me die anyway, whether its by radiation poisoning or by a fucking bullet to the head.” He growled.

“John, are you here?” Nora called into the dark office.

“Haven’t left actually.” He replied back in a low, tired voice.

Nora entered the room and closed the door. She pulled out a tarnished silver lighter and flicked it open. The flame threw harsh shadows on the wall but provided her enough light to go to the half burned candles in the office and light them.

“What are ya doin’?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” She replied. “Your office already looks like a mausoleum. I figured if I light enough candles, we’d have enough of them to do a seance so we could call the spirits back from beyond the grave.”

Nora caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and she turned to see Hancock fiddling with a
“What are you —“ But Nora didn’t have to finish her question before Hancock pulled out a bottle of whisky and pulled the cork out with his teeth. “I thought you weren’t suppose to have alcohol.”

“I don’t do as I’m told.” He growled.

“Clearly.” She smirked. “You gonna share the contraband?”

Hancock looked at her with a measured expression, took a swig from the bottle, and then handed it out to her.

Nora took it from him, took a swig from the bottle, and sputtered as the heat and raw alcohol taste burned her throat.

“W-what the Hell is that?” She choked out and handed the bottle back to Hancock. “That’s the worst whisky I’ve ever tasted.”

He took another pull from the bottle, winced, and set it on his desk. “That’s all Daisy could get me. Fahrenheit had the good hookup for booze.”

At the mention of her name, Hancock turned away from Nora. His shoulders heaved and a pained groan tore from his throat.

“I’m sorry.” Nora murmured but she knew her words meant very little.

“I — I just never thought that she’d go down like that ya know? A woman like Fahr could take down four men at once and not even break a sweat, and then that fucking cunt …” He trailed off. His fist was clenched so hard that Nora could see his pulse beating amid the taught tendons in his wrist. “… I’ve seen radstag killed with more dignity than what she did to Fahr.”

Nora placed a hand on Hancock’s forearm and this time he didn’t pull away.

“I know how much she meant to you. I don’t know if you remember, but you once told me how you first met, about how she beat your ass and left you lying naked in the street for trying to steal chems from Marowski.”

Hancock’s chuckle was rough, “Oh yeah. Where were we?”

“You took me on a date to the Shamrock Taphouse. The place was crawling with Raiders but we took them out and then we found a robot that dispensed beer. That’s all we needed for a good night. You talked about Fahr and the good ol’ days and I talked about Nate and about …” She still struggled with saying her son’s name aloud, “… about my son Shaun. You were there for me when I was in a pretty dark moment in my life. You empathized with me and you didn’t try to fix anything because there was nothing you could fix.”

Hancock closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “I’m getting flashes of it but it’s not all there, so I guess I’ll just take your word for it.”

“Well what I’m trying to get at is that I’m here for you. No matter how badly I want to, I can’t fix what has happened. But you’re in pain and you’re without most of your typical avoidance methods, and I’m sure that’s making all of this a living Hell.”

The ghoul swallowed thickly and covered Nora’s hand with his other one. Even though he enjoyed Nora’s touch, he felt the vortex of hatred, rage, anger, and grief churning his guts into a tempest, so
much so, that he wanted to curl in on himself.

“Sunshine, what happened with Bobbi cannot happen again.” He growled. “And I blame the Institute for their role in all of this shit.”

“The Institute didn’t kill Fahrenheit.” Nora replied.

“Didn’t they? They kidnap my citizens, replace them with copies, and instill fear across the Commonwealth? Then Bobbi No-Nose came in and began spoutin’ her mouth off because she was using people’s fears of synths as a rally cry to try and overthrow me, thereby murdering my right hand woman.”

Hancock sat up straighter in his chair and grabbed a cigarette from the pack and lit it. “Now if this was just business, I wouldn’t be so heated up about this. Fahrenheit took the job knowing the risks, but Bobbi targeted her personally. She strung Fahr up by her wrists so she would be forced to dangle until her shoulders dislocated, and then she shot her in the guts. All because Bobbi was afraid of a synth takeover that the Institute made people think was gonna happen.”

“Is it possible that Bobbi was successful in gaining a following because people haven’t had the chance to sit down and talk to synths face-to-face, at least not while being aware of who and what they are?” Nora asked.

“People see Nick around here all the time and —”

“— You know that Nick doesn’t count in this argument. Everyone can see that he’s a synth and can respond immediately, but it’s nearly impossible for people to identify a synth up close. What would happen if we had a handful of synths “come out” and talk with the group?” Nora asked.

“No, I don’t think that would work?” Hancock asked.

“I don’t know what would work in the situation we’re in, but it couldn’t hurt.” She replied. “The important thing to express to the citizens is that the Brotherhood doesn’t care if you’re a ghoul or a synth, to them both are considered abominations and both deserve to be exterminated.”

He sighed. "I've started to notice the crew cut beefheads around Goodneighbor with little more regularity. One of their planes crashed into Fandiel Hall the other day, damn near scared me out of my skin. You'd think they'd know how to fly them things a bit better."

Nora chuckled. "Well beefhead, kamikaze pilots aside, I need to start getting people to trust me. That'll be the first step. Do I have your support?"

Hooked at her from across his desk. In the candlelight, his dark eyes seemed to flash gold and amber as the flames around them flickered. “I trust ya, sunshine but I don't trust the Institute, and I’m not gonna agree to making a speech in support of the them. I will not lie to these people. But I wont stop you from speakin’ to them.”

"Fair enough." Nora said. "But will they even listen to me?"

“They’ll listen as long as I ask them to.” He replied. “I need to make an appearance out and about anyway. I can’t have my constituents thinking that I’ve holed up and died in this place.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Hancock gazed across the desk at her. His fingertips rested on either side of his temples as though he was giving himself a facial massage.
“How are you doing otherwise?” Nora asked.

Hancock groaned, “Aside for having pretty huge fuckin’ lapses in my brain and experiencing migraines that could stop a deathclaw, I’m doin’ better. This sure beats bein’ dead, but only by a slight amount.”

Nora came around the desk to where Hancock was sitting and she pulled him to his feet. She only had a week at most topside, and she knew she’d regret it if she didn’t get to spend some time fulfilling her more carnal needs.

“You know what helps a headache?” Nora asked.

“What’s that?”

Nora pulled him up and out of his seat and over to his bed by his belt. She leaned back on the large bed and pulled Hancock in between her knees.

“If I helped you release some tension.” She said, letting the heat in her voice carry the innuendo. “We both have been working too damn hard.”

Hancock tilted her face so she looked up at him. His lips were inches from hers and he said, “You drive a hard bargain, sunshine.”

And he kissed her.
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: There's mild body horror in the last section of the story.

Author's note: Thank you to all of my readers who have stuck by this story. This 3rd part has been a lot slower going for me and sometimes it can get discouraging to tie up all of these plot points and aim for a singular and satisfying conclusion. So thanks again to everyone for their support.

I may be slow at updating, but I WILL finish this story.

Chapter 11 — A Crucible

“Elder Maxson I think you should hear this.” Knight Rhys said as the Elder was doing his routine patrols of the recruits’ barracks.

“What is it Knight?”

Rhys flicked on the radio that sat on the table in the barracks common area and turned the volume up.

A young man’s voice broke in as the Old World song finally ended and announced, “Travis ‘Lonely’ Miles here. One time a good friend once told me that you gotta fight the good fight. Well I have a woman here who’s been doing just that and she’s got a special message for each and every one of my loyal listeners. Take it away babe.”

The shrill feedback of a microphone echoed through the Prydwen’s hull and then a wavering and unsure voice came over the airwaves.

“Uh … thanks Travis.” She cleared her voice and then began speaking with a little more confidence.

“We’ve all heard the rumors about the Institute and unfortunately many of the rumors you heard were true. The Institute did kidnap people and replace them with synths including the former Diamond City mayor. The Institute has committed unwarranted acts of violence against innocent people for standing in their way, and the Institute is responsible for the Super Mutant menace in the Commonwealth. And over sixty years ago, the Institute hired a mercenary to break into Vault 111, kidnap my son, and murder my husband. They kidnapped me and used my love for my friends to coerce me into five months of slavery. I did horrible things in their name. But the perpetrator of much of this violence, turmoil, and bloodshed is now dead, and I’ve been named the Institute’s new leader.”

Elder Maxson sat on the aluminum bench and angled his body closer to the radio in interest.

The woman speaking took another breath. “Look, I am not here to justify for the Institute’s past sins. And I know there is nothing I can say that will bring back the loved ones who were taken from you. Only time and I hope a small amount of grace will heal those wounds.”
“What I’m here for today is to tell you that the Institute is changing, and I am changing it. We have scientific and technological capabilities to improve everyone’s lives ten-fold. We have clean running water, the ability to grow and harvest crops which are more resilient to disease and radiation, and people with advanced medical training who are willing to diagnose and treat people who are sick, free of charge. Right now we’ve established trade lines with a few local shops where you’ll be able to buy raw materials, advanced armor, and weaponry for a fair price. The Institute is tired of hiding in the shadows as the boogeymen. We want to emerge into the wasteland, not as a force of violence or oppression, but as a force of hope and improvement for the future. Thanks for listening … for those of you who still are.”

The microphone screeched again and the young man added, “There you have it folks. If you have any questions or concerns, the wonderful Nat down at Publick Occurrences will be taking your thoughts and sending them on to the Sole Survivor directly. In the meantime, here’s that sweet crooner Bing Crosby and the wonderful Andrew’s Sisters with ‘Pistol Packin’ Mama.’”

Maxson flicked the radio off. He stroked his thick beard and considered his next move. The enemy had just provided them with its flank and Maxson was trying to decide how he should make the killing blow.

“Knight Rhys.” Maxson snapped.

“Yes sir!” The soldier saluted and stood at attention.

“I want you and Paladin Danse to assemble a team of four more soldiers and bring me this Vault Dweller. I want her back here alive. Is that understood?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Ad victoriam.” Maxson saluted which Knight Rhys echoed back before running off to Paladin Danse’s quarters to tell him of their new mission.

Maxson turned back to the dormant radio. He had come all of this way to pull the Institute out of the ground like a weed, but now it seemed like this Sole Survivor was doing a good enough job of it herself. He should’ve just been patient and let the eventual mutiny tear the Institute apart from the inside out, but Elder Maxson wasn’t a patient man.

He needed to meet this woman, this Sole Survivor, and end her once and for all.

Nora licked her lips as she stood in front of the assembled Goodneighbor populace two days later.

Her announcement in Diamond City went about as well as she expected but now everyone except Nat, Ellie, and Travis looked at her with suspicion.

Arturo refused to make eye contact with her and Vadim and Yefim all but kicked her out of the bar.

“Your presence here is bad for business. You understand, yes?” Yefim said as soon as she came into the Dugout Inn. “I’m sorry.” He added with a genuine air of remorse.

Without Nick and his sterling reputation to back her up and Piper as her endearing but overexcitable PR rep, Nora was adrift in a sea of strangers. Her trip from Goodneighbor to Diamond City and back took less than eight hours so she ended up spending the rest of her two days trying to help establish more safe houses for the newly freed synths with Deacon.

Between running PR and working with The Railroad, Nora barely had any time to think straight.
Then this morning Hancock came to her and said that he called a town meeting at noon; so here she was, standing atop of the balcony looking out at a sea of over one hundred stressed, emaciated, and dirty faces as they all glowered up at her.

Hancock watched her from the side. His black boot was kicked up against the wall in his usual devil-take-me way. Nora tried to compose herself and project the same confident and self-assured manner that she had while she was in the courtroom, but the blank stares and thinly veiled looks of contempt did little to assuage her stage fright.

Nora cleared her throat and spoke in a rushed, tight breath. “Look. I know that I’m the last person you’d probably want speaking to you right now so I’ll make it brief. We all saw the giant airship fly over Boston ten months ago, but if you’re anything like me, you had no idea what it signified. I’ve talked to people, people who’ve had direct contact with the Brotherhood in the past—” Nora nodded at Dr. Amari, “And they are not here to help you. If you have something they want, they’ll take it by force. Hell, just this morning I received a report from Preston Garvey, General of the Minutemen, that they descended on Sanctuary Hills and robbed them of half their food and some of their much needed supplies.”

“At least they didn’t fucking kidnap my brother and turn him into some mutant freak!” A high-pitched man dressed in a dirty business suit half hissed from the sidewalk. Many heads nodded and some citizens patted him on the back.

“And what about my daughter? I found her half-eaten corpse on the way back to my camp.” An elderly woman wheezed. “The Super Mutants ate her and then threw the rest of her body off the overpass. And guess who made the Super Mutants?”

The crowd’s murmur grew to a dull growl in dissent. Nora had to cut them off before the crowd had a chance to build off one another and escalate.

“I am truly sorry and my condolences go out to each and everyone who —“

“—Fuck your condolences.” A man yelled out. “Your condolences won’t bring my Maria back.”

“Yeah!” The half the town echoed.

She looked in the crowd and saw that Hancock locked eyes with Dr. Amari and Dr. Virgil. Amari nodded her head and then whispered something into Virgil’s ear. He nodded too and then pushed his way through the crowd. He towered over half the Goodneighbor residents and physically pushed pass the others who blocked his way. He climbed onto a stack of wooden crates and loomed out over the crowd.

“Listen! You all have lost loved ones. Taking out your anger on the innocent won’t bring them back.” He boomed out. “But if you need a place to direct your anger, direct it at me. I use to work at the Institute in the FEV labs. What they did was an atrocity and I did my best to put a stop to it. I destroyed the lab but I still have my research, and with it I’ve created an antiserum — a cure — which could reverse the mutation process.”

“Bullshit!” A man yelled out from the crowd.

“Yeah, you’re lying to us!” Another echoed out.

Then Hancock jumped up onto the boxes and stood next to Virgil. The crowd fell silent as soon as the ghoul rose his hands.

“Look. He ain’t lying. I saw it with my own eyes. When I first met him he looked as ugly and
smelled twice as bad as any of them Super Mutants. He was one of them, and I damn near shot him on sight. Now he’s standing before you like this—“Hancock gestured up and down at Virgil. “Still just as ugly but not as green or simple-minded or prone to bouts of cannibalism and stringing up people like fuckin’ piñatas.”

“I know it is hard to believe but I do have proof.” Virgil said, ignoring Hancock’s editorializing.

Then what happened next was beyond explanation. Virgil whistled and the massive barricade near the entrance split in half as four men from the Neighborhood Watch pulled them open. Ham and MacCready pulled a hulking green form through the gap and towards the crowd.

Thick ropes were tied to both of the creature’s wrists but it looked like either man would be thrown through the air if the Super Mutant had the inclination to jerk one of its arms too much. But then Nora saw what was truly keeping the Super Mutant docile.

KL-E-O came up behind the mutant issuing orders as her fully charged red laser eye was aimed at the mutant’s back.

“Citizens allow maximum space of up to ten feet from the target. Your safety is not guaranteed.” Her robotic, authoritative voice commanded but then her sultry voice added, “But a little danger never hurt anyone.”

The crowd backed up against the buildings as the mutant was lead into the town square, some even drew weapons. A multicolored gag was tied around the mutant’s mouth which muffled the beast’s angry roaring and broken threats.

Virgil rose his hands and motioned for the crowd to calm down. “Please! Don’t shoot. Just be patient and watch.”

Sweat beaded off his forehead as he pulled out a syringe rifle from the holster that was slung across his back. He checked the cartridge to ensure the correct vial was loaded, and then took aim at the mutant’s jugular.

The gun made a soft whooshing sound as it fired a red puff ball tipped syringe into the beast’s neck. The mutant barely moved. It didn’t look like the mutant even registered that it had been hit.

Nora and the crowd watched with tense uncertainty. After a whole minute of silence, the mutant finally grunted and then swayed on its feet. Ham and MacCready let go of their ropes and backed away from the wavering form just as all 400 pounds of the mutant fell to its knees and then landed face first in the dirt.

Virgil jumped off the barrels with surprising dexterity, ran towards the fallen mutant, and pressed a larger syringe to the mutant’s neck and dispensed the plunger. He rubbed the injection sight as though he was giving a vaccination and then stepped away.

“The serum I synthesized from my own blood successfully reverses the mutation done to the subject’s DNA. The serum was produced with a high powered amphetamine, courtesy of your Mayor, which will speed up the serum’s restorative process.”

Nora doubted that the crowd understood half of what he said, but when she caught Hancock’s eye she found his stony face remained impassive and impossible to read. Why would Hancock help Brian Virgil after what he had done to his brother? Hell, Hancock would have nearly gutted him in the middle of Sanctuary if Nora hadn’t stepped in. She wonder what had changed between the two men while she had been at the Institute.
A murmur of disbelief and slight horror broke Nora from her thoughts and drew her attention back to the marketplace. The eight and a half foot tall and 400 pound Super Mutant began shrinking.

Dr. Amari cut through the crowd with her doctor’s bag as two Goodneighbor citizens followed behind her while carrying a stretcher.

The awful snapping sound of bones breaking and then reforming rang out like gunshots and someone in the crowd puked into an empty barrel. The mutant … or rather … the greenish looking humanoid … seemed to deflate like a punctured air mattress.

Virgil nodded to Dr. Amari and she went ahead and administered a dose of Med-X. Virgil’s voice rang out, sounding more confident and more commanding than she had ever seen before.

“Once the serum replicates and replaces the corrupted DNA, the patient will revert back to their original state with only a few minor side effects. I cannot guarantee that this process will work on every Super Mutant — behemoths and those that have excessively mutated or those of an advanced age — will not survive the process, but I hope that this is just one way that the Institute, thanks to Nora’s help, can begin to make amends.”

By now the mutant’s form had reverted back into a human male’s shape. His sun-tanned skin was marked with blood and dirt from wasteland living but when Dr. Amari turned him over and rolled him onto the stretcher, a shrill cry broke out from the crowd.

“Richard!”

The crowd broke apart again and a sickly-looking blond haired woman stepped forward. She was holding a baby and pulling a dirty looking child of 7 or 8 by the arm.

“Is he alive?” She asked Dr. Amari.

The doctor placed a stethoscope on his bare chest and listened. It felt like the entire crowd was trying to listen to the man’s heartbeat as well. Then Amari nodded.

“His pulse is weak. We will transport him to my laboratory where we will get him stabilized.”

The man named Richard let out a low groan and slowly opened his eyes. The whites around his pupils were bloodshot and some of the veins had burst.

“M-Mary?” His voice was faint and weak.

The woman sobbed harder and clutched her baby to her neck. Her 8 year old of an indeterminate gender looked at his or her father with disbelief.

Dr. Amari made a short, deft movement with her head and the two Goodneighbor citizens carried the man away and Amari gently guided Mary and her children down the alleyway and to the Memory Den.

The town sat in stunned silence. Nora looked at Dr. Virgil and then back at the crowd. She expected more chaos or maybe more excitement. They all just witnessed a literal miracle, but the entire crowd looked … lost. The crowd looked back to her expectantly but Nora had no words. She was lost as well. What could she say that might add context to what just happened?

“Uh so…” She began, “Like I said, the Institute doesn’t want to make excuses for their mistakes. If we can, we want to fix them. But we can’t fix them and things like that — “ She gestured at the spot where the man had been — “can’t happen if brilliant minds like Virgil’s are lost. Now I know
you’re angry. You have every right to be angry. I just ask that you hold onto that anger just a bit longer and help me fight off the true menace to our society — The Brotherhood of Steel.”

The crowd remained silent. There was no clapping or hooting, but thankfully nobody booed her, cussed at her, or tried to attack her. They all just looked at her with expressions of horror, bewilderment, and cautious hope.

“Um…thanks for listening.” Nora said and she retreated back into the Old State House.

As soon as the whitewashed doors shut behind her, she sank heavily onto the red chaise in Hancock’s office and put her head in her hands.

Soon several sets of footsteps clambered up the stairs and entered the room.

“I gotta hand it to ya.” Hancock growled. “I didn’t think that would work.”

“The science was sound but I was doubtful about the process happening that quickly. I’ll have to have Dr. Amari give me a full report of Richard’s injuries and health to determine if we need to augment the serum so the change is more gradual and less of a shock to the system. Still think of all the people we’ll be able to save.” Virgil exclaimed. He sounded far younger than Nora had ever heard him. The gravel and fatigue in his voice was gone. Now he sounded like an excited teenager.

Nora lifted her head and watched the two men. Hancock slapped the larger man once on the back and then passed him a whisky bottle and two glasses. When the ghoul saw they had company he added a third glass to the group and gestured to Virgil to pour them all a drink.

“Why the long face sunshine?” He asked. “The crowd didn’t try to lynch you. I say you won them over.”

Nora didn’t know where to begin or if there even was a beginning. She was irritated, fascinated, exhausted, hungry, and annoyed all at the same time.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you and Virgil were planning this? Fuck. How long have you guys been planning this? I could’ve used you both when I was talking to Diamond City. Nearly that entire town hates me because I had nothing to show that the Institute has changed except my word!”

Virgil interjected, “I understand your frustration Nora. But this was the first live trial I’ve run aside for the one on myself. I wasn’t sure it was going to work. I figured an audience like Goodneighbor was already waiting for us to fail so the bar to impress wouldn’t be set as high.”

Something inside Nora snapped and she rose to her feet.

“Listen. Both of you. You cannot leave me out of this kind of crucial intel and we can’t leave things like this to chance. I have five different fires going and I only have one bucket with which I can put them out. I need all of us to work as a team. That stunt you guys pulled out there could’ve blown up in our face, and who would they have blamed? Me. The Institute-loving outsider. I don’t have Hancock’s reputation. I don’t have your practical medical skills. These people would murder me as soon as look at me and I’m trying to save them and I need both of your god damned help to do so!”

Nora’s voice echoed through the office. She had never yelled at anyone to this degree before. Even when she was interning, her courtroom demeanor was forceful but measured. This was just pure emotion let loose.
Hancock’s face was unreadable but Virgil stepped forward and nodded.

“You’re right Nora. I’m sorry.”

She nodded in acknowledgement and then turned her face to Hancock. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Well thanks to Virgil and his antiserum you just might get your brother back. Are you finally willing to bury the hatchet and move on? Are you willing to help the Institute or not?”

Hancock’s intense stare seemed to burn through the back of Nora’s skull. And then he extended a mottled hand.

“I’m with the Institute because its you whose leading them. I could care less about those egg heads but I care about you, sunshine. Goodneighbor’s with you. I’m with you.”

Nora took his hand and shook it.

“Thank you.”

Dr. Li’s fingers trembled from the frigid sea air and the anxiety that twisted her gut into knots as she unscrewed the back panel from Liberty Prime’s combat inhibitor and soldered the wires just enough so they’d overheat after an hour or so of Liberty Prime being online.

She had already sabotaged the knee joints by tightening some screws to the point that they became stripped and loosening other screws so they’d pop out of place as soon as Liberty Prime moved. The last thing she needed to do was do something about its laser eye.

At full power, that thing could dig through rubble, dirt, and solid concrete at 1 foot a second. If she could somehow cut the power even by 40% or 50% that might just be long enough to buy the Institute and synths an extra 30 seconds to escape into the fortified barracks in the lower levels. Granted, it wasn’t much, but it was all that she was working with.

However, Dr. Li wasn’t scheduled to work on Liberty Prime’s laser weaponry today and she knew that tinkering with its head would be a dead giveaway that something was amiss. Proctor Ingram trusted her enough to give her minimal security while she worked on the construct, and Dr. Li didn’t want to give anyone the idea that she wasn’t trustworthy.

She wiped her oily hands off on a rag and straightened up. Her back cracked and ached. Working in these conditions and in this weather was hell when she was a young woman in her twenties, but now she was feeling her advanced age.

Dr. Li struggled to her feet and then half-limped down the catwalk as the feeling came back into her legs.

“D’you need assistance ma’am?” A Knight asked.

“No.” She snapped. “I might be old but I can still walk, thank you.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Dr. Li walked up to a large trash barrel that was on fire and held her freezing hands over the flames. Her stomach churned and grumbled as she warmed up. It had been over eighteen hours since she had last eaten anything. She made a resolve to force down some sort of food no matter
how unpalatable it was after eating bioengineered, nutrient-rich foods for the past decade.

“Li. Are you done for today?” Proctor Ingram asked. She walked out of the airplane hanger and approached her. The woman’s hydraulic legs whooshed slightly with each step and it made her sound like a traveling steam engine.

As soon as Ingram got close enough to Dr. Li, she rattled off the work she did on Liberty Prime before she was asked. “Prime’s central motherboard has been re-installed and cleaned up. I also re-soldered the actuators that connect from his memory banks to his central processor. There’s been some corrosion and rust damage as a result of keeping it out in the middle of this god damned beach, but the damage was minor enough that I just replaced the parts with spares pulled from a deactivated Mister Gutsy.”

“And what about the limb actuators? Have you finished installing the new hydraulics I created?”

“Not yet.” Dr. Li replied. “I’m waiting on getting that high powered magnet from one of your scribes so I can do some controlled test runs without having to install it, find out something is wrong, uninstall it, and then wait.”

“Our scribe should be back within the day.” Ingram replied. “You should get some rest. I’ll need you to pull a double shift tomorrow.”

Dr. Li bit her tongue at the sarcastic comment that sat ready to fire from her lips. She was effectively a slave to the Brotherhood. She had no “shift” and if Ingram commanded that she work until she dropped dead from exhaustion, well that would be a blessing in and of itself.

After Proctor Ingram left, Dr. Li trudged back to her own small barracks and shut the door. Immediately she knew that something was off. James’s scrubs were discarded on the hospital gurney that he was laying on and drops of blood peppered the floor.

“James?” She called out.

“O-over here.” He wheezed.

Dr. Li followed the blood trail and peaked around the blue dressing patrician that acted as a privacy barrier to their primitive latrine. James was huddled next to the 10 gallon plastic bucket. His white hair sat around the plastic toilet seat on top of the bucket like snow. Large patches of skin and scalp sloughed off and now James was bald and bleeding from nearly two-thirds of his head.

But the worst of the damage was that James’s nose had clearly fallen off. Dr. Li knew that because she saw the evidence sitting in the bucket along with blood, vomit, and waste. Blood ran down his upper lip, over his cracked and chapped skin, and dripped off his chin like rain.

“Oh my God.” Dr. Li breathed out. “James…”

He looked at her with a pitiful expression. The whites around his eyes had turned a blotchy red and yellow as the tiny veins hemorrhaged. He was missing skin off his entire right forearm and Dr. Li could see the tendons and muscles that chorded around his arm as though she was looking at a realistic diagram of the human muscular system.

She didn’t know what to do. What could she do? They were allowed one dose of Med-X every fortnight for fear that Dr. Li would purposely overdose on it to commit suicide. All other chems like Psycho, Buffout, and Mentats were expressively forbidden, yet she was sure that James was in incomparable pain.
“Just kill me Maddi.” James wheezed. “Please. This is excruciating.”

“Stop it James.” She snapped. “I—I’ll figure something out.”

She started boiling water over the small kitchen stove that she had salvaged from the airport’s
diner. Then she poured the last of their purified water into a metal basin, grabbed her blanket from
the bed and several stimpaks, and sat at James’s feet.

“What are you doing?” He wheezed.

“I’m dressing you up like a mummy for Halloween.” She deflected with sarcasm but then added,
“What the hell do you think I’m doing James? I’m trying to patch you up. Any of these open
wounds could get infected. You think you’re miserable now? Just wait until you get a blood
infection.”

Dr. Li tore strips from her blanket, soaked them in the purified water, and then squirted a small
amount of a stimpak onto the cloth. She rubbed the damp material so the medicine permeated
through the cloth and gently wrapped it around James’s skinless forearm.

He whimpered but did his best to not jerk away. The slight pressure from the bandage felt like
someone was touching his exposed nerves with a hot iron.

“You’re wasting your time.” He growled. “You’re exhausted. You’ve lost weight —“

“— Yeah well maybe I’m trying to fit into my bathing suit this summer” She bristled.

His trembling hand pushed away the second bandage and he looked into her eyes. “Just let me go
Maddi or let me end this on my terms.”

Angry tears bubbled to her eyes and she slapped the second strip down onto his arm so forcefully
that he yelped like he had been branded with a hot iron.”

“You should’ve just fucking listened to me James Matthew Conner. If you would’ve have gone to
Goodneighbor you wouldn’t be decomposing next to a ten gallon bucket that we’ve been shitting
in. Is this how you want it to end? Dying in this hell hole?”

“If I survive this, there won’t be an end.” He said. “I’ll be like this forever.”

“Really James? Immortality? That’s what you’re worried about?” She asked. “If you and I survive
this, I’ll fucking drown you in the god damned ocean for the shit you’ve put me through. But first
you gotta survive this.”

Then her eyes softened and a single tear dripped down her cheek. “Please James. Don’t leave me
here alone.”

“Alright Maddi.” He nodded and said nothing else as Dr. Li applied bandage after bandage to the
blistered and raw exposed tissue.
I’m so sorry about the delay. Truthfully, I was getting a little overwhelmed by the plot and I had to take a step back from it and work on other projects. But now I’m going strong and I hope to crank some chapters out faster than once every three months. Thank you for your patience and your support.

Chapter 12 — Caught in a Trap

Bullets pinged and sparked off the overturned table where Deacon and Nora were hiding. Both wore expressions of gritty determination as the Super Mutant’s assault rifle rapidly discharged with a tat-tat-tat-tat-tat sound.

Deacon’s eyebrows rose and he counted down silently with his fingers. Three, two, and one.

They both rose up from behind their makeshift cover and fired their weapons with impunity right at the Super Mutant’s head. Blood exploded out the back of its skull and it collapsed to the ground in a bestial roar.

While they waited for the smoke to clear, they listened carefully for other mutants that might be in the high rise. At this point, one mutant’s death was like kicking a beehive. Ten more mutants were likely to storm them, at least that’s what happened on the 3rd floor. However, Nora had the foresight to rig some frag mines in key doorways which cut their work in half.

As Nora reloaded her gun, she thought back to the time when she and Travis snuck past a group of Super Mutants while on their way to save Vadim’s ass from some low time raiders. Now here she was, gunning mutants without a second thought. Times had certainly changed.

Deacon snuck out from behind the cover first. He scurried down the hallway in a crouch. Nora kept her gun trained on the vacant hallway just in case Deacon’s presence spooked something, but the spy came right back and shook his head. He pantomimed an “okay” and Nora followed behind him just as quietly.

Although Deacon was an insufferable liar who spent five months presumed dead, Nora secretly admired the spy. He was smart and tactically minded. When he wasn’t spewing complete bullshit, Deacon was a pretty decent guy — but Nora would never say that to his face.

They snuck down the hallway of a ruined apartment. The furniture was still mostly intact and they passed at least two bathrooms that were in pristine condition. The Hub use to be an apartment complex for rich couples with no children, Boston socialites and social climbers, and the odd technological tycoon hoping to score a prestige job at Wattz Consumer Electronics or even Vault Tec. They stopped in front of a giant metal door which looked more at home in a bank rather than an apartment building, and as soon as they got close to it, the chip in Deacon’s pocket beeped. The door unlocked and slid open to reveal a cache full of weapons, ammunition, and supplies.

Deacon cleared his throat and stood up. He arched his back in a stretch and a couple of joints popped. “Let’s replenish our ammunition and grab a few more stims. I’ll contact Des and let her
know that the Hub is cleared out and ready for colonization.”

Nora nodded. Her own back ached from crawling through broken elevator shafts and partially collapsed hallways.

“I’ve got to make a call as well.” She replied.

Deacon’s expression was masked behind his glasses but Nora was sure he was giving her a disapproving look.

Nora ignored it and stepped into a nearby business room and withdrew a small communicator from her jacket pocket.

“This is Nora. I’m reporting in to the Directorate. Does anybody copy?”

“I copy you.” Dr. Filmore’s voice said.

“My work topside is coming to an end. I did what I could to get some more people as allies. The Railroad is offering to help, as well as the Minutemen. Goodneighbor is still contested but there are about half of whom will led aid if the Mayor asks them to. Diamond City’s allegiance is a little more shaky. We’ve got maybe 10 or 12 allies there, but the rest don’t trust us after what happened with Mayor McDonough.”

“Can you provide a rough estimate in terms of manpower we can expect should fighting break out?” Dr. Filmore asked.

Nora broke down the numbers while trying to keep out the hopeless despair in her voice, “We’ve got 60 from the Railroad which includes the members and the freed Gen-3 synths willing to fight, 30 from what the Minutemen could scrounge up among the settlements, 25 confirmed allies in Goodneighbor and at least 10 from Diamond City. Preston Garvey, the general for the Minutemen, is also offering heavy artillery if we need it. It will not reach the CIT but it will reach the Logan Airport. Unfortunately, ammunition is limited so we should use it only as a last resort.”

Dr. Filmore sighed. Nora knew the numbers were paltry. An army of 125 people plus a little artillery didn’t stand a chance against a force of Power Armor wearing, military trained, and battle hardened soldiers.

“Where are we on the synth rollout and weapons upgrades?” Nora asked.

“Dr. Secord assures me that we have 70 battle ready and fully outfitted Gen-2 synths on standby. If we can postpone any violence for a couple of weeks, we could easily triple that number. As for the improvements, we’ve prioritized that the they go to the Gen-2 synth division, the Directorate, the senior scientists, and those Institute staff who choose to fight. We can send out a Gen-2 to drop off a weapon for N1-08 if you wish.”

“That is probably wise.” She replied. “I will be relaying back tomorrow as scheduled. Anything else I need to know?”

“No Mothe—I mean Nora.” Dr. Filmore hastily corrected.

“It’s okay Allie.” Nora replied. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She turned off the communication device and then walked back into the hallway. Deacon was leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette and watching her intensely.
“What!?”

Deacon smirked, “Nothing, Wanderer. It’s just nice to see some of your old fistey mojo back. You are taking names and taking charge. I like that.”

Nora shot him a skeptical look, “I don’t really have a choice. If I don’t do this then we’re all toast. The Brotherhood and their great big airship will be a permanent mark in Boston. They are already swaying some people, especially over in Diamond City, to take their side by playing on their bigotry and fear.”

Deacon nodded, “Yeah and you could’ve easily caved to that fear but you didn’t. Here you are, sticking your neck out for a group of people who have torn your very life apart. Now don’t get me wrong, most organizations are gonna spoon-feed you their own patented form of bullshit but you took what the Institute was saying and threw it back in their face. You questioned what they were doing and what they were asking you to do, and now you’re trying to create a world that can serve as many of us as possible.”

Nora cleared her throat, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were complimenting me Deacon.”

The spy shrugged. “So what if I am. Anyway don’t get use to it Wanderer. There’s more than just personal pride riding on these next few weeks.”

The duo went back to the elevator and then Nora pursed her lips. “So what’s the choice Dee? We going up or going down?”

“Down.” Deacon said quickly. “I—I mean it makes no sense in going higher up in the air when the ground is just as nice.”

Nora punched the button which would bring them to the ground floor and the elevator doors closed.

“If I didn’t know any better Dee, I’d say you were afraid of heights.”

The spy’s face gave nothing away, “That’s impossible. I’m only afraid of radgulls…well radgulls and spiders but I haven’t seen any live spiders so …”

Nora snorted. She holstered her weapon and gave the spy a comforting pat on the back. “It’s okay you know. Some of these skyscrapers get really high. Once I went to the top of Trinity Tower with Nate —They use to have a glass observation platform at the top — and I could feel the building moving in the wind.”

Deacon clenched his jaw and his skin took on a slightly green color. “How fun.” He said emotionlessly.

“ZZZZZound Floor!” The elevator chimed.

The doors slid open. Deacon and Nora did one final sweep with their guns drawn before making their way into the setting sun.

Nora lowered her gun and the duo walked down the alley and back towards Goodneighbor. They weren’t far away but Deacon still insisted on silence as he remained vigilant and watchful for ambushes. As they neared Postal Square, Deacon held up a closed fist and they both stopped. Nora glanced around for anything out of the ordinary but she didn’t see anything.
“Deacon?” She whispered.

“Something doesn’t feel right.” He murmured. “Watch where you step and let me go first.”

She nodded and the spy crept along the half-burned shrubbery and cobblestone sidewalks. Nora followed close behind but when she got to the middle of the square, something flashed in her peripheral and she turned her head.

At that moment, she heard the sharp bounce of a grenade and her blood ran cold.

“RUN!” She yelled at Deacon.

She expected an explosion and the savage pain of blown off limbs but instead a large electric field encircled the area in a half-dome. As soon as she saw the electric field, she felt the power punch through her chest knocking her onto her back paralyzing her.

Nora couldn’t take in a breath. She felt magnetized to the earth and then she heard the telltale whooshing of hydraulic steps.

“Is this her?” A voice asked.

“Affirmative.” Another replied. “Confiscate her weapons and throw her into a vertibird. We need to get back before some scavver sees us.”

“What about the guy she was with?”

Nora heard a frustrated sigh, “He ran off. We won’t be able to catch him and the nearest settlement is full of junkies and lowlifes. They’ll protect him and they have nothing to lose. We might as well just cut our loss. We have what we came here for.”

As the numbness faded, Nora opened her eyes again and she tried to commit her assailants faces to her memory. Unfortunately every single one of them looked identical in their shiny metal Power Armor.

One of them rolled her onto her stomach, handcuffed her, and then hauled her to her feet. Nora still couldn’t breathe correctly and her words came out in a thick wheezing voice.

“What—do—you—want—with—me?”

“The Brotherhood will not answer questions from the leader of the Institute without our Elder’s consent.” One answered in a deep, authoritative voice. “Come along now. I warn you that if you resist, we will be forced to do more drastic actions.”

One of them aimed his gun at Nora and forced her to walk towards the idling vertibird that was perched forty feet away. If she ran, there was a high likelihood that they’d shoot her. Her heart pounded savagely in her ears. She swallowed thickly as the aircraft’s ominous whirling became the only sound she could hear.

A soldier in the vertibird hauled her into the machine by her jacket collar and set her on a small seat in the corner.

“Lancer, take us back.” A female voice ordered.

The pilot nodded. He wasn’t dressed in Power Armor. Rather, he wore a reddish orange flight jumpsuit. The man looked to be in his thirties and he picked up the radio as the aircraft gave a
stomach churning lurch and took off from the ground.

“ Paladin Danse. This is Vertibird Alpha. We are heading back to the Prydwen now. We have the Vault Dweller in custody.”

“Roger that Vertibird Alpha.” A voice said over the intercom. “We await your arrival.

Wind whipped up and into the aircraft’s open hull. Nora’s eyes watered and her teeth chattered from the cold. They flew over the Boston skyline and circled Goodneighbor like a hunting hawk before gaining more altitude and heading north east.

The people milling about in the Goodneighbor marketplace looked like ants. Thin fingers of smoke wafted up from assorted trash fires and Nora felt the same sense of loss and disconnection as when the Institute’s courser grabbed her at Greenetech Genetics.

The flight to the Brotherhood’s massive airship took less than fifteen minutes. The aircraft jostled as the pilot docked it and a metal walkway extended out to meet them. They must’ve been at least 300 feet in the air.

“Let’s go.” A soldier barked.

She walked across the platform and was stopped on the first deck by a hulking soldier in Power Armor. This time the soldier didn’t have a helmet on. His thick, dark eyebrows pulled in to the middle of his face as he scrutinized Nora. He had a broad face and a strong jawline that was marred by a scar of some sort on his left cheek and a recently healed cut over his eye.

“Ma’am. My name is Paladin Danse.” He addressed her. “I’ve been asked to escort you immediately to Elder Maxson for questioning. If you fully cooperate, I can ensure you that no harm will come to you.”

Nora glared at him. “Do I really have a choice?”

“You do not.” Danse said.

The Paladin led her up a set of metal stairs and onto a second deck. The airships huge hull loomed above them like a dark cloud. But aside for being 300 feet in the air, much of the Prydwen looked like one would expect a military fort to look. Soldiers hammered and welded parts of the ship, while two soldiers in the same red-orange jumpsuit were carrying folders and notepads and argued over some topic or other, and bored shift men (and women) did pushups, talked, or cleaned their weapons.

They entered the Prydwen’s hull and the Paladin lead her into a large, nearly empty room. A wide glass observation window sat at the far end of the room while a singular chair sat slightly down from the observation platform. Standing in the middle of the platform was a man of average height wearing a well-cared for bomber jacket. His hair was a bit long for the Old World military regulations but it was neatly combed and saved on the sides. His hands were clasped behind his back in a pseudo-parade rest stance as he looked out over Boston.

“Elder. Teams Alpha and Bravo have collected the Vault Dweller. We found her and an associate leaving a skyscraper. Her associate escaped. We believe that he’s holed up in Goodneighbor.” Paladin Danse said.

“Do you think he’s a threat?” The Elder asked.

“It would be foolish for us to think otherwise.” Danse replied.
The Elder turned to face them. Nora stifled a gasp. The leader of the Brotherhood was attractive. His face was slightly rounded from youth but his brown eyes blazed with a smoldering passion. He sported a scar across his right cheek and his full beard aged him just enough for people to take him seriously. But to top it all off, Nora noticed that the Elder was holding a manilla file folder with her name written across the cover and the word CLASSIFIED stamped in red ink.

Danse cleared his throat. “Elder Maxson. This is Nora Pendleton, survivor of Vault 111 and leader of the Institute.”

Maxson’s face remained impassive. “Was there any trouble in getting her here?”

“No sir.”

“Good. You’re dismissed Paladin. Ad Victoriam.”

Both men saluted each other and Nora heard the whooshing sounds from Danse’s hydraulics fade and then disappear as he left the room. Nora swallowed nervously and forced herself to maintain eye contact with the Elder.

“Why am I here?” She asked in a voice of false confidence.

Maxson squinted at her as though he didn’t quite understand the question. “You are here because I gave the orders to bring you here.” He began pacing in front of Nora with slow, methodical steps. “You’ve made quite a name for yourself in the Commonwealth. My advisors tell me that the Institute has been steadily gaining power, and now that you’ve activated the nuclear reactor, you are even more of a danger to us than ever.”

“We’re not a danger to you.” Nora urged. “The Institute doesn’t want to fight with the Brotherhood. We just want to exist in peace.”

“There will be no peace while you continue to allow abominations and scientific perversions to sully the Commonwealth.” Maxson snapped, his voice boomed through the metal hull.

“What do you mean by abominations and scientific perversions?” Nora asked.

Now Maxson did scowl. “Don’t play coy with me. I’m talking about the Super Mutants and the synths. Both came from your Institute and both have tainted this world with their filth. We’ve received reports of a settlement called Covenant being razed to the ground by a woman matching your description and a synth with the designation X6-88. There’s another that the mayor in Diamond City was a synth plant and I know for a fact that there are other synths out there who are either hiding or who don’t know their true identity. Do you deny any of this?”

Nora was silent.

“I didn’t think so.” Maxson growled.

Before he could turn his back and cast his final judgement, Nora spoke up. “I did destroy Covenant. I will not deny that. But I didn’t have a choice. Seven months ago, I was abducted by a Courser and brought to the Institute against my will. They implanted cybernetics in my head,” Nora pulled back her dark hair and gestured at the thick pink scar that ran from her temple to her cheek. “and I had no choice but to obey them.”

Maxson’s eyes stared at her scar. The intense heat from his gaze made Nora flush with anxiety, embarrassment, and slight excitement.
“What were you?” He growled.

“I’m sorry?”

Maxson stepped closer to her. She could smell his cologne and then wondered how he could still find cologne after 200 years.

“Before the bombs, what was your designation … your job.”

Nora blinked. “I — I was studying to become a lawyer but I took a break in my studies because I became pregnant. My husband Nate was a soldier in the US Army. He fought in Anchorage.”

“Sergeant Nathan Pendleton of the 2nd Battalion, 108th Infantry Regiment. He fought bravely during the Sino-American war and was awarded a purple heart and a gold star for bravery.” Maxson rattled off.

“Yes”

“He is reported as deceased in Vault Tec’s records for Vault 111.” Maxson said.

“Y-yes.” Nora’s voice trembled despite her efforts to keep herself together. “He was murdered.”

“Your son was abducted from the Vault sixty years ago. What became of him?”

“He died.” Nora’s voice remained neutral.

Maxson frowned. “How.”

She was about to reveal the real reason but gave him the half-truth instead.

“A brain tumor. It was inoperable.”

“And he named you as his successor.” Maxson concluded.

Nora’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

Maxson tapped the file folder with a thick hand. “We’ve been monitoring the Institute since we arrived in the Commonwealth. While your son was in charge, the Institute was merely a thorn in our side. They didn’t have enough power or resources to pose a significant threat. But now that you’ve taken over and now that you have the beryllium agitator, our scribes report a power increase of 210%. So I don’t exactly believe you when you say that you are working with the Institute under duress. You’re trying to help them.”

“Of course I’m trying to help them!” Nora exclaimed as her temper flared. “But at first I had no choice. Now, I think the Institute can be an invaluable resource for the Commonwealth if they are given the chance to fix the mistakes they made.”

Maxson smirked in satisfaction that he finally got a rise out of her. “You’re living in a world of delusions Nora. The Institute cannot be redeemed. The synths in there have no morality, they have no souls.”

“And what about you?” Nora charged. “When your giant airship came to town, people were clearly afraid. Is it the Brotherhood’s way to waltz into a town, bully people to behave in a certain way, and threaten them with violence if they don’t comply? You’re not here to save the Commonwealth. You’re here because being a bully is an ego trip, so don’t talk to me about who has a soul and who doesn’t.”
Maxson’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. Never in his life had anyone spoken to him like that before.

“You forget who you are standing in front of.” He warned in a low voice.

“No.” Nora spat. “I know exactly who I’m standing in front of. I’ve seen types like you before. You’re a despot. A tyrant. You don’t want to liberate anything. You just want to force people to fall in rank and file to your new world order. At least I’m trying to work so the entire Commonwealth can exist in relative peace.”

“Peace?” Maxson repeated. “You think that synth abductions and Super Mutant attacks are solutions that bring peace? I had you brought to me so I could meet the leader of the Institute with my own eyes. I’ve heard a lot of things about you Nora, but so far, you haven’t measured up.”

“I’m through with this conversation.” Nora spat. “And Screw you. I demand that you fly me back to Postal Square. I have things I need to do.”

Although she was still handcuffed, Nora marched across the room and towards the door. The door opened on its own and two fully armored Knights stepped through and blocked her path.

“Knights. Bring our guest to the brig where she can cool off and compose herself accordingly. See that Captain Cade visits her to give her a full examination in case she’s carrying any communicable diseases.” Maxson ordered coldly.

“What?!” Nora snarled. “You can’t keep me here. I’m not your prisoner!”

Maxson’s eyes narrowed as the Knights grabbed each of her armpits and hauled the Vault Dweller out.

He smiled in satisfaction and then turned back to the observation window. He pressed the communicator on his wrist to signal for another Knight to report to him.

The sun was setting over the Boston harbor. From his vantage point, he could see the tarnished marble walls of the CIT building. Several dozen feet below, he knew the Institute sat helpless like an animal in its burrow.

“Yes sir!” The breathless Knight said. “You called, sir?”

“Bring me Madison Li. I would like a full progress report on Liberty Prime.”

Maxson heard the salute and was left in silence once more. If progress was on pace, the attack on the Institute would happen in less than a week.

And there would be no survivors.

Deacon bolted down the street to Goodneighbor. His pompadour wig bounced haphazardly around his head slipping in front of his eyes. With a growl, he threw the wig off and kept running.

Desdemona, Tom, and the rest of the gang were all in Goodneighbor trying to reclaim the warehouses that refilled with scum during Bobbi’s brief reign. They had liberated one of them paying off, and in some cases, threatening the inhabitants, but the other two were full of vagabonds who were as stubborn as they were smelly. So Deacon pushed the pace despite the ache in his chest.
Gravel skidded beneath his feet when he rounded the corner which nearly sent him stumbling into a couple rusted out cars. Goodneighbor’s glowing neon sign flickered in the darkness as he neared the entrance.

“MacCready! Open the door!” He yelled to the sandy-haired kid on top of the barricade.

“What the fu—“

“— Open the fucking door!” Deacon snarled.

The kid set his gun down and pressed a buzzer which automatically opened the new steel door that Daisy had installed to beef up the security after the coup. Deacon gave the sniper a salute as a thanks and raced into the courtyard. He took the first right halfway down the alleyway and busted through the nondescript whitewashed door.

“Norasjustbeenkiddnapped!” He expelled in all one breath.

“What?!” Des snapped. A fork full of noodles was halfway to her mouth when Deacon had busted in.


“Give us the details.” Des snapped. “And quickly!”

Still panting, Deacon did his best to recount the story, and for once, he did so without embellishing or blatantly lying about a single detail. When he was finished, he sank to the concrete steps which led to the upper floors of the building and accepted the water that Tom handed him.

“This is bad.” Des growled. A focused and battle-hardened expression came over her and she barked, “Tom. Can you fly a vertibird?”

The small black man’s beady eyes looked warily at her. “I theoretically know how to fly a vertibird. I — I mean I’ve read about how Pre-War helicopters worked.”

“That’ll have to do.” Des snapped. “Tom. Go with Deacon. I want you both to talk with Magnolia. She should have a couple of Brotherhood uniforms from the New Years party. Borrow them from her.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Deacon croaked. “Why would Magnolia have Brotherhood uniforms? This town is made up of druggies, drifters, and cutpurses, and half of them are ghouls. Why come here?”

Des looked at him with a steely expression. “Magnolia is well-known around the Commonwealth for her … talents … and this particular talent means she relieves uniforms from Brotherhood soldiers. Now we are going to borrow them.”

Deacon’s eyebrows rose as he realized what Des was talking about, but Tom looked at the both of them in confusion. “How does Magnolia’s singing relate to getting those ugly ass orange uniforms?”

The spy smirked at Tom’s naivety and he pantomimed his index finger going into a circle that he made with his other hand and then crudely trusted them together. Tom blushed all the way down to his neck, but Des just looked annoyed.
“I’m glad you have time for immature games while one of our agents is a prisoner of war.” She admonished to Deacon before addressing Carrington. “I need you to go to Amari. Synth Nate is with her going through the intake information before the identity transfer takes place. Tell him that we need him for one last mission.”

Carrington nodded and left the room at a jog.

“What can I do boss?” Glory asked.

“I need you, Drummer Boy, and Wallace to move PAM up to Sanctuary Hills. Patriot is still there and we could use his help and the farther PAM is away from the Brotherhood the better.”

Glory didn’t look thrilled with that proposition but she nodded anyway. “We’ll leave right now.”

“Thank you, Glory.” Des said. “Carrington and I will remain here to ensure that this warehouse isn’t taken from us again.”

Deacon heaved himself up from the steps and patted Tom on the back. “C’mon. Let’s go play dress up. You can call me Initiate Jack Kass and you’ll be my techno-genius friend named Scribe Neil Down.”

Desdemona let out an exasperated sigh, “Really Deacon?”

He leveled an innocent look at her. “What? Code names are integral to maintaining our cover. You can’t just expect us to board their giant airship introducing ourselves as Deacon and Tom of The Railroad?”

Tom nodded earnestly and then said, “Des, make sure nobody touches LOLA. She’s a sensitive gal and she gets nervous when I’m out on an op.”

Deacon adjusted his sunglasses and opened the door to the alleyway. He sighed, “Once more into the breach, dear friends.”

Nora shivered in the corner. After her ‘discussion’ with Elder Maxson, his two goons hauled her off to some science lab deep in the Prydwen’s hull and threw her into a literal cage meant to hold an animal the size of a radstag. The heavy door was operated by a switch which was connected to Senior Scribe Neriah’s terminal. A window the size of a mail slot let in a thin stream of light but allowed for very little visual of the people around her. When she was thrown in here, the Scribe barely looked up from her work, and Nora was confident that nobody would pay attention to her out of fear or loyalty to Elder Maxson.

She closed her eyes and tried to get whatever rest that she could. She still had the communicator in her pocket but it only emitted a burst of static when she turned it on. There must’ve been an EMP field around here to scramble non-Brotherhood tech.

As she dozed, she heard the sharp and terse tone of a familiar voice. “If I need more Rad-Away then I need more. I’m working around highly radioactive chemicals and I’d rather not end up in here as one of your ghoul science projects.”

It was Madison Li.

Nora scrambled to the door and tried to peer out the small slot. From her vantage point, she saw Dr. Li’s back. The woman had lost some weight and there were shiny burns along her forearms. Nora couldn’t see Neriah but she heard the woman’s alto voice.
“You’ve had six doses in the past three days. Unless you are sleeping in a toxic chemical barrel you have no need for any more Rad-Away.”

Dr. Li growled and stormed away. As she crossed into Nora’s line of sight, Nora let out a loud “PSST.”

The scientist’s head snapped towards the cage as Nora tried to communicate nonverbally that she needed help. Dr. Li’s face blanched and she glanced over her shoulder. Neriah must’ve been busy because Dr. Li mouthed ‘later’ and then left.

Nora tried to not let hopeless despair settle in her chest. Time was of the essence and she needed to get back to the Institute as soon as possible. But Nora waited. She didn’t have a choice, and unlike the time she was imprisoned by the Institute, the Brotherhood simply pretended she didn’t exist so she had no idea how much time had passed.

She dozed off again and then awoke the she heard Dr. Li whisper, “Nora,” in a quiet but severe tone.

Nora rose and walked to the opening. Dr. Li was standing with her back to her pretending to be flipping through documents in a manila folder.

“Why are you here?” She whispered. “What the hell happened?”

“They ambushed me and another Railroad agent outside of Postal Square. They paralyzed me with the blast from a pulse mine and then brought me to speak to Maxson.”

“He’s an asshole.” She growled.

“Yeah.” I agreed. “D’you have any keys? Can you get me out?”

“I’m sorry Nora,” She murmured. “If they catch me helping you they’ll shoot me on the spot and I have … other things I’m juggling.”

“James.” Nora surmised. “How is he?”

Dr. Li sighed, “Not good. He’s ghoulifying and if the Brotherhood finds out they’ll kill him for being an abomination.”

“So that’s what the Rad-Away request was about?”

Dr. Li nodded and then she whispered. “Shit. Someone’s coming.”

She tossed a folded piece of paper through the slot and it hit Nora right on the nose.

“I’ll figure something out.” She hissed. “Don’t worry. I think I have a plan.”
Chapter 13 — The Escape

“What d’you mean she’s gone?” Synth Nate snarled.

“Be calm Nate. Anger only leads people to make rash actions.” Carrington said.

Deacon scowled at the scientist. “Thanks for the philosophical words Carrington but we don’t have time to ‘find our zen’ and chill out. Nora is in danger.”

Synth Nate shrugged on his brown leather jacket and eyed Deacon’s duffle bag. “You got one of them Brotherhood suits for me?”

“Sorry, no.” He replied. “But I have a plan. Tom will pilot the vertibird and I’ll bring you into the Prydwen at gunpoint and say ‘Hey look everyone! I’ve caught an Institute synth in disguise. And wouldn’t you know it but he was a Courser.’ I’ll earn major brownie points with the tin soldiers and you’ll be brought directly to a holding cell which is probably where Nora is at. Then we come through and bust her out, fly out of there on a vertibird, and call it a day. After that, celebratory drinks are on me.”

Hancock’s expression darkened. “What if they just shoot him on sight? The Brotherhood have the attitude of shooting first and asking questions later, at least with us ghouls. I doubt they're gonna ask too many questions with a synth.”

Deacon smirked, “They won’t shoot Nate if they think he has crucial intel about the Institute which can help them in their big bad plans of world domination.”

Dr. Amari eyed Nate. “Are you sure you want to go there as you are? I have the memory wipe loaded in a lounger and a new identity already fabricated. At least this way we can be sure they don’t stumble across information that might actually be relevant to their war. What if you get caught? The Brotherhood isn’t above torture, especially not when they see you as a non-human.”

“Wait a second. Nora would be pissed if she found out you wiped your memories without at least talking with her.” Hancock growled. “If you’re gonna go get her, you should go as you are...as she knows you. You owe her that.”

“Nora’s not my wife.” Nate stated quietly. The bitterness in his tone was palpable. “After this last mission is over, I don’t owe her anything.”

“Listen brother. That line you’re walkin’ is fuzzy, don’t think we ain’t sympathetic to that, but Nora cares about you, maybe not in the way you want her to, but doin’ this without givin’ her a heads up --”

“--If I wanted your advice Mayor, I would’ve asked for it.” Nate snipped.

He was done pretending that he could be Sergeant Nate Pendleton. It hurt too much to be him. It hurt too much to know that Nora wasn’t going to be his. And he was tired of hurting.

Hancock sighed and shook his head. “Fine. But Nora’s behind enemy lines and without our help she doesn’t have a prayer or a hope to escape. So let’s stop talking about what we’re gonna do and get her the fuck outta there.”
Tom and Deacon nodded. They dressed in the Brotherhood jumpsuits while Synth Nate put on combat armor and adjusted the sights on his improved laser rifle. Hancock handed Deacon a small cylindrical canister.

“That’s a signal grenade. A soldier was short on caps in the Third Rail and sold it to KL-E-0. Throw this into an open area and it will send out a signal to have a vertibird come by and pick you up. After that…” Hancock pantomimed shooting a gun and aimed his mottled, thin index finger at Deacon’s forehead.

Deacon nodded. The next step in that process would be grisly but he didn’t want to think about that until the time came. This mission had to be executed perfectly and he had to be methodical. Committing murder and Grand Theft Aircraft was just the unfortunate part of the whole situation.

“You ready to—for Christ sakes!” He cried in exasperation when he turned to the smaller man, “Why are you wearing your headgear? Our cover will be blown before we get onto the Prydwen.”

Tom scowled, “This ain’t just headgear, man! This is a bonafide piece of nanobot repelling technology. We can’t just jump in a vertibird without protection!”

Deacon rubbed a palm over his eyes. He wasn't going to start with Tom now. He gave his sunglasses to Carrington to hold and it felt unnatural without them. He felt vulnerable.

“Well kids, let’s get this show on the road. If we do this right, people will sing songs about our awesomeness.” He said wryly.

Tom, Nate, and Deacon filtered out of Amari’s lab. They walked through the marketplace trying to not draw attention to themselves but the glaring orange of their jumpsuits acted like a beacon for dirty looks and thinly veiled threats.

They walked back to Postal Square just as the sun was setting. The Brotherhood’s massive airship loomed on the horizon. Vertibirds docked and launched like bees coming and going from a beehive.

“Go ahead Tom.” Deacon said once they made it to the same place where Nora was abducted. A clear circle could be seen from where the vertibird kicked up the dirt and debris as it took off and landed.

Tom threw the grenade into the bare circle. The metal canister bounced twice and then a purple smoke cloud erupted from the device.

“How long does this take?” Synth Nate asked.

Almost immediately, they heard a low hum come out of the west. The vertibird’s shiny metal hull looked black in the moonless sky.

“Jesus.” Synth Nate murmured. “This is surreal.”

“What is?” Deacon asked.

“I’m … remembering. The vertibird flying in, us soldiers waiting for transport, the anxiety of a battle…”

“Oh man…think of all the nanobots in there.” Tom whimpered. “I don’t think I can handle this…”

“We gotta focus.” Deacon reminded him. “Remember the plan Tom. I take out the pilot and Nate
will take out any additional soldiers who might be aboard. As soon as I dump the body, you will take us up in the air."

Deacon’s face paled as he said that last bit. “Up in the air safely Tom. Like safe and quick and not having us crash to our fiery deaths.”

Tom nodded. “As long as the nanobots don’t mess with my juicy cranial matter too much, I should be able to do it.”

Deacon rolled his eyes, unholstered his pistol, and aimed it at Synth Nate’s head. He masked his face into a bigoted, disgusted snarl while Nate held his hands behind his back like he had been handcuffed. The vertibird’s humming got louder and the dust swirled around their feet as the giant metal beast landed twenty away.

The trio moved to the vertibird and Deacon hauled Nate into it first which was quite the feat as Deacon was a head shorter than the synth.

“Get in there you synth freak.” He growled. “Don’t make me put a bullet in your head.”

Thankfully there was nobody in the aircraft besides the pilot but Deacon’s order made the man turn around in concern.

“I-is that one of them Gen-3 synths?” He asked.

“Yep.” Deacon spat. “And I know for a fact that he use to be an Institute Courser. I’m bringing him back so we can extract information from him.”

The pilot frowned and glanced up at Deacon’s face. “Wait…you don’t look familiar. Has Paladin Danse authorized the ground patrols to deviate from the established routes? What’s your platoon designation?”

Deacon’s face didn’t betray fear. He scowled at Nate but then whirled on his heel and aimed Deliverer at the pilot. The silenced pistol made a muffled sound and the inside windshield spattered with the man’s brains and parts of his skull.

“Tom, get in.” Deacon snapped as he hauled the pilot out of the seat and threw him to the ground.

“Awww man. Now the seat’s all bloody.” Tom complained.

Deacon rolled his eyes. He opened an overhead container and found a dirty washrag and a can of WD-40. He took the rag and wiped the blood off the windshield as best as he could. There was nothing he could do about the seat or the pilot’s console.

“Suck it up Tom and get us in the sky.”

Tom grimaced but set to work flipping levers and switches. Deacon sat in the seat next to Nate and grabbed ahold of the mesh that was attached to the interior wall. He’d like to meet whatever idiot decided that an aircraft didn’t need doors and kick them squarely in the balls … or lady balls. The vertibird rose into the air much too fast and Deacon felt his butt fly off the seat a few inches.

“TOM!” Deacon yelled.

“Sorry! Sorry, man. I — I got it.”

Tom pulled back on the wheel which sent the aircraft’s nose pitching towards the sky.
“TOOOM! I swear to God if you kill us, I’ll come back from beyond the grave and haunt your dead ass for all eternity.”

Tom gritted his teeth, pushed the wheel down which leveled the aircraft off, and carefully pushed the throttle forward. The vertibird flew through the sky at a slow but steady pace while Deacon rested his head against the mesh, his stomach twisting into knots and doing flip flops on itself.

“Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.” Nate suggested. “That will help with the nausea.”

“Cool…thanks man.” He said weakly. “And I’m sorry about the whole ‘freak’ shit. I — I’ve had experience being a bigot.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Nate replied.

The cold air whipped through the cabin as Tom guided the vertibird towards the Prydwen.

“We’re coming Nora.” Deacon murmured. “Just hang on.”

Nora tucked the piece of paper that Dr. Li had given her into her shoe. The paper held neatly printed information and diagrams discussing the various ways Dr. Li had sabotaged Liberty Prime. The information would be invaluable to pass along so the synth troops knew what parts to target, but she couldn’t exactly keep it in someplace that was easy to search. Hell…even if she lost the document, she had read it at least a dozen times and knew it by heart.

Time seemed to crawl on, and that left Nora with a lot of time to sit and think, two things that never contributed well to her mental health. She didn’t dare entertain the various dark thoughts and doubt that still swirled in her mind, so she tried to distract herself. After counting backwards from 1,000 and doing pushups until her shoulders ached, Nora filtered her pent up energy into pacing back and forth in the small 8 foot by 8 foot cage.

She estimated that 12 hours had passed since she had been abducted although she couldn’t be exactly sure. She knew it was night as she had overheard soldiers complaining about being put on the graveyard shift. Furthermore, the lights in Neriah’s lab were turned off and the scientist had turned in a couple hours ago.

Part way through the night, Nora had to pee. Of course the Brotherhood didn’t provide her with a rudimentary lavatory — or at least a bucket — so she had to relieve herself in the corner like an animal.

Her throat felt like sandpaper yet none of the soldiers paid her any attention, nor did they heed her requests for food and water. As she was in the middle of her second round of counting backwards from 1,000 she saw a shadow move outside her cage.

“Nora.” Dr. Li’s voice hissed.

“What?”

“I don’t have long to talk. I’ve found some information on Quinlan’s terminal that — well — it changes the game for us.”

“What are you talking about?” She asked.

Dr. Li slipped her another piece of paper. This one was smaller and had a recall code written on it.
“What’s this for?” Nora asked.

“Paladin Danse is a synth.”

“You’re kidding?! He’s a spy?”

“No.” Dr. Li said. “I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know. Some things weren’t adding up about him, especially when he talked about the Capital Wasteland, so I did a bit of digging. Quinlan still had the connection to my Institute terminal open and so I hacked into the SRB’s database and got my answer. His designation is M7-97.”

Nora’s head swam as she processed this information. “So what am I supposed to do with this?”

“I am going to tell him that you’re trying to escape. When he comes over to check on you, I want you to issue the recall code. When he deactivates, I will open the cage while you remove him from his Power Armor and drag him into the cage in your place. Then you will hijack his suit and escape. Assuming you don’t draw attention to yourself, you should be able to make it out if people think you’re the Paladin.”

“What if someone tries to talk to me? Or what if Elder Maxson sees me and gives me an order in which I have to respond?”

“That’s why we’re doing this now. The Brotherhood’s 3rd shift crew is full of loafers, newbies, and people who are being punished. If you project confidence and don’t open your mouth, you should be able to fool them.”

Nora’s stomach clenched. “God this better work.”

“Be right back.” Dr. Li said.

Nora waited for a few minutes and then she heard the telltale whooshing of Power Armor hydraulics. She ducked below the small window and she saw Paladin Danse’s shadow block out what little light there was.

He made a sound of disgust in his throat. But before he could call for anyone else’s aid, Nora said in a loud voice “Cirrus-5-2-Typhoon initiate factory reset.”

Danse made no sound but his head bowed to his chest. Just then the large cage door rose and Nora scampered out. Neriah’s green terminal illuminated Dr. Li’s face. She looked about as tired as Nora felt.

“Quick.” She hissed. “Twist the wheel on the suit in the back and drag him into the cage. I’ll close it behind him.”

Nora did so. The Power Armor frame opened and she caught Danse’s dead weight while nearly sinking to the ground. Her back screamed and her shoulders protested as she dragged the man just far enough into the cage so the door would close. His eyes stared open and empty; it was eerie. He looked as though he was dead.

“Get in.” Dr. Li hissed.

Nora climbed into Danse’s Power Armor and the suit closed in behind her. The last time she had been inside of a Power Armor suit was when she was almost eviscerated by a blind deathclaw outside Virgil’s cave, and the darker, self-flagellating part of her mind took great pleasure in
reminding her of that moment.

The door to the cage closed and Nora looked expectantly at Dr. Li.

“Go.” She hissed. “Get out to the deck. Once there, you’ll be able to jump off the deck to the ground. Run a safe distance away and have the Institute relay you back. The EMP field ends about fifty feet from the Airport’s entrance.”

“What about you? I can’t leave you.”

“You have to.” She replied. “The work on Liberty Prime is almost done, but if I leave now, Maxson will hunt me down and he’ll suspect that Prime’s been tampered with. Besides James needs me here.”

Nora shuddered. A lump stuck in her throat. “Thank you.”

“Go.” Dr. Li hissed.

Nora walked through the main hull and kept her head up high. Just as Dr. Li predicted, the crew on this 3rd shift barely looked at her, and if they did, they often jolted out of their seats and grabbed the nearest rag or wrench and pretended to work with faux enthusiasm.

Nora’s heart pounded in her chest as she climbed the stairs which led to the outside deck. The last thing she needed was for Elder Maxson to walk down the stairs. But who she encountered instead was far, far worse.

“Danse?” A female voice asked. She didn’t sound suspicious yet. In fact, she sounded tired. “Did you get put on 3rd shift because of me.”

Nora shook her head. Oh God, she thought. What am I going to do?

“Well there’s small favors at least.” The woman replied. She was short. Incredibly short even when compared against the 7 foot tall Power Armor. Her brown hair was pulled up in a military bun and her cap was perched squarely on her head. Nora had seen her around Danse when they walked past Neriah’s lab together. Her name was H-something. Hayden? Harlen? Haylen?

“I heard about the Vault Dweller’s argument with the Elder. I can’t believe he ordered us all to not talk to the prisoner, or at least allow her something to eat and drink —“

The woman stopped herself and blushed. “Not that I was criticizing his decisions! I understand why Elder Maxson made that choice, but it just seems…cruel.”

Nora looked around. She still had one more flight of stairs before she made it to the main deck. She could run for it, or maybe she could knock the Scribe unconscious. Dammit, Nora thought. How do I get out of this.

As though it was through divine intervention, the siren near the stairwell blared an ungodly loud noise and began flashing red.

SECURITY BREACH IN THE MAIN HULL. THE VAULT DWELLER HAS ESCAPED.

Nora mimicked the salute she saw other soldiers doing when they either greeted or parted company and the woman before her did the same thing.

“I’ll go search the lower hull.” Scribe Haylen said. “Be safe Danse.”
Nora took off and went up the stairs which led to the landing platforms and the main deck. Soldiers ran past her grabbing laser rifles, pistols, and heavy weaponry. Despite the underlying current of chaos, the Brotherhood operated efficiently and swiftly, almost like a well-oiled machine.

As she descended the first staircase, she saw a vertibird off to her left with a Brotherhood soldier wearing a remarkably odd helmet. Then she spied Nate and Deacon behind him.

“Deacon!” She yelled

Deacon couldn’t hide the jubilant smile on his face.

Nora approached him in a dozen large steps.

Still wearing his lopsided grin, he appraised the Power Armor. “This was suppose to be a rescue mission Wanderer! Nice suit by the way.”

“You know I can take care of myself” Nora said and a proud smile colored her voice. “But enough talk, we need to get out of here.”

“There she is!” Someone yelled. “She’s wearing Paladin Danse’s armor. Search for Danse! He could be injured!”

“Oh oh.” Deacon said. “Alright! Time to go!”

Red laser beams flew past them as a dozen soldiers began opening fire. Nora felt the blasts hit the suit. She felt the heat from the bullets on her own back but the steel and aluminum held well enough that her body didn’t take any damage.

“Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go!” Deacon urged Tinker Tom.

“Just a minute, man! She’s gotta disconnect from the landing platform. It’s a whole ordeal.” He snapped back.

Volley of red laser bolts crackled so closely over their shoulders that she could smell the ozone they gave off. One managed to hit Nate’s chest piece — a blow that would’ve killed him had he been without it — and he shucked the burned plastic off with a pained grimace. The grey-white plastic fell to the ground 300 feet below like a leaf falling from a tree.

“Deactivate the launch pads!” Someone yelled. “Don’t let them take off!”

Nate ran across the thin metal walkway first, followed by Deacon, but the platform retracted before Nora could make it across.

“JUMP!” Nate yelled.

Nora jumped from the Prydwen’s deck and landed like a sack of tatos into the vertibird but Nora’s additional weight, on account of the suit, pitched the aircraft to the left side.

Tom growled and tried to compensate but the aircraft began shuddering. “That’s not good.” He muttered.

“Go. Go. Go!” Deacon snarled to Tinker Tom. “Gun it!”

The vertibird banked sharply to the right as Tom overcompensated for Nora’s added weight. A terrible metal snapping sound echoed like a cannon blast and the thin arms of the docking
mechanism broke in half which put them into a free fall. Tom yanked hard on the throttle and on the wheel just as the vertibird’s engine kicked on. They rocketed up just as the ground was about to smack them in the face and took off to the north west. Nora’s stomach had simultaneously plummeted and then rose up to her throat once Tom had activated the upward thrust which sent them flying two hundred feet into the air in a three seconds.

“TOOOM” Deacon roared for a second time that night. “I FUCKING HATE THIS.”

“Woo HOO! We’re flying! We are flying!” Tom crowed like an excited child on a rollercoaster. “This is awesome!!”

But before they could breathe easier, a four vertibirds launched from the Prydwen’s hull and chased after them and several soldiers were jumping into others and preparing to launch.

“Tom we gotta get rid of our guests!” Deacon yelled.

When Tom looked behind him, Nora expected the normally nervous and odd man to freak out even more, but his dark face solidified into rigid determination and he hunched over the controls.

“Hold on to your butts. We’re gonna do some evasive maneuvers.” Tom announced.

“Hold on to this.” Nate called out to Nora as he gestured at an army green netting that was attached to the inside of the aircraft.

Nora wrapped both of her armored hands in the netting and held tightly like Nate had done and braced herself for the worst. At least if she fell out of a vertibird in Power Armor, the slim chance of survival was better than ‘definitely dead.’

The aircraft pitched from left to right, and at one point, Tom nearly did a full barrel roll. His dark eyes blazed with mania and adrenaline while Deacon’s eyes were filled with complete, utter terror.

“T-Tom. TOM! THERE ARE FUCKING BUILDINGS THERE TOM!” Deacon’s panicked babbling fell on deaf ears as the vertibird pitched violently to the left and right again as Tom weaved in between the Boston skyscrapers and slipped beneath a semi-collapsed overpass.

Explosions and fireballs illuminated the sky behind them but Nora didn’t dare look out the window to see just how many of their pursuers they had lost to the Boston skyline.

As they flew, the Mass Fusion building rose up through the fog. Tom banked to the right to avoid the building and then they heard the telltale humming of another vertibird cutting though the fog.

“Those bastards are trying to cut us off.” Tom yelled. “Hold on!”

Tom banked the aircraft to the right narrowly avoiding Trinity Tower but their pursuers were hot on their tail.

“Remember Tom? Sanctuary Hills!” Deacon yelled over the motor. “But we gotta lose them first. We can’t lead them there.”

“We need to go on the offensive.” Nate yelled back. “Tom, bank hard to the right on my command. I’m gonna try and shoot them out of the sky.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re gonna do what?!” Deacon half-squealed, but Nora saw his resolve. Nate’s chin was set in a hard line. His eyes blazed in determination and Nora had an uncanny feeling that this was what her husband looked like on the battlefields at Anchorage.
“Trust him, Dee.” Nora yelled out. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Nate nodded his thanks and then peered out the open hanger door for his opening. They flew over Diamond City and its bright food lights. The slate grey river snaked below them beneath the thick clouds. Cambridge sat to the north while thick radiation-scarred forest awaited them to the west.

One vertibird cut through the dense clouds and flew towards them at top speed. The Lancer in the front gestured wildly at them while another Brotherhood Knight stepped up to man the mini gun.

“Here we go!” Nate yelled. “Now Tom! Bank to the right!”

Tom did as he was ordered just as the Knight let loose several dozen rounds. The gunfire missed them by mere feet.

“Now to the left!” Nate yelled.

He grabbed both of the minigun’s handles and started firing as Tom maneuvered the aircraft. It was like an invisible hand cut through their pursuer with a line of bullets. Nate yelled a beastly roar as the minigun barrel glowed red hot in the darkness. The vertibird exploded and a rush of super heated wind and gas knocked into their aircraft. The other aircrafts were too far off to be within firing range.

“Cut to the North!” Nate yelled. “We gotta lose them in the cloud cover before we get to Sanctuary.”

Tom nodded and they banked right past the Corvega Assembly Plant and made their way towards Malden.

“Oh oh.” Nate said.

A vertibird came out of the clouds on their left. It was much too close to be part of the response from the Prydwen which meant it was a patrol aircraft that received orders to search and destroy.

The National Guard Depot flew by them and Nora saw the large spires of the Parsons State Insane Asylum ahead. Beyond that was wilderness.

“GO FASTER TOM!” Deacon snarled.

“I’m at maximum thrust. Her engine will burn out if I push her too hard.”

“Then push her!” He yelled. “We need to get to cover!”

Tom looked anguished and he hit a few buttons as the hull’s sirens went off warning that engine failure was imminent. As they approached Lynn Woods and Lake Quannapowitt, Nora heard the woosh of a missile and the entire aircraft jostled violently as a huge explosion in their rear pushed flames and smoke into the cabin.

“We’ve been hit!” Nate yelled. We gotta jump!”

“If we jump, we die.” Deacon said.

“If we stay, we die!” Nate snapped. “Jump on my command!”.

The vertibird’s dials and monitors were going wild as the air roared around them. Black earth and trees gave way to the steel grey water and Nora untangled herself from the netting. She grabbed onto Nate’s hand. If they timed their jump right, they’d be able to land in the reservoir.
The icy water flew up to meet them and she braced herself. The survival instincts in her brain screamed at her to land feet first into the water. She gritted her teeth and prayed to anyone listening for them to survive.

“Jump NOW!” Nate ordered.

Nora and Nate jumped out one side of the vertibird while Tom and Deacon jumped out of the other. Everything happened in a split second. Nora entered the cold water feet first and felt an icy punch to her chest. She saw a golden hue above her and heard the muffled sounds of an explosion. She sank to the bottom like an anchor. Her suit squealed warnings at her and she pressed the eject button but the water must’ve shorted the suit’s controls. Cold water came in through the suit like water coming into a sinking car. Once it got to her stomach she couldn’t stop her stomach muscles from clenching and tearing whatever breath she had from her lungs.

Then a grating metal on metal sound met her ears and she was enveloped by the cold water and pulled backwards out of the suit. Once her head broke the surface, she inhaled a huge gulp of cold air and saw figures splashing nearby.

“I gotcha Wanderer.” Deacon wheezed. “Swim to shore.”

The attacking vertibird flew to the wreckage which was 800 yards away in the forest. They completely overlooked them in the darkness. It flew as low as possible without hitting the treetops, circled the wreckage, and then flew back towards the Prydwen.

Deacon let out a low sigh and they swam to shore as silently as they could. Nora climbed onto the bank. Her chest pounded and her ears were ringing from the explosion and the impact of hitting the water. Then unbridled laughter tore from her chest. It was the kind of laughter that only happened when surviving a near-death experience.

“Nora.” Deacon said sharply. “Something’s wrong.”

Nora’s laughter died and she rolled onto her hands and knees. Thirty feet down the bank was Tom kneeling next to Nate who was prone on his back.

“Nate?!” She ran to him and collapsed onto her knees at his right side.

In the darkness, his pale face was almost luminescent. Nora saw a line of dark liquid drip from his hairline. His jaw clenched in pain and his lower lip quivered. Although Nora couldn’t see how badly he was bleeding, she could smell the copper tang anyway.

“Shit! Nate, what’s wrong? Where are you hurt?”

Tom pulled out a small flashlight that was attached to his uniform with a metal carabiner. He turned it on and held it above Nate’s body.

With a pale, shaking hand Nate gestured at his chest and Nora gasped. Three large dark red spots bloomed out on his white shirt; the largest one was just below his right pectoral muscle.

“I — I — I” Nate shuddered. “The explosion. Shrapnel…from the minigun…clip exploded…”

“Shhh...Don’t talk Nate. We’ll get you help. I’ll just relay us back to the Institute. You’ll be fine, hon.” Nora’s voice was too cheery but her false bravado was all she had.

“DEACON!” Nora yelled. “HELP ME!”
The spy knelt next to Nora. He was favoring his left leg and had a gash across his lip, but otherwise he looked no worse for wear.

“Wanderer, we are sitting ducks out here. We gotta keep moving. If they send more vertibirds for us…”

But Nora tuned him out. She smoothed Nate’s hair down while she pressed down on the worse wound with a handkerchief. Deacon saw how Nora’s hands, pale from the cold, were tinged pink from Nate’s blood and for the first time, his reaction was guileless.

“Nora, oh shit!” He whispered.

Nate coughed. It was a sick, wet sound that brought blood to his lips. His hands trembled and his adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed a whimper.

“Directorate. This is the Institute. Do you copy?” Nora half-yelled into her communication device. “There was nothing but silence.”

“God damnit,” Nora cursed. “Deacon, we need some stimpaks or Med-X. Hell, anything would do by now.”

“I’m sorry Wanderer, there’s no —“

“BRING ME A FUCKING STIMPAK NOW.” Nora roared. Her voice echoed in the night.

Deacon and Tom didn’t move from their spots. They couldn’t. How could they tell her that it wouldn’t make a difference, at least not with the rate he was bleeding out?

Nora turned her attention back to Nate. She applied pressure to the main wound and the one at his hip, but the third one at his shoulder couldn’t be dealt with until Deacon or Tom could find a stimpak or even some bandages to stop the bleeding.

“Directorate…this is Mother. I am requesting relay transport. Nate is injured and —“

Nate coughed again. His teeth chattering from the cold. “N-N-No-Nora. I’m t-t-tired. God. I’m s-so tired.”

“Shhhhh. Don’t talk right now. Just focus on my voice. Don’t fall asleep. Just keep listening to me.” Nora soothed.

His eyes locked with hers and she saw the abject horror in his eyes.

“Talk to me.” He grunted through clenched teeth. “Keep me awake. T-tell me a s-story.”

Nora grasped at the first story that came into her mind. She spoke quickly.

“How about the time we first met, huh? I saw you serving sandwiches to an elderly man at the counter. You were wearing that ridiculous paper hat that the diner made all of their cooks wear, but I saw your blue eyes look out at me and I couldn’t focus on what I was reading. I could’ve held your gaze for the rest of the night but you had to get back to work. I didn’t even know your name yet, but I desperately wanted to talk to you. So when I ordered my second sandwich to-go, I was overjoyed to see that you had written your phone number on the back of the receipt.”

Nate winced and the muscles in his neck tightened in pain. Nora saw the veins bulge out against his alabaster skin.
“I’m not him Nora.” He said and shuddered. “Amari — I — was gonna — I’m so sorry --“

“Shhh. It’s okay. There’s nothing to apologize about.” Nora croaked. Tears fell freely down her face and dripped on their clasped hands. “Don’t ever apologize to me Nathan. Never.”

“N—Nora.” Nate chocked out. “I — l-love you.”

“I love you too.” Nora whispered.

“No!” He urged and his body jostled against the pain. “I love you Nora. Me. Not Him.”

Nora nodded. She completely understood and she smiled. “I know Nate.”

In a way, Nora did love him too. Not in the same way that she loved Nick or John, but she loved Synth Nate for what he brought into her life. She loved him for the tenderness and loyalty that he showed her son during his final moments. She loved him for his courage and bravery in all manner of things. And she loved him for his honor. Although she had broken his heart by rejecting him, he never pushed the issue once she said ‘no.’ Although he could never be her husband, she loved him anyway. She loved him like a fellow solider, like a best friend, and like a brother.

Another shudder tore through Nate and his eyes rolled back into his head. He let out an unintelligible groan and then was still. The handkerchief beneath Nora’s hand was soaking wet with blood and an anguished sob tore from her throat.

“NATE!”

She sat back on her haunches only to find Deacon’s arms pulling her up away from Nate’s cold body.

“NO! LET ME GO!” She roared and thrashed against him, but Deacon forcibly spun her around and hugged her to himself.

“He’s gone Nora.” Deacon choked out.

“DAMMIT! YOU WERE SUPPOSE TO SAVE HIM!” Nora half roared and half sobbed into Deacon’s shoulder. She pounded on his back with her fists not caring if she hurt the man. After all, he deserved to hurt as much as she did.

“Nora. Stop. Dammit Nora, STOP!” He pinned her wrists to her chest and backed her into a small tree. For a man of his slight stature, he was strong.

“He’s gone Nora.” Deacon said. “There’s nothing we can do for him now.”

“Fuck you!” Nora spat. She felt as strong as a three year old child and her upper lip trembled. “Why didn’t you get him any medicine, huh? Why didn’t anyone come to help us? You just fucking let him die! I hate you! I fucking hate you!”

Tears dripped down Tom’s face as he took the scene in. The sounds that erupted from Nora’s chest were sounds that he didn’t know humans could make. Nora groaned and screamed. She would’ve collapsed onto the ground if Deacon hadn’t caught her.

Deacon pulled Nora into another hug, and his time she didn’t retaliate with aggressive blows. He just held her as Nora sobbed into his soaking wet Brotherhood uniform. And try as he might to keep his damn composure, a few tears of his own trickled down his cheeks too.
Nora’s pain evoked something that Deacon had thought he had buried long ago. As Nora mourned for her lost synth husband, he too mourned for a woman with white-blond hair and a smile as bright as an atomic blast.

“I’m sorry Wanderer.” He choked out. “He’s gone.”

“No. No. No. No.” Nora moaned and she collapsed to the ground with Deacon still holding her. He held her until her sobs turned to faint hiccups and shudders. Then all at once, her cries stopped and she looked down at her blood-soaked hands.

“Nora?” Deacon asked tentatively.

“We can’t leave him here.” Nora croaked.

“We’re sitting ducks out here.” Deacon admonished.

“We. Need. To. Bury. Him.” Nora punctuated each word with a hiss. She grabbed Nate’s cold hand and held it to her chest rocking back and forth on her knees.

Deacon rose to his feet, “Tom, give me the flashlight. Stay with Nora. I’ll be right back.”

Tom handed the light over to Deacon and watched Nora shudder and sob. He bowed his head and placed his dark hand on Synth Nate’s shoulder.

After five minutes, Deacon came back with two shovels. He tossed one in front of Tom and began digging a hole up on the bank where the water wouldn’t wash out the grave.

“Tom, help me dig.” Deacon ordered. But before he could grab the shovel, Nora snatched it from him and rose to her feet.

“Nora—” Deacon protested but Tom shook his head. “Let her grieve how she needs to grieve, man.”

The digging was harder work on account of the cold ground, but she barely felt the cold chill despite being soaking wet. Nora set to work digging with single-minded intensity. The sound of metal on rock, the sound of her heavy breathing was meditative. She didn’t have to think. She didn’t have to feel.

They worked together in silence. Deacon’s grim face looked at her but he said nothing. There was nothing he could say that would make any of this okay. So together they dug a single grave and together they they cried.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is all about the Brotherhood of Steel. I enjoy the Brotherhood as a faction and this chapter has reminded me how much I enjoy writing Brotherhood content despite casting them as the villains in this story.

We’ll get back to Nora and her part to play in the upcoming battle in the next chapter.

I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 14 — Dishonorable Discharge

“Knight-Captain Cade, what is Paladin Danse’s prognosis?”

The doctor looked at Elder Maxson with a grim expression. In his twenty-three years as the Prydwen’s medic, he finally came across a case that was truly unexplainable. From the outside, Paladin Danse sported no visible wounds and an X-Ray taken of his chest cavity showed no broken bones or internal wounds that might’ve affected his heart. Sure, if he had access to one of those Old World CAT scan machines, or even an auto doc, he’d be able to do a more thorough examination, but from what he could tell, Danse was physically alive but mentally unresponsive.

He shifted uncomfortably under the Elder’s steely gaze. Far be it for him to pussyfoot around the issue. He’d have to come straight out with it. Elder Maxson could take it.

“Paladin Danse is physically healthy. His vitals are all within normal parameters but his brain is unresponsive. He’s in a coma and there’s not much I can do for him.”

Maxson’s gaze lingered on Danse’s body lying on the examination table. He was dressed in his Brotherhood fatigue pants but was bare from the waist up. The man’s chest rose and fell so slightly that most people would’ve assumed that he was truly dead.

Cade cleared his throat and Maxson jerked slightly as though he was caught doing something he shouldn’t be doing. “What are your orders regarding the Paladin, sir?”

Maxson opened his mouth to speak but no noise came out. Loss was a part of the Brotherhood. He wouldn’t have been unanimously elected Elder by all of the Brotherhood chapters if he shirked away in grief when he lost soldiers on the battlefield, but that didn’t make the loss any easier to bare. Danse had served him faithfully ever since he became Elder at sixteen. He never once questioned his command despite being nearly twice his age. Danse had been the most loyal, most talented, and most valuable member of the Brotherhood he had ever seen, and his fate should reflect that.

“End his suffering Cade.” He spoke in a barely audible whisper.

“Yes sir.” Cade said. “The medication will take some time to prepare so I’ll give you a moment to say your good-byes. Come and collect me from the barracks when you’re done and I’ll start on the necessary procedures.”
The doctor excused himself and left the Elder alone in the small examination room. Maxson took a step towards Danse’s body. His stomach clenched in pure rage at the Vault Dweller. She did this. He wasn’t sure what she did to harm Danse in this fashion but he was sure she was at fault. She was a murderer and as soon as Danse’s body was properly laid to rest, he’d march on the Institute and exterminate them all.

He placed a large hand on Danse’s shoulder and a low sob tore from his throat unbidden and unwelcome. Danse’s skin was cold to the touch. He was nothing more than a corpse at this point. Even if Danse’s mind was still alive, his body was at the mercy of time. Time that they didn’t have. They needed to be focused on the mission and worrying about Danse’s body was an extra liability that they didn’t need. He knew the Paladin would understand. Danse wouldn’t want his brothers and sisters to be distracted from the mission.

“Ad Victoriam, brother.” He murmured.

Elder Maxson squeezed the man’s shoulder once in a final gesture of appreciation and he turned to leave.

A small body was standing in the doorway. Her eyes were puffy and red with tears and she trembled like a scared child when she saw the Elder.

“S-sorry sir.” Scribe Haylen squeaked. “I — uh — was checking on D-Danse to see if he woke up yet.”

Maxson exhaled slowly. Scribe Haylen could be belligerent and defiant — two traits that were antithesis to being a good Brotherhood soldier — but he couldn’t deny that she was in just as much pain seeing her fallen mentor.

“I won’t lie to you Scribe,” Maxson said even-tempered and as gentle as he could be. “Knight-Captain Cade’s prognosis for Paladin Danse wasn’t good. I’ve given him the order to end Danse’s suffering.”

Haylen’s eyes widened and shone with unspilled tears. “You’re killing him?”

“He’s already dead.” Maxson replied. “He is in a coma. There’s nothing we can do for him. If he is left alive, he’d just waste away aboard the Prydwen for years as a vegetable. He would be fed through a tube until old age or disease finally claimed him. I will not subject him to that kind of suffering.”

“People can come out of a coma.” She squeaked. Her voice sounded so child-like and innocent that Maxson’s forced himself to tap into his limited patience for Haylen’s benefit.

“Yes they can but that doesn’t mean they will.” He purposely emphasized the words. “If I could look into the future and see if or when Danse would come out of the coma then I’d most assuredly let him remain here until he awoke, but I don’t have that luxury. We are at war Haylen. We will be marching on the Institute in no less than a week, and I can’t let something like this distract us from our mission.”

Haylen’s eyes narrowed and her voice was thick with unbridled emotion, “You bastard. I can’t believe that after everything Paladin Danse has done for you — for everyone — that you’re just going to turn your back on him like this. Danse is the most selfless person I have ever met. I’ve watched him risk his own life based on nothing more than principle alone. He has dedicated his life to this mission and you’re just going to put him down like some sick dog?”
Maxson’s gaze was cold and he drew himself up to his full height as he took several steps towards the Scribe until she finally stepped back in submission.

He spoke slowly and punctuated each word with crackling anger, “I will excuse your belligerence this time on account of Danse, but if you ever speak to me like that again, I will have you charged with treason and thrown off the Prydwen. Do I make myself clear?”

Haylen’s jaw clenched and she trembled but she maintained eye contact with the Elder. She nodded and then stepped aside so he could pass her.

“Say your good-byes to Danse and then report directly to Proctor Quinlan. You will be working directly under him until I can assign another Paladin to be your commanding officer.”

Haylen knew that that meant. Maxson would take his sweet time finding her a new commanding officer which meant that she’d be stuck on the Prydwen under Quinlan’s eye until Maxson felt she had been suitably punished for her outburst.

“Ad Victoriam Scribe.” Elder Maxson growled and left her in the medbay.

Haylen forced herself to take several calming breaths before she went in to say goodbye to the only man in her life who hadn’t disappointed her. Danse didn’t deserve to have some blubbering girl weeping over his body. Like it or not, she was a soldier and she had to pull herself together.

The Prydwen wheezed and groaned like a living beast and the sound echoed through the empty vessel. Aside for a handful of Squires and inexperienced Initiates, the rest of the Prydwen was empty. All available personnel had been dispatched to hunt down the Vault Dweller and her compatriots. So when she heard a sharp whistle come out from behind a broken Nuka Cola machine she damn near jumped out of her skin.

“Who’s there?” She called out.

A woman stepped out from behind the vending machine, looked up and down the hallway, then grabbed Haylen firmly by the elbow and tugged her into the medbay. She softly closed the door and flicked the lock. Haylen was about to protest but the woman cut her off with a head jerking motion.

“Shut up. There’s not enough time to explain everything. You know who I am right?” The hawkish woman hissed.

“Your name is Li right? You’re from the Institute?”

The woman’s eyes gleamed with a luster seen on slightly insane people and she pressed a piece of paper into Haylen’s hand.

“Danse isn’t dead. He isn’t in a coma. He’s deactivated.”

“Wha—“

— “No time. No questions. Read that code exactly as I have wrote it and Danse will wake up. He will be confused and groggy. You may need to remind him of who he is. Sometimes the details get a little muddled when they are deactivated but he’ll be fine. Then you both need to leave. I’ll create a distraction which will draw Maxson and Ingram to me. If Maxson finds out the truth about Danse he’ll kill you both.”

Haylen looked at the piece of paper in her hand and then back up at Dr. Li. She had a billion
questions for the woman but the weight of their dire situation forced her to swallow them all. She nodded. Dr. Li unlocked the door, poked her head out into the hallway like a mole rat sensing for danger, and disappeared.

Danse’s pale body looked unnaturally ashen beneath the fluorescent lights. Haylen stepped up to the medical table and looked at the piece of paper. The writing was legible but the phrase she was suppose to read aloud didn’t make any sense. But then again, what did she have to lose?

“M7-97 initiate factory startup protocols 1-1-94-Alpha.” She read aloud the command in a strong voice and then waited.

And waited.

Haylen waited at least fifteen minutes, long enough for the alarm sirens to go off and for Lancer Captain Kells voice to come on over the announcements to say, “All available Brotherhood personnel must immediately report to the bridge. The Logan Airport is under attack.”

A handful of people thundered past the medbay and she ducked out of sight until they were gone. True to her word, Dr. Li must’ve done something to raise the alarms.

She waited four or five more minutes wringing the paper into a gnarled and twisted tube in her anxiety as she paced back and forth.

Then a weak voice so unlike Danse croaked out from the medical table, “Where … am … I?”

Haylen froze and spun on her heels. Danse struggled to sit up. His eyes were slightly unfocused as though he had just woken up from a deep sleep. Then Danse instinctually went for the gun that was always at his hip. Thankfully he was disarmed.

“Who are you?” He snapped.

“Sir…please. It’s me. Scribe Amelia Haylen. I’ve served under you for the past six years. We were stuck at the Cambridge Police Station for the past six months until the Prydwen finally made it to Boston.”

Danse swallowed audibly and he put a hand to his forehead. “I — I have so many memories running through my head. I can’t sort them all out. Why is this happening to me?”

Haylen took Danse’s hands into hers. Her skin felt blistering warm and he desperately wanted to bring her hands to his face to ease some of the pain in his forehead. But doing that would be … inappropriate for some reason.

“Do you know your name?” She asked.

He furrowed his brow. “I — I think I’m called Danse?”

A small smile toyed at Haylen’s lips. “That’s one of many names, sure. I also call you El Capitan and ‘the blockhead’ when you aren’t around. Are you able to walk?”

Danse swung his legs off the table. The movement drew his fatigue pants against his thick thighs. His broad chest rose and fell with ease and Haylen caught herself wondering just how he would feel beneath her capable hands.

“Are you blushing Haylen?” Danse rumbled.
She jumped, “No sir. It’s sunburn. Uh — I — uh let’s get going.”

“Going where?”

“Out of here.” She said. “We gotta leave before Maxson gets back.”

Danse blinked several times. His mind felt slow and the throbbing behind his forehead only got worse as he tried to piece together fragments of information and memory.

“Why should I run from Elder Max—“

“Shhh.” Haylen hissed and she clasped a firm hand over Danse’s mouth. “I think I heard someone coming.”

“Who’s coming?” He asked but thanks to Haylen’s hand it sounded more like “who’s cuffing.”

Haylen pressed her hand a little harder against Danse’s mouth and closed her eyes to listen. Aside for the occasional groans and creeks from the aircraft’s exterior, Haylen heard no other noise.

“We gotta get out of here.” Haylen whispered to Danse. “I don’t have time to explain.”

She let go of Danse’s mouth and he brought up a hand to massage his jaw. Then Haylen grabbed that hand started tugging on his huge forearm but it was about as effective as tugging on a brahmin’s horn.

“What — where — what?” Danse winced and his hand went to his head again. “I don’t feel well Haylen.”

“I know. That’s why we have to get out of here!”

“No. I just gotta —“

— “Danse I’m serious. You’re in grave danger. Maxson was about to euthanize you because you wouldn’t wake up. Dr. Li gave me this.” she handed Danse the rolled up, twisted paper but she didn’t see that there was a printout on the back.

He unrolled it, turned the paper over, and scanned the back. His eyes narrowed at first and then his jaw dropped open. “No…this…what? That’s impossible.”

“There’s no time!” Haylen urged. “C’mon Danse.”

Whatever was on that paper had shaken Danse to his core. Haylen saw his indecision and panic — two things that she never saw from Danse before — and that scared her.

“Please!” She pleaded. “I’m not leaving here without you.”

Danse’s eyes held immeasurable pain when he looked at her and Haylen’s tears ran anew. She liked to think that she knew Danse well enough to read him like a book. She knew how he operated, she knew his fears, his little quirks, his unconscious mannerisms, but now she was seriously afraid that maybe she didn’t know Danse at all. Even if he didn’t want to, the Danse she knew would go with her.

“Haylen?” Proctor Quinlan’s voice echoed down the hallway.

“Shit! Quick lie back down and close your eyes.” She all but pushed Danse back onto the exam table.
“Haylen?”

“I’m in the medbay.” She called out in a quavering voice.

Danse obeyed and laid back down just as Quinlan came into the room. His eyes were downcast and he was reading intently from a printout. His brow furrowed creating creases on his slightly ink-smudged skin.

“Haylen what are you —“ He looked up at Haylen’s fresh tears and over to Danse’s body. “Oh dear child. This is a sticky situation. Come here. Don’t get too close to that thing.”

“Thing?” Haylen echoed but she dutifully stepped towards the older Scribe.

“Yes, thing.” He spat. “I just discovered some terrible information. I need you to report immediately to Elder Maxson. It seems that this so-called Paladin Danse is none other than a filthy synth imposter.”

“Synth…” She whispered and then the pieces fell into place.

“Yes. Synth. Synthetic human. A bastardization of technology. That’s why I need you take the transport vertibird down there to notify Elder Maxson imm—“

Glass shattered over the top of Quinlan’s head and the man cut his sentence short, looked dumbfounded for a moment, and then slumped to the ground with a pained groan. Haylen stood over him holding a heavy glass graduated cylinder, now broken, over her head like a neanderthal that first learned that something heavy plus someone’s head can equal a suitably unconscious person.

Danse sat up and looked at the scene. “Scribe, you just assaulted a senior officer!”

“Yeah well I suggest we listen to what he said and take the vertibird. The transport vertibird won’t get us very far, the damn thing hasn’t worked right since ’85 but it’s our best chance.”

“But you assaulted an officer Haylen!” Danse’s consternation made his voice echo through the hull.

“Quiet!” She hissed. “If you stay here and wait for Maxson to learn you’re a synth, you’ll be shot where you stand. If you come with me at least you’ll have a chance at surviving and then we can make a plan to help the Brotherhood out as best we can. But you’ve GOT. TO. MOVE. IT!”

The Paladin groaned and shoved himself off the table. He grabbed medical tubing from Cade’s equipment drawer and tied Quinlan’s hands behind his back and tied his legs together while Haylen kept watch for younger Initiates or Brotherhood children who might’ve been woken by the sounds they made.

“The coast is clear.” Haylen whispered. “If you get in a suit, I’ll follow you out and tell anyone who asks that I’m suppose to inform Maxson about you. Do not speak unless you’re given a direct order to, and even then, try to disguise your voice. Maybe with an accent or something.”

“And how would I do that?” He asked darkly.

“I don’t know. Doesn’t your synth body have a voice modulator or something?”

The withering look he gave Haylen could’ve stopped a deathclaw. She sighed, “Nevermind. Let’s just go.”
The duo walked through the empty cafeteria towards the Power Armor bay. Proctor Ingram was already dealing with the feral ghouls at the airport, and at nearly five in the morning, the other engineers were either assisting with the fight or were asleep in the barracks.

“What happened to my Power Armor?” Danse asked as he got into the first available suit. As soon as he stepped in, his heartbeat eased a little. He always felt better being inside a suit.

“Don’t worry about that now.” Haylen said. She peeked into the main stairwell that led to the deck. “The coast is clear. Let’s go.”

Haylen and Danse walked out onto the Prydwen’s deck. The cold morning wind tugged at Haylen’s uniform like frozen claws and she ran towards the last available vertibird that was parked on the far end of the platform and closest to the airport landing pad.

The vertibird was damaged on their way to Boston. A Super Mutant encampment hiding in a skyscraper got a lucky shot on the bird and nearly shot it out of the sky. The forward thrusting mechanism was busted so all it could really do was hover about 300 feet in the air.

“Lancer, we need to go to the airport. Proctor Quinlan asked me to relay an important message to the Elder.” Haylen barked and climbed onto the vertibird.

The Lancer was bleary-eyed and young; he couldn’t have been older than fifteen and he had been caught sleeping on the job. He looked a little annoyed when Haylen issued her command but his eyes widen in fear when he saw the unnamed Paladin board the vertibird.

“Who is that?” He asked Haylen. “His or her name isn’t on the suit.”

Haylen wanted to tell the kid to just shut up and drive but the youth would’ve been suspicious of that, so he said, “That’s Paladin Rhys. He’s my new commanding officer now that Danse is …”

The kid’s face fell and nodded sympathetically, “I’m sorry for your loss ma’am. Congratulations on the promotion, sir. I’ll get you down to the airport right away!”

Although the kid was young, he was a skilled Lancer and landed the vertibird on the airport helipad without issue. Haylen and Danse disembarked and immediately took cover in the open doorway. Proctor Quinlan wasn’t joking. The feral ghoul distraction was more like an infestation. Several dozen swarmed a handful of Knights in the main part of the airport while at least six more came running to meet them.

Haylen began firing on instinct. She had flashbacks to the firefight at the Cambridge Police Station and how they almost became overrun if it wasn’t for Danse’s heroic act of detonating nearby cars to take care of the approaching swarms.

Two ghouls collapsed in a pile of gore and dismembered bits. Another one launched itself at Haylen but she sidestepped quickly and it went skittering into the dirt. One jumped onto Danse’s back and he grabbed it by its tattered shirt and threw it forty feet away into several shipping containers.

“Let’s go!” Haylen yelled over the gunfire. “We gotta get out of the airport and into open ground.”

Danse nodded and provided cover fire while they ran through the dilapidated concourse towards the baggage claim and the exits.

The acrid smell of ozone filled the air and red flashes illuminated the dark hallway that blocked them from their exit. Elder Maxson backed into the concourse. His huge gatling laser tore through
ghouls like they were tissue paper but there were so many of them that they were still tearing through his gunfire.

Haylen’s heart would’ve seized up in fear at seeing Maxson in his intimidating black Power Armor holding a weapon that could easily end hers and Danse’s lives in nanoseconds, but the adrenaline coursing through her body kept her mind focused.

She jerked her head towards the shipping containers to the left and mouthed to Danse ‘hide’ before providing cover fire for Maxson. Ghouls crawled over one another snarling like rabid dogs, but eventually the dead carcasses had built up in the doorway to the point that their bodies were a natural barricade from other ghouls looking to break into the concourse.

“Haylen!” Maxson snarled as they pumped enough laser cartages into the last one that it disintegrated into ash, “I told you to stay with Quinlan. How dare you defy a direct order! I will deal with you —“

“— Sir! Proctor Quinlan told me to come down here. He has an important message for you about Paladin Danse. He told me that it was urgent! That’s the only reason why I came down here, I swear!”

Maxson roared in frustration. Haylen had never seen a real lion before but she had heard Old World holotape recordings of the beast and Maxson would’ve put the largest lion to shame with his battle cry.

“I don’t have time for Quinlan’s message. Since you’re here, help me provide cover fire to the other Knights and Initiates that were stuck down here. There’s still horde of zombies out in the airport hangers in the north part of the building. If you do that, then maybe I’ll reconsider your punishment.”

Haylen nodded and replied with a polite but fierce, “Sir, yes sir!”

She ran into the forest of tall shipping containers and was nearly hamstringed by a feral ghoul that was crawling out of an opening; its legs had been shot off but its long talons were still sharp enough to act like razor blades.

“Paladin!” She hissed as loud as she dared.

Danse appeared in the western stairway like a ghost and motioned to her that the coast was clear. They descended several flights until they ended up in the airport basement. All they had to do was follow the wall to the north and they’d make it to the northern stairwell which led to the doors that to the open wasteland.

Haylen’s eyes watered from the pungent smell of decaying flesh, rotting food, and human (or not-so-human) sewage. Danse activated the headlamp and looked around at the horror. Piles of MREs sat half-devoured in piles. Fat rats nibbled on the food they could get to but it was clear that somebody had spent a fair amount of time feeding the ghouls that lived beneath the airport.

“Who would feed these monsters?” Danse growled.

“I don’t know.” Haylen said through tight lips. Simply breathing in the putrid air hurt her lungs. “But that’s not our problem. We gotta get out of here.”

“And leave our brothers and sisters to fight these zombies without our aid?!”

“Yes!” Haylen exclaimed, “Because those same brothers and sisters would no sooner than shoot
“Why haven’t you?” Danse’s question came out of left field and Haylen would’ve stopped moving to ponder it if they weren’t ankle deep in muck and sewage water.

Danse knew Haylen couldn’t see his expression from behind the helmet but he did his best to temper his voice into professional neutrality despite the tempest roaring inside of him. How could Haylen count him as a friend when he wasn’t even human? Why should he receive mercy from a righteous fate? He was an abomination. Still, his primal survival instinct — whether a product of his biology or pre-programmed into his head — screamed at him to follow Haylen. Not doing so would mean certain death.

“I don’t kill my friends.” She said simply. “Let’s move out.”

Haylen climbed the stairs first. She heard soldiers in Power Armor running through the corridors and she heard Ingram’s steely battle-ready voice leading the charge. After the herd had passed, Haylen waited a few more seconds and then motioned for Danse to follow her.

Power Armor wasn’t meant for stealth so they figured if they blended in as more Brotherhood soldiers looking to fight the feral ghoul horde they’d be less likely to draw attention to themselves.

“Got some ghouls ahead!” Haylen yelled out and she discharged her laser pistol into the wall a few times to add to the charade.

Danse followed her lead and aimed some shots back towards where they came. They made it to the nondescript steel door that led outside when a mottled red arm shot out from the shadows and grabbed Haylen’s arm.

“Help me.” The creature wheezed.

Haylen screamed and jerked out of the creature’s grasp which drew it into the dim fluorescent lights.

A tattered hospital gown hung off his trembling frame. Its blue eyes were bloodshot and the whites of its eyes were a sickly yellow. It didn’t have a nose and only a few wisps of fine white-blond hair remained sticking out of its head like whiskers.

“Please…”

“I see one down here!” Proctor Ingram shouted.

“Shit!” Haylen cursed. She looked once more at the ghoul and shook her head. She threw her weight against the door when she opened it and the cold pale light of early dawn met them.

Danse and Haylen sprinted through the entryway in the barricade. Blood pounded in their ears and the roar and thunder of the battle fell by the wayside. Time seemed to momentarily slow down as they ran for their lives from the only home either of them knew and into the unknown dangers of the wasteland.
Meetings of the Minds

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Angst is pretty heavy throughout this chapter. There’s some mentions of suicidal ideation as Nora struggles through a depressive episode.

Trigger Warning for attempted suicide.

The end events of this fic run concurrently with my fic Brothers In Arms ... which I will finish at some point.

Chapter 15

Nora, Deacon, and Tom arrived at Tenpines Bluff exhausted, frozen, and in poor spirits. The trio looked like a motley crew as they shuffled up the steep embankment.

“STOP!” A deep male guard snarled from atop a wooden barricade. “We don’t accept Brotherhood soldiers here. We’ve already told you that we don’t have food to spare so go scavenge elsewhere.”

Deacon plastered a winning, non-threatening smile onto his face. “Would you believe that we aren’t Brotherhood soldiers and that we hijacked a vertibird, crashed it into the lake, and walked here wearing their disguises?”

“No.”

The barrel on the man’s gun rose to point at the spy’s head.

“Well it was worth a try.” Deacon stage whispered to Tom and Nora.

Nora looked at the man atop the barricade. If he shot them where they stood at least she’d stop feeling the icy cold, the bone numbing exhaustion, and the bitterness that tore at her heart.

“He can’t shoot us all.” She mumbled and she walked towards the barricade.

Dirt exploded by her left foot but she treated it like it was a mere buzzing fly. Then dirt exploded on her right. Deacon and Tom watched the woman walk between the two wooden barricades like she was walking into a Super Duper Mart after a long day at work. Even the sentry watched Nora with mild fascination before raising his rifle to fire a third time.

“STOP!” Tom yelled and he ran in front of Nora shielding her body with his. But as he was eight inches shorter than Nora, it was more of the thought that counted.

“We ain’t part of the Brotherhood, man!” He exclaimed. “D’you think the Brotherhood would send three people lookin’ like us to hassle you. We just gotta see Lucas and then we’ll be on our way. Just please don’t shoot us!”

The sentry scrutinized the trio. Nora rolled her eyes at the guard and pushed past Tom. Deacon skipped past the sentry as well while flashing him another friendly but apologetic smile.
“She’s my diabetic cousin.” He told the guard in a low, conspiratory tone. “If she doesn’t get some Sugar Bombs in her, she gets a little cranky. Here’s a token to prove that we’re legit.”

He pulled out a waterlogged flyer from the small satchel. The paper was soggy and smelled faintly of seaweed. Still, the man opened it and then scrutinized Deacon.

“Do you have a geiger counter?” He asked as he narrowed his eyes.

“Mine’s in the shop.” He replied. “See. I told you we’re legit. So I’d appreciate it if you didn’t try and shoot holes in our girl. She’s got the charisma of a Yao Guai but don’t hold that against her. We’ve had a helluva day.”

The large black man grunted in affirmative and handed the flyer back to Deacon. "There’s a couple of new settlers staying here who are part of the Minutemen militia. If you need extra manpower or fire support, they might be willing to escort you to the Starlight Drive In or maybe up to Sanctuary."

“Thanks.” Deacon replied and he hustled to catch up to Nora.

“So do you have a death wish I don’t know about?” He said tightly through his teeth.

Nora’s face looked pained for a moment and then she schooled her expression to cool neutrality once again.

“I have to report back to the Institute immediately. I don’t have time for obstacles, even minor ones, to get in my way.”

Deacon placed both of his hands firmly on her shoulders. “Hey. I can appreciate your commitment to the job you never wanted and all, but take a moment to get some perspective. Get into some fresh, dry clothes. Eat some damn food. Drink some booze and go the fuck to sleep. You haven’t slept in at least twenty-four hours. Then we can reconvene and get a plan together.”

Nora’s chest rose and fell in ragged, panting breaths. She wanted to hit Deacon again, or maybe she wanted to run in the opposite direction and just keep running until her legs gave out, but no matter what, she knew that slowing down now would leave her mind free to think about what happened back there. She couldn’t do that again. She spent her first month in the wasteland rehashing the last twenty minutes that she spent with her husband like it was on a constant playback in her mind. Doing that again might just kill her.

“It’s my fault Dee.” She murmured.

“No it’s not Wanderer. Believe me, it’s not your fault.”

She shook her head. Deacon didn’t understand. He had never been in her shoes before. He couldn’t understand.

“I should’ve never let him go topside. I should’ve kept him at the Institute to help the scientists with the war effort. He would’ve been safe. He would still be alive.” Nora’s voice broke and she looked away as hot, fat tears slipped down her cheeks.

“You know he wouldn’t have wanted that. He went down doing what he was good at. This Nate, just like your late husband, wouldn’t have wanted to go any other way.”

Deacon cupped Nora’s face in his calloused hands and made her look at him. Without his sunglasses, Nora noticed that his blue eyes looked as deep and placid as the lake they just crawled
“But I just sat by and watched him bleed out and I did nothing.” Nora croaked. “He died in service to me. I should’ve saved him. But I was useless. I’m useless. I can’t do this Dee. I can’t do this.”

The hug he gave her was crushing, and instead of barraging him with more punches she collapsed against him and he sank a little beneath her dead weight.

“Help me Tom.” Deacon croaked.

They both grabbed ahold of Nora’s arms and helped her over to the blasted out house and made her sit down on the dirty, broken bed that sat in the rubble. She hugged herself and rolled over onto her side and sobbed.

She cried for what she had lost: Synth Nate, her son, and her husband. She cried for Nick and prayed to any higher power that he had made it safely to wherever he was going and found the answers he was looking for.

Nora cried for herself. She let her mind fall into the cesspool of self-pity and self-doubt. Why did she think that she could do this? Why did she think she could play the part of Wasteland Hero when she could barely keep herself together? What was the point of caring about anything when her immediate future just offered more pain and more suffering?

But most importantly, she cried in fear of what was to come. Her brief introduction to the Brotherhood and to Elder Maxson solidified Nick’s warning in her head. The Brotherhood was dangerous, and they had the superior numbers, the firepower, and the pure zealous insanity to carry them through. The upcoming battle was sure to be a bloodbath and Nora didn’t want to think about the friends and allies, the innocent people, who would die to protect the once infamous “Commonwealth Boogyman.”

Nora cried herself to sleep on that broken and dirty bed. Meanwhile Deacon and Tom had changed into a fresh set of clothes and were carrying a pile over to Nora when they saw her blotchy-red and tear-streaked face peaceful for the first time that night.

Deacon draped a heavy woolen blanket over her, took out Deliverer so he could clean it, and settled against the whitewashed wall that still stood defiant against the wasteland’s brutality. Meanwhile Tom mumbled to himself as he tinkered with electronic scraps, no doubt building yet another pseudo-sexual feminine electronic device. Deacon didn’t want to touch that issue with a ten foot pole so he just left the brilliant madman alone.

Instead he thought back to an earlier time. A time when he actually had hair. A time when he was just a simple farmer trying to eek out a simple life for him and his wife away from the gang he used to run with. He thought back to how Barbara’s eyes looked — glassy and dark — when he came upon her body in their humble hovel that they called a house. He still remembered how their blood smelled when he murdered them all. He could still taste the bile in his throat from his own vomit after his dark deed was done.

Deacon reloaded Deliverer and casually held it across his knees and let his head rest against the wall. His mind came back to the advice he gave Nora back at the Hub: don’t trust the bullshit that people feed you. Instead, take a look at what they do. When he first met the clueless Vault Dweller, he didn’t have high hopes that she’d amount to anything other than food for some wasteland critter, but then she showed him her true colors.

Nora was a determined, selfless, and self-possessed woman. Things in her life tried their damnest
to beat her down, and while she might’ve fallen to her knees once or twice, Nora never stopped fighting. He could admire that. Hell…he respected that.

“Hang in there Wanderer.” He murmured. “You aren’t alone.”

It was midday when Haylen peeked out the window of a derelict and empty apartment building somewhere in the heart of the Boston ruins. She listened for the telltale hum of a vertibird’s engine or the whooshing of hydraulic powered steps from Paladins on patrol. She didn’t hear anything but that didn’t mean the Brotherhood wasn’t out there.

Once they ran out of the airport, Haylen cut northwest along the docks towards The Old North Church. They weaved through alleyways and beneath overpasses so any pursuing vertibirds couldn’t spot them, but as most of the vertibird fleet was still out searching for the Vault Dweller, Haylen felt somewhat confident that they wouldn’t be at risk for an aerial attack. The ground forces, however, were out in droves and around mid-morning she overheard Maxson’s orders on a Scribe’s radio.

“Search Team Echo report!” Maxson’s artificially muffled voice echoed out over a radio that must’ve been stuffed in a Scribe’s satchel.

There was a momentary pause before a deep basso voice replied, “Go ahead Elder.”

“Scribe Haylen and Paladin Danse ran from the Brotherhood compound at 0430 this morning and are officially AWOL. Both should be considered armed and dangerous. Haylen has already assaulted a senior officer and Danse is a synth infiltrator. Bring Haylen back alive and kill the synth. That is an order.”

“Yes sir!” The Scribe rumbled. “Ad Victoriam.”

Haylen’s eyes widened and she swallowed down the frightened groan that tore at her throat. They were now officially enemies of the Brotherhood. That idea alone seemed too surreal to be believed, but then again, Haylen knew that this was the likely consequence. They had to keep moving forward. They couldn’t go back now.

Danse whispered. “This isn’t good Haylen. We need to turn ourselves in.”

“Are you crazy? They’ll kill us both.”

The Paladin spoke in a level and flat tone. “The Elder is right. I should be considered dangerous. If I am a synth then I could’ve broadcasted every single mission we’ve ever done back to the Institute. I could’ve sabotaged the Prydwen, or even Liberty Prime, and then deleted the memories from my brain. I could’ve killed you or Knight Rhys or any of our brothers and sisters without hesitation. I am a danger to everyone. I am an abomination.”

“That’s not true Danse.” Haylen said as loudly as she dared. “If you were a danger, I’d be dead already. The Prydwen would be a pile of flaming rubble on the shoreline, and Liberty Prime would be fucking tap dancing to Danny Kaye’s “Civilization.” You might be a synth but you would never betray the Brotherhood.”

“You’re right.” He said and he stood up from their hiding spot. “I wouldn’t betray them. I should’ve never gone with you Haylen. I’m sorry. The Elder is right.”

Haylen heard rustling in the darkness and something in her mind told her to act. She tackled Danse just as the electrical charging sound of his laser pistol started up and he put the barrel of the gun to
his temple. Her small form crashed into his body knocking the pistol from his hand. His head snapped back and she felt wet blood on her hand and for one horrible, brief second she thought that Danse had managed to pull the trigger.

They struggled against each other in the darkness. Danse outweighed her by at least sixty pounds and towered over her by a foot. She was no match for him physically, but she didn’t need to beat him, she just needed to distract him.

She saw him reaching for his gun so she gathered up a bunch of gravel and dirt and threw it into his eyes. He didn’t make any noise but his grip around her tightened and she knew there would be bruising.

He brushed at the dirt with his thick bicep, coughed several times, and rolled her over onto her back as easily as rolling a duffle bag over. Then he straddled her body and pressed his forearm against her windpipe.

“Why did you stop me!” He snarled. Dirt that had collected on the bridge of his nose fell into Haylen’s face mingling with the burgeoning tears.

“B — Be — Be — because I —” She gasped for breath and Danse ever so slightly let up on the pressure but didn’t get off of her. “Because I care about you.”

He sighed, “We’ve been over this Haylen. I’m not human. How could you care about me … a machine?”

“The same way that you can care about your squadron, your brothers and sisters, your home with the Brotherhood.”

“Those are implanted memories! They are not mine! They were never mine!”

“Oh really?” Haylen’s composure was starting to crack and her voice jumped a full octave in pitch. “You’re my friend, Danse. My mentor. Do you think that was programed into you? Was your honor, your desire to be a leader, your intelligence, or your compassion programed into you?”

“I — I don’t —”

“When you killed Cutler after he was mutated, did you do it because ones and zeros in your brain told you to?” She continued. “When you saved Rhys from that pack of feral ghouls at the police station, was that just a tactical strategy to lure us into a false sense of security? Or what about the time you caught a stray bullet in your shoulder and I had to extract the bullet and patch you up? Did your processors malfunction which made you make an error on the battlefield?”

“Haylen…”

“Dammit Danse! I don’t care that you’re a synth. Everything that makes you…YOU … isn’t up here,” she tapped his forehead with her forefinger, “it’s in here.”

The Paladin looked down at Haylen’s gloved hand when she placed it over his heart. He bowed his head and sat back on his heels. The gun sat between them. He sighed and picked it up and holstered it without another word.

“Let’s move out.” He ordered wearily and offered her his hand.

Haylen took it and the Paladin helped her to her feet. She rubbed her neck, almost certain she’d have a bruise there tomorrow, and gave him an uncertain look.
“The closest civilization is Goodneighbor which is a mile or two due north.”

Danse looked at her darkly, “You call that den full of chem fiends, whores, and ghouls a civilization?”

Haylen sighed, “I don’t like it any more than you do but it’s our only option. There’s a rumor that that The Railroad has taken up residence there, and maybe they can —”

“— Absolutely not, Haylen.” Danse snarled. “I would rather have Arthur slit my throat than work with that group of terrorists”

“We don’t have a choice!” She countered. “The Brotherhood is hunting for us. We can’t just live in the Boston ruins and we can’t go back to any Brotherhood outposts or back to Cambridge because they’re certainly starting their search there. We need temporary allies if we’re going to survive the war that’s coming.”

Danse’s eyes blazed with fury, frustration, and despair. His nostrils flared as he lightly panted from trying to hold back all of the pain that threatened to tear out of his chest. His life had always been one of structure and discipline. He knew his place among the Brotherhood. He knew his worth. He knew himself. But now, as Danse the Synth, he was lost.

“I’ll go with you to make sure you are safe.” He relented. “But don’t expect them to welcome us with open arms. From their perspective, we are the enemy.”

“Even enemies have a truce once in a while.” Haylen replied. “Consider this parley until we can come up with a better plan.”

Danse scowled as he cautiously glanced around the open doorway and out into the alleyway. He didn’t hear any Brotherhood soldiers or vertibirds so he motioned to Haylen to follow him.

The duo walked through burned out backyards and beneath rusted fire escapes. They kept to the shadows and only crossed into the open sunlight after listening for oncoming vertibirds. The mile and a half long journey took them until evening as they kept stopping to let patrols pass by or to deal with nearby raider and Super Mutant threats.

The sky had turned a deep gold by the time they approached the neon sign pointing to Goodneighbor. Haylen took the lead but was stopped by a steely-eyed kid sitting atop the barricade.

“Oh no…” The kid sneered. “Uh sorry but we aren’t accepting solicitations from Brotherhood of Steel soldiers today. We’ve already got plenty of sticks. No need to extract yours from your butts on our account.”

“Please. We only came here for temporary asylum. We don’t want to make any trouble for you or the other citizens.” Haylen replied.

“Oh yeah?” Danse snarled. “Why don’t you tell that to the countless dozen Mungos your group turned away when the shi — stuff hit the fan after the Enclave poisoned the water. You could’ve taken us in but you just holed up in your Citadel and at Fort Independence and told the rest of us to fuc — screw off.”

“You’re from Little Lamplight?” Danse asked.

He had only heard the term ‘mungo’ in association with the kids who lived in the vast caverns outside of Vault 87. Then again, he mused, was his memory of the term truly his own or did
someone program it into his head?

The kid sat up straight, almost regally, and puffed out his chest. “I was Mayor of Little Lamplight until I became one of those Mungos that you turned away. So now I’m giving you a little payback. Go away and this won’t have to get violent.”

An indiscernible voice said something to the kid. Neither Haylen or Danse could make out what was being said but they both noticed that the voice sounded rough, like its owner needed a lozenge.

The former kid mayor sighed, “Fine. You’re the boss, boss.”

He rose from his post, climbed down the wooden stairs, and unlocked the door. Then he opened the door and gestured for them to get inside with a jerk of his head.

“Welcome to Goodneighbor.” He said sullenly, his salutation clearly coming from a place of duress.

Haylen and Danse hurried on inside and as the kid closed the door behind them. As soon as they entered, every single person stopped what they were doing and stared at them with hostile expressions.

“Are you sure about this?” Danse asked between his teeth.

“It was either this or face execution.” Haylen shot back from behind a fake but affable smile.

“Oh…I think these people,” he spat the word with clear disapproval, “will more than gladly do that job for the Brotherhood.”

Haylen was about to respond with a sarcastic comment but the whitewashed double doors opened on the large brick building’s second floor and a ghoul stepped out onto the balcony.

As soon as he emerged, all of the Goodneighbor denizens looked to him as though they were awaiting orders. His black eyes scrutinized them both with an expression that conveyed furious contempt. His thin lips curled back into a snarl.

The ghoul wore a tricorn hat and an odd red jacket complete with coattails along with an Old World flag wrapped around his waist that was knotted rakishly at his left hip. On his right hip, he had a pistol resting in a dark holster that was nearly hidden by his coat and slung over his back was a hulking combat shotgun.

He spoke in a low and calm voice but each word he said dripped rage.

“Where. Is. Nora?”

Danse and Haylen looked at each other in confusion.

“Sorry sir, I —“

“What the fuck did you do with the Vault Dweller you kidnapped in broad daylight by Postal Square?”

The ghoul’s voice echoed off the buildings and a primal shiver crept down Haylen’s back. She swallowed and stepped forward with her hands raised in surrender.

“She escaped with two of her companions. They hijacked a vertibird and flew away. The Brotherhood has been out searching for them since it happened.”
“And so you both came to Goodneighbor to look for her too?” The ghoul asked.

Danse stepped forward, “We came here looking for temporary aid and a place to rest before we move on. If you do not want us here, we will be on our way.”

The ghoul chuckled, “Oh, you tin cans ain’t goin anywhere, ya feel me?”

Four ghouls dressed in suits and fedoras had snuck behind them during the exchange and now had their tommy guns trained on them both. Other drifters and wastelanders watched the spectacle with cautious glee, yet none of them were far from weapons of their own.

“What you gonna do to them Mayor Hancock?” A voice yelled out from the crowd. Another couple of people laughed in raucous merriment and the Mayor gave them a small salute by flicking two fingers off the brim of his hat.

“They want a place to rest and relax? Well I say we show them to the best that Goodneighbor can offer.” He leered down at both of them. “Take them both to the cells in the basement. Remove them of their weapons and lock them up separately. We don’t want them to get any funny ideas now.”

Hancock watched the poetic justice with unabashed satisfaction as the two Brotherhood soldiers were forced to put their hands on their heads and were marched into the Old State House and down to the basement.

He struck a match on the whitewashed railing and lit a cigarette. The rush of nicotine did nothing for him but this was more of a ceremonial act anyway. He wasn’t sure why two of the Brotherhood’s best and brightest walked right into the one damn town that hated their guts, but he was going to enjoy finding out why.

Hancock removed his knife and placed it on his desk near the dozen or so empty beer bottles. He did it as a precaution for himself. Nora would be pissed if he let his temper get the best of him like it did with Virgil. Then again, his temper was supercharged on Psycho masquerading as Med-X but he knew better to tempt fate or to tempt himself.

The ghoul paused at the doorway and looked back at his empty desk where memories of Nora sometimes haunted his healing brain. Shit. As the memory came back to him, he felt the echoes of shame and frustration from those few days in Sanctuary leak back into his psyche. The emotions weren’t powerful but he did remember them.

Hancock took a long, tobacco-free, breath and fixed Nora squarely in his mind. She expected more outta him. Ever since Nicky left, she needed someone to be the calm and rational mind that could put things into a different perspective. He needed to think like that synth did. He needed to think like a detective: rational and cool instead of emotional and impulsive.

“Be like Nicky…” He mumbled to himself. “Well fuck me sideways.”

Nora, Deacon, and Tom crept through the sparse forest under the cover of night. The Drive-In’s large gray movie screen sat on the horizon like a ship’s sail and it marked the next checkpoint where they could rest before cutting south through Lexington and on towards Boston.

Vertibirds swept over the tree tops in steady intervals. When they flew by, the trio took cover wherever they could. The clothes they purchased from Lucas were all Pre-War military in some capacity and the dusky grey and greens on their clothes camouflaged them against the stark grey landscape.
And so, a journey that should’ve taken the trio a couple hours took almost all night. They were exhausted, dirty, cold, hungry, and irritable when they dragged themselves into the small storeroom behind the Drive-In’s movie screen.

“I’ll take first watch.” Deacon announced as soon as they crossed the threshold and collapsed onto whatever available bed, couch, and floor space was there.

“No Dee. I’ll do it. You’ve been up all night anyway.” Nora replied. “I need to try and contact the Institute again now that we’re closer to the CIT.”

“ANNA and I can do it!” Tom piped up. He cradled a bundle of wires that he soldered to a toaster-sized metal box. Small red, yellow, and green lights flickered at seemingly random intervals and the thing occasionally squealed feedback which made the mad technophile beam.

“What the hell is that?” Deacon deadpanned.

Tom held the box up to them both. “Guys I’d like you to meet ANNA, or Augmented Nuclear Nanobot Annihilator.”

“That thing is nuclear? As in radioactive?” Nora asked and she took a conscious step away from the device.

“She runs on nuclear energy but she ain’t radioactive. At least…not until I can find a fusion core to power her up. It’s a shame we lost that suit of Power Armor in the lake. If we grabbed the fusion core from that, then I could really show you what this baby could do!”

Nora and Deacon stared blankly at the small black man. The spy shook his head, donned his sunglasses, and said, “Nope. I can’t handle this right now. Nora you got second watch. Tom, you and your … Anna have third watch. Don’t come outside unless it is an emergency. They’re still looking for us and we don’t exactly blend in as we are now.”

“And so you’re just going to sit outside and wait for The Brotherhood to find you?” Nora asked.

Deacon smirked, “I’m a spy, darling. I’ll be outside playing the role of chemmed up Scavver #1. See?” He cleared his throat and said the next line in a thickly slurred voice, “Tha’s my trash pile! Keep yer hans off of it!”

“Oscar worthy.” Nora shot back unamused.

The spy’s smirk grew, “Trust me Wanderer. Remember that I was the one who escorted you from the CIT to Goodneighbor while pretending to be a trader from Abernathy after faking my death. I’m good at this.”

She sighed, “Just … be careful. Please.”

Deacon’s ire tempered when he heard the thinly-veiled pain and worry in her voice. God why did he have to be an ass sometimes, he thought.

He walked to her and grabbed her hands with his and gave them a reassuring squeeze, “I always am careful, Wanderer. I’m the paranoid one, remember?”

“And the one who’s apparently afraid of heights.” She grinned. “I didn’t know that about you. I’m gonna file that one away in the file marked ‘Absolute Truths About Deacon’”

“Yeah…well…” And then he hurried out the door and firmly closed it behind him.
He unrolled a sleeping bag that Nora had left from her last stay with Hancock, Nick, and Liam and placed it over the plush red couch. The he slipped into it while cradling ANNA in the crook of his arm like a teddy bear. His metal helmet sat askew and it looked rather uncomfortable as the pointy bits poked into Tom’s head.

“You sleep with your helmet on?”

“Sleep is the best time for the nanobots to get ya.” The spy yawned. “They sink their little metal fangs into your brain juice when your mind’s at rest. And I ain’t about taking chance now.”

Nora pursed her lips and shrugged. Fair enough, she thought.

She spread out another sleeping bag onto the small cot tucked away in the corner of the room. Her fingertips skimmed along the rough mattress. She thought back to the night that she and Hancock shared in this room. She recalled the crackling chemistry that arched between them he healed the laser burn on her face. She remembered how the room smelled, earthy and richly spiced from his hand-rolled cigarettes, and how her life seemed so much simpler when her only concern was finding her son.

The metal bed frame squeaked in protest when she slipped beneath the sleeping bag with her clothes on. She didn’t like laying down in a bed so she pulled the slippery canvas material up to her armpits and sat against the wall with it huddled around her body like a kangaroo’s pouch.

Then she pulled out her small radio, flipped the dial on the front to one of the two frequencies that the Institute used, and spoke wearily into the device.

“This is Nora? Does anyone copy?”

More silence filled the room and Nora rested her head against the concrete wall. She sighed and tried once more and expected yet more silence but Dr. Filmore’s sleep-filled voice was edged with panic.

“Nora? Nora can you hear me?”

“Yes Allie. I can hear you.” She said hollowly.

“Jesus Christ. Where have you been? The Directorate…well…we all thought you were dead. We expected you to radio in nearly twenty hours ago.”

She sighed. Tom’s soft snoring was punctuated by ANNA’s idle squealing. Oh if the Institute could only see her now, she thought bitterly.

“After I contacted you, I was abducted by the Brotherhood and —“ Nora’s voice faltered, “and Dr. Li helped me escape. Two Railroad agents including N-Nate hijacked a vertibird and we flew it north with them hot on our tails. We were shot down over a lake and we’ve been trying to get within radio frequency so I could make contact you, but I couldn't get within range until now.

“Is Dr. Li okay?” Allie asked.

“Yes. At least as far as I know.” She replied. “She looked exhausted but she wasn’t injured and there weren’t signs that the Brotherhood hurt her. I did catch a glimpse of Liberty Prime when we left. It —“
“-- Not now. Not here.” The scientist barked. “I can’t be sure this frequency isn’t being overheard. I’ll immediately prepare a relay signal. It’ll take about ten minutes for me to triangulate your location. I’ll radio you back when it’s ready, and I’ll go wake up The Directorate members so you can brief us on everything as soon as you get back.”

Nora swallowed. Something like hot anger or even molten hate burned her throat. Dr. Filmore didn’t ask about Nate. Was he really that expendable to the Institute just because he was a synth? If so, what did that mean in terms of Nora’s safety? Were they looking for a ‘fall guy’ as Hancock had warned her or were they just so battle-focused that common decency fell to callous decisiveness as they eye of battle drew closer?

Her thoughts spiraled as she sat on the mattress hugging arms around her knees.

God she missed Nick. She missed being able to bounce ideas off of him. She missed his quiet strength and his uncompromising morals. But what cut her to her core was that they had parted ways seeing different sides of the same coin. They both wanted to help people. Nick spent almost eight decades helping the people in Dimond City while they treated him with suspicion, disgust, and outright contempt. Similarly, Nora was bending over backwards helping a group of people who were to blame for inflicting pain and terror on the Commonwealth for more than a century. She and Nick followed the same moral compass. So then why did Nora feel like she had driven Nick away? That him leaving was her fault? Maybe that’s what Mama Murphy’s vision meant when she said that one of them would ‘cease to exist.’ A large rock settled in her empty stomach and it made her feel queasy.

“Nora, do you copy?” Dr. Filmore’s voice asked which broke her from her dark thoughts.

“Yes.”

“Are you ready?”

Nora didn’t have much to take with her as whatever she had brought with her from the Institute was still stashed in Hancock’s office in Goodneighbor. The rest of their gear and any useful supplies sat at the bottom of the lake. She literally had nothing but the clothes on her back.

“Go ahead.”

“Alright.” Dr. Filmore replied. “Readying the relay in 3 … 2 … 1 …”

Nora saw the white-blue flash from behind her closed eyelids then felt a moment of pure weightlessness before smelling the faint acrid odor of abraxo cleaner and the neutralized scent of filtered air.

She was still clutching the sleeping bag around herself when the light dissipated and the spots in her eyes vanished. The atrium was unusually busy considering the late hour and Nora blinked several times at the figure standing near Dr. Alan Binet who looked fit to bursting from sheer excitement.

The figure was a Gen-2 synth, tall, maybe six feet or more, and its tattered body was bare save for a pair of black pants that had so many holes in them that it was a wonder the fabric even held together anymore. Assorted halogen lightbulbs protruded along the construct’s shoulders and back while thick black chords wrapped around the thing’s waist and hips like a belt made of thick black worms.

Nora shirked the sleeping bag off herself and rose to her feet. Dutifully a Gen-2 synth came by and
picked the sleeping bag up and placed it in a laundry cart. The item almost looked sacrilegious among pristine the white Institute towels and hospital scrubs.

When she approached Dr. Binet, he nodded towards her and then gestured in her direction which made the synth turn as well. She stopped in her tracks when she saw the synth’s face. His face looked exactly like Nick’s.

“Welcome back Nora.” Dr. Binet replied affably. “I’d like you to meet someone.”

The synth smiled politely at her and offered his skeletal hand out in a handshake. She accepted the handshake and tried to force herself to stop staring at him but she couldn’t.

“My name is DiMA.” He replied in a soft, tenor voice. “I’ve heard many things about you Nora.”

She cleared her throat, “Uh…nice to meet you. I’m running on very little sleep so I apologize how this will sound, but uh … what are you?”

The synth chuckled. He didn’t seem annoyed or hurt by the indelicate question. “I’m a synth. I’m the first prototype that was built here at the Institute along with NiMA who now goes by the name Nick Valentine. He and I were built around the same time and we share the same physical mold, but I was encouraged to develop my own self-awareness and personality whereas Nick’s were implanted from the memories of a Pre-War cop.”

Nora’s eyes grew wide. “Nick did it? He found you?”

DiMA nodded sagely, “Indeed he did.”

Then Nora looked around the Atrium. Her heart soared into her throat at the thought of seeing Nick’s wry grin as he watched her from the sidelines, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Nick?” She asked throatily. “Uh…did he? Where is he?”

DiMA brushed off the hundreds of worst-case scenarios that popped into her head with a delicate wave, “Do not fear. He is quite well. He went back to that human settlement with the reporter. I am here on behalf of both of us. I am here to negotiate with you Nora. Once you are ready to hear my case.”

She blinked at the synth and then she looked to Dr. Binet who was beside himself with awe and child-like giddiness. His face fell a little when he took in Nora’s dirty, disheveled, and exhausted appearance, and he deflated a little.

“Sorry Nora. We — uh can postpone the meeting until you’ve rested for a bit. In the meantime, I’ll give you a tour of the Robotics lab and …”

Dr. Binet’s voice died away as he led the odd-looking Gen-2 synth through the doors which led to the Robotics laboratories. She trudged up two flights of stairs and made her way to her room. She barely remembered taking a shower or shoveling two bags worth of Food Product into her mouth. Her sleep-deprived and mentally exhausted brain sat back while her body operated on autopilot fulfilling her basic survival needs.

By the time she pulled the blankets off her bed and collapsed onto the stiff couch cushions that she had placed in the corner as a makeshift bedroll, Nora was convinced that the weird looking synth had actually been a hallucination. A surreal, vivid hallucination.
I'm happy to report that I'm back writing for a couple of weeks before work picks up once again. It's been a rough few months but I'm glad that I have this story to keep coming back to.

I hope you enjoy. Reviews are very much appreciated.

Chapter 16: War Games

Nora scrutinized the Gen-2 synth who sat directly across from her in the Directorate meeting room. DiMA looked right back at her; his expression was pleasant but enigmatic and vague. Around them sat the rest of the Directorate: Dr. Secord, Dr. Filmore, Dr. Binet, and Dr. Holdren and they all looked expectantly at Nora to begin the meeting.

She cleared her throat. “I wish I had better news for all of you but I can only tell you the reality of what we are about to face.”

Her bottom teeth worried across her upper lip as she thought sifted through the overflowing mental file of all that she experienced and witnessed in the last few days.

“While I was imprisoned, Dr. Li managed to slip me some key intel about her work on Liberty Prime.” She fished out a warped and formerly waterlogged folded paper from her pocket. Dr. Li’s sharp, neat handwriting was clear despite the fact that the ink bled slightly from the water damage. While the paper held up remarkably well considering Nora’s hellish adventure, the bottom left part of the paper was smeared with Nate’s blood.

Nora swallowed her welling grief and set the paper on the table.

"Uh--this information--," her voice grew slightly hoarse as her throat constricted around the sobs that were pushing out of her chest. "

“-- I've got it Nora.” Dr. Binet gently offered and he slid the waterlogged and bloodstained paper towards him. “Madison and I worked together regularly and aside for her assistant, Rosalind, I have the most experience with Dr. Li’s work.”

Nora nodded and she cleared her throat once more. "Thank you." She murmured to the man.

Under the unforgiving fluorescent lights, the bloodstain on the paper looked fresh. Nora grimaced as the scent of Nate’s blood filtered back into her nostrils and she tucked her hands beneath her arms to protect them from the encroaching Commonwealth cold.

“… Nora?” Dr. Filmore asked. “Are you okay?”

“Hmm?” Eight pairs of eyes … well ten, including DiMA’s, watched her warily and she flushed from the sudden attention. “Uh. Yeah. Sorry. I just haven’t slept all that much recently.”

She shook her head and the smell and the chill disappeared and Nora was fully back in the
“Uh. As I was saying. The Brotherhood of Steel will likely march on us within a week, if not sooner. While on the Prydwen, I was interrogated by Elder Maxson and he seems convinced that me leading the Institute as its Director spells danger for the rest of the Commonwealth. Before we activated the reactor, the Institute wasn’t a threat to the Brotherhood, but now —“

“— now they want to cut off our literal and metaphorical heads before we get a chance to strike back.” Dr. Binet replied grimly.

“Exactly.” Nora agreed. “Even with the sabotage done on Liberty Prime, they will march on us with their entire force so we have to be ready for it. They have hundreds of fully trained soldiers at their command, while we have several dozen willing, able bodies ready to fight. The numbers aren’t looking good for us.”

“So are you saying that we’ve already lost?” Dr. Secord interrupted.

Nora leveled a somber gaze at the normally venomous woman. “I am saying that we need to consider the real likelihood that the Brotherhood will breach the Institute’s defenses even despite Dr. Li’s sabotage of Liberty Prime.”

Dr. Holdren spoke up, “We’ve been protected these walls for over a century. Surely the Brotherhood —“

Nora shook her head, “— The Brotherhood knows that all they need to do is dig a few dozens meters down outside the CIT ruins and they’ll bust into the Institute like they’re busting into an ant hill.”

Dr. Secord let out an impatient noise that sounded like a feline growl, “So what? We can’t just surrender! I don’t know about you, but I’m not one to give up so easily. The Institute is my home! I’d rather die than see it destroyed by a group of raiders.”

“I’m not saying we should give up,” Nora’s voice held a perceptible edge, ”but we also have to deal with the very real possibility that many people will die! To counteract that fact, I’m trying to save as many lives as I can but we need to be pragmatic about this. I’m no military tactician but I know people who are. If the Railroad can —“

“Oh here we go again!” Dr. Holdren drawled sarcastically. “Those toaster-lovers are nothing more than glorified terrorists! And we —“

“— And we need those glorified terrorists to give us a fighting chance at surviving this!” Nora snapped. Then she directed her question to Dr. Filmore, “How many people do we have currently living in the Institute?”

“At this moment, we have fifty-three scientists including their spouses and children, but I’m not sure on the exact number of synths without looking into some of the SRB’s files.”

“I have that information.” Dr. Binet offered and he sifted through a manila folder full of triplicate forms, spreadsheets, and charts full of alphanumeric code, “Including the Coursers who accepted reassignment, the Gen-2 janitorial and food production workers, and the Gen-3 laborers, we have 109 total active synths.”

“What about Gen-1s?” Nora asked.

Dr. Secord sighed and pulled out an equally thick manilla folder and read from packet of compiled
information: “Out in the Commonwealth we have maybe 300 units spread throughout Boston. I’d wager that 20% are either outside of our signal range now and are unreachable and another 15% have been destroyed by enemy fire, feral ghouls, or animal attacks.”

“What about the ones we have here?” Nora asked.

Dr. Secord shrugged, “We have as many as you’d like — five hundred units … maybe more. The director before Father spent most of his tenure building up our Gen-1 synth defenses. That’s partly what put us into a resource shortage as once we upgraded our units to Gen-2s, we had very little use for them other than as a literal skeletal crew for maintenance and recognizance.”

DiMA shifted in his seat, “May I offer my advice?” His voice was soft and almost melodious.

“Go ahead.” Nora replied.

“Like the rest on your council, I am doubtful about how helpful the Railroad can be. I don’t like that a group who claims they help synths persuade them to believe that their only option for their safety is to lose their entire identity and hide away from the world. While they may volunteer for the memory wipe, they pay for their freedom with their identity.”

“Well we need the Railroad’s help.” Nora stated firmly. "I'm not going to budge on that."

DiMA nodded. “By all means, let them fight with you. I simply ask that you consider an alternate plan for the synths who are residing in the Institute. We can't just release them into the Commonwealth unprepared and unprotected.”

Nora knew that DiMA was right. After all, that was the motivation behind having Synth Nate escort groups topside to meet with Railroad members. Nora was grateful for the work The Railroad had done; they had worked tirelessly securing safehouses all across the Commonwealth, but their work only amounted to five or six secure locations. That wouldn’t be enough to accommodate over 100 newly freed synths. They’d all need food, supplies, and weapons. They’d need to have jobs secured for them lest they turn raider like Gabriel.

“Then what do you propose?”

“Allow me to bring them back to Acadia. Granted that The Island is no less dangerous than the Commonwealth, but we’ve managed to carve out a section that is free of Fog and has arable land for farming, and suitable defenses. Acadia is a refuge and the synths who come with won’t have to hide or change their identity. They will be welcome for who and what they are.”

The consternation that DiMA’s request garnered from four-fifths of the Directorate was both profound and defining. Dr. Binet shot Nora a frustrated look which she returned with chagrin.

Nora stood up, brought her thumb and index finger to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle.

“Enough!” She commanded.

Much to her surprise, the entire group froze in mid-argument and looked at her. The annoyance and ire that bubbled in her guts would only add to this smoldering trash fire if she let any of it go. So she tapped into the stoic calmness and reserve that she had once seen her son use when the Directorate meeting had a similar reaction to appointing her his successor.

“I will not tolerate any more infighting. Disagreement is natural and I promise that I will hear your complaints, but if we stand any chance at fighting the Brotherhood then we need to stop tearing each other’s god damned throats!”
“I am not your enemy and please believe that I did not come here to create dissent among you all.” DiMA said softly. “But all of you are scientists, rational thinkers, can’t you see the value of independent synth life? You all have the opportunity to see how wondrous that can be. Don’t squander this opportunity that Nora is giving you. Take a chance to see how wondrous synth independence can be.”

“This is complete bullshit!” Dr. Secord seethed. “Synths are not people. You were created to be tools for humanity not an extension of it. I cannot sit idly by while you make a mockery of everything Father had created. I’m resigning effective immediately.”

Nora leveled a steely gaze at the blond-haired woman. “I will accept your resignation Alana and I’d be lying if I said that I was sorry to see you go. But you must understand that until this war resolves, you will not be permitted to leave the Institute. You are a security risk. You have intimate knowledge of how the Institute operates, and I can’t risk the fact that you could give this information to the Brotherhood to hurt us. I’m sorry.”

Dr. Secord’s enraged look paled when Nora spoke her command into her wrist communicator.

“Please escort Dr. Secord back to her private quarters. She is to be confined there until further notice.”

“Affirmative.” X6 said over the communicator although he wasn’t all that happy about it.

The former Courser came into the meeting room wearing a normal Institute uniform rather than Courser leathers and he still looked formidable and intimidating. Dr. Secord left without protest and the entire Directorate seemed to relax a bit.

Nora sank back into the chair. “Are there any other staffing changes that I should know about before we proceed?” She asked wearily.

Dr. Holdren shifted uncomfortably in his seat but said nothing while Dr. Binet and Dr. Filmore simply shook their heads.

“Good. Then let’s table this discussion until tomorrow morning.” Nora replied. “DiMA. I’ll consider your request and have an answer for you by then, if that’s alright with you.”

“Of course.” He replied.

“Thank you. Until then, you’re all dismissed.”

Nora waited until the other three scientists filtered out of the room before she stood up. DiMA followed her lead and followed her out of the meeting room.

She didn’t say anything until they reached her private quarters, but instead of going inside, she walked through the automatic doors that led to the shared balconies and fished a pack of cigarettes from her pocket.

Nora started smoking the night after Synth Nate had died. She found one of Hancock’s packs in the Starlight Drive In and she took them with her when she came back to the Institute. She could almost feel his silent approval as she gave into her vice once again. But with Nate gone, she didn’t have a good reason not to smoke anymore. And to hell with it all: smoking made her feel good. There were too few things in this world that she could say that about.

Nora pulled a cigarette from her pack, lit it with a flip lighter she had left on the balcony railing, and exhaled a stream of thin grey-white smoke.
“I’m sorry you had to see that.” Nora said quietly. “I wish that would’ve gone better.”

DiMA didn’t look at her. Instead he stared out at the Institute’s atrium and watched the workers and synths go about their duties.

“They are scared.” He said. “These scientists have never known what it’s like to be threatened before. They are not used to how fear feels.”

Nora scoffed and took another drag off her cigarette. “Lucky them.”

She felt DiMA’s eyes on her when she said that and she turned to meet his gaze. DiMA’s eyes were identical to Nick’s, and although his face was smoother and less weatherbeaten, Nora noticed that DiMA’s eyes held none of Nick’s warmth. His eyes looked truly mechanical and almost alien.

“You are afraid too.” He assessed.

“I’m always afraid.” She remarked and flicked her cigarette on the edge of a ceramic ashtray. “If you live in fear long enough, you get used to how it feels I guess. But it doesn’t stop the feeling from sitting in my brain like some parasite.”

“Are you afraid that you will die?” He asked softly.

Such a blunt and direct question threw Nora off.

“No.” She responded automatically. And then she actually considered what she was scared of them most.

Nora thought back to the Brotherhood vertibird they hijacked and the jubilant chaos of fighting. Running away from the Brotherhood as Synth Nate shot them out of the sky had been sort of fun in retrospect. Well…fun until they crashed in the lake. It was fun until the synth clone of her husband bled out in front of her and died on the shore. It was fun before she had to sneak her way through half the Commonwealth while an entire army’s worth of soldiers were hunting her down. The Commonwealth was a disturbing blend of macabre beauty and blood-curdling terror; she just wished that the consequences weren’t so dire.

She sighed and rested her lit cigarette in the ashtray. “No. I’m not scared of dying as much as I’m scared that something will happen to Nick. If he died…well…I just…I couldn’t…”

DiMA looked at her and Nora caught his gaze. He didn’t look surprised, in fact, he looked like he had been expecting that answer.

“He has the same fear about you too.”

“He does?”

DiMA nodded, “He said you’ve had a few close calls already. He told me about your close call with a deathclaw and about being stabbed with a poisoned blade by a madman.”

Nora felt slightly irritated but she couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. What right did Nick have to go and blab personal things about her to a complete stranger? That move sounded more like something Piper would do.”

“Well did he also tell you I tried to kill myself…twice actually?” She spat.

“He did not.” DiMA said in an even tone.
Nora’s ire tempered a little at that and her irritation cooled to become uncomfortable shame. “Yeah, well…” She swallowed thickly. “I couldn’t handle being here. Before I took over, this place was different — it was like a prison — and I fight the Directorate at every meeting to keep it from becoming that again. That blowup back there was nothing. I’ve seen worse. Hell, I’ve done worse. I wanted to wring that stupid bitch’s neck but I promised myself that I’d be different than Father.”

DiMA sighed regretfully, stood next to Nora, and looked down at the people and synths below. “How did they hurt you?”

Nora’s voice caught in her throat. Dammit, she thought. Her voice became hollow when she spoke, “How didn’t they? Father manipulated me. He imprisoned me here and made me work as one of their Coursers. I have this scar from the cybernetics they drilled into my skull so they could control me and keep tabs on me. He threatened to kill my loved ones if I disobeyed. Then Dr. Secord’s boss, the old leader of the SRB, he … raped me —” she swallowed the words down like they were bitter poison “— and Father took his side. A young man who used to live here helped me escape but I didn’t think I was worth anything anymore. They damaged me; Hell, they damn near broke me, and I thought that Nick deserved better.”

“Who is ‘He’?”

“My son.” Nora said.

She looked at the holographic gravestone that sat in the center of the atrium. The iridescent Vitruvian Man was the only image inscribed there. No name, no birth or death date; Shaun’s legacy was boiled down to one thing: The Institute.

“And you still feel like you can redeem them?” DiMA surmised.

“…Yes.” Nora replied in shock. “How did you—“

DiMA smirked, “That much Nick did tell me. But he also told me that you and him argued over this issue.”

“Nick doesn’t think the Institute deserves to be protected after everything they’ve done to humans and synths.”

“And you do?”

Nora’s gaze fell on Dr. Binet and Eve as they walked through the atrium on their way to dinner. She thought back to how Dr. Binet believed his son’s exile was a guaranteed death sentence and how relieved he was to learn that Liam hadn’t only survived, but he thrived in the Commonwealth, and she spoke from her heart.

“I think there are people here who are misguided and have been taught to fear the Commonwealth because they know no other life outside of the Institute. Most of these scientists aren’t bad people; they’ve worked under a bad leader…or several bad leaders. I want to at least give them a chance to do good. There are so many people struggling and dying in the Commonwealth; starvation, disease, and raider attacks happen all of the time. The Institute has the means to help others. The only way to atone for their past sins is to help out in any way they can.”

DiMA was quiet for a solid minute but when he spoke, Nora heard a thin wisp of doubt in his voice.

“I created Acadia to be a refuge for synths, a place where they could come and be accepted as who and what they are. The citizens of Far Harbor reacted … poorly to our existence and despite Nick’s
assistance, it’s been a struggle maintaining the peace. Violence against synths is a common occurrence and it’s gotten to the point where Acadia’s had to close its doors against the outside world. Don’t mistake this as doubt Nora — what you are trying to do is admirable — but this type of peace and coexistence is counter to human nature.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t at least try.” Nora replied.

That made DiMA smile. “I can see why Nick likes you.”

Another person cleared his throat and a smokey baritone spoke, “Hey now DiMA. ‘Like’ is a bit of an understatement, don’t you think.”

Nora spun around to face the doorway and there Nick Valentine stood, tan trench coat, dirty fedora, cigarette, and all. A whirlpool of emotions sent Nora’s mind spinning. Nick was back! He came back to the Institute of all places. But how? Why?

DiMA nodded. “I suppose you’re right, brother. I’m still struggling with the abstract concepts behind the word ‘love.’”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Faraday can explain it to you if you ask.” Nick replied and he shot Nora a conspiratory grin which was lost on her. “But now, If you don’t mind, I’d like a word in private with Nora.”

“I will be here for twelve more hours, Director. Should you wish to speak with me, I’ll be in Dr. Binet’s laboratory. I will await your decision on what I requested earlier.”

He offered Nora his hand and she took it.

“Thank you. DiMA. I’m glad to have met you.” Nora replied.

Once DiMA was gone, Nora felt the panic, jubilation, and fear rise up to her throat.

“Nick.” She choked out. “W-what are you doing here?”

The synth’s neutral expression darkened slightly at her question but he didn’t take her eyes off her. “I’m here to bury the proverbial hatched, doll. I messed up.”

“Nick, you don’t—“

His sigh cut her off, “— Dammit Nora. I hate being mad at you. When I traveled to Acadia looking for DiMA, all I could ever think about was you. I had no idea if you were alive or how you were doing with all this shit, and when I got back —“

“— Nick, wait —“

“— I found out from Hancock that you had been kidnapped by the Brotherhood that you and Deacon crashed a vertibird, and —“

“— Nick! Please!” Nora pleaded but he shook his head.

“I should’ve been there for you Nora!” He yelled. “Goddamn it! I left you to do this alone like a goddamn coward and—“

Nora grabbed Nick’s hand and dragged him back into her sleeping quarters less the entire fucking Institute hear their private affairs.

“You don’t need to support the Institute Nick!” She urged. “It was wrong of me to ask that of you. I
“— I don’t support them Nora, I support you.” His voice crackled a little when he said it and the anguish on his face was palpable. “I love you Nora. I’m so damn sorry I left. I was a damn fool.”

And like that, whatever tension and resentment that had been building between them was broken. Nora’s shoulders slumped a little as a significant weight lifted from her chest. She let out a shuddering breath and slipped beneath his arms and held onto him.

She placed her hand and Nick’s warm chest and felt his steady heartbeat beneath her palm. Nick was alive and he was here. That’s all that mattered.

“I love you too Nick.”

He cupped her cheek and bent down and kissed her. She caught the slight scent of the ocean air on his cracked grey skin and his lips tasted like salt and sweet cloves. Her hand slid down from his chest to encircle around his waist and she pulled him against herself. He let out a low sigh at the physical contact which only ignited the desire for physical contact that Nora had suppressed in lieu of more practical and pressing matters.

“Doll…” Nick groaned as her fingers skillfully pulled the bottom of his dress shirt out from his slacks.

The coquettish look she gave him made his internal temperature climb a couple of degrees. God he missed that look.

“I don’t have any more meetings for tonight. I’m all yours if you want.” She purred.

The heat behind those words and the sheer desire that crackled through Nick’s body killed whatever witty response he had thought. All he could do was nod.

Nora walked over to a wall panel, punched in a four digit number and said, “Please set my room to secure. I do not want to be disturbed for the rest of the night.”

“Of course, Mother.” A deep bass voice responded. The green light above the panel turned red and Nora looked back at Nick.

The synth already took notice of the fact that she was limping slightly and she had contusions, several bruises, and had lost weight again.

“Doll, what happened since I was gone?” He asked.

She sighed, walked over to the desk and fished out another cigarette, and met Nick in the middle of the room. He had his lighter out before Nora could even ask and he lit her cigarette. She took a long drag off the filter and blew the smoke out through her nose and mouth.

“Do you want the whole story or the cliffs notes version?” She said.

“The whole story if you’re up to it.” He said.

Nora nodded and guided them to the couch. Nora leaned back and kicked her feet up and rested her legs across Nick’s lap and she told him the entire story. He listened patiently and pulled Nora to his chest as she recounted Synth Nate’s death. The fact that the Brotherhood had the gall to kidnap and imprison Nora was enough to make his circuits crackle with rage. But Synth Nate’s death all the more tragic because his existence — like DiMA’s and like Nick’s — was because of
unrestrained scientific progress. Synth Nate never had a chance to be anyone except the mere shadow of a dead man, yet that didn’t mean Nora mourned him any less intensely than she had her late husband.

They spent nearly two hours wrapped up in each other fully clothed but far more intimate than the had been in a long time. After a while, Nora’s heart thumped softly and steadily to indicate that she had fallen asleep. Nick set the half-filled ashtray on the end table and gingerly scooped Nora up in his arms. He carried her over to the bed but noticed that the pillows and blankets were spread out on the floor. A thick pad made out of pliable foam acted like a makeshift bedroll, but he didn’t understand why Nora was sleeping on the floor when a perfectly good bed was a mere ten feet away.

“I get nightmares.” Sleep slurred her voice. “I can’t sleep alone in a bed anymore. Sleeping on the floor makes me feel more safe. ’S weird. I don’ understand it.”

“It’s okay, doll.” He murmured as he kicked back the covers and set her on the inch thick mat. “You’re safe with me.”

“I always am.” She murmured as sleep took her once again.

Nick kicked off his shoes, undid his tie, slid his suspenders off his shoulders before settling in behind Nora’s back.

He gently brushed back her brown hair and kissed the pink scar that ran from her temple to behind her ear.

“I love you Nora.” He whispered. She grunted her affirmative response but didn’t wake up. Nick draped his arm over her waist and slipped his other beneath the pillow she was using and just held her.

This woman had been burned and abused in all manner of ways and by all manner of people and could still see the good in a group most considered irredeemable. He had met all manner of people ever since DiMA had rescued him from the Institute a century and a half ago, and in all that time, he had never met a person as driven, courageous, and compassionate as Nora.

Nora was a kind of woman that came along once in a lifetime. Pre-War Nick Valentine had Jenny but he, the synth Nick Valentine, had found Nora.

And Nora was the type of girl he could see himself marrying some day.
Chapter Notes

It was fun to show off a rougher side of Hancock. Of all the companions (besides maybe Cait and Strong), he's the one I'd least want to cross.

And enjoy some 'calm before the storm' Nick and Nora fluff and minor smut.

Chapter 17 — Don’t Change For Me

“Danse?”

“Yes Haylen?” He replied wearily.

“I think I hear someone coming.”

Sure enough, a pair of heavy footsteps crossed overhead making the ancient boards above them groan and squeak in protest. The footsteps descended the ancient spiral staircase at the opposite end of the hallway and they both jumped to their feet.

Danse slipped a rusted nail into his pocket that he pulled out of a rotted piece of wood. The metal was about two and a half inches long, and now that he had filed it down to a sharp point, he could use it as an improvised weapon. And that’s precisely what he planned to do if given the opportunity.

Mayor Hancock stepped off the stairs with MacCready close behind. The sniper’s eyes were constantly moving, ready to sense danger. Although a bit malnourished and weak-looking, his clear skill with a gun and his unwavering focus would’ve been an asset had he been a Brotherhood soldier.

“Mayor!” A pitiful voice cried out. “C’mon man, let me out. I shouldn’t have stolen from you, alright? I didn’t even know those chems were yours! Honest I didn’t! I wasn’t gonna use them. I just needed the money to pay off my debts at the Combat Zone.”

Haylen expected the terrifying ghoul to shoot down the guy’s excuses … or rather … literally shoot the guy, but instead the ghoul took a large ring of keys off a nearby hook and unlocked the cell door.

“Get outta here Jimmy.” The ghoul growled. “And don’t let me catch you stealing from me again. Cuz next time I won’t be as nice.”

“Oh thank you! Thank you! You won’t regret this Hancock! I swear I ain’t gonna cross you again.” The urchin extolled.

“Here.” The ghoul growled. He handed the thief a tin box of caps and then stared him down. “This is a loan, ya feel me? When I find ya again I want this paid back in full. This will be enough to get Tommy off yer back. He treats his debtors far worse than I do. Remember that.”

“Yes! I will Mayor Hancock. Thank you!”
The man emphatically shook the ghoul’s hand and then nearly tripped over his own feet to get up the stairs. Thinking that the ghoul would’ve just gone back upstairs, Haylen settled back against the cell wall in defeated exhaustion, but then he looked at her. His onyx eyes bore into hers and like a prey animal caught in a trap, she couldn’t escape his gaze.

Mayor Hancock smirked and then sauntered down the corridor towards their cell. Danse made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat and then took a step in front of Haylen.

“At ease soldier,” The ghoul rasped, “I’m here to talk to the lady.”

“Yeah well the ‘the lady’ is telling you to go fuck yourself.” Haylen spat.

The ghoul’s eyes seemed to take on a whole new luster which made his stark, ravaged features look even more inhuman in the low light.

He cackled, “Sister, you’ve got fire and I like that but you better watch your tongue. Other people won’t be as kind to you as I’m going to be.”

“Oh you’re so kind.” She drawled, her voice thick with sarcasm. “I feel like we’re already BFFs.”

His dark eyes glinted and his reply was colored with clear heat in his tone, “Oh sister, I treat my friends real well. If you come upstairs and give me a few hours of your time, I’ll help you see several things from all new perspectives.”


“Haylen…” Danse’s voice held a clear warning.

Hancock turned to Danse and rested his ruined hand on his flag belt and defiantly cocked his hip out. He pulled out a jet canister, took a long huff off of it, and leaned in towards the bars and exhaled the slightly green vapor into Danse’s face. Hancock grinned when the larger man sputtered and coughed.

“And what about you, crew cut?” The ghoul rasped, “I ain’t picky with my friends. I like the strong, silent types just as much as the spitfires. Wanna come up to my office so we can have us a little talk?”

“No.” Danse growled.

“That’s too bad.” Hancock drawled in a tone that said he really didn’t give a fuck either way.

“Dammit! Just let us go!” Haylen pleaded. “We’ll get out of your town. We won’t say anything to anyone. You can’t just leave us locked up here. We didn’t do anything wrong!”

Hancock leveled a hard gaze at Haylen. “I detained you both because I got a reputation to uphold, ya feel me? If I just let two Brotherhood tin cans walk around my town without at least reading you the riot act first, the rest of my citizens would all try to take their ounce of flesh for all of the shit you Brotherhood types have done to us ghouls since arriving here. Sticking you down here was doing you a favor.”

“A favor? Really?” Haylen asked incredulously. “So you were just doing this out of the kindness of your rotten little heart?”

Hancock smiled. It was the kind of smile that skeletons wore: perversely joyful and yet somehow merciless. “Oh no sunshine. See, when you kidnapped Nora you made an enemy of me. But
because she’s alive, despite your guys shooting her out of the fucking sky, I ain’t gonna kill you… yet. But I also ain’t gonna let you go free either. Not until you answer some questions for me first.”

“Who the hell is Nora?” Danse asked.


A wave of realization washed over both of them. The Vault Dweller and this ghoul were allies? Which meant that this ghoul was somehow connected to The Institute. Which meant that Haylen and Danse were in way more trouble than they thought.

Hancock growled and huffed impatiently, “C’mon Mac. Let’s see if a little more time freezing their asses off down here will loosen their tongues.”

The sniper and the ghoul walked back towards the staircase but Haylen yelled out, “Hey zombie!”

The ghoul mayor stopped and growled, “I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that, sister, and I’m gonna walk away.”

“What are you doing?” Danse hissed but she ignored him.

“You heard me!” She yelled. “Since when did the Institute start recruiting ghouls? Do the people here really hate the Brotherhood as much as you claim? It seems to me like are you just trying to protect your own interests. I heard about the coup that happened here a few weeks ago. Did the town finally realize that their Mayor is secretly the Institute’s bitch?”

That made Hancock turn around. Pure fury and animalistic rage contorted his body into something truly ghoulish. Haylen knew she should’ve stopped but after the things she had just been through, she had a lot of anger to unleash and she just let all her pain flow out in a vitriolic rant.

“Were you a science project gone wrong?” Haylen needled. “Is that why you look different from the rest of the ghoul’s I’ve seen? God, I hope there’s not a synth copy of you somewhere out there. Dealing with one pompous, egomaniacal Mayor is already too much for me.”

“Haylen.” Danse said sharply. “Enough!”

Hancock walked up to the cell, grabbed Haylen by her Brotherhood uniform, and pulled her forward so her face was pressed uncomfortably between the jail bars. “You’ve said more than enough for one day. It’s time you know just who you’re fucking talking to.”

The ghoul gestured at Danse with a nod of his head. “Watch him.”

“Right boss.” MacCready replied and he leveled his rifle at Danse.

Hancock dragged Haylen to the cell door, unlocked it, stepped inside. His rough and mottled hand closed painfully around Haylen’s bicep and while he went to grab something from his coat, she jerked out of his grasp.

“Don’t you fucking touch me!” She snarled.

Just then, Danse struck out like a viper and jabbed the sharpened nail right beneath Hancock’s left armpit. He angled his strike downward so it would slip between the ghoul’s ribs and puncture a lung. Or that would’ve been the plan had MacCready’s gun not gone off and shot Danse through both calf muscles. He fell to his knees as though a battering ram had taken both of his legs out
from beneath him and Hancock caught his thick wrist and twisted ever so slightly that something popped and he dropped the weapon.

“You son of a bitch!” Haylen snarled and she launched herself at the ghoul.

Hancock caught her around the waist and maneuvered her against the stone wall like it was a well-rehearsed dance. His hand closed around her throat in a firm hold. He could easily crush her throat just like he had done to that bitch Bobbi No-Nose, but instead he growled at MacCready.

“Get in here and watch her kid.”

The sniper holstered his rifle so he could maneuver in the small cell and pulled out an impressive pistol. He grabbed Haylen and wrapped a thin, wiry arm around her neck and placed his gun against her head.

Once Hancock was satisfied that she was properly subdued, he snatched the nail from the dirt and held it up to a dim light bulb. “Impressive. Must’ve taken you a few hours to file this down so precisely. And you’re fast for a big guy…but you’re never gonna be faster than Mac, brother.”

He walked behind Danse rolling the nail between his ruined fingers. “See I’ve been in my fair share of jail cells and the key to using a shiv — “ He grabbed Danse by his hair and hauled him up onto his knees, “— is to do it in a way that keeps you in control.”

Hancock snarled like a beast as he pressed the nail up against Danse’s thick neck. A thin rivulet of blood flowed from the small wound as Danse’s Adams apple bobbed in his throat.

“NO!” Haylen screamed.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t give your boyfriend here a new windpipe.” Hancock snarled at Haylen.

“It’s not his fault. I was the one who insulted you, not him.” She said quickly. “If you leave Danse alone, I’ll do whatever you want. I won’t fight back. I’ll…have sex with you if that’s what you want.”

“H-Haylen…NO!” Danse choked out behind gritted teeth. “Don’t debase yourself t-to protect… me.”

Hancock looked at Danse with complete abhorrence, growled in disgust, and threw him aside.

“Follow me, sister.” Hancock commanded. “Let her go Mac.”

The sniper did as he was ordered and pushed Haylen towards Hancock with such force that she would’ve crashed into him had her knees not given way beneath her.

“W-what?”

The ghoul leveled a venomous gaze at her. “You told me I could do what I want to you, and I want you to follow me. I asked you nicely before, and now this is me not being so damn nice.”

Haylen struggled to her feet. Danse pressed his hands to the gunshot wounds and pleaded, “Dammit … don’t…Haylen.”

“You’re a fucking monster.” She spat at Hancock as she walked out of the cell. MacCready followed her wordlessly and kept his weapon trained at her head.
“Bring her up to my office and lock her in there.” Hancock ordered. “Then send Reno down to watch this one so he doesn’t do any other stupid shit.”

“Got it boss.” MacCready replied.

Hancock looked at Danse. This beast of a man looked defeated. His dark eyes were hollow and showed no signs of life. He looked like a beaten dog or like a starving kid trying to eek out a living in the Boston ruins, and the ghoul mayor actually felt sorry for him.

“God motherfucking dammit.” He grumbled in annoyance.

He fished through his voluminous coat pockets and tossed the man two stimpaks and a syringe of Med-X.

“The bullet passed through both of the muscles so you won’t need to go digging for it.” He growled. “Patch yourself up so you don’t bleed out in my cell. And you best tend to your wounds soon, this cell ain’t the cleanest place around and I’d be all heart broken if you died of blood poisoning or some shit.”

Danse looked at the aid and met the ghoul’s eyes. There was so much emotion swirling beneath his stoic exterior that it was a wonder the soldier didn’t self-destruct.

“Don’t…hurt Haylen. Please.” Danse groaned, half-blinded by pain. “She’s young and impulsive. She shouldn’t have run her mouth like that but…”

He swallowed and Hancock already knew what the man was trying to say. There was a subtext in Danse’s unspoken question. Hancock was many things, but he absolutely wasn’t a rapist.

“Relax crew cut. I ain’t gonna hurt her. I get it. I’m a disgusting ghoul and you think I’m gonna corrupt your girl’s purity because I’m some fucking beast, but believe it or not, I respect a woman’s boundaries. We’re just gonna have a talk. If she ain’t ready to play ball, then I’m sending her back down here to freeze her ass off right along with you. But if you tell me what I need to know, you both can go free. Easy and breezy.”

“What do you need to know?” Danse whispered.

“For starters, what would be the best way to ground the Brotherhood’s fancy airship. It’s a giant blimp so my caps are on an explosion some kind…”

Danse blanched. He looked like he was about to be sick but he pushed it down. “We aren’t gonna tell you anything about the Prydwen. I’d rather die than help you kill the only family I’ve ever known.”

A smaller ghoul came up to Hancock. Although shorter and stockier than the mayor, he held a combat rifle with confidence and Danse knew that he had no other choice than to endure continued capture and wait for Haylen to be brought back.

“Anything I should know about the prisoner, mayor?” The smaller ghoul rasped.

Hancock grinned. “He should be pretty subdued now. Just make sure he doesn’t try to kill himself in my cell. I need him alive.”

“Yes sir.”

Danse clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw ached. A raw, burning pain radiated up both his legs and he needed to apply the stimpaks soon. Hurry up and wait, he thought grimly to himself as he
tore at his pants leg to get to the bullet wound.

Hurry up and fucking wait.

Nora awoke disoriented and confused in the dark. She reached back for Nick but felt nothing but air. Oh God! Nick was gone? She rolled over and felt around the bedroll blindly but came up empty.

“Nick?” She called out.

She tried to calm herself. Nick was probably fine. He was probably with DiMA. But the asshole voice in her head whispered lies to her. Maybe he was getting back at her for leaving him in much the same fashion back at Sanctuary Hills. Maybe he wasn’t even here and she was going insane. Maybe Dr. Secord hurt him to get back at her. Maybe he was dead.

Nora’s thoughts spun uncontrollably but she still needed to do something, so she flicked on the table lamp and pulled herself to her feet. She shook the fatigue and grogginess from her head and went to the communication panel on the wall. Just as she was about to contact Dr. Binet as that would’ve been the most likely place for Nick to go, both of them walked into her living quarters as though summoned.

“I’m sorry for the intrusion Nora.” Dr. Binet said. “I was escorting Nick back. He and DiMA had more questions about their respective beginnings; our conversation went long and we lost track of time.”

She let out an audible sigh of relief.

“You were sleeping and I didn’t want to wake you.” Nick said apologetically. “You need your rest.”

God she was being stupid. Nick was his own man. He could go where he pleased. Anyone in the Institute would have to answer to her if they even laid a finger on him. She didn’t know why she was being so paranoid.

“It’s fine.” She smiled. Fatigue settled back in her mind now that the panic had left. “Thank you for watching out for him, Dr. Binet.”

“My pleasure.” He inclined his head to both of them in respect. “Goodnight.”

When the door closed, Nora allowed herself to relax a little more. “God Nick. I don’t know why I’m so keyed up right now.”

“Sit with me and have a drink, doll.” Nick said. “When was the last time you just took time out for yourself.”

She snorted, “Well… I woke up in a hellish post-apocalyptic world, nearly died several times, and now I’m planning a war where nobody wants to get along long enough to fight the enemy. So I’d say it’s been a while.”

“Then let’s fix that.” He replied.

Nora plopped down onto the couch and leaned up against Nick’s side. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small silver flask and passed it to her.
“What’s this?”

“A local specialty from a little bar in Far Harbor. DiMA had me look in on a couple of things and I kept getting pulled back into town. The bar keep was one of the few people who didn’t hate me on account of what I am. I ended up clearing him of an attempted rape charge which saved him from being executed and he repaid me with some of his specialty spiced tarberry wine.”

Nora unscrewed the cap and took a drink. The wine was a little tart and sour but had a sweet finish.

“Are people always paying you with alcohol?” She gently teased. “It’s a wonder that you aren’t evicted from your agency. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get paid for your services.”

“You paid me.” Nick pointed out.

“No, actually I didn’t. I tried to pay you but you wouldn’t accept my money.”

“I don’t do this job for the money.” He replied. “And it didn’t seem right asking for money from the town. They have it bad up there. What with the radioactive fog, the mutated amphibious life, the half-insane raiders, the Children of the Atom, and the wolves, it’s a wonder anyone can successfully live on the island.”

“Somehow DiMA does.” Nora pointed out.

Nick nodded, “Yes. Acadia is … unique. It’s no Diamond City but it’s safe and comfortable. Chase and Faraday run a tight ship but they both genuinely care about those who find themselves needing a place to lie low and recuperate.”

“But…”

Nick sighed, “But DiMA believes Acadia should be a refuge for synths and synths alone. He believes that Gen-3 synths shouldn’t try to assimilate into the Commonwealth, at least not if they have to pretend to be human, and he wants Acadia to be some utopian place where synths don’t have to hide what they are.”

“And you don’t agree?” Nora asked.

Nick shrugged, “This whole segregation thing might protect synths in the short-term, but hiding away from the world because we are different is proving to everyone else that being something other than human is shameful. I’d rather deal with the uncomfortable xenophobic moments in Diamond City than hide away in some colony because of what I am.”

Nora nodded. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of about being what you are.”

“I know that, doll.” He replied quickly and then he sighed. “But…look…uh…can I ask your advice on something?”

She sat up and turned to look at Nick. His expression looked thoughtful but the polymer over his eyes furrowed which gave him a grave look.

“Of course Nick.”

“So…Dr. Binet and DiMA have been talking through whether either of could upgrade to a Gen-3 body if we wanted to. Dr. Binet said it would be impossible for DiMA as his mind, his consciousness, is completely organic and is constantly developing and learning. Replicating that
type of advanced consciousness into a Gen-3’s body is impossible. But my mind, my personality hasn’t changed all that much in the past century and a half. If Dr. Binet could scan my current memories, he could hypothetically upload my mind into a Gen-3 body.”

Nora sat up and looked at the synth. “What are you saying Nick?”

He held up his skeletal hand and flexed the digits in front of Nora’s face. “Doll, although I don’t agree with DiMA’s desire to segregate synths, I can’t help but wonder how things would be different, maybe even better, if I retired this old body of mine. My hand, for example, gives me nothing but trouble. It’s hard to maintain and clean, it doesn’t have any feeling or sensation to temperature or pressure, and it’s unsettling on a good day and downright freaky on other days. Parts scavenged from other Gen-2 synths are not compatible with my body, yet Gen-3 synths are too advanced to be of any use to me either.”

Nick sighed and gently took Nora’s hand into his skeletal one. “And that’s not to mention the holes in my neck and my — ahem — lack of some key components. Who knows what else is wrong with my internal components. I just…this body wasn’t meant to last as long as it has. I’ve needed repairs and upgrades on a fair amount of my drives, internal mechanisms, and diagnostic software capabilities, but Dr. Amari lacks the mechanical know-how to do much with my internal components. She’s a fantastic brain doc, but she’s not a robotic engineer. At least not someone who is as knowledgeable as Dr. Binet.”

He cleared his throat and then added, “I think these changes would help me see myself as less of a machine and more as a human. It’s something I realized since I met DiMA. He knows that he is an advanced machine with a brilliant mind and an organic personality, and he’s okay being seen as other or alien. But I see myself as human — or as close to human as I possibly can — and I’d like to take some steps to help the outside match how I see myself on the inside.”

Nora blinked a few times as she processed everything that Nick had said. “Nick — wow, this is uh — wow.”

“Mind you, this isn’t going to happen any time soon but I just wanted to pick your brain and hear what you thought.” Nick replied.

Nora leaned back against Nick and brought his skeletal hand up to her lips. She kissed his rusted knuckles and reassuringly squeezed his intact hand.

“I love the person you are, not how you look. If doing this will make you happy, then I’m all for it. But I want you to do this because it’s something you want, not because you think you need to change for me.”

He smiled and then nodded. “Thanks, doll.”

Nick wrapped both of his arms around Nora, and he gently pulled her against him so she could sit between his splayed legs. Then he placed a gentle, chaste kiss on her shoulder. She took another drink of the tarberry wine and sighed contentedly. They sat in silence for a long while, long enough for Nora to have finished the wine and passed the empty flask back to Nick. There wasn’t enough wine to get her drunk, but the potent homemade brew pulled pleasant flush to her cheeks.

While the alcohol was a welcome distraction, it did relax her guard just enough for one of her more nagging fears to fight its way to the surface.

“Nick…can I ask you something?”
“Of course, doll.” He murmured.

“I — uh. I don’t exactly know how to ask this and I feel foolish for worrying so much but…” Nora swallowed and grabbed Nick’s arms and wrapped them around her like a security blanket. “Would you consider going back to Far Harbor with DiMA? At least until after this whole conflict with The Brotherhood is over?”

Nick chortled, “No doll. I’ll be right by your side until the bitter end.”

Nora turned to him. “See, that’s what I’m afraid of Nick. I — I’ve lost so much already. I can’t lose you too.”

The synth sighed and wrapped Nora up in a hug. He kissed her temple and then her cheek and finally lips. “I’m not going anywhere.” He said firmly.

Nora buried her face in his chest and squeezed her eyes together so tightly to suppress her tears that she was starting to get a headache.

“Hey.” Nick whispered and he pulled her off him and cupped her cheek in his polymer hand. “You don’t have to worry about me Nora. I’ve survived a century and a half in this world. I’ve been in more gunfights than I can count. I’ve been shot, stabbed, thrown off a three-story building, and mauled, and yet I’m still here.”

“Wait…you were mauled?”

Nick gestured to the tears in his neck. “A client of mine disappeared and I tracked him down. Found the poor bastard torn limb from limb right outside a yao guai den. Unfortunately for me, momma bear was still home and she wasn’t too happy to see me there. Arturo found me while he was out scavenging the ruins and patched me up as best he could but my neck was torn up pretty good.”

“What I’m getting at Nora is I’m not gonna run away from this fight just because it is dangerous. I’m by your side. Always.”

Nora nodded once. Thin tears slid down her cheeks and she bit the inside of her lip to stop herself from totally breaking down. Truthfully, she expected Nick’s answer but that didn’t remove the core of what bothered her. Synth Nate’s death marked the second time that Mama Murphy’s prophecy had come true. Of the three who love you, one will forget you, one will cease to exist, and one will perish with your name last on his lips.

Synth Nate’s last words echoed in her head: I love you Nora. Me. Not Him. His last words solidified that although he was a clone of her late husband, Synth Nate was his own person. Just like Nick. And that person died in her arms on that cold and rocky shoreline with Nora’s name one of the last things he ever said.

Nora looked at Nick. His golden eyes glowed with vitality and life. His thin lips pursed in concern and he opened his mouth to say something but must’ve thought better of it. He watched her just as intently and they sat together, entwined together, like one complete unit. Nick’s resolve bolstered Nora’s strength and guided her through the depressive thoughts that weighed her down. Likewise, Nora’s love and unconditional acceptance pushed Nick past his own insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. Nora needed Nick just like he needed her.

“Doll —“

“— Don’t upgrade to a Gen-3 body.”
“What?”

Nora closed her eyes and she shook her head. God she was being foolish and selfish, but she knew no other way to avoid her worst fear.

“I’m sorry Nick. I just — uploading your mind into a Gen-3 synth is a big risk isn’t it? It took several attempts to get Pre-War Nick’s personality to stick. Who’s to say that the process will even work? I can’t lose you Nick. I can talk to someone in Advanced Systems or Robotics and see if they can patch up your hand and your neck with material that we have scavenged. Hell, I’ll see if I can find you a strap-on dildo if you want a penis so badly…but don’t change because you think it’s what I want.”

Nick frowned. “Doll, am I correct in assuming this sudden change-of-heart is because of the prophecy? Is that what’s been eating at you? You think I’ll cease to exist?”

Nora flushed. Now she felt like a childish schoolgirl who was putting too much stock into horoscopes and tarot card readings.

“Look I know it’s stupid, but it came true with Hancock and Nate, and I can’t take the chance that something bad would happen to you, even if you’re changing for the right reasons. I stand by what I said. I love you Nick Valentine. I love your rough edges and your defects and the fact that you smoke like a chimney. But please…at least for now, stay exactly the way you are. You are perfect.”

“Nora…” Nick sighed. “God — I — uh. I don’t know what to say.”

Nora cupped his tattered cheek. “Don’t say anything Nick. Just kiss me. Please. I haven’t seen you in weeks. Help me forget all of this other shit. I only need you.”

Nick’s lips were on hers milliseconds after she finished talking. He groaned and his hot breath tickled her nose. His tongue ran over hers dominant and self-assured as he cupped her face in his hands like she was the most precious yet fragile thing in the world. Nora’s head spun and she held onto Nick’s back melting against him like some dime-store novel dame. He broke off their kiss just long enough for Nora to take a breath before he took her again and picked her up. She wrapped her strong legs around his slim waist but it didn’t matter; Nick let go of her face and cupped her ass and held her against him.

“P—please Nick.” she groaned against his lips. “I need you.”

“You’ve got me, doll.” He growled and set Nora on the bed. “Now lay back and let me take care of you.”

He parted Nora’s legs and slipped in between them with a gracefulness and self-assuredness that made Nora tremble in anticipation. They were both still fully clothed which added to the urgency of their mutual needs. Nora grabbed the hem of the Institute tunic she wore to pull it off but Nick shook his head.

“The top stay on, doll.” He commanded. “The pants can go otherwise this will be a little more tricky.”

Nora cocked an eyebrow at him but obeyed and shirked off her underwear and scrub-like pants and tossed them onto the floor with Nick’s trench coat. She noticed that he was wearing a light grey and white pinstripe button-down shirt instead of his customary off-white business-formal affair. His dark blue suspenders were new and they accentuated the gold of Nick’s eyes.
“You go shopping at the Far Harbor mall while you were away?” She teased and ran her finger down his chest in appreciation.

“Figured that after ten years of wearing the same old thing, I could use a wardrobe update. You know…clothes make the man and all that.” His low voice sounded slightly tight and airy.

“That they do,” Nora purred. “I like it. Especially these.” She fingered the elastic on the suspenders and playfully snapped them against his chest. “It’s a shame they’re coming off.”

“Oh they’re not coming off, doll. Tonight is all about you.”

“Then why do you want me to keep my shirt on?” She grumbled half-heartedly.

Nick crawled up her body like a predatory cat. “The shirt stays on because I’ve always had a thing for a woman in uniform, and because” — He settled his body over hers so his clothed pelvis was flush against Nora’s bare vulva. “— I get a thrill out of the fact that I have the Institute Director completely and utterly at my mercy.”

Nora’s breath hitched. She shuddered and her hips ground against Nick’s. The friction was nice but she desperately wanted to glide across his smooth, bare sex.

“Please…” She begged. “Don’t tease me.”

Nick’s smile turned positively vulpine. “Oh Nora…that’s all I have planned for you. Dr. Binet informed me that you have a 9 A.M. Directorate meeting to finalize the battle plans. That gives me six hours to have you all to myself.”

“You must have quite the stamina.” She teased.

“Synths typically do, doll. Care to find out just how much?”

Nora grabbed him by the suspenders and pulled him against her. She kissed him hungrily and hooked her foot behind his hips to keep him still.

“I think I’m up for the challenge.”

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