The Ceremony of Innocence
by ItinerantPedant

Summary

Nora turns at long last to getting into the Institute, by any means necessary, and rescuing her missing son. And if she can survive what comes next, the Commonwealth will never be the same.
Nora and Piper had barely had more than a few days to settle into their new routine…Piper writing articles, Nora contributing recipes, and mothering Nat so thoroughly that the fourteen year old was beginning to visibly chafe…basic domestic bliss, in other words; when reality intruded in the form of a visit from Deacon.

Piper opened the door at his knock, and as soon as she saw him, her face fell.

“Wow, way to make me feel welcome,” he said.

Piper shook her head.

“It’s not that I don’t like you, Deacon, it’s just…”

Deacon finished, “…Me being here means the honeymoon is literally over. I’m sorry. You-know-who has a mission for us.”

Piper blew air out, and then called Nora.

Nora was walking up, already strapping her shoulder holster on. “I heard, Thing. No rest for the wicked, huh?”

Deacon shook his head, “If it was just garden variety urgent, I wouldn’t be here. There’s some kind of lead on the fallout from Augusta.”

At that name, Nora’s lips thinned, and she picked up her Type 79 rifle. Piper gave Nora a look, but didn’t say anything. Her wife’s PTSD wasn’t exactly in abatement, but in the last month, since the Castle, the abrupt mood swings had moderated quite a bit. She wasn’t sure if revisiting the Augusta situation would be good or bad though, and didn’t really look forward to the possibility of further trauma.

Nora put on her game face, as Piper got her weapon as well. One of the good things about the break was that Tinker Tom had lined nearly all of Piper and Nora’s clothing, and then Nat’s at Nora’s request. Nora’s thoughts had been that while she NEVER expected Nat to get involved in her missions, there always existed the possibility of danger, and giving her daughter the best protection the Railroad could offer was the least she could do.

Nora called to Codsworth. “Sweetie, Piper and I have to go away on business for a while. Look after Nat and the house, and let Ellie and Nick know, so they can keep an eye open too, OK?”

“Absolutely mum. And I wish you and your better half the best of luck. Break a leg and all that,” he said.

Deacon, Piper, and Nora left Diamond City and went directly to Railroad Headquarters. Nora stopped frequently, to lace up her boots, to adjust her load, to pick up something she’d dropped…and to check for tails. There were none.

When the three arrived in headquarters, they were immediately waved over by Desdemona. She smiled and hugged Nora and Piper. “Congratulations, you two, and I am sorry I had to interrupt your honeymoon, I truly am, but two pieces of information have surfaced recently and I need Whisper and Crier on the case.”

Nora nodded, but lost some of her stern look. The Railroad was truly not what she had had to deal with when she was JADE SUN of BLACKLIST. For one thing, when her boss said she was sorry
for interrupting a vacation, she actually meant it. For another, she’d joined The Railroad of her own accord rather than being blackmailed into it. And finally, she wasn’t alone. Her wife was her partner in this, as in so many other things.

“OK, Dez. Give me the rundown,” Nora said.

“Two things. We have a lead on a possible survivor from Augusta. I’ll let Carrington handle that briefing. I wanted to let you two know personally that we sprang your mole trap. And the results…,” Dez trailed off.

“Yes?” prompted Nora.

“All four sites were hit,” said Deacon.

“You’re shitting me. ALL four?” Nora said.

Dez nodded.

“And we’re sure there wasn’t any cross-contamination?”

Dez nodded again, “Each site was hit within 24 hours of planting the story with each of Stockton’s caravaners. They didn’t have time to cross-contaminate.”

Nora whistled. “Stockton’s entire organization turned. Jesus. It’s really goddamned lucky our whole organization wasn’t rolled up by The Institute. Dumb fucking luck.”

Deacon said, “And the bitch of it is we can’t even route synths around Bunker Hill. It’s too central.”

Nora sighed, “OK, welll…,” she looked at the ceiling for inspiration, “shit. We’re just going to have to move synths when the four aren’t there, except for some times when we drag a synth into their view and then hide ‘em again, just so the Opposition doesn’t figure out we’ve made his informants.”

“I’m having PAM work up a schedule of movements designed to minimize the chances of both exposure and the chance that The Institute figures out we know who their informants are,” said Dez.

“OK. Makes sense,” said Nora, “Now I’m going to go get Carrington’s piece.”

“It’s a better piece,” said Dez.

Nora chuckled bitterly, “You’d hope so.”

When Nora found Carrington he looked up. “Ah, Whisper. I understand congratulations are in order.”

Nora nodded, and Carrington continued, all business, “We think a Raider gang has captured one of our agents, Blackbird. The twist is, we thought Blackbird was at Augusta.”

Carrington looked at her, “You understand what that means. Desdemona clings to the far fetched hope that Blackbird is alive, and that they can tell us what happened to the synths at Augusta. So she wants you to tackle this fools errand.”

Nora shrugged, “It’s probably a dead end, but you need to understand. I’ve worked for a really ruthless intelligence agency. It’s to her credit that she sometimes rolls the dice for her people.”
Carrington shrugged, “If you chain too many assumptions together you rarely get what you bargained for. I doubt we’ll find more than a body. The dead drop should have the full briefing. Raiders aren’t known for keeping their captives alive. But since we’re asking you to risk your neck, good luck.”

The dead drop was outside a T-station near Vault 81. Nora was pleased to see that the signs were varying now. No dead drop was ever perfect, but these new ones were way more secure. The tape simply stated, “Blackbird spotted at Back Street Apparel. Badly injured. Way too many hostiles for the runner to engage. Request assistance from HQ.”

Deacon looked at Nora and Piper. His eyebrows went up. “Sounds legit to me too, Deacon,” said Nora.

The three made their way down Storrow Drive until they got into the Back Bay. Back Street split from Storrow at Mass Ave, and the three made their way more carefully until they crossed Gloucester Street. At that point, they could see a guard outside the shop, as well as two turrets. Nora sighted on the Raider and dropped her. Shifting up and left she shot out another turret as it started target acquisition.

The remaining turret couldn’t make the group out against the building they were huddled up against. Nora leaned out, drew a bead, and shot the turret before it could pick her up out of the radar clutter.

They moved quickly along the street, and into the store. At that point all three froze to let their eyes adjust to the low light. Which was good, as there was a tripwire immediately inside the entry. After Nora clipped the wire, she heard two Raiders stroll into the shop from the back. They were chatting about trapping one of their recruits, who’d been terrified of fire, in a flame circle.

*These guys are just a piece of work. At this point it’s turning into pleasure rather than business.*

The two Raiders crossed to the west side of the shop, and Nora and her group mirrored them, finding another tripwire in the process. This time the wires were attached to a three grenade “bouquet”.

*Hey, look, free explosives. Sweet.*

Nora harvested the frags and then signaled Piper to take the left Raider and Deacon to take the right one. Nora herself moved across to the eastern aisle and made her way down it. There were two muffled pops, and two grunts as the Raiders were killed. At that moment Nora heard a turret spin up. Looking left she saw one of the things in a shopping cart. While the cart provided some protection, it wasn’t enough, and after four rounds, the turret blew.

They heard panicked movement in the back room, and Nora moved into the back hall. To her right was a partial door, and the sounds were definitely coming from the office. Nora considered it poetic that the grenade she used to kill the three in the office was one of their own, just recently “liberated”.

Three more came down the stairs to their left, but one at a time which made killing the remaining Raiders a matter of patience. When they hadn’t heard any activity for several minutes they combed the shop.

They found Blackbird’s corpse in a changing room that the Raiders converted into a cell. Judging by his wounds, he’d never stood a chance. He had a holotape on him.
“Augusta overrun. Two coursers, unknown number of older models. I’m the only survivor. They came straight at us, knew our location. Package’s fate is unknown. If I don’t make it out, make them pay.”

Piper shuddered, “Two Coursers. God, they never even had a chance, did they?”

Nora shook her head, “No.”

The small group left the store, headed further down Storrow and towards HQ.

Nora was muttering to herself as they made their way across the city, until Piper came up and took her hand. “What’s all that about, Blue?” she asked.

Nora looked over at Piper, “At some point, we have to thin the bastards out, right? They don’t come from some central supply depot. With enough people it has to be possible right? Because right now it feels like we’re playing ‘whack-a-mole’.”

Piper looked thoughtful. She squeezed Nora’s hand, “I know it doesn’t feel like it, Blue, but sometimes just before I break a story, it feels like I’m never going to. Maybe it’s like that.”

“God, I hope so, Thing. But maybe I should take matters into my own hands. Or, I should say, maybe the General needs to start throwing her weight around.”

When they arrived at HQ, Nora called Dez and Carrington over and brought them into PAM’s Records Room. She looked them both over. “First, Blackbird was dead. But,” she continued before Carrington could so much as get a word out, “Blackbird was alive when the runner spotted him. They didn’t know Blackbird was mortally wounded.”

Nora looked at both of them. “Going after Blackbird was the wrong call. AND it was the right call.”

They both looked puzzled. Nora went on, “In the DIA we’d NEVER have thrown good assets after bad like that. But the DIA were only worried about assets and return on investment. THAT is not who The Railroad is.”

Nora was staring at Carrington now, “We look after our people, human and synth, here. We do NOT give up until we know it’s impossible,” and she turned to Dez, “But we manage the risk. We do not go running off just because a synth might be in danger. Because that is a FANTASTIC way to end up in a trap.”

She glared at both of them. “But…and I want you both to listen to me carefully about this, of the three missions I’ve run since we all agreed I really, REALLY know what I’m doing, the Opposition has been Raiders. Every. Single. Time.”

She started ticking them off, “Stockton and High Rise. Augusta. Blackbird. Every time it’s been those godforsaken wastes of genetic material that have been at the bottom of the problem. Only on my first mission was the Oppo actually the Institute.”

Nora shook her head, “That policy of not helping the humans in the Commonwealth is looking pretty damned shortsighted right now. Because based on what I’m seeing your main problem is Raiders. Now I know that’s not the case,” she raised a hand, “But every time I hear one of the Headquarters people say something about Commonwealth people being a problem, I’m fining them ten caps. We’ll have a party with the proceeds. But that crap stops now. It’s time the Railroad becomes part of the solution to the Raider Problem.”
“But,” Dez started.

Nora put up a hand. “I know what you’re going to say, boss. And I agree. We don’t have the resources to divide our attention, now. But this room, and that room out there,” Nora pointed out the door, “Has all the information we need to target Raider groups.”

Nora smiled, “And as it turns out, Agent Crier here,” Nora pointed at Piper, “Has a LOT of pull with the General of the Minutemen. Being married to her and all.”

Even Carrington chuckled as it began to dawn on both of them where Nora’s tongue lashing was headed. “So now, because I am not Having It anymore, we’re going to coordinate with Preston Garvey of the Minutemen. Yes, an individual militia member may be a synth hating bigot. Does not matter. I’m not using him to escort a synth, I’ll be using him to start smacking down those god damned Raiders.”

“I see your point, Whisper,” said Dez. “I’ll have some of our headquarters folks start working up Raider sightings so you can feed them to the Minutemen. Because you’re right. We missed an opportunity back when, and we’re paying for it now.”

Nora nodded. “OK, anything else for me?”

PAM spoke up, “Agent Whisper. Probabilities indicate that you can open a traffic node in the western Commonwealth that would increase throughput by 45%.”

“OK, where on the west side of the Commonwealth do you want a safehouse, PAM,” Nora answered.

“You understood that?” said Deacon.

“Learning to speak ‘analyst’ was a survival move back when, Deacon.”

“At a location called Sunshine Tidings,” said PAM.

“South of Abernathy? Good spot. My people can easily keep it safe,” said Nora.

“Placation token dispensed: good luck agent.”

“But usually the analysts weren’t THAT blunt about their pro forma sendoffs,” Nora said as she rolled her eyes.
Good Day, Sunshine

Nora, Piper, and Deacon headed out. Sunshine Tidings was almost straight west of where they’d met Deacon for the Switchboard mission. But when they headed that way, there was a snag. A BIG snag.

“Shit! Behemoth!” Piper stage whispered as they all crouched.

“Really? I never would have noticed, Thing,” Nora said.

“You know, ammo isn’t cheap. Think we could just pay it to leave?” asked Deacon.

Both women turned on him and glared.

“Just a suggestion.”

Nora checked her Pip-Boy and led them in a large circle to the north. But not before marking the spot on the map. Before long they were skirting Walden Pond. Sunshine Tidings was at the top of a ridge overlooking the pond.

There was Mr Handy circling the central barn, which was labeled “Sunshine Tidings Co-Op”. He was gliding around, periodically saying things like “Whoa! Groovy.”

Nora shook her head. “What IS it with this place that it just encourages counter-culturalism?”

Piper looked at Nora, “What?”

Nora pointed downslope, “Walden Pond, birthplace of the Transcendentalists,” she pointed at the Co-Op, “Sunshine Tidings, hangout of beatniks. There’s just something about this area…”

Piper frowned, “I thought you didn’t like the repressed version of America.”

Nora looked at her wife fondly, “I don’t. I may be traditional in some ways, but it’s by MY choice, not someone else’s. But that’s not to say that I don’t find it funny that the area around Walden Pond is still a hotbed of radicalism after 450 years.”

“Oh,” Piper gave a little chuckle, “I guess when you put it that way, Mrs. Wright, you conformist you.”

Nora nodded, “After YOU, Ms. Wright.”

As they walked into the campsite/settlement, they heard growls.

“Watch your digits, Blue. Ferals,” Piper called.

“Yeah, got ‘em, hon,” replied Nora.

God I hate these things. Not like I hate Raiders, but I hate hate HATE seeing human beings turned into these…

“You know, I’ve always wanted to try Holy Water on these guys,” said Deacon.
Nora, Piper, and Deacon made a small circle and fired as ferals emerged from every nook and cranny.

“No, those are slow Zombies,” called Nora over her shoulder as she shot another feral, “These are the fast kind. Holy Water doesn’t work on fast zombies.”

“Who says,” said Piper, as she shot one that had come charging in.

“Me,” said Nora, “I’m the only one who grew up with a batch of Zombie movies so I’m the expert. They were a metaphor for Communism.”

“No, no,” replied Piper, firing, “Zombies are a disease metaphor, sweetheart.”

Nora shot one that had gotten into range, then said, “Oh. That makes sense. We thought of Communism as a disease…as if it were contagious. So you’re saying they’re two exemplars of the same root fear?”

Piper shot the last ghoul. “Yep. You got it, Blue.”

They stood up. The robot had simply circled the fight, saying, “Mellow out.” Nora figured it was safe to leave it be.

Deacon looked at both of them. “You two are absolutely my people. Glory would have never had THAT conversation while blasting ferals. She’s boring.”

Nora laughed. She gestured at the cabins, “Let’s get busy.”

It didn’t take long to clear the remaining cabins, and take care of a few bugs. Nora surveyed the site. Several fields with cabins circling the entire area. Put in some defenses and this would make a first rate farm. And they could move synths through as temporary farmhands.

As soon as they took care of the jolly green giant neighbor. That thing had to go.

Nora gestured and led the other two across the Sudbury Dam and up to the Abernathy’s and then on to Sanctuary. When they got there, Nora called Preston over.

He came up, “Hey General. Piper. Deacon. What’s up?”

Nora smiled at him, “I’ve opened another site, at Sunshine Tidings. It’s another first rate farming site. I have some refugees from Boston I need to put there, but it needs an outpost and could use some good farmers.”

Preston nodded. “I have some folks over at the Abernathy’s who were looking to establish a place of their own.”

Nora nodded, “This place would be perfect for them, but you need to have Cait and the Regulars go clear out a Behemoth down the hill from the place. Tell them to take some heavy weapons.”

Preston grinned, “You mean like the Fat Man Cait has been DYING to try out?”

Nora chuckled, “Yeah. I suppose that’s a valid use for it. You mean to tell me she didn’t uncork it for the first radroach she saw? The girl’s learning restraint.”

“Putting her in charge of our main garrison at Red Rocket was either evil or inspired. Either way, she’s only gotten to be an even better leader since she dried out. And she was good when she was high,” Preston said.
“Good. Also, do NOT ask, but I’m about to start getting you serious information about Raider activities. What do you need to make the Minutemen more effective?” asked Nora.


“OK. So start recruiting,” said Nora.

“What?”

“Look Preston, you don’t need the General of the Minutemen to recruit more folks. I’ve seen what’s happening. Even the Diamond City guards know you and the ‘New’ Minutemen. Maybe we needed my personal touch at the beginning, but this is a self-sustaining movement now. Just make offers, expand out from the bases…here, Red Rocket, Tenpines, The Abernathy’s, and now Sunshine,” Nora said.

“And Starlight Drive-In,” put in Marie as she walked up. She kissed Preston on his cheek.

“Starlight?” asked Piper.

“Drive-In theater south of Concord,” said Preston, after he’d given Sanctuary’s physician a sound kiss, “It was just sitting open, and it’d make a great jumping off point for expansion south and east, so I sent Cait and a few Regulars to open it up.”

“Dr. Curie, I love your boyfriend, but damn he’s obtuse sometimes,” Nora said to Marie. She looked at Preston, “You saw a need and you moved on it. So just keep doing that, Colonel.”

“Colonel?”

“You’re my executive officer. You’re a damn colonel. Now shut up, take the promotion and start growing the army. That’s an order.”

“Yes ma’am,” he saluted. “There is something that needs your attention though,” he added.

“I thought we just covered this…,” Nora started.

“It’s Ronnie Shaw, General,” he interrupted.

“Who or what is a ‘Ronnie Shaw’?” asked Nora.

“Veronica Shaw. She’s a Minuteman legend. She got cheesed off at the leadership about a decade ago, told them all off, colorfully, and left. She was the Cait of her time,” Preston answered, “If she wants back, it’s a big deal. She might inspire some settlements and militias to link themselves up with us. It could double or triple our reach. Overnight.”

“Well, damn, Colonel Garvey. You’re right. This IS something that requires the General’s personal attention.”

Daylight was quickly evaporating, though, and the weather had turned cold again, so Nora decided to spend the night in Sanctuary with Piper and Deacon. She invited Marie and Preston to dinner.

Nora saw that Sanctuary had grown under Sturges and the Long’s careful guidance. Marcy might have been a bit caustic but she KNEW how to run a settlement. It might have been that she was caustic BECAUSE she knew how to run a settlement. The more the settlers looked to Marcy for
guidance, the less spiky she became.

There was still the subtext of sorrow for their dead child when you spoke with them, especially Jun, but Marcy was proving someone for whom power did not corrupt. By universal agreement, the settlers in Sanctuary had appointed her the mayor.

And in return the place had blossomed. In the two and a half months that Sanctuary had been a concern, there was a hospital, a general store, a bar/inn, and shops for clothing and one for weapons and armor.

Now Nora almost didn’t recognize her old suburb. But she found her house had been left how she wanted it. While she’d moved to Diamond City, and even as several folks had openly coveted it, as Nora found out, it had been Marcy as much as Preston and Sturges who’d placed the residence off limits.

She did have to laugh when she saw it though. Sturges had rebuilt the house, fixed the roof and any holes, but Preston had really put his touch on it. Apparently, if you wound up on Preston Garvey’s naughty list as a militiaman, your punishment detail had consisted of “area beautification”, and the area in question had been Nora’s home.

There was a sign outside the house, “General’s Residence, Commonwealth Provision Government Minutemen” and a flagpole, with the flag of the CPG flying, the version of the Great Seal that Nora had had placed at the cemetery on the hill above. And the weeds in her yard had been pulled. The entire lawn was a precisely clipped brown expanse.

*I may never get used to a ‘lovely brown lawn’. But damn it if the only thing this is lacking is the green color to make this yard the envy of any Pre-War family. But the edging REALLY sells it…*

Nora had been in the DIA as an agent but during her time before and after her period undercover in China and Alaska, she’d been on military bases. And she knew the one thing all generals seemed to love was whitewashed edging stones, preferably as identical as a private could be tortured into locating.

Her front walk and driveway would have fit right in any Senior Officer’s Housing neighborhood. Nora shook her head. Piper just laughed when she saw it, but Deacon really took the cake. He sprang forward and opened the door for Nora, while popping the crispest salute of which he was capable. And he was shouting, “Welcome to your residence, General Ma’am. Would the General like anything? Coffee, ma’am? Tea, ma’am? Her august and majestic butt wiped?”

Nora laughed, but then looked at him and said, “Consider your insubordinate ass lucky that you AREN’T being required to wipe my august and majestic one, peon,” and swept in with her nose held high. Piper harrumphed and followed Nora, nose in the air as well.

And in a sign that there had been a TON of emotional growth over the last month, Marie was right behind them, nose just as high, even as the giggles were escaping her.

Chapter End Notes

I confess. Macy Long annoys the ever loving fuck out of me. Her incessant complaining is only interrupted by direct insults.
So I got to thinking. WHY is Marcy like this? You could say because of losing their son, but an examination of terminals available in Quincy seems to show that she was a little bitter all along.

I like playing with characters that in a play through you ignore/avoid...like Preston. So I gave Marcy a reason to be bitter...thwarted capabilities. And I'm letting her flourish in new environment. Just for funsies.

Also, another bit on the weird nature of vegetation in the Commonwealth. An eye pleasing expanse of beautifully cut, trimmed, and edged brown...

And finally, Piper is expounding on my "Theory of Horror", wherein monsters are metaphors for various primal fears. Zombies are fear of diseases. Werewolves are the fear of nature. Vampire stories are about the fear of sexual relations. Aliens are fear of the "other". Mixed in with an inability to trust your senses in many cases. John Carpenter's "The Thing"? Fear of the other, mixed in with fear of uncertainty about exactly WHO is the Other. "Twilight"? Fear of burgeoning sexuality under target constrained conditions (Forks is at the ass end of nowhere...). "50 Shades..."? Fear of hopped up soft-core fanfiction. (I realize I didn't cover it just now...but it's a fear of mine..."Please god, don't let this be 50 Shades of Sole Survivor"...
Nora sent Deacon to go buy deboned chicken. She gave him a list of other things to get from the sellers in town, including an onion, a staple of the post war Eastern US; tatoes; some wild garlic, also an eastern US plant; some garden herbs; and heavy cream from the brahmin.

She looked at them all, “There’s a chill in the air and it’s time for Great-Aunt Kathleen’s Chicken Stew.”

Piper grinned, “You know I might have plans for you later, Blue. Don’t get too stuffed.”

Nora blew her wife a kiss, and then, when Deacon arrived, started cooking. She cut up the chicken, and then browned it in a pan. Once that was done, she set it aside, and browned the wild onions and garlic until they caramelized.

At this point she’d acquired her usual audience, and chopped the tatoes a little theatrically. Marie was especially interested. Though she’d grown a lot since getting her new body she still was a sucker for new experiences.

Nora mixed the garlic, onions and chicken in a pot and put a layer of sliced tatoes on top, tossing a little salt over them. Then she mixed the thick cream from the brahmin and some water and the pan drippings from browning the chicken, and tossed in a couple tablespoons of razorgrain flour. She poured the liquid over the tatoes, then sprinkled the garden herbs over everything and covered the pot and put it in her oven, set to 375 degrees by her trusty thermometer.

“You carry that thing everywhere, boss?” asked Deacon.

“You don’t have to have any,” Nora shot back. He raised his hands in immediate surrender.

“Not a chance boss. My nose works.”

Nora nodded, mollified, and set her Pip-Boy for a half hour. Then she sought out Marie, already deep in conversation with Piper.

“…so? What difference does it make?” Piper was asking as Nora came up.

“What difference does what make?” Nora asked.

“I feel that perhaps I am rushing my Preston,” Marie answered. “I was wondering how long is the right amount of time to know someone before you say you are in love? Piper doesn’t feel there’s a right amount of time. I told her, I thought it was still too soon.”

Nora laughed. Piper turned and said, “How long for you, Blue?”

“With you? I was attracted to you in about 30 seconds. I’d started falling for you by the time of McDonough’s ‘I am not a synth’ speech. By the time you pulled me out of that memory lounger the first time? Hopelessly in love with you,” Nora answered.

Piper chuckled, “When you ate that crappy meal I cooked you. You have no idea how upset I was. I thought, ‘Please god, just this once let my cooking not suck,’ but you saw what happened. And
you still ate it. And faked liking it.”

Marie smiled, “I could not help myself. Preston took one look at me and called me beautiful. I had never thought of myself in those terms. And he has always been a gentleman.” She pouted a little, “Sometime too much so, I think.”

Piper smiled, “Guys like Preston sometimes need you to tell them what to do. The good news is they’ll listen. Try it sometime.”

Nora was looking at Piper speculatively. “Hmm. That mean you want me to boss you around?”

“Oh good lord Blue, you know you like me to drive. Stop pretending,” said Piper.

Nora blushed, and looked at Marie. “It’s true. All woman of action during the day, but I love when Piper just ravishes me.”

Marie laughed, “Perhaps, I should ravish Preston?”

Nora nodded, “You’ve been sleeping together for long enough, time to start the ravishing.”

“At this point you’re just saying ‘ravish’ because you like the way it sounds, honey,” said Piper.

“Maybe,” laughed Nora.

Dinner was delicious and filling on a cold January evening. It was warmer in the Commonwealth than Nora remembered it being before the war, but there were still some actual snow falling.

That night, Nora cuddled up to Piper after her wife had made love to her, and whispered, “Ravish ravish ravish.”

Piper laughed. “I love you Nora, you know that?”

“If you don’t you’ve taken horrible advantage of me, Piper,” and she waited a couple beats then said, “And yes, I’m aware how much you love me. And I hope you know how in love with you I am.”

Piper smiled and kissed Nora, and then cuddled her as they fell asleep.

The next morning dawned clear and cold. Nora told Deacon and Piper to bundle up. Deacon had looked suspicious, “Why?”

“Because we’re going to make a grand entrance at the Castle,” Nora said.

Deacon looked even more suspicious. “I’ve read the reports. Does this ‘grand entrance’ have rotors? Wings? The imminent and likely potential for sudden screaming terrified death?”

“Yes. Yes. Let me think….yes, absolutely,” said Nora.

Deacon just moaned.

He’d settled into a sullen silence by the time the Vertibird arrived. Nora stood behind him to ensure the he got on. Then she climbed aboard, put on her headset, and gestured for Piper and Deacon to put on theirs.

“Roger that, Knight,” replied the pilot.

The Vertibird leapt into the air, and then banked hard right out over the Old Mill Pond. Deacon said, “Oh, god, we’re all gonna die,” as he maintained a death grip on one of the hand holds.

About a half an hour later his chin had acquired a manly tremble as they finally flared in for a landing in The Castle’s courtyard.

Ronnie Shaw was a tall, thin woman in fatigues and a beret who looked like old saddle leather and beef jerky had a love child. Her skin was weathered and her voice was harsh from a life of shouted orders.

“Oh, General, I was wondering if you were gonna show up. Wanted to see what you greenhorns had gotten up to,” she said.

“And? What do you think?” Nora asked.

“I think you’re doin’ pretty gol’durned good. Wouldn’t stay otherwise. Your kids here have the makings of first rate Minutemen, I’ll say that.”

“Thanks. That mean you’re thinking of hanging around?” said Nora.

“I might be at that. Been a while since anyone had the gumption to even try retaking the place, let alone doin’ it,” Ronnie replied. Then she held her cap down as the Vertibird spooled up and took off.

“Walk with me, General,” Ronnie said, then strolled over to a sealed portion of the Fort in the West Bastion. She gestured at the blast door. “Not many folks know it, but this used to be the flapjacking armory,” and her voice lowered, “Saw yer fancy ride. What’s up with the goose steppers?”

Nora used the same low tone, “They think I’m using the Minutemen to get at the Institute for them.”

Ronnie tensed, “And?”

Nora looked over at her, “And I’m using THEM. They’re nut jobs. Human fanatics. I’m going to get at the Institute, but for me, not them. And when they don’t have anything left to offer, I’m cutting them loose.”

Ronnie nodded, “And the Minutemen?”

“You have to ask?”

“I just did, didn’t I? You can assume I durned well need to,” said the older woman.

“I’m trying to recreate the CPG,” Nora said.

“That’s what I heard. That’s why I’m here. This gol’durned factionalism HAS to end,” Ronnie looked at Nora and seemed to reach a decision. “There’s a back way in there.”

“Oh?”

“Yep, follow me,” and at that Ronnie turned and headed for the far side of the fort. She walked into the “General’s Quarters”, currently set up as the Operations room. Then she walked into a corner where a bunch of dirt and rubble had covered the back of an alcove.
“Right there,” she pointed.

Nora turned and said to one of the Minutemen, “Captain? Send me a couple troops with shovels.”

He nodded and walked out briskly.

Nora looked over at Ronnie, “Care to tell me what we’re after?”

“Nope. Not ’til I’m sure it’s there.”

Deacon said, “And here I thought you were being mysterious just because.”

“That too, laughing boy.”

Two soldiers showed up with shovels and Ronnie quickly and efficiently set them to work digging out a trapdoor. It wasn’t deeply buried and the two had it exposed in less than half an hour.

“OK you two, police up the dirt and get this place looking respectable again by the time we get back,” Ronnie said. Then she opened the trap door and dropped in.

Nora activated her Pip-Boy light and looked down. The drop was less than five feet and then a tunnel sloped down, back towards the west. She followed Ronnie.

“Best keep an eye peeled General,” said Ronnie when they’d all joined her.

Nora glanced around and then back at Ronnie, “No kidding,” and then she set about deactivating the landmines around them.

After a few minutes, they’d taken care of the ones near the entrance, but Nora was incredibly careful from then on, deactivating several more until they arrived in a barracks.

Ronnie looked around. “We’re under the armory now, for sure,” she gestured at locked door. “Now what was the password? ‘One if by land’? Nope. ‘We the people’? Nope. Gol’durn it. It’s been a while. ‘United We Stand’. That’s it. Here we go.”

She led them into the next room, which was dry and musty. There was a body, mummified, on the ground, in a Minuteman uniform.

“I’ll be,” said Ronnie. “General McGann. So THAT’S what happened to him. He must’ve thought the attack was Super-Mutants and not ‘lurks. He’s the one who locked the place up. Rest easy General. Your watch is over. The Minutemen are back.”

She led Nora and the group up the stairs, and opened the blast door from the inside. Then she led them into a room in the bastion. It WAS nicely filled with things that went boom and zap. But Ronnie walked straight over to a table on the far side.

“Yep. This is it,” and she waved Nora over, and spread out a diagram.

Nora looked at the design. “That looks like a heavy mortar,” she said.

“Yep. Back in the day we had artillery like this. Made a Raider think twice,” Ronnie said. “Range of about 7 miles. Which is good because our portable radios couldn’t manage much more than that. Still put the fear of…well…the Minutemen…into your average Raider gang.”

“So we set these up at every settlement, and then if a patrol needs some firepower, they call and get instant heavy weapons?”
“Since you just described what artillery IS, I’d say yes, General.”

Nora laughed out loud. “Let’s start getting these set up everywhere.”

Deacon interrupted, “Don’t they need a test, boss?”

Nora nodded. “Good point. Grab a couple of those radios, Deacon, and let’s head outside. Ronnie, you’re coming with us.”

Deacon moaned. “We’re flying somewhere again, aren’t we.”

He was right, and minutes later, the three of them, plus Ronnie, were on their way back to Sanctuary. When they arrived, Nora called over Sturges and showed him the diagram. “Can you have two or three of these set up at Red Rocket and maybe the Abernathy’s by this time tomorrow?”

Sturges looked it over and seemed to be doing some backwards planning. He nodded, “Maybe even earlier. I’ll know more soon,” and with that he was off. Nora called Cait on her radio, “Hey Cait, hold up on the Behemoth hunt.”

“What?!? Ye’d better have a fecking good reason for that.”

“I do. C’mon up to Sanctuary,” Nora replied.

When Cait arrived, she had blood in her eye. “What’s this then?”

Nora smiled, “Relax. You still get to nuke the Behemoth Cait. I’m just adding to the fun. We’re gonna shell it AND nuke it,” and she showed Cait the plans.

Ronnie added, “I’ll boss the guns, and you two can call for fire.”

Nora looked up questioningly. Ronnie grimaced, “Lord preserve me from ign’rent ijits. Look, I can teach you how to call for artillery in a day, you seem smart. But I don’t have the month or so it would take to teach you gunnery, General. We’ll train folks up eventually, but for now, it has to be me.”

Nora nodded.

The next day dawned bright and beautiful, and Deacon, Piper, and Cait joined Nora on their way to a Behemoth hunt. Nora ran a radio check every mile or so and by the time they reached Sunshine Tidings she was confident Ronnie would be able to hear her. On the last radio check, Ronnie herself came on the net to tell Nora the guns were ready.

They all moved down slope until they could see the pile of junk the Behemoth was living in. Nora looked at her Pip-Boy Map. “OK Ronnie, the grid is…”

Ronnie interrupted. “Do it right, dagnabbit.”

Nora rolled her eyes, but started her call for fire over, the right way. The artillery functioned as advertised, and she was able to quickly correct it into the target. When the shells began arcing into the Behemoths lair, it roared and reared up, already bleeding.

Cait chortled as she launched a Mini-Nuke at her target. The shell blew, and when the smoke had cleared, chunks were missing from the Behemoth as it slowly toppled over.

And then Ronnie came on the radio to call “Rounds complete”.

All in all it was an excellent test. And what’s more, the entire northwest of the Commonwealth was now under the shelter of Nora’s guns. As well as everything in a 6-7 mile radius of The Castle. Which included the better part of Downtown Boston.

Cait looked over at Nora with undisguised glee. “It’s about to suck t’be a Raider, darlin’.”

Nora grinned back at her friend and field commander, “And it’s about to be really fun to be you, Cait.”

Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote of Frederick II of Prussia, aka "Frederick the Great", who was King IN Prussia from 1740 to 1772, and afterwards declared himself King OF Prussia in 1772 until his death in 1786, having finally conquered enough of historic Prussia during various wars, especially the Seven Years War, to consider his country no longer divided. The Seven Years Wars was known in America as The French and Indian War, and the raising of taxes on American Colonists to pay for the British portion of both the European and North American theaters’ costs turned out to have some interesting consequences for George III.

I plan to make up at least one "colorful idiom" swear word every single time Ronnie Shaw makes an appearance.

Also "Great Aunt Kathleen's Chicken Stew":
1 lb radchicken thighs, cut into 1 inch pieces
1 big onion, chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 lb baby potatoes, peeled and quartered
1 cup heavy cream
½ cup chicken stock or water
1 tsp parsley, chopped
1 tsp dill, chopped
salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 375 F.
Season the chicken with salt and pepper and brown it over high heat in a large skillet. Do not overcrowd the skillet or it won’t brown properly. Remove the chicken and add onions with garlic to the same skillet. Brown until caramelized.
Place the chicken and onions into the oven proof pot. Layer the potatoes on top and season with salt and pepper.
Combine the cream and chicken stock and pour it over the potatoes.
Bake for 30 minutes covered or until fork tender.
Nora and Piper went directly home from the test, and Deacon headed for HQ. Ronnie and Sturges started planning the Grand Tour of putting in artillery and training the crews. The next morning, Piper and Nora paid a call on Nick.

The old synth was in a fine mood. He’d just collected a double bagful of caps for a missing persons case, and for once it didn’t dead end at a figurative sign saying, “The Institute”. It did end at a sign saying, “He was cheating on you and left for Bunker Hill,” but it was closure for the woman scorned, at least.

Nora smiled to see Nick, and said, “Time for another council of ‘The Two Old Farts and Her Wife’.”

“OK Nora, what’s up?” Nick asked.

“Where to start? Let’s see. Got myself a Sergeant Major for the Minutemen, old warhorse named Veronica Shaw,” started Nora.

“Who came with artillery,” put in Piper. Nick’s eyebrows went up.

Nora nodded. “So we’re putting that in any CPG settlement now. But the kicker is, well…”

Piper put in, “Blue is implying she got pissed off and did something rash that once again turned out unusually well,” she turned to Nora and added, “I really prefer the ‘Get fed up with stuff and change it’ you over the ‘Get overwhelmed and have a breakdown’ you. If only because it scares me less.”

Nora reached out and squeezed Piper’s hand, and looked back at Nick, “Yeah, I kinda put the whole ‘Force the Railroad to work with the Minutemen’ thing into fast forward mode. From the Railroad’s point of view.”

Nick’s eyebrows went up again.

“OK, Nick, I’ve had interrogation training, so you can knock off the inscrutable act,” Nora said.

Nick laughed, “Old habits, Nora. Sorry. What do you two mean?”

“Well, it started when Deacon showed up at our doorstep…,” Piper began.

The two women laid out the entire Blackbird mission, and Nora’s rant at the leadership of the Railroad, culminating in her demand for information, as the General, regarding Raider activities.

Nick shrugged. “So what are you talking to me for? You pretty much have things where you want them, don’t you?”

“That’s the thing Nick,” Nora answered, “You’re the only person except Piper I’ve brought in on this, well, this conspiracy. I feel like I’m too close sometimes. I need you both for a reality check, and…”

“Yes?” Nick said.
“I keep putting off taking this data to Virgil. There’s always something that interrupts heading back into the Glowing Sea, even over and above the danger,” Nora said, “I feel like I’m subconsciously finding reasons not to find out the worst. What else am I subconsciously avoiding thinking about?”

“You’re only human, sweetheart,” interrupted Piper. “But I get it. I’ll be a better wife about keeping you moving forward in the future, I guess. At least try and point out when you might be avoiding something.”

Nora smiled at Piper, “Thanks. But one thing I have to do before we head back to Virgil is make damn sure the plan still makes sense. First, can anyone think of a reason to not cut the Brotherhood off as soon as we can?”

“Not really,” said Nick, “The only thing that is a problem there is that they’re heavily armed. When you turn on them, they’re going to be REALLY dangerous, so be damn sure you know what you’re doing when you do. But that was going to be the case whether you betrayed them or just worked at cross-purposes, so it was always inevitable. But at some point in the near future, you two are going to have to pay a visit, if only so Nora can file a report on her ‘progress’ while on detached duty.”

“Don’t remind me,” Nora said, “There aren’t enough showers for how slimy I feel after taking to some of them, especially Maxson. To go undercover like that, you have to put yourself in the target’s skin. And I’m always skeeved out after talking with him.”

“So we’re set on the Railroad then?” Piper asked. “It seems like we’re settled on them.”

Nora nodded, “Yep. Them and the Minutemen. The last straw, if you want to use that term for good news, is that both Dez AND Carrington were all for my intel sharing plan. They’re willing to do what they can about raiders, and they’re admitting that maybe they’ve been a touch monomaniacal.”

“And the Minutemen?” asked Nick.

“Well, candidly, we’ve been using YOU. And Marie,” answered Nora. “You’re both synths, and at this point, there’s hardly a Minuteman who hasn’t had to see Dr. Curie. She’s just ‘The Doc’ to them. And you’re good ol’ Nick, the General’s buddy. Overcoming prejudice is a matter of letting individual examples overwhelm prejudice against a group.”

“Over a long damn time,” noted Nick.

“Yeah, I know. If I had a magic wand I’d use it. But if we can just get to the point where it’s not ‘shoot first and ask questions later’ I’ll take it.”

Piper and Nick nodded at that, but then there was a knock at the door. Nora opened it. It was Deacon. “Dammit, Deacon, are you stalking me?”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it? No. There’s been yet another development,” he said, “And this time it’s kinda your fault. After your mole hunt was so spectacularly successful, you know we’ve had PAM scheduling synth movements, and now we have one that needs to move and there’s a block of some kind on the scheduled route. The synth HAS to move Nora. He’s been exposed as part of the disinformation schedule.”

“Fuck. Alright, let’s get moving. Nick, look after Nat, OK?”

Nora, Piper, and Deacon were walking into HQ less than two hours later, and Carrington, Dez, and PAM were deep in discussion.
PAM was speaking, “… Institute presence increases odds of detection on all southern routes by 52%.”

Carrington shook his head, “52? That’s prohibitively dangerous.”

Dez turned, “Whisper. How do you feel about getting thrown back in the fire?”

Nora smiled “We’re here aren’t we?”

Dez nodded once. “We’ve hit a snag. Your old friend H2-22 was one of PAMs scheduled exposures. While he was at Amari’s getting his memory taken care of, the route we were using got compromised. He’s got to move, or we could lose more than just the one synth.”

Nora shuddered at the thought of two or three Coursers cutting their way through Goodneighbor on their way to slaughter every living soul in the Memory Den. “Ok, what kind of options do we even have?”

“PAM, what if we reroute to the west?” Dez asked.

“Switchboard is a nexus. Odds of detection increase exponentially with proximity to the nexus,” replied PAM.

“In English PAM,” said Dez.

Carrington said, “She means we can’t run ops anywhere remotely close to Switchboard in Lexington, and any route to the west ends up close to Lexington. The Gen 1s blocking the original route north at Malden Center have to go.”

Nora was looking at the route maps. “Until that new safehouse at Sunshine Tidings is up and running, I don’t see any way around Malden to Griswold. But this route is doable, Dez.”

Dez shook her head, “We do it your way then. Contact Amari, and tell her rerouting isn’t possible. Clear the route for one last run. Then get Caretaker over to Mercer…Sunshine Tidings…so we can buy some breathing time to relocate Griswold and Dayton as pre-cleaning safehouses. Mercer and Stanwix will be the final stops on the way out.”

Nora and her merry little band headed out for Goodneighbor. Less than an hour later they were walking through the doors, and making their way to The Memory Den. When they arrived Irma smiled and hugged Piper and Nora.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?” asked Irma.

“We really need to see Dr. Amari, Irma,” said Nora.

“She’s downstairs doing something. Let me get her,” said Irma.

As Irma went down the stairs, Deacon began poking around the console. Moments later they heard, “Leave that alone,” from the stairs as Amari came up.

Nora went over and in a low voice said, “I’m here from the Railroad.”

Amari looked shocked, “You’re the contact H2-22 was talking about? Just when I thought one person could only experience so much danger in their life.”

Amari’s face said everything Nora needed to hear. “The patient is resting right now. If you were hoping to say goodbye, I’m afraid you’re too late. He’s far past remembering his old life. He talked
quite a bit about you before I administered the anesthetic, and I’m sorry you didn’t get the opportunity to say goodbye.”

“I understand Doc,” said Nora. “But we have to move him fast, so we’re simply going with the original plan.”

“I thought you guys were supposed to be subtle,” said Amari.

“Under most circumstances…” Nora trailed off.

Piper added, “If we had the luxury we would be, but we don’t.”

Amari nodded, “He’ll be ready to move when you call.”

Nora, Piper, and Deacon left Goodneighbor, headed north across the Charles, then past Bunker Hill, and across the Mystic River. There was a brief moment of excitement when some mosquitos, “Bloodbugs” as Commonwealth folks called them, came out of nearby house and boathouse they were nesting in, but they were easily dispatched.

It never failed to amaze Nora that her number one insect dispatching device was her pistol now, but that was the world in which she found herself. She made a mental note to have Preston’s guys take a look at the place, as it had some potential, as an east/west link and a garrison location like Red Rocket if nothing else.

Ultimately the small group found themselves nearing Malden Center when they heard the ripping sounds of a 5mm minigun ahead. Nora hurried forward when…

You have GOT to be kidding…

Glory was pretty clearly both holding her own and have a fine time as she dispatched a third synth. Deacon, who’d popped up behind Nora, was outraged. “Do you have any idea how many missions involving Gen 1s she’s made me do, because she ‘can’t shoot them’? And here she is mowing them down like there’s no tomorrow.”

At that, Deacon popped out of cover, “Glory! You asshole!”

Glory looked up in surprise. “Deacon, my man, what are you doing here?”

“Don’t you ‘my man’ me, Glory,” he said, “All those times you turned down Gen 1 missions, and I find you here shooting them up like it’s not even a thing.”

She had the decency to look a little abashed. “OK, so maybe, just maybe, I overstate my degree of philosophical opposition.”

“‘Overstate’?!? You owe me, Glory. BIG time;” he crossed his arms.

“OK. I owe you. I owe you.”

He glared at her. “And it starts now. You take point.”

“Me?” Glory asked.

“Yes, you,” he said, “Don’t even TRY to pretend this isn’t your mission too…but from the Griswold side. I’ve seen this happen too often not to know what’s happened. And we still need to get H2-22 out of the Den. Fast.”
Glory rolled her eyes, but she did lead them down into the Malden T-station.

Nora pulled Deacon to one side, “Deacon, what’s up? I’ve never seen you not ironically detached.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, “I’ve had the occasional run and RUN-IN with the Big G. She’s a hard case, and she’s a HELL of a Heavy, but sometimes…man, she just games the system. I guess I kinda snapped. And maybe I just…boss, you don’t treat this all as a big game, and Glory? Even when we were running for our lives from Switchboard, she was just acting like it was some big game. I’ve come to trust you, and when I saw her here, like that, it all snapped.”

He looked at Nora, “I joke. I kid. I lie. I do it all because I’m…I’m a big fraud.”

Nora stopped and looked at him. He was looking down, “I used to be everything wrong with the Commonwealth. Ran with a gang out of University Point, the Deathclaws. Anti-synth bigots…and anti-SYNTH, not anti-Institute with poor target recognition, like your wife used to be. We were mean, dangerous, and one day we egged each other all the way to killing someone we suspected of being a synth.”

He looked back up at her, “I still remember what the eyes looked like after. And I just turned and left. Never even hung around long enough to figure out if they’d been right. I was OUT. And I settled down, far from University Point. Got married. Barbara was…she was everything. She used to look at me like…like Piper looks at you.”

Deacon hands were balling into fists now. “I came in from the field that evening, and those…animals…had put her head on a spike and were waving it around. And I snapped. I started killing, and killing. I didn’t care if I died as long as I killed every last one of them. And I killed them all. And I didn’t die. So I buried Barbara, and the next day someone from The Railroad contacted me.”

“They’d caught my performance. They liked what they saw, and they didn’t know what the backstory was, so I got a job offer,” he shook his head. “Dez deserves to be in The Railroad, and Carrington, and Tom, and Piper, and you. Especially you. You were practically born to be in the Railroad and save us from ourselves. But not me. And when I saw Glory and realized her Gen 1 thing was an ACT? For a second there? Even if she IS a synth, she didn’t deserve to be there either.”

Nora shook her head. “No. We ALL deserve to be here, Deacon, no matter the route, no matter the petty little games we may play. In the end, we deserve to be here because we say so. It’s a choice I make every day, and YOU make every day, and Glory makes every day. So sometimes we play games…you tell stories, Glory sees what she can get away with…hell, I run off and play house with my wife for weeks on end…but in the end, what makes us worthy to be here, is…being here. Making the choice to do this, for today, for the next week, forever. For however long our nerve and our skills will let us.”

Nora laughed, genuinely, as she realized something important, “Because I wasn’t…we WEREN’T blackmailed into this. We choose, Deacon, and that choice defines us.”

Deacon looked up in shock. “Wow. Ummm…I never looked at it…so, yeah. Um…good talk, boss.”
Nora punched Deacon in the shoulder. He looked at her, “What was that for?”

“I…dunno. It just seemed like a thing I ought to…do…”

He laughed, “No totally. The right thing.”

Piper came running up. “You guys are missing it!”

It gradually dawned on the two of them that there was a LOT of shooting going on, mostly the ripping of Glory’s 5mm minigun.

When they got into the station, it was kind of impressive. There were a lot of Gen 1s. Or maybe a few Gen 1s in a LOT of pieces. It was hard to tell without an accident reconstruction unit.

Glory was finishing them off. She came back and looked at Deacon. “Deacon. I’m sorry. I really am. I thought it was funny and clearly, I was wrong. I promise I’ll make it up to you, OK?”

Deacon thought for a second. Then he punched Glory in the shoulder. “OK. Good talk.”

Nora snickered and Piper and Glory just looked confused.

“Let’s let Dez know to move H2,” said Nora. “It’s been a long day.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally, this was supposed to be a straightforward account of Memory Interrupted. But I got to the part where you meet Glory outside Malden T station, and it occurred to me that you meet her cheerfully gunning down Gen 1 synths. After which she THEN says, "Aw hell, Gen 1s. Can't we, ya know, scare em off? Well, if it's gotta get done..."

Which makes NO sense, given what I was about write about. So I took my notes, threw them in the air, said "Fuck THIS shit," and wrote some of my favorite character beats thus far. In addition to giving Glory more personality that the game does, I was able to make Deacon's confession more organic, and give Nora an important epiphany.

Not bad for a moment that started at "Hey, WAIT a damn minute...!"
Returns And Allowances

A day and half later, Nora woke up next to Piper. She looked at her wife. She thought about Nat, across the way, sleeping in her room with what was obviously now HER dog.

*It's time Nora. Time to quit fucking around. Time to find out what happened to your son. For better or worse.*

She sighed. She got up. She went downstairs. Codsworth was puttering.

“Coffee, sweetie. And get ready for us to be gone a while.”

“Mum?”

Nora smiled, a little crookedly. “Time to find Shaun, Codsworth. Time to put all this training to the use I think it’s been aimed at all along.”

He repeated himself, “Mum?”

“It’s time for me to go get my son, Codsworth.”

“About damn time, Blue,” Piper said from the stair.

“Yeah, mom,” said Nat from the other side of the room.

Nora snorted. “You know it means a little brother, right Nat?”

“So? I got a mom. Finally. I got a sister. I can stand a brother.”

“HAVE a mom. HAVE a sister,” said Piper. But she was smiling. “By the way Nat, you ARE aware how weird having a ‘mom’ who’s married to your sister is, right?”

“When were we Wrights ever typical, Piper?” Nat asked.

Piper just laughed.

“Piper, could you pick up some more Rad-X and RadAway at Chem-I-Care?” Nora said, then turned to Nat after Piper left. “Are you going to be Ok, sweetie?”

“Sure, mom, this is more warning than I usually get. Just watch your ass, Ok?”

“Nat, lang…you know what, yeah, I’ll watch my ass. And Piper’s too.”

After her shopping expedition, Piper joined Nora, and they headed out to Sanctuary.

“Honey?” said Piper.

Nora looked over, “Yes?”

“How come we have to start every trip to the Glowing Sea by going all the way up to Sanctuary to get the Power Armor?”

“Well the things are too big to store inside at home, and would YOU park a pair of suits outside, where anyone with an FC could pop one in and drive off? Not to mention that Sturges is the only one who knows how to maintain them properly outside the Brotherhood,” replied Nora.
“Walk to Sanctuary, it is,” said Piper.

“It’s worse than that, Thing. We’re going to be driving the suits all the way back down to Virgil. We can’t keep flying up to the edge of the Glowing Sea and then flying back with no explanation,” said Nora. “At some point, Maxson will ask why.”

“Yuck. Hey, wait a sec. Why don’t we fly all the way to the Children of Atom’s camp? Then if Maxson asks, we were soliciting help from the Children in looking in the Glowing Sea, based on our prior visit,” suggested Piper.

“I knew I married you for more than just how gorgeous you are, Piper. That’s a perfect cover story,” said Nora. “And if the Brotherhood goes in and tries to question them, you just know that will go badly. For one or both of them.”

“Eww, sweetie. Way to make me feel like I’m dragging the Children into the crosshairs,” said Piper.

“Sorry,” said Nora.

“Don’t feel that bad Blue. Remember, they were going to execute me for revealing that they were poisoning everyone in Bunker Hill. I’ll manage to contain my overwhelming remorse. Somehow,” Piper said, then grinned at Nora.

Nora looked at her wife a little quizzically, “Am I starting to rub off on you Piper?”

Piper just laughed at that. Nora thought for a second, wondering why Piper was so cracked up. Then she blushed.

The walk was much easier from then on, as the prospect of walking all the way from Concord to Natick, through numerous potential hazards had been reduced, thanks to Piper’s cleverness, by having the Brotherhood chauffeur them.

Nora even found time to discuss with Piper Nat’s latest run-in with Sheng. On New Years’ Day Nora had been at great pains to point out to Nat that as Nora’s daughter, she was never going to be limited to the boys or girls in Diamond City of around her age, and her sister’s Sheng crack that morning was just a joke.

Nat had still found an excuse to give him a black eye almost immediately upon return to school. Based, according to Nat, on him talking about her sister’s wedding and then making a kissy face.

Nora’s point was that Sheng needed a talking to. First, Nat was not hitting him because she ‘liked him’ as she’d heard from a couple of ignorant folks in Diamond City. That was a ridiculous statement. Sheng was getting hit because Nat DIDN’T like him, probably never WOULD like him, and if he kept trying to kiss her, he was liable to end up in Dr. Sun’s care. And she also felt she needed to explain to Mr. Zwicky that perhaps Nat and Sheng should have separate study periods. So that the Libertarian molester could never get near her daughter again. And to inform Mr. Zwicky that Nora wasn’t going to allow Nat to be held responsible for the results of not separating them.

Nora didn’t have a problem with Sheng per se. Well, that was a lie, she personally couldn’t stand the little shit, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that NAT couldn’t stand the little shit either and he was not getting the hint.

Piper conceded Nora’s arguments, but replied that her strong preference would be to drag Sheng along on their trip to the Glowing Sea and body bomb him over the central crater. Problem solved.
Nora let that stand in as Plan B.

Their legal strategy and united front vis a vis Sheng and the school in the matter of Natalie Wright v. An Annoying Little Shit being established, Nora and Piper enjoyed the rest of the walk up to Sanctuary. As Nora pointed out, thanks to the traffic between the cluster of Sanctuary/Red Rocket/Abernathy and The Castle, the route between Diamond City and Sanctuary was practically secure rather than just mostly safe.

Which made the whole thing more of a 3 to 4 hour hike than a trek across the Wasteland with every sense alert.

They arrived in Sanctuary, having messaged ahead, to two warmed up, fully charged, ready to go suits of T-60 Power Armor, a maroon one for Piper and a blue one for Nora, both sets having laser rifles clipped to the leg storage points.

“I could get used to the valet service, Thing. How about you?” Nora observed.

“I’m more looking forward to being able to ride most of the way there, Blue. I almost died last time. The less time we spend in that place the happier I’ll be,” replied Piper.

“Way to remind me. Now I feel guilty,” Nora said.

“For the love of…don’t be, Nora. I want to go, with you, to see about getting into the Institute to find your son. I don’t hold you responsible for what happened last time,” Piper said vehemently, “I’m literally just pointing out that the less time we spend there, the less chance of something bad happening.”

Nora smiled, “I don’t feel bad about you coming along, I just meant I felt guilty for forgetting about the last time when I cracked the joke.”

“Oh that. You have to get in line after Deacon and Cait in the thoughtless humor department, hon. Don’t sweat it,” said Piper.

Nora nodded and opened her armor and climbed in. After the suit closed up on her, she turned and saw Piper getting into hers as well. Nora took a deep breath, and then clumped over to the cleared area serving as a landing pad, and tossed a Vertibird signal.

After a few minutes, she could see the Vertibird over the trees to south and just moments after that, the ‘bird was settling on the pad.

Nora and Piper scrambled in, Piper clipping herself into the Power Armor alcove and Nora manning the minigun.

When she was looped into the intercom system, Nora gave the Lancer flying the ‘bird the coordinates for the Children of Atom’s village and instructions to get into her hazmat suit. When everyone was buttoned up and secure, the ‘bird rose into the air, and headed almost due south, passing over the Abernathy’s, Sunshine Tidings, and Ft Hagen on its way along the western shore of Lake Cochituate and then out over the barren expanse of the Glowing Sea.

When the time comes and I cut these guys loose, I am REALLY going to miss this. Not just the speed of travel, but the views. The ability to truly get a bigger picture. But mainly, just flying. Even if I’m successful in creating it, the CPG is not going to be building aircraft for a long time. I need to enjoy it while I can.

After a period flying over the stark expanse of the ruins of Natick…now the Glowing Sea…the Vertibird began a shallow descent into the crater at ground zero. As she watched the crater lip rise up, Nora got ready to jump out. When the ‘bird landed, they lumbered out and waved as the Lancer
took off.

Nora then waved to the Children of Atom who were giving them suspicious looks, and headed out of the crater the same way she’d left the last time, with no words for the cultists or from the cultists.

*They’re a batch of religious fanatics with an innate radiation resistance that have chosen to live inside a crater from a hydrogen bomb. Who’s to say what’s normal to them? If they have a problem about us ‘waving and walking’, they’ll say something.*

*Or not. I’m OK with that too.*

Virgil’s cave was unchanged when they walked in an hour later. The trek from the Children of Atom’s village to his cave was an uneventful one in contrast to their last trip into the Glowing Sea. When Nora clumped in, followed by Piper, Virgil looked up, startled but not visibly surprised or shocked.

“Wasn’t sure I’d see you again. You manage to get what you need?” he asked.

“Do you have anything for me?” Nora replied. She was a little blunt, in part because she didn’t one hundred percent trust Virgil and she was also worried about what came next…the trip to the Institute was a literal leap into the unknown, and for the highest stakes possible.

“I’ll take that question as a yes. Can’t say I’m too surprised. You did get rid of Kellogg after all. Not much of a step up to take out a courser.” He took the chip from Nora’s outstretched hand. “How’d you manage to get it decoded?” Virgil asked.

Nora replied, “I’m afraid I can’t say.”

“Fine. Forget I asked.”

Virgil turned to his desk, picked up a large sheet of paper and showed it to Nora, “You’re not the only one who’s been busy. I did the best I could; from memory and from bits I’ve heard over the years. Came up with some schematics for you. Wasn’t easy, these hands are ridiculous. Fine motor skills have gone to shit,” Virgil looked rueful, which was an impressively awful expression for a Super Mutant.

He continued, “Here’s the simple explanation: you need to build a device that will hijack the signal the Institute uses to teleport Courser, and send you instead. You know the craziest part of the design? The classical music station? That’s the carrier signal for the relay. All the data’s on the harmonic frequencies…you’ve been hearing it all along.”

He raised a finger, and finished, “I want to be clear this isn’t my area of expertise. I was Bioscience and not Advanced Systems or Engineering or anything.”


“Divisions within the Institute. Specialized groups working on various projects. Hopefully it’ll make sense later,” he said impatiently. “But if you can build this device, and make use of that code, you should be able to override the signal from the Institute’s relay.”

He looked at her with great intensity, “Can you? I mean, can you build it? You have people that can help? This is a lot for one person, even you.”

Nora looked at the “blueprint”; a large schematic that looked clearly enough drafted to her.
Complicated though. And the information was not legal or tradecraft related, so as far as she was concerned it was random words and lines.

_I have no idea why he complained about drafting this. Looks fine to me. What must his handwriting have looked like before? Time to lie to the poor man though…_

“I’ve got it covered.”

_I’d better FIND someone who can read this and make this. Because I wouldn’t know where to start and I DAMN sure wouldn’t use anything I’d built to zap myself apart for transmission._

Virgil nodded, “Good. Because you’ve gotta make it in there. For both our sakes. Don’t forget our agreement: I’ve helped you the best I can. If you can make it in there, you have to get that serum. It’s my only hope for ever being…normal.”

Nora promised him, and shook his hand and headed out. Piper and Nora headed back to the crater, and the Children. When they got there, they actually stopped long enough to exchange brief pleasantries with the Children while waiting for the Vertibird. Apparently the Children were NOT that wrapped up with being social, and Nora’s ‘dine and dash’ hadn’t raised any hackles. Not that Nora actually cared. She’d gotten almost everything she could from them, and her ruthlessly practical side was telling her there wasn’t much left that the Children had left to offer.

The Vertibird carried them back to Sanctuary. It had been long day, and Nora and Piper racked their suits. Nora walked up to her wife immediately after they exited the Armor.

“What do you think, honey? Who can make this…thing?’ Nora asked.

Piper shook her head, “Let’s talk to Dez and Deacon, see what they have to say. Maybe Tinker Tom,” Piper shuddered at that thought. Then Piper looked over Nora’s shoulder and perked up, “Sturges!” she called. She looked at Nora, “I don’t worry about Sturges’ sanity, let’s have him check it out.”

Nora turned and gave Sturges a smile. She waved him over, and rolled out the schematic on a nearby table. He came over, gave it a casual glance, then a MUCH more thorough going over, peering closely at certain segments.

Nora finally gently tapped his shoulder, “You understand this?”

Sturges looked up, “Yep. But, holy shit boss, pardon my French, is that thing complicated.”

Nora asked him, “Could you make it?”

He shook his head. “This bit here, the reflector, easy enough,” he said pointing at the base, “And the antenna? Also easy enough. But the controls, the signal interceptor analyzer and transmitter? I don’t have anything resembling what I’d need to actually make that thing, not to the level of safety I’d want.”

He shook his head, “And that’s not even accounting for this beast here,” and he pointed to a frame and mechanism that straddled the reflector, “The actual dematerializer. I’m not sure I’d want to ever let that thing be used on me under any circumstances. Certainly not one made with the tools I have access to.”

Nora was too busy thinking to see the look Piper got on her face, and she hid the look before Nora could look up. “But you think, if it were properly constructed it would work as advertised?”
“With the right signal key? Yeah, I think so,” he answered.
Half a Truth Is Often a Great Lie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, after returning to Diamond City to get rested, Nora headed for Railroad Headquarters, making it there by midmorning. As usual, when she got there, Dez, Carrington, and in this case Deacon, went into the records room with PAM.

Nora unrolled the schematic, and Deacon took one look and left to get Tom. When Tom came in, Nora turned and said, “Tom, I need your honest, no shit, candid assessment. Is this thing something you can make, reliably enough for me to use?”

Tom looked it over, muttering to himself. Fingers tracing circuits, and then a sharp intake of breath. Then more peering and muttering. Eventually he looked up at Nora. He nodded. “I think so.”

Nora just started at him. Expression blank.

He stammered, “I m-mean probably,” he looked down. “These pieces are easy,” he said, gesturing at the reflector and the antenna, “and this bit, well...,” he trailed off pointing at the signal interceptor analyzer and transmitter.

Nora continued staring at him.

He said, “I could put my hands on the parts I need. Most likely,” and then he looked over the dematerializer. “This part,” he said as Nora continued staring at him, “Maybe. Probably. I think so?”

Dez intervened. “Thanks Tom, we’ll take it from here.”

Tom walked out, as unconcerned as if the entire conversation hadn’t taken place.

Nora shook her head. Dez looked at her questioningly.

Nora said, “This is where I remind everyone he tried to get me to inject battery acid into my veins within days of meeting me. And sounded more certain of doing that than he sounds now. “

Nora looked over at Dez, “I’d rather stick my face in a Vertibird rotor than let him build something meant to dematerialize me. It’d have the same result and be way less work.”

Carrington nodded, Deacon smirked, and Dez reluctantly nodded her head. “Your life, Whisper,” and she sighed, “And you’re probably right. No. You’re definitely right. Dammit.”

PAM interrupted, “Only Organization Brotherhood of Steel possesses technology similar to that of Organization Institute. Suggest utilizing Organization Brotherhood of Steel to construct the Signal Interceptor.”

Nora looked over. “I was really hoping to avoid it coming to that.”

Desdemona looked over at Nora, “We could use them to get you into the Institute. The code we have from that Courser Chip is effectively a one shot gimmick. The minute you get in, they’ll figure out how you hijacked the signal and deactivate that key. It’s not like we’ll be providing them with their own personal molecular relay.”
“True, but while I have been at pains not to burn any bridges, I really was hoping we’d gotten to the end of working with them meaningfully,” Nora said, “At some point, they’re going to put me in an untenable position. And the odds of that happening increase every time I have to interact with the barely mature maniac they call an ‘Elder’.”

Desdemona shrugged. “I wish I had a better plan Whisper. I wish I could look you in the eye and say, ‘Let Tinker Tom do it,’ but PAM’s right. I don’t think anyone but the Brotherhood could make an Interceptor that works. You’ve taught me that it does no good to insist that the Railroad do the work and therefore do nothing when you can help someone else do something, or in this case, manipulate them into doing it.”

_The one time I really win an argument and here it is, biting me. But let’s face facts. If I want to get into the Institute, the route goes through the Brotherhood. GOD-dammit!_

Nora blew out air. “You’re right Dez. We’re going to have to use them to make this thing. I just hope to god the price isn’t too high.”

Dez nodded, “You and me both. Now, what I’m about to tell you next is the single most closely guarded secret we have. There is someone on the inside, IN the Institute, who is working with us. We have no idea who he or she is, we just get messages carried by escaped synths about what’s coming next and where. We’ve codenamed the asset PATRIOT.”

Nora nodded. Dez continued, “When you get in…”

_IF I survive and if I get in Dez, but Ok…_

“…we’d like you to do two things. First, run this preloaded holotape somewhere secure on a terminal linked to The Institute’s network. Make sure you have some time to download everything. And second, run this tape. Its payload will burrow into The Institute’s network and wait until PATRIOT composes another message. Then it will contact him, and establish messaging protocols between us and PATRIOT, using the synths he helps escape.”

Nora took the two small holotapes, and nodded. “Now here comes the REALLY hard part,” she said to Dez.

Dez looked confused.

Nora went on, “Telling my wife that this time she can’t come.”

After getting a few more tidbits of information that PATRIOT had managed to get out, Dez said goodbye and good luck. There really was nothing useful Nora could glean about the actual physical Institute, the place she was on the verge of attempting to sneak into somehow, from even their most knowledgeable adversary.

When they’d gotten home to Diamond City, Nora asked Piper to sit down.

Piper smiling, sat. She wasn’t smiling long. When Nora told her that this part had to be done alone, Piper blew up. She shouted, she threatened, she even tried reasoning with Nora. But Nora calmly pointed out that the process of building the transmitter would be done at the Prydwen. That they would be surrounded by heavily armed soldiers who thought of Piper and Nora’s marriage, should they learn of it, as “unnatural” and who might well be tempted to act on those thoughts.

That when Nora left for the Institute Piper would be stuck amongst the Brotherhood, with no guarantee that she’d be allowed to leave. That she could be used as a hostage to make sure Nora did what they wanted.
Piper’s last stand was her insistence that they could BOTH transmit to the Institute. They’d seen Shaun relay with the Courser in Kellogg’s memories. There was no reason that they couldn’t both go to The Institute.

She did not like Nora’s answer. Nora pointed out that going into The Institute blind meant that only she had the skills necessary to infiltrate, or shoot, or bluff, or do any of a number of things to get in and out alive, and Piper being with her meant that BOTH of them were less likely to make it back out.

When Nora pointed that out, and then followed it with, “We can’t let Nat become an orphan, Piper,” Piper screamed at her, “No, but you’re happy to make me a widow!” and stormed out.

Well THAT went well.

Should I follow her?

No. I know her. She needs time. Piper has never let anyone make up her mind for her, and she’s always managed to get to the right conclusion anyway.

And that conclusion being?

That it’s silly to punish your wife for leaving you alone by insisting on her leaving you alone…

God I hope so.

Less than fifteen minutes later the door opened up. Piper walked through. She’d been crying. She walked right up to Nora, put her arms around Nora’s neck and kissed her, then pulled back and said, “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

Nora smiled, and said, “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about…” but Piper interrupted.

“I do, Blue. I knew that you’d never be happy, that WE’D never be happy, unless you did everything you could to rescue Shaun. But when it came down to it, I never really thought it through. That you’d have to leave me behind. That I could…,” Piper’s voice broke, “That I could lose you. I didn’t want to admit that, and now I can’t help facing it.”

Piper looked at Nora, “I could lose you. And I don’t want to waste what might be my last hours with my wife, fighting.”

So they didn’t. They had a wonderful dinner, made by Nora with Piper’s help, and helped Nat with her homework. They watched Nat play with Dogmeat, while they cuddled on the couch. They listened to Travis on the radio, still awful, but the voice of home.

And then they went to bed, where Nora and Piper made love. And then Piper turned and scooted her behind into her wife and pulled Nora’s arms around her and went to sleep.

Two hours later, Nora woke up. Piper was crying again. Nora turned her over. Piper looked at her through teary eyes, and said, sniffled really, “I promised myself I wouldn’t do this to you, I…I…”

Nora shushed her, and wiped away the tears, and said very seriously, “Are you listening?”

Piper gulped and nodded.

Nora took her wife’s face into her hands. “I will come back to you, Piper Wright. No one and nothing on this planet is going to be able to stop me from getting back to you. And Nat.”
She kissed both Piper’s eyes. “I will do my best to bring back Shaun, but *I* will get back to you no matter what.”

Piper looked back just as seriously, “You better. Otherwise I’LL have to rescue YOU.”

The next morning Nora got up in the pre-dawn, and put on a Brotherhood Uniform, the “Under Power Armor Onesie” that most Knights wore most of the time. This particular uniform had a little something extra provided by Tinker Tom, which Nora found comforting.

She went into Nat’s room and kissed her daughter on the cheek, and then went back to her bedroom and did the same with her wife. Then she strapped on her pistol, and took her rifle from the rack, and stepped outside. The sky was just beginning to lighten as she left Diamond City and then tossed a signal grenade. The Vertibird arrived in a roar of rotors, and Nora climbed aboard then had the Lancer fly her to the Prydwen.

As she flew off, Piper and Nat, having been woken by the arrival of the Vertibird, stepped out the front door in time to watch her departure. Nat looked up, and then buried her face in her sister’s side. Piper looked down at Nat. “She’ll be back, Nat. She promised me she’d be back. She promised me.”

Nat, her face still buried, just nodded.

Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote from Benjamin Franklin, who was absolutely chock full of them. He happened, as the old philandering bastard so often was, to be right.
The Vertibird hummed and whined as it docked with the Prydwen. Nora jumped off and landed lightly on the gangway, then walked briskly along it and headed for the Command Deck.


Nora took a deep breath and went through the hatch into the Prydwen. Maxson was already awake and at his usual station on the command deck overlooking Downtown.

Nora walked up to him, saluted fist to her chest, and said, “I might have a way to get into the Institute, Elder.”

Maxson’s eyebrows went up, “I believe there’s a bit more to the story than you’re telling me but based on your actions and your reports so far, I’ll take you at your word. I’ll brief Proctor Ingram. Report to the airport and get started on the project right away,” he clapped his fist to his chest. “Ad victorium, Knight. Dismissed.”

Nora left and headed for the regular shuttle to the ground the Brotherhood ran. After she arrived on the lower pad, she headed immediately for Proctor Ingram, at that point supervising the construction of a vertical gantry, off of which random pieces of some kind of machine hung, outside the main terminal. Nora walked up, holding her schematics, and with a large, almost shit eating grin on her face for Ingram’s benefit.

Ingram looked at Nora. She seemed to have just gotten off the radio. Which was almost certainly what had just happened.

“So, looks like you’re calling the shots around here, huh? All right I’ll bite. What does your new miracle device do?” Ingram asked.

Nora looked serious, “Did you know that the Institute has a teleporter called the Molecular Relay?”

Ingram’s eyes widened. “Molecular what now? No.”

She took the plans from Nora and looked at them. Like Sturges and Tom before her, she started with a cursory glance that immediately turned into rapt scrutiny. “Molecular transmission via encrypted RF waves? OK, even I have to admit that’s genius. And this explains why we’ve been intermittently picking up anomalous energy reading all across the Commonwealth. Not to mention how they get their tin soldiers to come out of the damn walls.”

Ingram looked up, “This little beauty allows you to hijack their return signal. Instead of the intended target, it grabs you instead.”

“Can we build it?” Nora asked, holding her breath.

*What do I do if she says no?*

Ingram looked at the plans, then got faraway look, her lips moving soundlessly. Then she refocused on Nora, and gave a curt nod. “Yep. It’ll take a cargo hold full of high grade metal, and a
ton of specialized parts, but you should be able to find everything you need here at the airport,” and she gestured at the quartermasters.

And she clicked over a list to Nora’s Pip-Boy, “Here’s a list of everything…plus you’ll need a massive power source to actually run the Signal Interceptor. We’ll get that by hooking into the airport’s grid. You start moving supplies…I’ll get my crew to work, right now.”

Ingram turned away, shouting for a couple scribes as Nora went to start the flow of parts to Ingram’s build team.

The rest of that day was spent sweating and laboring to build the device that was intended to destroy Nora’s body, reduce everything that she was to information and transmit it to a hostile organization located somewhere in the Commonwealth where it MIGHT get reconstituted.

Jesus. When I put it that way, why am I not just packing up and going back to Piper and Nat and forgetting all about this?

Because they took my son. Because I’d really prefer to get him back. Because in the process of figuring all of this out, I am now almost certainly a person of interest or even obsession with the Institute. At this point, it’s them or me. And if they get me, they’ll get Piper and Nat too, and that cannot be allowed to happen.

This is the highest stakes mission I’ve ever undertaken, with a million moving parts and three organizations I have to manipulate into doing what I need them to do when I need them to do it, and the one thing I cannot do, is fail. I have to succeed. And I have to destroy The Institute.

Wait, what?

Think this through. When I leave The Institute with Shaun, or leave knowing that he’s truly lost forever, the only way they’re not going to follow me is if they don’t exist.

After she finished following her train of thought, Nora went to see Tegan in his cage.

“I need a big demo charge, Tegan. Really Big. Something that could really ruin someone’s day if I need to,” she said.

He showed her a scalable yield nuclear demo pack. It cost an obscene amount of caps. Which Nora paid, gladly.

No price too high for an insurance policy for protecting my family. Now here’s hoping I have the option of getting away before I set it off.

She stowed the demo pack, about the size of half a loaf of bread, in a cargo vest clipped to her uniform. Then she went to finish her work on the Interceptor. By nightfall, it was almost complete and she and Ingram stepped back to look at it.

She turned to Nora, “You’re crazier than a sack full of molerats to use this thing Knight. And I say that as someone who keeps trying to get back into the field with exactly two fewer legs than the regulation allowance.”

Nora looked back, “Will it work, Proctor?”

Ingram shrugged. “It will do exactly what it was designed to do. Whether what it was designed to do will work is the question.”
Nora sighed, “Well that’s about as good a set of odds as I can expect, I guess.” She looked over at Proctor Ingram. “We should inform the Elder that we go tomorrow.”

Ingram nodded. “I’ll let Arthur know. Get some sleep Knight. You’ll need it.”

Nora went to find a cot, away from the build team and laid her head down. She thought she’d have trouble sleeping, but that part of her that she’d had since her initial training knew she had to be alert and oriented tomorrow. And that part of her snuck up on her consciousness, and knocked her out.

It was barely light out when Ingram shook her awake. Nora slipped into her vest, which in addition to the demo pack she’d told no one about, was carrying four plasma grenades and as much 7.62mm and 10mm ammo as she could, and two days of water and concentrated rations. She sighed and looked up at the sky slowly turning from indigo to blue.

*Why does everything military have to start before dawn? Why couldn’t I be from the universe where the first ever soldier was a night person, and they set the traditions?*

Nora turned down a cup of coffee from one of the scribes, as discovering a uncontrollable urge to urinate right in the middle of hiding from Institute searchers didn’t sound attractive. Not that she knew what was going to happen. So she planned for the worst.

She walked over to the Interceptor. During the overnight, Ingram’s team had put the finishing touches on it, and Proctor Ingram was giving it a final check against the schematic before energizing it. Nora looked up at the sky and took a deep breath.

About a half an hour later, just as the sun was peeking up over the Atlantic, Elder Maxson walked up to Nora. He stood for a second, companionably, then turned to her. “Remarkable work Knight. The Signal Interceptor appears to be complete. Are you ready to put it to the test?”

Nora nodded, “Ready to go, Elder.”

He looked her over, “Your confidence is an inspiration to us all. That being said, this is the first we’ve attempted to directly adapt Institute Technology. When we throw that switch, we don’t know what will happen. God willing, you’ll end up inside the Institute and the mission can continue.”

Nora raised her eyebrows, “I know what my goal is. What is the mission that you have for me?”

He smiled, “I understand, but remember who is making your goals possible, Knight. I want you to listen very carefully, because once you’ve entered the Institute, we expect to lose contact.” He raised a finger.

“It’s imperative that you memorize what I’m about to tell you. About ten years ago the Brotherhood began recruiting civilian scientists to assist with various projects. During this time we were able to secure the services of a Dr. Madison Li, a noted mind in the field of nuclear engineering,” he said.

Nora, wanting a distraction as much as a briefing, encouraged him to go on. If she survived, she could easily see this moment being the last time she was “part of” the Brotherhood, but she didn’t really have anything better to do at the moment, so she focused on this. “How did the Brotherhood meet Dr. Li?” she asked.

Maxson replied, “She was part of as civilian project in the Capitol Wasteland that the Brotherhood appropriated. It wasn’t difficult to convince her to stay.” There were a lot of questions that Nora wanted to ask about that statement, but she knew it would be ill-advised.
He went on, “That said, Dr. Li’s contributions to our cause were instrumental in maintaining order in the Capitol Wasteland. After some time, she developed…differences…with the Brotherhood and exiled herself to the Commonwealth. We’re fairly certain that she made contact with the Institute.”

Nora looked at him sharply, “I’m surprised that the Brotherhood let her go.”

He shook his head, “Had I been in command, I wouldn’t have allowed it to happen. She was a valuable asset.”

*There’s never a conversation with this guy where I don’t end up with the god damned willies.*

Nora kept any expression from her face as he continued, “The mission is simple. Once inside, you’re to track down Dr. Madison Li, ascertain her status, and if alive, to convince her using any means necessary to return to us at the Brotherhood of Steel. There’s a special project we’re working on, and it needs her attention.”

Nora looked over to him, “What’s this project?”

For a miracle, Maxson was feeling chatty. Maybe the prospect of infiltrating the Institute was making him cheery or maybe the fact that he figured either Nora would get to Li or die made him consider her a good security risk, but, “Dr. Li previously worked on a potent weapon for the Brotherhood of Steel. We’d like her to continue where she left off.”

Then he must have thought better, “That’s all you need to know. Listen to me. I know that you’re risking your life going into the Institute blind.”

*You fucking THINK?!?*

He stared Nora down as if through sheer force of will he could replace her need to get her son with his own desires. “Just keep your mind on the mission, and don’t let anything sway you from your sworn duty.”

Ingram looked up, and called Nora over. “I’ve checked and re-checked everything, and I think the Signal Interceptor’s ready to go. Are you?”

*Showtime.*

“Let’s do this.”

Ingram nodded. “All right. Head up onto the platform and I’ll see if I can find a signal I can lock on to.”

Nora walked over, and hopped up on the platform.

Maxson followed, “Dr. Li is a valuable asset. If any harm comes to her I’m holding you personally responsible.” Nora nodded. She just barely managed to keep the eyeroll internal.

Ingram was checking her console. “Let’s see…relay is dialed in, beam emitter’s warmed up, everything looks green. Let me start scanning for a signal.”

And then they waited. Ingram killed a little bit of time by walking over to Nora and handing her a holotape chip. “By the way, this little trip you’re taking is a perfect opportunity find out as much as we can about the Institute and what they’re up to. I put a clever little program on this holotape that’ll scan their network and download anything it finds. Place it in any network terminal down there, and it’ll do the rest. Bring it back to me and I’ll see if I can make sense of whatever it
Nora smiled to herself.

*I’ll have to put a label on this one. Wouldn’t do to mix up my Railroad download, with my Brotherhood download, with my contact chip. All these things presuming that I don’t go down in a hail of laser fire from the moment I materialize. Or that I materialize at all.*

By mid-morning Nora had progressed from standing to sitting to laying on the platform with her legs crossed. Suddenly, the entire assembly started humming. She stood up.

Ingram's eyes were locked on the console, “Cross your fingers…I’m inputting the code now. Wow, there’s a ton of interference and ghosting. It’s going to take a minute to lock in.”

“Take your time and get it right Ingram,” Nora called, “I’d prefer to arrive without being merged with a housefly or inside-out.”

Ingram actually sounded excited, “Ok, looks like we have a winner. RF capture complete. Ramping the emitter.”

Nora crouched and drew her pistol.

“Sixty percent…eighty…spiking…now steady, throwing the transmit switch...”

*Piper, Nat, I love...*

An explosion of white.

**Chapter End Notes**

The title is a quote from DH Lawrence, poet and author of Lady Chatterly's Lover. Which is one of those books that really rubs your nose in how different the past is. In Ancient Greece, or some Roman periods (not Augustan Rome...man was a prude), or modern day? Tame. At the time, though, it's publication by Penguin Books was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications act. In 1960, just to reinforce the point that Fallout's Pre-War society locked in the 1950s was highly repressed.

Lawrence himself was an anti-democratic elitist, verging on fascist. Which makes the quote being part of a chapter involving the Brotherhood especially apt.

Yes, that's a deliberate reference to David Cronenberg's "The Fly".
Instantly, Nora’s vision cleared. She was in a round chamber, facing an archway. She took a deep breath. There seemed to be no one outside.

*I suppose that makes sense. It’s not like the Courser whose place I just took wouldn’t know what to do. If everything is automated, no one would have to see one of their murderbots covered with some poor wastelander’s blood dragging one of their slaves back to them.*

Nora moved cautiously and quietly out of the chamber, and swept her pistol around as she cleared the corners of the room she was in. There was a console in the middle of the room, and the walls were lined with mysterious pieces of equipment with blinking lights. The left side of the room was extended outwards and there was a hall opposite the console. Nora could see no one down the hall, and she moved to cover the extension of the room as she cleared it as well.

In the process she moved behind the console and saw a large red button, prominently placed, and a computer terminal. The button had a label: [Emergency Evacuation Relay].

*I have a parachute. As long as I keep my route back here open, I can get out of the facility. Never ever EVER let anything get between me and this button.*

Nora began moving down the hallway. At the end she could see a clear tube in a small room.

*Could be a short trip.*

“Hello.”

Nora nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked around wildly.

“I wondered if you might make it here. “

It was an intercom.

“You’re quite resourceful, you know. I am known as Father. The Institute is under my guidance. I know why you’re here.”

*Fuck fuck fuck FUCK! I didn’t get 30 feet before I was blown.*

“I’d like to discuss things face to face. Please step into the elevator.”

A platform arrived and the clear tube opened. There was a button that was gently glowing like a heartbeat.

“I can only imagine what you’ve heard, what you think of us. I’d like to show you that you have the wrong impression.”

*So now what, Jane Bond? Talk your way into and out of the Institute? This right here, this moment, is WHY you came alone. So you could do what you had to. Tell me, JADE SUN, if you get in that elevator do you think you can get back to that button? Can you make it back here so that you can be Nora Wright, wife of Piper Wright, again?*
Nora thought. Dispassionate.

Yes. I can.

She got into the elevator, and pressed the button. The platform sank into the tube, and the hallway slid up smoothly.

The platform moved down into a large atrium that rose up around her. Everything was clean; whites and soft blues. There was greenery below, grass grown in an indoor park, and she could make out what looked like apartment blocks lining the central atrium, and people in white overalls walking around the atrium and on balconies.

“Welcome to the Institute. This is the reality of the Institute. This place, these people, the work we do.”

My god, the size of the place.

As she continued to sink her unseen interlocutor went on as she goggled at the balconies, at the people moving about purposefully. At the fountains running alongside the apartment blocks and the gardens.

“For over a hundred years we’ve dedicated ourselves to humanity’s survival. Decades of research, countless experiments and trials, a shared vision of how science can shape the future. It has never been easy, and our actions are often misinterpreted by those above ground.”

She arrived at the main floor, and continued, sinking into a basement or sub-level, or whatever you would call floors below a main floor when the whole thing is deep underground.

The tube opened into hallway. The floor plating and the walls seemed to be made of millions of interlocking hexagons. And the whole area was as clean as anything she’d seen since the War.

As she walked along the hallway, the voice continued.

“There’s too much at stake here to risk it all. As you’ve seen things above ground are…unstable. I’d like to talk to you about what we can do for everyone.”

Nora arrived at a new elevator in an opaque shaft. She pressed the button. This time she went up. The voice went on, “But that can wait. You are here for a specific and very personal reason. You are here for your son.”

The door opened. Nora walked down a short hallway, her gun held ready, but not yet raised. Through a doorway ahead she could just make out what looked like a cell. She stepped into the room.

Inside the cell was a boy. He looked like his father, and like his mother used to look.

He was her son.

Nora tried to speak. Nothing came out. She swallowed. Tried again. “Shaun?”

The boy perked up, “Huh? Yes, I’m Shaun.”

There was no recognition in his eyes. Logically, Nora was expecting that, but emotionally, she was disappointed. There was a part of her that felt that her son should somehow recognize her instinctively. He didn’t.
She knelt down, putting her gun to her side. Away from him. Trying very hard not to see the symmetry to the moment he’d been kidnapped.

“Shaun, I’ve been looking for you for…so long.”

He looked confused, “Who are you?”

Nora’s eyes closed, then she opened them again.

*Please. Just...please.*

“Shaun, it’s me. I’m your mom.”

The boy became agitated, he was looking around, “Father, what’s going on?”

*Oh god. Your father is dead, my beautiful baby boy.*

“Shaun, daddy’s gone but I’m here. Your mom is here now,” Nora said in urgent tones.

The boy began pacing, “What’s going on? Father!!”

Nora was acutely conscious of the passage of time, and fact that, at this moment, her route out of the Institute was clear. For now.

“Shhh...it’ll be OK. Mommy’s here now.”

Shaun raised his hands, as if to push her away. “I don’t know you. Go away! Father! Father help me. Help me!”

Nora tried again, “Shaun please, calm down. I’ll get us out of here.”

Shaun began backing away, horror in his eyes. Breaking his mother’s heart. “Father, help me! She’s trying to take me!”

A door opened and a man stepped through. He was older. Hair and beard grey. A lab coat and sweater underneath.

*This is it. I’m going to have to shoot my way out aren’t I?*

The man spoke, “Shaun, S9-23 Recall Code Cirrus.”

Her son went slack. The arms drooped, head bowed. Her son stood stock still. Motionless.

The synth stood motionless in the cell as Nora turned to the newcomer.

He was looking at the boy, “Fascinating, but disappointing. The child’s responses were not at all what I anticipated. He’s a prototype you understand. We’re only now beginning to explore the effects of extreme emotional stimuli.”

*I’ll give you extreme fucking emotional stimuli!*

Nora’s gun came up. Standing a safe eight feet away from the man, her muzzle never wavered from its aiming point on the bridge of his nose. Far enough away that he couldn’t possibly reach her before she shot him, but close enough that there was no doubt that she’d hit him.

Now he raised his hands, “Please try and keep an open mind. I recognize that you are emotional,
and that your journey here has been fraught with challenges. Let’s start anew. I am Father. Welcome to the Institute.”

“Give me Shaun. The REAL Shaun. Right now!” she gritted out through clenched teeth.

He smiled, “I know. You’ve gone to such lengths to find him.”

Nora glared. For some perverse reason, her anger seemed to please him. “I’ll make this very simple. Where. Is. My. Son?”

The man smiled wider. Nora wanted to shoot him like she’d never wanted to shoot anyone, save Kellogg, before. But he was her only lead, and she doubted that this time she could shoot first and ask questions later.

“He’s here. In the Institute. Closer than you think,” said the man. He went on, “But I need you to realize this situation is far more complicated than you could imagine. You have traveled very far and suffered a great deal to find your son. Well, your tenacity and dedication have been rewarded.”

He just kept smiling at her.

“It’s good to finally meet you after all this time. It’s me. I am Shaun. I am your son.”

Chapter End Notes

Another in a series of poetically inspired titles, this one by Ralph Waldo Emerson, from a poem "Concord Hymn". I wandered into the poem while I as poking around the Transcendentalists, back at the Sunshine Tidings chapter and I liked the ring of the phrase.

It's appropriate on several levels, as both Nora and Shaun are FROM Concord, and there's a plea here to spare someone from time and nature, and of course we know who HASN'T had either time or nature spare a shaft raised to him...as well as the "shaft" being in this context a monument to Lexington and Concord just as the Institute is in a sense a monument to Father.
“Bullshit,” she said.

He shook his head, “Is it so hard to imagine? After all the things you’ve seen and experienced in the Commonwealth?”

He continued, looking at her earnestly, “Think about it…In the Vault you had no concept of the passage of time. You were released from the pod, and went searching for your infant son. But then you learned that your son was no longer an infant, but ten years old. You believed ten years had passed.”

He nodded at her, “Is it really so hard to accept that it was not ten years, but sixty? That is the reality. And here I am, raised by the Institute, and now its leader.”

It can’t be.

Why not? You had no idea how long you’d been under the first time. It was the same amount of perceived time as the second. It could just as easily have been 150 years and 60 years as 200 years and 10 years.

And he has Nate’s eyes.

Let’s say I buy all this. Then what?

Then you have the ultimate infiltration ahead of you, JADE SUN. You still have decisions to make. Maybe soon, maybe later, but decisions.

She looked at Shaun. He really DID have his father’s eyes. “They stole you. Kidnapped you. They had no right.”

Shaun shook his head and looked…impatient. “Right, wrong…irrelevant. It was necessary. The Institute knew that humanity’s future depended on it.”

He held his hands up, “At that time, the year 2227, the Institute had made great strides in synth production. But it was never enough. Scientific curiosity and the goal of perfection drove them ever onward. What they wanted was the perfect machine. So they followed the best example so far. The human being. Walking, talking, fully articulate. Capable of anything.”

If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that right and wrong are never irrelevant. And that when you think that way you damage yourself. Profoundly.

Nora looked disgusted, “So the weird science experiments needed specimens. That’s why they took you.”

Shaun shrugged. “In a manner of speaking yes. The Institute endeavored to create synthetic organics. The most logical starting place of course was human DNA. Plenty of that was available of course, but it had all been corrupted, by radiation.”

Was it really unsuitable? Or did they have a phobia? What was it Kellogg said? They didn’t like
“dirty contaminated degenerates”. Chasing a perfect specimen.

Shaun continued, “It had affected everyone. Even in their attempts to shield themselves from the world above, members of the Institute had been exposed. Another source was necessary. But then the Institute found me after discovering the records of Vault 111. An infant, frozen in time, protected from the radiation induced mutations that had crept into every other cell in the Commonwealth. I was exactly what they needed.”

It’s not like HE chose these things. Maybe I can STILL rescue my son.

Shaun opened his arms, “And so it was my DNA that became the basis for the synthetic organics used to create every human like synth you see today. I am their Father. Through Science we are Family. The synths, me, and you.”

I can hear the capital letters. Father. Science. Family. It’s almost messianic with him. But he includes me. Now what?

Nora, desperately bargaining for time to think, decide, act, asked, “And you’ve been down here the whole time?”

Shaun nodded. “I have yes. I know you must have questions.”

Nora looked at her son. She’d admitted that much to herself at least. “Your father never got to see you grow up…,” she said, a part of her perhaps testing this person that she felt she should love, but could feel slipping into the distance.

Father’s answers did not inspire confidence. “Yes, what happened to him was regrettable. I’ve gone over the records. It seems what happened to him was an unfortunate bit of collateral damage.”

Nora’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. But Father continued, “For many years I never questioned who my parents were. I accepted my situation and that was that. With old age comes regret and asking what if more often. But what matters now is that you and I have a chance to begin again.” Shaun smiled at her sincerely.

Maybe. Oh god. Collateral damage?!? What’s the right thing to do?

Nora frowned, “So you’re in charge of the Institute?”

Of course she was really asking, “What part of our misery are you truly responsible for,” but that would be the kind of question that would have to be followed almost certainly by running for it. And after the initial shock, she was becoming aware of the three holotapes she’d hidden in herself. If she was still going to do what she’d come to do, she needed to stay.

This is why I came alone. So I could to adapt to any possible outcome. Although, “Your son is a sixty year old man who’s in charge of your opponent,” is not one of the possibilities I thought about. What is possible from this point? I need time. To think. To decide.

Oblivious to her turmoil, her son replied, “I am the Director yes. I spent decades working to reach this point. It’s a responsibility I take very seriously. The Institute is…important. It really is humanity’s best hope for the future, no matter what those above ground may think of us.”

Maybe I can put everything together. It’s at least a possibility at this point.

Nora looked at Shaun, “They need your help Shaun. It’s rough up there to say the least.”
He shook his head, “Oh we tried that. Surprised? The Institute once tried to help create a stabilized Commonwealth government. It ended in bickering, infighting…a disaster. No, we look after our own now. Ultimately the Commonwealth has nothing to fear from us. Whatever you’ve seen or heard I hope I can convince you of that. Just give me time.”

Great. Yet another faction only worried about its own interests. But Nick had a different take on what happened to the CPG. Who’s right?

But for now, I have time. He wants to convince me. I want convince him. Maybe we can convince each other.

But there’s one thing I have to know. And now.

She looked at Shaun levelly, “Kellogg worked for you.”

He shook his head again, “He was an Institute asset long before I arrived here. It wasn’t until I became Director that I learned of all the things he’d done…what kind of person he was.”

Just to be clear, my son is telling me, “It was like this when I got here.” Uh-huh.

Nora just looked at Father, “You knew the man was a psychopath, but you used him anyway?”

He looked troubled, at least, “Would you have preferred that I turned him loose on the Commonwealth? At least keeping him on a short leash kept the collateral damage to a minimum. The Institute took advantage of his vicious nature, I won’t deny that. Institute technology prolonged his life, and his usefulness, far beyond any normal human lifespan.”

Shaun actually looked ashamed. “He never failed the Institute but his cruelty became more apparent with every completed objective. I won’t lie…it wasn’t coincidence that your path crossed his. It seemed a fitting way to allow you…us…to have our revenge.”

Nora was more than a little troubled by that last. It was possible that Shaun really had no idea of the varied levels of survival skills out in the Wasteland. It was also possible that Father had simply not cared. Which one it was, was not yet clear.

He continued, a bit more briskly now, “I know that there’s more to discuss, but the Institute is on the verge of some important breakthroughs. Your presence would be appreciated as we approach them. I’ve been a part of something amazing here. I’ve helped to build a life for myself and the people of the Institute. Now after all these years, you have an opportunity to help with that. Doesn’t that intrigue you? Isn’t that what you want?”

There’s only one possible answer to keep the plate spinning. And maybe the horse will learn to sing.

“Yes.”

Shaun looked happy, “You’ve been through so much. I’m glad it has not impaired your judgement.”

Father went on, “Forgive me, I assumed that after everything I’m sure you’ve seen above ground you would be a bit more biased against us. There is much to be done. You’ll need time to acclimate yourself. A chance to become familiar with our procedures. The Institute is as much your home as mine.”

He clapped his hands together. “Please take some time and get to know it. Meet the people you’ll
be working with. You’ll want to introduce yourself to the division heads. Dr Fillmore in Facilities, Dr Ayo in SRB, Dr Holdren in Bioscience, and Dr Li in Advanced Systems.”

Dr. Li! Now what?

Go. Talk. Observe. And then, maybe, decide.

Father touched a stud, and the door behind her opened. When she turned back, he’d gone back to his office. The boy remained in his “cell”. Deactivated.

Nora sighed and went out the door and down set of stairs, a circular arrangement that went up several stories and down, as it turned out, one.

Where as fate would have it, Dr Allison Fillmore was consulting with a subordinate, while that subordinate was making some adjustments in a Gen 2. She looked up in shock as Nora came down the stair.

“They weren’t kidding, you really are here. I’m Allie Fillmore. You can think of me as the Institutes Chief Engineer,” she said as she looked Nora up and down. Nora was incredibly conscious that she was wearing a Brotherhood Uniform. And, unlike everyone she could see, her pistol and rifle. But no one had yet demanded them from her.

Maybe he really is trying to get me to ‘join’ the Institute. And avoiding making demands until then.

“I heard about you. To have lost so much. I guess I felt a little sorry for you. Your whole world is gone,” then she looked worried. “I’m sorry, that was very personal.”

I’m as unknown a quantity to them as they are to me. And just like Kellogg they may be more frightened of me than I realize. Even here, surrounded by every COURSER not on a mission. But I guess if you’ve lived your entire life completely secure, even a minuscule increase in risk is going to seem HUGE.

Allie continued, obviously relieved to be on more familiar ground discussing her job, “I’ll be happy to answer any questions you have about us. We maintain and upgrade the systems that make it possible to live and work in a place like this. There’s a lot of machinery behind these walls.”

Nora nodded, “And it must be a challenge to meet the power demands of a place like this.”

Allie agreed, “Absolutely. We scratch and scrape for every precious Watt we can. Over the years we’ve learned a few tricks to help with the power budget. When necessary we can tap into select power sources on the surface. We take only what we need, of course. Fortunately Advanced Systems is always working on new solutions to generate more energy. And it’s a good thing too, because demand is always increasing.”

She smiled at Nora, and said, “I’m afraid I really should get back to work. Unless you have more questions, of course.”

Nora shook her head, “I’m sure if I think of anything else, I can always find you.”

Allie smiled, “During working hours sure. I do a have family after hours,” she said. Suddenly her face fell. “I’m sorry, that was thoughtless.”

Nora waved her hand, “Don’t worry about it Allie.”

Interesting. She didn’t shake my hand or touch me in any way. Is that an Institute thing or a “dirty
Nora had been strolling and found herself in the central atrium. The clear tube she’d come down extended from the floor, the central fountain really, all the way to the domed ceiling high above. Looking across she could a green archway, with the label Bioscience above it. Everything was both utilitarian and soothing. When she entered that facility, she could immediately smell green growing things.

Down a small hallway, there was another door that was currently open. When she stepped inside, she saw a positively enormous hydroponics facility. The lights were full spectrum and played on rack after rack of food plants rising 4 or 5 stories up the sides of the central chamber. Two scientists were having a disagreement as she came in.

“…I can’t understand how anyone survives to adulthood out there,” said one.

“Well they do, though god knows not in very good condition,” replied the other. “There are a number of food supplements that could…”

“That is not an option and never was,” replied the first, firmly, “And those people are the last remnants of a dying past. It’s best not to dwell on the subject.”

The other’s lips thinned. “They’re still people and they’re still suffering; we can at least admit that it’s regrettable. How can we redefine mankind, if we can’t even hold onto our own humanity?”

The first looked troubled, “Well that’s best left to our colleagues in the robotics division,” then he turned and saw Nora. “Welcome. Clayton Holdren, head of Bioscience division. Bioscience studies botany, genetics and medicine as well as providing health care for the Institute. But our most important contribution is providing the food we eat and the oxygen we breathe. Tell me…will you be joining us?”

Nora looked him over. His Nietzschean attitude to everyone not currently in the Institute notwithstanding, he seemed an affable sort.

I’m tentatively gonna file him under “brown-noser”. He may turn out useful though.

Nora nodded, “I’d like to give it a try.”

Clayton smiled, “Great. In any case I imagine you’ll want to continue looking around.”

Nora nodded again. She was starting to feel like a Bobblehead. But she asked, “Can you tell me how to find the SRB?”

Clayton made a small moue of distaste. “I suppose you DO have to see everyone, even our…colleagues…in the Synth Retention Bureau. It’s directly across from us. Just head out and go straight. You can’t miss it.”

Nora thanked him and left.

SRB is Bureau 8. Bureau 8! Just stay calm, damnit.

Fuck calm! This feels exactly like choosing to walk into Qincheng Prison freely. Have you lost your god damned mind Nora?

I’m not Nora. Not yet. I’m still JADE SUN. Just because I had a damn heart to heart with my son,
doesn’t mean I’m not still JADE SUN. Until I’m back Diamond City on my second glass of wine, I am not in the clear. And I’m not Nora.

She walked up to the door. It opened and she stepped in. There was a decontamination arch around her and in an office to her left, she could see a slight, Chinese looking man waving his arms and speaking with a woman. She assumed he was Ayo…as he was wearing what she had learned quickly was a Senior administrator coat, but in SRB black, and browbeating the woman he was with who was dressed as he was.

Weirdly, the way he looked calmed JADE SUN down. She was on familiar ground now. It was almost like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Another title from Yeats "The Second Coming", which, as it deals with the Apocalypse, is appropriate. The Ceremony of Innocence is based on another line from the poem.

The horse might learn to sing is from a joke, and you can google it.

The other joke in this one is when Nora thinks that she can only be Nora when she gets back to Diamond City and is on her second glass of wine. It's a pilot joke/saying, cautioning rookie pilots about overconfidence, "No landing is complete until you're in the officer's club on your second beer."

Finally Qincheng Prison is a real place, for dissidents, political prisoners, and one assume, spies. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qincheng_Prison
Love Is Whatever You Can Still Betray

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I’m thinking of going over to Robotics and knocking some heads together,” said the man JADE SUN had tentatively tagged as Dr. Ayo.

“What now?” the woman he was with asked.

“They’re dragging their heels about getting me the targeting package upgrades I’ve asked for. Maybe I should take some Coursers along. You know, send a message,” he said.

JADE SUN smiled at that.

What a wonderful seething pack of insecurities this guy is. Lovely. Lovely. I can use this. What should I use first? His desire for agreement and approval? His need to dominate? The desire to be seen as the toughest person in the room? So many emotional handles, so little time.

The woman sighed, “Please don’t. There’s enough friction as it is between us and pretty much all the other departments.”

Ayo smirked, “You going soft on me Alana? My methods get results and they will this time. You’ll see.”

He looked up as JADE SUN strolled up, casually curious. He looked her over, “So here you are. Justin Ayo, acting director of the Synth Retention Bureau. I’ll be up front, we’re going to be keeping a close eye on you for the near future. Despite your relation to Father. I’m sure you understand.”

Ok. Need to dominate it is. Play him hard or flatter him? Start with flatter.

“No problems, here,” she said, a twinge of concern and fear in her voice.

“Now Father has asked that I provide you with a brief overview of the SRB. Our primary responsibility is the recovery of escaped synths hiding amongst the human population above,” he started.

Secret police. Useful. First inclination is to bully, not extract information. Probably the reason that The Railroad hasn’t already been destroyed. They don’t start looking for intelligence except as a third or fourth order concern.

JADE SUN nodded. She let herself relax some, as if he’d just told her she was cleared of all wrongdoing after all.

He was proud now, “Our main instrument is the Courser, a third generation synth assigned to operate on the surface. They hunt down and reclaim synths that have escaped the Institute. They are highly self sufficient, trained in combat, infiltration and tracking. In a word our Coursers are relentless.”

He looked at JADE SUN sharply, “I gather you know all this as you’ve encountered on already. In fact I’d very much like to know how you defeated it.”
JADE SUN looked troubled, because she couldn’t help. She herself wasn’t really sure how it had happened. It had been so fast and confusing, she almost didn’t realize what had happened until she’d gotten a lucky neck shot in. And she believed herself. For that moment.

She shook her head, “I guess…I guess I just got lucky,” she lied.

He sighed, “That’s hardly helpful. I suppose I’ll have to ask Robotics to perform a detailed diagnostic on the entire production run. As if we don’t have enough problems. Now unless you need something else, I need to get back to work,” he turned away, bored with the conversation now.

*Lovely.*

JADE SUN turned, and came face to face with the woman. She nodded, “Alana Secord. Don’t mind Dr. Ayo. He’s incredibly busy and always being expected to work miracles with no resources.”

JADE SUN nodded, “I’m sure he’s very capable,” she said. “I’ll make sure my son knows how useful you are down here.”

_Chew on that. I have the Director’s ear. Because I’m his MOTHER. And we’re both ABOVE you. And your boss. Wonder how the pair of you will react to that…_

Secord looked a little troubled as she nodded and turned away.

*Just lovely.*

JADE SUN turned and left. As she exited the SRB, she saw a sign directing her left for Advanced Systems. She went down a ramp and then back up following a blue line labeled “Advanced Systems” now.

Nora felt herself unwind, almost as though she were holstering her pistol. Not by much, but by a critical margin. There might well be a time soon when she needed to project a more sincere presence. Like speaking to Dr. Li. Who she was going to have to convince to return to the Brotherhood. Probably.

The door opened, and her first thought was that they were under attack. But a moment’s observation told her she was hearing a weapons test. Looking right into an office, she saw an older, but still striking woman, in a blue senior scientist coat.

She walked up, after closing the door behind her. “Dr. Li?”

Dr. Li looked up. Her eyes widened marginally. “It’s you, you’re not authorized to be here.”

Nora smiled, “Actually I was looking for you.”

Dr. Li gave her a suspicious look, “Why?”

“Father told me to meet the division heads.”

Dr. Li grimaced, “That’s not the reason, and we both know it. A Brotherhood airship arrives in the Commonwealth and then you find a way to intercept our teleport signal and then you show up at my door. I knew it was just a matter of time before you people found me. I’ve been looking over my shoulder for decades waiting for them to send someone like you to kill me.”
Nora leaned back, “Why would they want you dead?”

Dr. Li, shook her head, “I did some pretty sensitive work for the Brotherhood. Even though Lyons let me go there were some others in the ranks who thought I knew too much. That’s why I came here. It was the only place where I thought I would be out of the Brotherhood’s reach and still be able to do research.”

She looked Nora up and down, “Since you’re related to Father, though, I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I might not agree with everything he says, but I know he’d never allow harm to come my way. Say what you came here for then leave.”

*It all comes down to this…*

“Are you happy here?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li leaned back herself. This was clearly not a question she was expecting, and instead of a flip answer, she actually thought about it, “You’d think, with the equipment and facilities. But there is a lack of transparency. I don’t think we get the full story on everything that goes on down here.”

*First order cover story…*

“The Brotherhood needs your help doctor.”

Dr. Li shook her head, “Needs my help? Why? They said they didn’t need me when I left. Made it pretty clear that I was a nuisance.”

“They’re having problems and need your help.”

“I don’t see where that’s my problem. Tell me…why would I want to come crawling back to the Brotherhood?”

*She doesn’t like Father’s secrecy. I’ll bet the Brotherhood was too “Band of Brothers” to bother with duplicity.*

“The Brotherhood was always straight with you,” Nora offered.

“I am getting a bit tired of all the secrets here. Sometimes I feel like Father is keeping things from me. Things I’m not supposed to know about. I don’t like that. But still…”

*I wonder…*

“But your work could be instrumental in freeing the Commonwealth,” Nora said.

Dr. Li shook her head, ruefully, “You really know how to push my buttons don’t you? You know I never understood why the Institute was so damn selfish. All those innocent people up there, dying, and we’re surrounded by technology that could make their lives better. Yet we hide down here and insulate ourselves from everyone and everything. It’s not right,” Dr. Li shook her head, “It’s not right.”

She looked at Nora, “Ok…I’ll make my way to the Brotherhood. I’ll do it separately. We can’t take any chances. Tell whoever sent you that they just got the services of Dr. Madison Li. Now for the sake of keeping up appearances, let’s see that Pip-Boy of yours. I’ve been told to install a Courser Chip in it.”

“No,” said Nora.
“What? What do you mean ‘No’?” Madison asked.

“More like yes, but not quite yet. I’m here under false pretenses, Madison,” said Nora.

“I get it, you’re not really here at Fathers request, you’re here for the Brotherhood.”

“No, Dr. Li, I mean, I’m also not really here for the Brotherhood either.”

“Well who are you here for then?” snapped Dr. Li.

“Are there any recording devices on?” Nora asked.

“No. And if there were I’d know. Trust me,” said Madison.

Nora sighed. “I’m here on my own. Or for the Commonwealth, I suppose. I’m with the Minutemen,” she looked at Li carefully, “And The Railroad.”

“Those loonies?!?” said Dr. Li.

“Why do you call them that?”

“They think the synths are human,” said Dr. Li.

“And how do they differ from human?” said Nora.

“Well, they’re grown in Robotics for one thing,” said Dr. Li.

“I was grown too. Not in a room, but is that really so different?”

“And we program them.”

“Hypnosis. Convincing someone to leave the Institute? Talking someone into doing something foolish? Not re-programming?”

“I mean…arggh.”

“Exactly. Don’t dismiss someone as loony if you can’t get through four laps of the Socratic method without getting tripped up,” said Nora. “But I’m off track. I was here to rescue my son. Imagine my surprise when I found him over two times my age, and running the place. But I used the Brotherhood to get here. They want you back, and if that’s where you REALLY want to go, fine, but is it?”

“What was all that convincing me to do it for, then?” asked Dr. Li.

“Me, making sure you really want get out of here and won’t betray me the second I drop my guard,” said Nora.

“I still could,” said Dr. Li.

“And I could shoot you with my silent pistol, stroll out of here after exchanging mock pleasantries with your corpse, walk straight to that elevator, go up to the teleport room, and hit that lovely red button labeled ‘Emergency Evacuation Relay’,” Nora pointed out. “Let’s agree that we could both ruin the others whole day and then agree…not to.”

Madison smiled incongruously. “That is simultaneously the strangest, and yet most sincere offer I’ve ever had. And I worked with James Neeson. So while you don’t know it, that’s saying
something. What’s your offer?”

“Ok. I have to bring you back to the Brotherhood, at least temporarily. But I’ll have someone looking out for you. He’s really good at disguise. He’ll pull you out when the time comes, or help you if you have to run. You’d know when. If the Brotherhood started talking about Knight Nora Greene’s betrayal. The need to attack the Minutemen. Either way, until then, you’d be an agent in place for the Minutemen and The Railroad.”

“How’d you get them to work together?”

“It’s a really long story. I’ll tell you someday. Just accept that they are.”

Dr. Li shook her head, “I must be crazy.”

“No Dr. Li, you just really want to do the right thing. I’m making that possible. On that note, I have three tapes I need to link to the Institute network. It’ll take a few minutes.”

Madison looked on a bit surprised as Nora unzipped her suit to the crotch and then reached under herself to pull the three tapes inside the waterproof cylinder from inside her vagina. Nora slotted all three into Li’s terminal.

At Madison’s questioning look, she smiled, “Most guards won’t actually try to fondle someone when searching them. Makes your genitals a GREAT place to hide things.”

“What if they’re one of the few?” Madison asked.

“If they’re a pussy grabber? Then you tell them you’re on the rag, if you have to explain any lumpiness. If they’re still groping, offer them head to distract ‘em.”

“That works?”

“If they’re a groper, they’ll go for quickie head. Every time.”

“I can’t imagine your life.”

“I’m trying to get away from this sort of thing. Not there yet. On that note, you said something about outfitting my Pip-Boy with a Courser chip?”

Madison nodded. “Father wanted it that way. You, and you alone, have easy access into and out of the Institute.”

“How will you get out?” asked Nora.

“You’ll note who is installing a Courser Chip, yes?”

Nora shook her head, “Stupid question. Disregard.”

Madison finished the installation and ten minutes later the two download holotapes were filled. Nora put her contact holotape and the Railroad download back under her. The Brotherhood one went into her pouch. She only had one more thing to do before she went home.

When she walked in on Shaun, he looked grey and tired. He perked up when he saw her. “I trust you met everyone?”

Nora nodded. “Dr. Li set me up with the chip. Thank you, Shaun. I have people I have to let know I’m OK.”
Shaun replied, “Please hurry back. There are…matters…which need your attention.”

Nora nodded once more, turned, and went up to the relay room. When she got there, her Pip-Boy showed her an extra menu item. [Relay? Y/N]

She stood in the round room and selected [Y].

She was utterly destroyed. And reproduced above ground. Miles away.

But that was OK. She’d already been utterly destroyed once today. At least.

Chapter End Notes

There's a reason cavity searches happen. As anyone who's seen Deadpool 2 can attest. They're a great place to hide things from a 'casual' search.

Also, "Lovely, just lovely" comes from, of all places, Sam Eliot's portrayal of Brig Gen John Buford, Army of the Potomac 1st Cavalry Division, in the movie "Gettysburg". I imagine Nora saying those "Lovely"s in exactly that satisfied, aggressive tone suggesting an enemy has done something especially useful for you as in the movie. Better than "excellent" or god forbid, "awesome".

"James Neeson" is a reference to "James" voice actor in Fallout 3, Liam Neeson. James was a man with...particular...talents.
When she arrived back at her point of origin, she found the Signal Interceptor dark, with some partially fused components. She also found Paladin Danse and a group of 3 other knights.

He smiled hugely when he saw her, “You’re back Knight! Ad victorium! Congratulations.”

Well they’re not dragging me off to firing squad. Yet.

“I really should get back to Diamond City, Paladin…” she started.

He gave her a look, “Nonsense. You need to brief the Elder, and get the data to Proctor Quinlan, and then…well Dr. Li arrived shortly before you. A success on every count Knight.”

It’s been two full days. Piper must be going out of her mind.

When they walked over towards the shuttle pad, Nora saw that there was a large robot taking shape, rapidly, on Ingram’s gantry. Danse said nothing, so neither did she. They took the flight up and then entered the Prydwen’s interior.

When she entered Maxson turned. She walked over, and saluted, Danse at her side. Maxson smiled, “I’ve received word that Dr. Li has returned. Do you think she’ll cooperate?”

“I suspect she’ll be exceptionally helpful, Elder,” replied Nora.

“Good. Excellent work, Knight. Dismissed.”

Nora went up to the quarters and delivered her holotape to Proctor Quinlan. From there, Danse took her for a checkup with Cade. When he stopped poking her before reaching anything near her stashed tapes, Nora relaxed. She’d never been happier that the Brotherhood’s attitude to medicine was highly utilitarian. When he pronounced her disgustingly healthy, Danse relaxed.

He was concerned for me. So he actually acts like a leader. Huh.

Danse turned to Nora, “Go get some sleep Knight. I’ll get you in the morning.”

“But…” Piper?

“Dismissed Knight. We’ll be at it early. Get some rack time. That’s an order.”

Nora woke to a gentle shaking. Danse was hovering. It was 0500 hours. Nora wanted to shoot something.

When she’d gotten dressed, he took her to the Power Armor bay.

“I have a set, Paladin. I can go get it…”

“Negative.”

God dammit.
“We’ll use this set. Suit up, Knight.”

At least Nora wasn’t using her own stash of FCs. That was probably the ONLY thing good about this situation.

When the clamshell had hissed shut and the system booted up, Nora clumped after Danse. He led her to the shuttle and down to where Ingram was looking up at a robot. Nora pulled her helmet off for clean air as long as she could.

“Unless you’re blind as a bat I’m sure you’ve noticed what’s on the gantry on the tarmac. Maxson and Kells have been looking for something that’ll tip the balance against the Institute. The Prydwen might be a beast, but she’s not build for fighting. That’s where this new project comes in.” She looked fondly up at the robot.

“This is what’s left of Liberty Prime. The Brotherhood used it in the Capitol Wasteland as a weapon against the Enclave. It’s the most advanced robot we’ve ever had at our disposal. Unfortunately it was destroyed in the line of duty. I’ve spent the last few years piecing him back together, and he’s finally ready for final assembly. In order to get him fully operational we’re going to need your help, or rather your help and Dr. Li’s help.”

Nora shrugged, invisibly, “No problem. I’m sure this looks worse than it actually is.”

Ingram shook her head. “Most of his problems are simple engineering problems. Like the electromagnetic actuators. My team can handle those. Others, like the tendency of his CPU to overload and shut down, are science problems. For that we have Dr. Li.” She gestured at a control console across the way from Liberty Prime.

Madison waved as they walked up. “I’ve solved the basic overload problem, Scribe,” she started.

“Proctor,” said Ingram.

“Oh yes, when you reunited with the Western branch the higher ranks became legitimate didn’t they? Anyway, I solved your CPU problem, and frankly it’s getting hard to explain to him why he can’t move.”

“The actuators will take care of that, Dr. Li,” said Ingram, “But there’s a more serious issue that neither engineering nor the science teams can solve.”

Dr. Li looked at Nora behind Ingram’s back and let Nora see she was worried.

Ingram looked at Nora, “Prime is missing one of his main components. His nukes.”

Nora’s eyebrows went up, Dr. Li was making stretching motions behind Ingram.

“I’ll just run down to the Super-Duper Mart and pick some up,” Nora said.

“Cute. I wish it was that simple. Prime’s bomb pack is fitted for Mark 28 Nuclear bombs. The same type of bombs that were dropped from aircraft during the Great War,” she said. As she was speaking, Madison suddenly flashed Nora an OK symbol. Nora really hoped she meant that she’d figured something out.

Ingram went on oblivious to the amateur spy theatrics going on behind her. “The Commonwealth was a major staging area for the military’s air force, so we assumed we’d have no trouble finding them. But since we arrived our scouting teams haven’t located a single bomb.”
What a crying shame.

Madison cut in, “That’s going to be a problem. Without a fully loaded nuke pack, Prime won’t have the firepower to take on the institute.”

Maybe we can short circuit this shit right here and right now.

“Great. That’s just…great,” added Nora. While thinking those exact words with far more enthusiasm.

Ingram shook her head, “Well, hang on a sec. Before you give up hope, there’s actually a silver lining here. Proctor Quinlan has located some records regrading a military installation which was used as a nuclear weapons storage facility. We’re fairly certain this included a stockpile of Mk 28s. The catch is that the installation is located somewhere in the Glowing Sea.”

On how many different levels do I want to say ‘fuck!’? The one good thing is that my wife isn’t coming this time…although now it’s pushing three days. When will Piper decide I’m not coming back?

And didn’t I say to myself, ‘No more nukes for you?’ And here I am getting ready to…

“I’ll head out immediately.”

Maybe I can go AWOL? No. Shit! If I don’t go, they’ll send someone who actually wants these fucking unspeakable maniac brownshirts to HAVE the bombs. No. It has to be me. I’m sorry Piper.

“Good, because that’s exactly what we’re asking you to do. Scribe Haylen’s established a communication point on the frontier of the Glowing Sea. I suggest you head out there, first, and establish a signal protocol with her so that the nukes can be airlifted out once you’ve located them. Hopefully by the time you’ve returned, we’ll be ready to wake Prime up and you can say hello.”

Danse walked over from wherever he’d been hiding, “Come on Knight. I’ll brief our strike team. Meet me at the Vertibird on the Prydwen.”

“You’re coming?” said Nora.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the entire world, Knight,” he said.

Nora nodded. Then she turned, “Dr. Li, if you’d be so good as to brief me on what we need to know to be sure the bombs are properly set up for Prime?”

Madison nodded, and walked over.

Helmet off. Leave it behind. According to Sturges there’s no mics anywhere else in these suits. And lord knows the military loves their standardization, so there won’t be any in this one either. Unless they already suspect me, in which case I’m already fucked.

From a distance Nora and Madison seemed to be conversing about Prime. Occasionally Dr. Li would point at something, and Nora would nod. What they actually talked about was how they would stop this insanity, and what the backups were.

When they were out of earshot, Nora said, “I hope all that nonsense means you have a way to stop this from turning into the biggest fiasco since Custer decided ‘What the hell? Might as well charge.””
Madison answered, “Yes. I have several ideas. First, if we get unlucky and there’s actually a storage site for you to find and it has actual Mark 28s, then you can possibly sabotage the bombs. If that won’t work, and it probably won’t, when they get back there’s plenty I can do. Most of it on Prime. I can make sure he can never unlock the warheads for use by stripping out his valid codes.”

She continued, “If that doesn’t work, or in conjunction with it, I can eliminate targeting protocols, and all Prime will do is drop the things at his feet. If I let him unlock the warheads, that will be a brief, exciting moment for anyone nearby.”

“Finally, I can link his self-destruct to his sub-routines relating to targeting his nukes,” she wrapped up.

Nora asked, “He has a self-destruct?”

Madison looked at Nora as though she’d grown an extra head. “He’s a thirty foot tall war robot that can crush a Chryslus in one hand, shoot laser beams from his head, and throw tactical nuclear bombs. Of COURSE he has a damned self-destruct.”

“You must think I specialize in stupid questions, Madison,” said Nora.

“I think that you are under an enormous amount of stress and are trying to find a way to minimize loss of life on all sides. And therefore not thinking entirely rigorously,” Dr. Li said.

“Well you’re right about not thinking very well,” Nora said. “Do what you have to. And if someone who identifies himself as ‘Deacon’ contacts you, do exactly what he says the moment he says it. As soon as I can get to a dead drop, or back to HQ, I’ll make sure he knows you’re his personal mission. OK?”

“About that. What happens to me afterwards?” Madison asked.

“I’m not positive, but it would be what you want. That much I can tell you,” answered Nora. “Because you’ll be the one making the choice.”

Madison nodded. “Best job offer I’ve had in decades.”

Nora smiled. “I need to get up to the Prydwen. Meet my ‘strike team’. And sincerely hope we fail miserably.”

Nora took the shuttle back up, where she was immediately met by Danse and two more Power Armor clad Knights; Knight Elaine Pangloss and Knight Alec Moore. They both clapped their fists to chests with an impressive clang of metal fist on metal chest, and chorused “Ad victorium.”

Danse said, “Knights Pangloss and Moore will be coming along as part of the sweep and retrieve. Knight Pangloss will be your wingman, Knight Greene. Knight Moore will be mine.”

Nora nodded at the other woman on her team, noting that she was carrying an automatic laser rifle with a missile launcher clipped to her back and ammo tubes on her other back and both her leg attachment points. She looked a little like a one woman gypsy caravan.

All four of them loaded onto the Vertibird.

As it dropped away, Nora had more than one variety of sinking feeling.

_I hope to god this isn’t the price that’s too high. Giving them mini-nukes was bad enough. This is literally thousands of times worse._
What in the name of god am I thinking?

Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote one would hope is not lost on anyone...the line from the Bhagavad Ghita that ran through Robert Oppenheimer's mind as he observed the Trinity Detonation. Which headlines this chapter for obvious reasons.

Several game bits were elided here. In the game, most of the quests for the Brotherhood consist of running up and down from the ground to the Prydwen and back. Two or three times. And then a quest to get electromagnets that you probably have in any one of a number of settlements (the game sends you to Malden Hospital, but all you have to do is go to the Workbench in Sanctuary...probably...for one electromagnet). Boom, done. I'm not going to blow 2 to 3 thousand words and an extra chapter on THAT, thanks.

Finally, on the research for writing front: Mark 28’s were a real series of thermonuclear warheads deployed from 1958 to 1966 in our timeline and were 1.1Mt yield in Mod 1 configuration, 350 kt yield in Mod 2, or 70 kt yield in Mod 3. The visual model from them in the game look much more like Mark 6 fission bombs, which were fielded from 1951 to 1955 with yields depending on pit and Mod block of 8, 26, 80, 154, and 160 kt. For reference Little Boy (the bomb dropped on Hiroshima) had a yield of 15kt, and Fat Man (the Nagasaki bomb) had a yield of 21kt. The most destructive bombs ever actually deployed in human history do not even qualify as serious threats today. But given how Prime deploys these bombs if you play the Brotherhood quest line, they probably have a sub-8 kt yield.
As the Vertibird banked left and headed southwest from the airport, Danse came up on the team radio net and briefed them. Taking control of their Head Up Maps, he showed them their insertion point, Waypoint Echo, a mile or so northwest of Vault 95. Then he sketched out what they knew of the Glowing Sea, based on their own surveys and Nora’s two trips. He circled a couple landmarks, including the Crater of The Children of Atom, identified by Danse as “having access to Institute Records, according to Knight Greene”.

*I can’t possibly string this out much longer. They are THIS close to finding out that Virgil was the source.*

She chimed in, “That’s not exactly true Paladin, sir.”

“Oh?”

“Yessir. The source is an Institute scientist that fled because of his differences with the leadership, sir. He’s hiding in the Glowing Sea and the Children helped him hide,” she added.

“Well, he can come in and the Brotherhood will protect him,” Danse said.

Yeah, right. If you only knew.

“He was quite clear. Once the Institute is gone, he’ll come in. Not one second before,” Nora replied.

“Nonsense. How is the Glowing Sea safer than the Prydwen?”

“Because the radiation disrupts the Molecular Relay signal, sir. If he came to the Prydwen now, he could easily be abducted or assassinated by a Courser teleporting right into the Prydwen.”

“You confirmed this?” Danse asked.

“Yessir.”

“How DID you manage your feat, Knight? We haven’t had a chance for a formal debriefing.”

Nora answered, “Well, if you turn on your recorders, sir, we can do a preliminary one right now.”

Danse paused for a moment, then said, “Go ahead, Knight Greene.”

Nora figured he had said that for the benefit of the recorders and launched into her story. She spun a tale of arriving in the Institute to a single, luckily female, attendant, whom she incapacitated and whose clothing she stole. Then, according to Nora, she accessed records, made her tape, and in the process learned of Dr. Li’s position at the head of Advanced Systems.

Nora claimed to have made her way, disguised and undetected, to Advanced Systems, where she was lucky enough to convince Dr. Li to return to the Brotherhood, and noted that Dr. Li had arranged for both of them to use a one shot relay code to escape. Unfortunately, as Nora was at great pains to ensure they knew she was sad to note, there would be no further trips to the Institute. The dangerous maniacs were inaccessible to Nora.
Or soon will be. As soon as I can knock the dust off my boots and Madison can assure me that IF we find nukes it won’t matter, I am history.

And that brought the Brotherhood up to date. One relay. One concussion administered. One theft of coveralls. One high stakes stroll to an office. And out, never to return.

By the time she’d finished outlining her fictitious foray into the Institute they were on final into the Landing Zone at Waypoint Echo. As the Vertibird descended Nora could see that the team at Echo had had to drop several trees, which on one level, OK, but on another, these were trees trying and succeeding at survival on the very edge of the Glowing Sea. A bit of a shame.

As the strike team departed the Vertibird, Scribe Haylen walked over from her console.

“It’s good to see you again Knight,” she said to Nora. “You’ve come a long way from the Police Station in Cambridge.”

“Yep. About 15 miles,” said Nora

Haylen looked puzzled for a moment, then laughed. “Good point Knight.”

Why is it these guys can’t seem to get it through their thick heads that joining, even ‘joining’, a military unit is a tiny thing compared to waking up 210 years after you watched an H-Bomb destroy your home and emerging into a world where everything is trying to kill you?

It’s not even imaginative enough to qualify as a failure of imagination. More like they keep repeating the same rote phrases to each other like some kind of catechism…

Haylen turned to a map projector. “I know you don’t have time for small talk so I’ll get right to it. We suspect that Sentinel Site Prescott was a storage location for Mk 28s in the Commonwealth, pre-war.”

She marked the location of Prescott, or its suspected location, on their heads up maps. Then she held up a box about the size of four packs of cigarettes, “I’ve had the men set up the equipment we’ll need to pinpoint you once you find the bombs. We’ve rigged up a pulser to emit a unique tone that we can listen for. When you find the bombs, plant the pulser and we’ll do the rest.”

Nora looked it all over, “Doesn’t sound too difficult.”

Unfortunately.

Haylen shook her head, but smiling, “Oh no, not at all. You’re only heading back into the most inhospitable place in the entire Commonwealth. I know you’ve been through the Glowing Sea before but keep an eye on your Geiger counter.”

Nora nodded, “Yes, mom. Anything else?”

“Don’t forget to pack a handkerchief.”

Nora laughed. She turned and Danse and the rest of the team were readying weapons. Nora got her laser rifle set and looked to Danse as she reported ready.

He called, “Team formation wedge, Greene’s element left, stay alert.”

Each soldier was about 20 yards from the next. Nora was behind and to the left of Danse about 20 yards, with Moore behind and to the right 20 yards. Pangloss was 20 yards behind and to Nora’s
left. Seen from overhead they would have resembled an inverted check mark, with the long side to the left.

They took on a heading towards the reported location of Prescott. Within a mile they were passing a half covered church…only the steeple and roof stuck out of the ground. Shortly after that, maybe another mile, and they were amongst the ruins of a jet liner that had crashed, presumably on the day of the war. Even a nuclear powered jetliner wasn’t immune to electro-magnetic pulse, or at least that was the most likely explanation Nora could come up with. As the plane was not their objective they bypassed it as well.

After traveling a short distance further, and up a slope, she heard Moore call, “Action right. Radscorpions right.”

Nora turned in that direction and saw a Radscorpion pop out of the ground behind Moore in addition to the one in front.

 Fucking things always turning up where you least expect them and don’t want them.

The group was disciplined. Only Moore and Danse were speaking, and Danse only to orient and issue a fire order for Nora and Elaine to engage, “2nd element, target right, 20 yards, scorp, lasers, fire at will”.

Other than that, all they heard was Moore, cursing. Nora and the rest of the team were pouring fire into the scorpions, Nora and Elaine into the one behind Moore, and Danse and Moore into the one in front. Unfortunately, the chitinous plates were absorbing and deflecting a great deal of the lasers.

Nora tried something other than just pouring fire in, instead working on the damage dealing bits. First she crippled its stinger, then kept up steady fire into its claws. Eventually, the monstrous bug spasmed and flopped over dead.

Unfortunately, at almost that same moment, Moore’s arms spread wide, and he screamed and flopped back. The radscorpion in front of him, with white markings on its front, had gotten its stinger in under his chest armor, and into his abdomen. Nora watched in horror as the stinger pulsed obscenely, pumping venom into Moore.

She raised her rifle, sighted on the head of the bug, and emptied a full 30 charge clip into the thing. The scorpion and Moore died within seconds of one another.

Danse leaned over, opened a chest port, and took Moore’s holotags. Then he straightened up and called, “Vee formation, Greene right” and continued on.

 They’ve gotten too used to taking casualties. 210 years of constant unending hostility to everyone and everything that isn’t them, or knuckles under TO them, have left them isolated. The only thing keeping them from utter and complete destruction is recruiting and indoctrinating wastelanders. If they weren’t…

 Their casualty rate would have them hiding in bunkers hoping to avoid notice. They can’t accept that they need allies and not vassals. And that’s before the human purity and “only we may have technology” things are layered on top. They’re a dead end at best. An active and constant threat to the CPG at worst, because their species of total control is anathema to democracy.

Nora took up her position to Danse’s right rear, and kept her eyes to the right. For better or worse, Danse and the team were going through the Glowing Sea like a bull through a china shop. Nora could only hope that she’d manage to remain alive through the experience.
Oh Piper. It’d be the worst kind of ironic if it wasn’t the trip to the Institute that killed me, but instead these idiots total lack of subtlety afterwards.

Nora saw where the Radscorpions had come from, a factory whose roof was all that was exposed. They bypassed that as well, then crossed Hwy 128/I-95, after which Danse called out, “I have a radar echo. Strong. Large structure.”

Nora checked her HUD as well, and there it was. Probably Sentinel Site Prescott.

Crap.

It rose out of a plain of packed dirt, orange colored water, and garbage strewn across the plain including, unfortunately, storage enclosures for warheads.

Double crap.

Also a pack of ferals.

Well, shit. Kneel and shoot…that one is down…clearly they’re going to get bombs. No stopping that. And there’s too many with me…I’ll never…shit, that was close…never manage to sabotage anything unnoticed. Let alone the bombs we’re here to collect. Now Madison has to do her thing. Uhn…that one’s down. Pangloss is in trouble, shoot, shoot…Power Armor is NUTS, it stabilizes breathing, just point and shoot, no skill needed. So now I guess, we’ll need to hook…uh…off me you poor fucker…oops head exploded…yuck…we’ll need to hook the self-destruct sub-routines to the nuke use sub-routines.

Man, there are a LOT of them. Glowing Sea I suppose. That was one WEIRD bomb. Wonder why I never heard of it. Go down, you sorry bastard…and what if Zhao Chung’s research continued after I was blown? What if someone else was able to put a stealth field on a warhead? What…uhn…off me. Shoot and again, and he’s down. What if THIS is the result from a stealth field around a thermonuclear detonation? Some kind of super-boosted bomb effects?

World shouldn’t…go DOWN damnit, you’ve got no arms or legs, you loonie…still be this fucked up after this long.

Maybe…there goes the last, nice shot Elaine…the reason I never heard of a Chinese Super-Toxicity Stealth Enhanced Bomb was because they came up with it after I was blown and ran for it. Or they didn’t even realize what the effect would be. It’d explain those weird rad-storms too. The water cycle is supposed to cleanse the environment, not perpetuate the problem.

Nora stood up and glanced at both Danse and Pangloss. The ferals had gotten in close, but even a really dedicated feral wasn’t a threat to Power Armor troops unless it was 30 to one. They’d just made a disgusting mess out of all three of them by getting close before going down.

They entered the facility and as soon as they were inside, heard a loud warning buzzer. Which at the very least masked their movement in large clunky, noisy Power Armor somewhat. Nora both loved Power Armor for the protection and environmental control it gave her, and hated it for its noise and size.

There just weren’t that many occasions for someone like Nora to use the ungainly suits. Unfortunately for her preferences, being in the middle of the Glowing Sea was one of the occasions requiring them.

Looking down, Danse happily pointed out a few bombs. Mk 28s for sure. Nora shook her head inside her suit. The Brotherhood’s long shot was paying off. And the closer they got to having a
fully armed, nuke-equipped Liberty Prime, the closer Nora got to having to do something. She simply could not let the Brotherhood muscle its way to the top of the heap here as they had in the Capital Wasteland.

*I should download their historical records. Maybe there’s something in them that would give me a lever. Make these guys leave and never come back. Easy enough to do. These guys simply do not think in sneaky circles. The network security would be laughable to a garden variety agent.*

And I am not garden variety.

So they began moving down to the storage floor, using stairs circling the perimeter of the cavernous chamber. One level down they entered a side control room and Nora checked a terminal.

“What are you up to Knight? This is a sweep and retrieve not recon,” said Danse.

Nora ignored him, and clicked through. The alarm was because the supply shaft had been converted in to a missile silo, and the facility was on lock down for a launch that had never occurred.

Danse, irritated, called, “Knight! I expect my orders obeyed without question.”

Nora simply replied, “I was determining that the facility is on lockdown because that,” and she gestured at the central elevator, “Is now a silo. With a functioning ICBM in it. Figured we might want to know.”

Danse simply said, “Good work Knight,” and moved on.

*If I actually cared, I’d be seething right now. Fuck it. I’m still seething.*

They continued all the way to the bottom, where the door to the storage floor was non-responsive. Nora hacked a nearby terminal while Danse was preparing explosives, and opened it by shutting down the launch alert. Which also shut off the godawful constant alarm as a side benefit. Danse looked up at the sudden silence. “What? Oh, good work Knight,” as he saw Nora at the terminal. She then opened the door and led the other two through.

Once on the floor, they could finally make out the archway across the room that led further into the complex. There were only two Mk 28’s in this room that were assembled, so Danse led them over to the passageway on the far side.

Several molerats attacked, but were even less effective than ghouls in damaging the three of them in the slightest. When they got to the tunnels, Danse took point, and he in turn dispatched another small pack of ferals that came sprinting down the passage. In point of fact, the only time there was any excitement was in one hallway that turned out to be riddled with hidey holes for the ferals, out of which they emerged as the group passed. And that was only because none of them could just open fire. Which meant gritting your teeth while a partner carefully lined up a shot.

Ultimately they found themselves looking up at a control room and tightly shut blast doors. There was a shadow moving in the office, so the three of them readied their laser rifles, and went in.

They were confronted by man in green robes, seemingly unaffected by the radiation. Nora called over the net, “Child of Atom.”

The man glared at them, “State your purpose, stranger, for you walk on Atom’s hallowed ground.”

Danse said to the man, “We’re looking for bombs...nuclear bombs.”
The man was having none of it, “You trivialize that which resides here. This place is holy. The Children of Atom have sworn to guard this place until the time of the Great Divide. None shall enter.”

Nora shook her head in the suit. Without Piper here, she wasn’t sure what statements would ramp this guy down instead of up. She spoke up, “Forgive me. I wish to...repent and seek the wisdom of Atom.”

The man’s face twisted, and he spat out, “No! You will not tempt me with your lies!”

And he leapt at Nora, who brought her rifle up and shot him in the belly four times. As he collapsed in front of her, an assaultron came out from an alcove and attacked, only to be cut down by Danse and Pangloss.

Well, a soft answer doesn’t actually always turneth away wrath. I wish I didn’t have to, but this guy didn’t make it easy, or even possible, to avoid killing him.

She hacked the terminal and opened the door below. From the office she could see rows of bombs through the doors.

Yep. It’s all down to Madison now. I couldn’t sabotage all of these even IF I weren’t here with these two.

Nora went down and looked along the racks. There was a lot of destruction here just waiting to happen. Danse clumped up behind her. “Elder Maxson wants me to remain with the bombs and oversee testing and transport. You and Pangloss are to return.”

Then he activated the signal pulser and set it down. “I’m proud of you Knight. You have taken every mission we’ve thrown at you and you achieved every objective. I’m proud to call you sister.”

Nora blinked. She looked at him and said, “Thank you Paladin. I look forward to seeing you back at the Prydwen.”

She saluted and turned away to meet the elevator coming down the shaft, loaded with Brotherhood troops getting ready to service and transport their deadly cargo.

She was planning to betray them all, and she didn’t feel a twinge of remorse.

Chapter End Notes

Astute observers will note that Nora and company adopt a formation known as "The Wedge". First used by fighter aircraft in WWII, as the Finger Four formation, it allows maximum tactical flexibility (two wedges can maneuver together, or a wedge can break up and maneuver as two two-person elements, etc.). So much so that today, almost everything except the Navy uses The Wedge. Army Armor platoons (four tanks) also use aircraft terminology to the extent that the platoon is made up of two elements, the Platoon leader and his or her "wingman" and the Platoon Sergeant and his or her wingman. That is the formation (sized down for Power Armor rather than the approx 50 to 100m an M1A2 tank unit would use) that Danse puts his team in, with Nora in the Plt Sgt position.
Power Armor occupies the spot in Fallout where tanks used to go. In FO4 the designers deliberately treated Power Armor as something you "drive" whether than "wear" and if you look back you can see I've followed that. Because it actually "feels" more right.

And now, the second part of that revelation from Be All My Sins Remembered in Agent of Change. Yes, it was planned. I needed something so awful that someone like Nora would be willing to kill the little girl, and where her actions wouldn't cause all of you to immediately condemn her. When I hit on Stealth Bombs as the thing she was trying to stop I realized I had two birds I could kill with one line. A nuclear device going off inside a stealth field's focusing effects causes heterodyning of the radioactivity, causing it to boost its effects into a realm where the differences are not just quantitative, but qualitative.

And thus, greater induced mutations, 210 year old wastelands, and rad storms. A Handwavium Bomb.
The lift arrived at the bottom of the shaft and Pangloss and Nora boarded. At the top, they left the facility and were met by the Vertibird that had dropped off the recovery team. They climbed aboard, and began the flight back to the Prydwen.

*At some point I have to get loose. I have to let Piper know I’m OK. Somehow. And the longer I’m gone, the greater the chance Shaun or Father is going to get suspicious.*

When the ‘bird arrived at the Prydwen, Nora immediately reported to Cade for decontamination. The dose that had built up, even through her armor, was considerable, and she was already nauseated. She could certainly do without diarrhea, so while she had to get back to Li to inform her of the results of the trip to Prescott, getting Cade to dose her with concentrated RadAway took precedence.

She checked her Armor into the bay, and then walked down the companionway to sickbay to present herself for decontamination. While she was in Cades office, idly waiting as the drip cleaned her system, she skimmed a terminal. Sure enough, the documents covering the history of the Brotherhood were out in the open and it really wasn’t difficult to get at the more classified information either. She made a holotape of Brotherhood history and classified activities and stuffed it in her pockets.

When Cade returned and pronounced her cleaned, she headed down to Liberty Prime. When she got there she found Li at a console. She leaned over, and said in a low voice, “They found ‘em.”

Li nodded, “I know. Ingram is talking with Maxson right now. I’ve already introduced the programming error that will self-destruct Liberty Prime if he tries to fire a nuke.”

Nora looked relieved, then had a thought, “This is pretty high stakes, Madison. How can we be sure the programming is functioning?”

Dr. Li smiled, “Way ahead of you. During his initial startup he’ll report ‘Weapons Hot’, rather than ‘Weapons Tight’ if the programming is functioning as I intend.”

Nora nodded, and then looked up to see Proctor Ingram walking over from her radio consultation. She was smiling as she walked up. “Looks those Mk 28s are gonna do the trick. That was a good find.”

Dr. Li said, “I’ll work with your team ensure that Prime’s bombs remain stable after they’re loaded into his pack. It won’t be too much of a problem.”

Dawn was finally breaking and Nora was getting run down, but there was nothing for it. She gulped down a cup of coffee offered by one of the scribes. Yesterday had been long and today wasn’t shaping up to be any kind of prize either.

Ingram looked over at Li and said, “Well Dr. Li I have to admit we couldn’t done it without you.”

*You’re not going to be able to do it WITH her...*
Dr. Li was sipping coffee as well, but looked concerned, “It’s a little early to start celebrating Proctor Ingram. We haven’t fully thrown the switch on Prime and I’m just hoping that all the work I’ve done to keep his systems stable are going to hold.”

Nora shrugged and said, “But there’s only one was to find out.”

“Fair enough,” Dr. Li said as she looked over at Ingram. “Proctor all the readouts are green. It’s time to perform the power shunt.”

Ingram looked over at the gantry, and shouted, “Shunting power! Clear the pad!”

When the last pad worker was clear and flashed her the thumbs up, indicating everyone was accounted for, she turned to Dr. Li. “You are go.”

Dr. Li typed some commands into her keyboard, and with little warning, there was a hum from Liberty Prime.

“Liberty Prime…back online.”

Ingram called over, “Let’s run a diagnostic…”

“Diagnostic Command: accepted.”

Dr. Li was looking over the readouts with a frown, “Give him a moment. He needs to adjust to his new configuration.”


Dr. Li smiled and said, “Let me run a systems and battle readiness check.”


Nora and Madison smiled at each other, and Ingram looked happy as she called over, “I’ve got green across the board here. He’s looking good from where I’m sitting. Doc, if you wouldn’t mind keeping an eye on the big guy here I’d appreciate it.”

With that, Ingram called Nora over, “I wasn’t sure we could pull it off, but Prime is looking pretty good.”

Nora frowned and said, “What was that he said about his power core?”

Ingram shook her head, “Prime’s in top shape but his nuclear engine needs a restart. Right now we have him running off the Prydwen’s engines. Once I figure out how to make or find a beryllium agitator, we’ll send him off to kick in the Institutes front door. Now, you better hightail it up to the Prydwen. The Elder said he needed to speak with you ASAP.”

Nora saluted, fist to chest, and turned to go up to the Prydwen herself.

As she walked in on Maxson, one short shuttle ride later, he turned on her, anger evident in his face.

“Is there anything you wish to tell me, Knight?” he snapped.
Nora leaned back, “Excuse me?”

Maxson sneered, “I find your ignorance awfully convenient. Proctor Quinlan completed the decryption of the data you retrieved from the Institute. A portion of his findings included a list of synths that went missing from there. After careful analysis we discovered that Paladin Danse is a perfect match for one of the escaped synths!”

Nora, who’d been getting ready to shoot her way out for any one of a number of reasons, let genuine shock show, since her surprise was tactically useful, “What?!? Is Quinlan absolutely certain?”

Maxson nodded curtly, “He validated the data several times. The results are accurate. The data you provided included a record of each subjects DNA. We keep similar records. Paladin Danse is a perfect match for a synth designated M7-97. And now he’s gone AWOL. You see the conclusion I hope. I’m finding it difficult to believe that he never took you into his confidence.”

Nora decided on outrage as a reaction, and glared at him as she said, “You have some nerve to accuse me of lying.” About this, at least.

Maxson’s shoulders relaxed. She’d passed the test. “Your outburst inclines me to think I may have misjudged you. So I will take you at your word. But that doesn’t change your duty. I am ordering you to hunt down and terminate Paladin Danse.”

Wow. Judge, jury, and executioner. Cozy little setup you have here, teenage Hitler. How would Knight Nora Greene react? She wouldn’t be happy. Can’t exactly just say, “Yeth, marthter. At oneth, marthter.” and slouch off like a good little Igor, can I? They’d start to wonder…

Nora looked levelly back at Maxson, “Danse deserves a chance to explain himself.”

Maxson did exactly what she expected, and drove yet another nail into his coffin in the process, when he replied, “You will do it. This is not up for debate. I am giving you a direct order and I expect that you will obey. Report to Proctor Quinlan for your initial targets. Dismissed.”

Nora saluted and left and went straight to Quinlan’s compartment. He looked up, “Ah, Knight. Terrible business with Danse, just terrible. Still, can’t have that sort of thing. Must be done. Terrible shame.”

“How Elder Maxson said you’d have a list of targets for me sir?”

“Yes, Knight. I’m afraid the only way to be sure of finding Danse will be to visit any potential hiding spot that his recon team may have visited in the year it was here in the Commonwealth. I’m sorry, but the only way I can see to run him down is to visit them all.”

And finally FINALLY I can get out of here and they won’t expect me back for a good long while. Piper, here I come!


At that moment Haylen walked in, “I may be able to help you Knight.”

Quinlan looked over at the young woman, and said, “And how did you find out, Scribe Haylen?”

Haylen just calmly said, “This is the BROTHERhood of Steel, Proctor. By now, everyone stationed in the Commonwealth knows what you found. Do you have the Proctor’s list, Knight?”
Nora nodded. Haylen inclined her head, “If you’ll follow me, Knight, let’s go over that list. I may be able to help you prioritize.”

She led Nora down to what would be “the bilges” were the Prydwen a watergoing vessel. As it was not, some enterprising soul had created a semi-unofficial recreation area. She turned on Nora suddenly. “How could you? Danse doesn’t deserve to die.”

“I agree, and I have no intention of doing any such damn fool thing,” replied Nora.

“He was your mentor, he’s a good soldier and here you are…not..killing…him,” Haylen wound down.

She looked at Nora, “You won’t just shoot him? You’ll hear his side of the story?”

“I won’t shoot him under any circumstances Haylen. I hate to tell you, but I do not agree with the Brotherhood about synths,” Nora said. “In fact there is almost fuck all I agree with the Brotherhood about. Collectively you’re all as mad as hatters. I’ve given this a lot of thought and you are exactly what happened before the world ended. You want to talk danger of a second global catastrophe? Take a major military force with NO accountability to any higher authority than the whims of its senior officers, and give THEM a messianic sense that they and only they are the line between civilization and ‘communism’ or ‘anarchy’ or ‘door to door salesmen’…whatever they think is a threat.”

Haylen was staring at Nora in shock. Nora went on, “It wasn’t unconstrained ‘science’ that destroyed the old world, Haylen. I was there. I saw. I saw the highest councils of both sides. And it was unaccountable men, making decisions for all of us ‘for our own good’ without questioning for even a second if what they were doing was what we wanted, that killed the world. And Maxson is just another in a long line of self-appointed saviors that is going to destroy the very thing he claims to love so much. Because all he really loves is getting his own fucking way.”

She looked at Haylen. “I have no intention of killing Danse. I have no intention of ever returning to this nuthouse. I have no intention of being stopped by you, or anyone else, from getting back to my wife. If you want, I will warn Danse, if you know where he is. But if you don’t know where he is so that I can at least tell him that I consider him marginally less insane than most of you, I am going Home. In case you were wondering, I consider you and Proctor Ingram marginally less than totally crazy as well. I can tell you, because I have some hope of surviving the revelation. I can never tell her that she’s one of the few I even care about their living or dying.”

Haylen looked down at the deck. “He’s at Listening Post Bravo. It was our fallback point. He’s there.”

Nora sighed deeply.

*Just a little longer, darling. Then I’ll be back. But I owe the big idiot.*

Nora turned to go. “Take me,” said Haylen.

“What?” said Nora.

“Take me. You’re right. We’ve been unaccountable for too long. And we’re self-righteous about it. Look at Rhys. I stand with Danse and no one else. Take me. Please,” she begged.

Nora nodded. “Grab anything you can’t bear to part with and meet me on the flight deck in five.”

Ten minutes later, a Vertibird dropped from the Prydwen. On board were Knight Nora Greene,
really Wright, and Scribe Meredith Haylen and a small bag of Haylen’s possessions. What wasn’t on board were Scribe Haylen’s illusions or Knight Greene’s need to placate The Brotherhood. Those had been left behind.

Less than a half hour later the ‘bird was settling onto an honest to god landing pad at the Listening Post. Haylen and Nora hopped off, and went into the facility. Nora called the elevator, and when it arrived got in, and pressed the down button. When the doors closed Haylen said, “Please stop.”

“Stop what?” Nora asked.

“Whistling. We’re going to warn Danse that the Brotherhood wants him dead and you’re whistling like you’re going to meet your boyfriend,” Haylen said.

“Wife, but yeah. I am happy Haylen. I haven’t seen my wife in nearly 4 days, and she has a lot of good reasons to think I’m dead. Yeah, I’m about to be VERY happy,” Nora replied.

“You’re a lesbian?” Haylen asked, in a tone of voice that implied that Nora was about to try and convert her.

Nora laughed. “I’m bisexual. My WIFE is a lesbian. But don’t worry Haylen. You’re cute and all, but I really, really love my wife.”

“What’s it like?” Haylen asked.

“What’s what like?” asked Nora.

“What’s what like?” asked Nora.


“First, that’s an offensive way to put it. And second, NO loving relationship is unnatural. Love is love,” said Nora.

“Oh,” said Haylen.

The elevator opened. The two walked into an office, and on the far side, in another room, Danse was waiting.

He looked at them, “I didn’t expect to see you Haylen.”

“You should have told me,” she said.

“I might have, if I’d known what I was. Until that list was decoded I was sure synths were the enemy. I never expected to hear I was one of them,” he told her.

“I’m hoping there’s a way out,” said Nora.

“No. Nothing has changed. I must be destroyed. If you disobey, you’re betraying the Brotherhood of Steel and everything it stands for,” said Danse.

Haylen spoke fiercely, “But Maxson is wrong. Synths are just like people. They are people.”

“What are you saying, Haylen?” said Danse.

“Synths ARE people,” she insisted. “Or they wouldn’t be able to do this,” and she kissed him. Hard.

She pulled back. “Tell me you didn’t feel anything Roger. Make me believe you.”
Roger Danse. Huh.

Good argument though.

Nora spoke next. “Danse…Roger…um, Danse, synths, synthetic people are people. You’ve helped countless people, saved your brothers and sisters, fought and felt and, I hope, loved,” she said as she looked at Haylen, “and it takes a human to show humanity. No matter how they were born.”

“Alright. I’ve at least been of benefit to humanity. I’ll concede that much. But what now?” Danse asked.

“We leave the Commonwealth,” said Haylen.

“I can make that happen,” said Nora smiling. “Let’s go.”

As they were leaving the bunker, a harsh and supremely unwelcome voice brought them all up short.

“How dare you betray the Brotherhood!” shouted Maxson.

Danse stepped forward, “It’s not her fault, it’s mine.”

Maxson chopped the air, “Silence creature. Knight why has this…thing…not been destroyed?”

Nora stepped up, “Because you’re wrong.”

Maxson shook his head, “I’m not. It wasn’t born from the womb of a loving mother, it was made in a laboratory. Flesh is flesh. Machine, machine. The two were NEVER meant to intertwine. It,” he pointed at Danse, “Is a single bomb in an arsenal preparing to lay waste to mankind.”

Nora shook her head, incredulously, “Seriously? You’re comparing Danse to a nuclear bomb?”

Maxson had a fanatic’s gleam in his eye, “It may not be a bomb, but the goal is the same. Deliver a lethal blow without warning and without mercy. How can you trust a manufactured soul?”

Nora broke in, “I’m not sure YOU have a soul. I’m positive you’re not in a position to judge someone else’s.”

Danse shook his head, “I didn’t know, Arthur. I feel like a human does. How is that wrong?”

Maxson ignored Nora’s jibe and addressed Danse, “The Institute has foolishly chosen to grant you life. You simply should not exist,” and he turned to Nora, “You have your orders Knight.”

Nora drew her pistol, but she pointed it at Maxson, “No. Whether natural or artificial, Danse has saved countless lives by his actions. To execute him because of what you think he’ll do is as bad as anything the Institute could do. It’s time for you to finally do the right thing. Walk away. There’s going to be zero dead bodies today, or one,” she stared Maxson down, “But I guarantee that if there’s one body, it won’t be Danse’s.”

Maxson stared at her. Nora just smiled, “I hereby tender my resignation from the Brotherhood of Steel, effective immediately. Pray to whoever you worship that I don’t also decide you’re an enemy, Maxson. Now go.”

He stood staring at her for long moments. No one could possibly claim that Arthur Maxson was not brave. Then he turned and walked away. Deliberately.
The three of them watched, without speaking, until Maxson’s Vertibird was out of sight.

Danse turned to Nora. “That took guts.”

Nora holstered her pistol, then looked over at Haylen and Danse. “What now?”

Danse looked at Haylen, “Maybe I’ll stick around for a little while longer. See what happens. You can find me…”

“Us,” interrupted Haylen.

“Find us here when you need us,” Danse finished.

“Well, it’s going to take a while to get back to Diamond City. I’d better get started,” said Nora.

“Are you going to be OK alone, Kni-…Nora?” Danse asked.

Nora gave him a crooked grin, “After everything, you can even ask that question?”

“Never mind,” said Danse.

“I pity anyone stupid enough to get between you and your wife, Nora,” said Haylen.

“Don’t have a problem with ‘unnatural relationships’ anymore, Meredith?”

Haylen answered Nora, but she was looking at Danse, “Love is Love, Nora.”

Chapter End Notes

The title is NOT a quote of Einstein. As near as the Internet can discern, the actual “author” is somebody in Alcoholics Anonymous in the early 70s (1972, maybe).

Again, weird crap you find out researching fiction.

Weapons Hot sounds cool, but it isn’t an actual fire control measure. Weapons Hold (Fire when AND ONLY WHEN fired upon or ordered to), Weapons Tight (Fire when AND ONLY WHEN the target is positively identified as hostile), and Weapons Free (Fire when you cannot identify the target as friendly) are real NATO Brevity Codes. “Weapons Hot” offended me. I figured out a way to make it work for me.

I confess. I chickened out. I got Haylen out of the line of fire.

Also, apparently Lin Manuel Miranda existed. I suppose his "Hamilton" in this timeline sounded a lot like "South Pacific". Ah, well.
Homecoming

It was getting towards 5 PM when Nora finally walked into Diamond City. She went down the stairs two at a time, and as she rounded the corner at the bottom of the stair, she saw a small figure selling papers. Nat looked tiny for some reason. It might have been the tears in Nora’s eyes. Then she heard the shout.

“Mom!”

Nat was running at her full tilt, and when she arrived, grabbed Nora in a huge hug. “We were so worried. Piper kept saying you’d come back. She did. But I was worried.”

Then Nat looked up, “Piper’s been crying, mom,” she said seriously.

“I guess we better fix that, huh?” said Nora.

Nat took Nora’s hand and all but ran back home with Nora. They opened the door, stepped in, and Nora saw that Piper was engrossed in her work. There was a handkerchief next to the terminal. Her eyes looked bloodshot.

“How were paper sales, kiddo,” she said without looking up.

“Not too bad,” said Nora.

Piper looked up in shock, her eyes filling instantly.

“I promised you, Piper. I’m home,” Nora said her arms held wide.

Piper gasped and then ran into her wife’s arms, kissing her face, her eyes, her mouth, frantically. She pulled back, looked at Nora, her eyes full of love and then burst into tears.

“I thought…maybe…I thought something…,” she managed to get out.

“Nat told me,” Nora said seriously.

“She told you?”

“She said you’d been crying. I’m the cook in the family so I figured it wasn’t onions and that left…” Nora was interrupted by Piper kissing her.

“Shut up Blue!” and she nestled her face into Nora’s neck. “I love you Nora,” she said.

“It’s OK, hon. I’m here. I’m here,” Nora said. She walked the two of them over to and sat down on the couch, where Piper plastered herself on her wife as though she were trying to actually climb into Nora’s skin.

“You’re really here,” she said.

“Yes darling. I’m really here. I’m really, really here,” Nora said.

The door burst open and Nick and Ellie rushed in too.

“Well, all right,” said Nick.
Nora disentangled herself and stood up and Nick came over and surprised Nora, Ellie, Piper, and himself by hugging Nora tightly.

Ellie was behind them, tears in her eyes, hands over her mouth.

Nick let Nora go, stood back, and said, “We figured after three days that…well…”

Nora nodded. “You three have no idea. I was in and out of the Institute in less than a day. It was afterwards…”

Piper patted the seat, and everyone sat. Including Nat. Nora looked over.

*She actually has a right. She IS fourteen, and she should know if there’s a threat, where it’s coming from.*

Nora looked at them. “What do you want to know first? I feel like, if I don’t let you get the questions that are bugging you out of the way, you won’t hear the whole thing.”

Piper asked, “Did you find Shaun?”

Nora laughed, bitterly, “Did I find Shaun. Boy, did I ever.”

“And,” Piper said.

“He’s in charge of the Institute,” Nora replied.

“How can a ten…”

“What?!?!”

Nick said, just exactly loudly enough to silence the rest, “It was more than ten years, wasn’t it?”

Nora nodded. “Between his kidnapping and my release, it was sixty years.”

“Your son is…” Piper started.

“A sixty year old man, yes,” answered Nora.

“Oh,” said Piper.

Nora held up her hands, “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel about it either. Some of the things he says…sometimes it feels like Shaun is saying them, sometimes Father.”

“Father?” said Nick.

“Yeah that’s the OTHER shoe,” Nora answered, “It’s why he was taken. They needed ‘pure’ DNA samples to create thesynths. They, apparently, call him ‘Father’ now, even the other humans. Without him, there are no Gen 3 Synths. There’s more than a whiff of ‘cult’ about the whole thing.”

“It’s NOT your fault, honey,” said Piper.

“It’s not? Because it really, really feels like maybe it is,” replied Nora.

“Wait. How can anything be Nora’s fault?” asked Ellie.

“I got pregnant with Shaun on purpose. To escape a bad situation. And that means that everything
“BullSHIT, Nora!” said Piper, “Bullshit. You had a fucking baby. That’s it! They chose what to do with it. They chose to weaponize what they’d taken. Not you.”

Piper stood up, “I just got you back. And for the last month or so, I haven’t had to tiptoe around you waiting for the damn breakdown. You are not going back to that place, honey. No.”

Now she was waving a finger under Nora’s nose. “All the ways you go through life blaming yourself for things that occur when you just happen to be standing nearby. God damn, but you are the most guilt-ridden woman I’ve known.”

Now Nora was leaning back and Piper was standing over her hands on her hips, “You have enough that you can legitimately blame yourself for…and you know what those things are…that I’m not about to let you blame yourself for something you have almost nothing to do with, goddammit!”

You could hear a pin drop. Natalie’s eyes were like saucers.

Nora looked away from Piper for along couple seconds, and then she stood up, and embraced her wife, and looked into her eyes and said, “You’re right, Piper. As usual you’re right. More profane than usual for you,” and Nat sniggered, “But I guess it was that or slap me. You’re right. I was starting the pity party and it really isn’t my fault.”

She held Piper’s hand, as they both sat back down and said, “But I do have to decide…I have to learn…who is responsible for what the Institute has done? How much is Shaun? How much is before Shaun? Can I save my son? Does he want saving? What would saving him actually BE? I… I just don’t know. I looked into his eyes when he described his father’s death as collateral damage, and there was nothing there. No emotion. But I looked into his eyes when he told me to give him time. There was feeling there. What’s real, what isn’t? I have to know.”

“How?” asked Nick.

“How what,” said Nora.

“How are you going to find out?” Nick said.

“By going back,” Nora said, holding up her Pip-Boy, “This acts like a Courser chip. I can teleport in and out at will.”

“What!” exclaimed Piper.

“It’s not the shot into the unknown that it was before, sweetie. I would be going, invited, into the Institute. Think of this as a really really long rescue mission, where I keep coming out to see you.”

“Why not bring me too?” asked Piper.

“It’s not an insane notion, Piper. I’ll ask, I promise,” said Nora.

“OK, so you went in, learned that you were on ice 60 years while your son became Father of all the synths, and Director of the Institute, and now you can come and go at will,” Nick summed up.

“Anything else?”

“I had to give the Brotherhood nuclear weapons.”

“What!?” exclaimed Piper.
“When I got back, I had no choice. I was surrounded at all times. It’s Ok though, I made sure they can’t use them. That meant I had to hang around a while longer. Then I quit.”

“Anything else,” asked Piper through gritted teeth,

“Encouraged an Institute scientist to defect to the Brotherhood, but not really, She’s defected to us, while pretending to work for the Brotherhood, and making sure the giant death robot doesn’t work, and will self-destruct when and if Maxson uses it. So I need to let Deacon know he has to look after her.”

“Blue, I can’t help feeling like you’re doing things in the sneakest, twistiest way possible, just because you can, because now I know,” said Piper.

“What do you mean Piper? ‘Now you know’ what? What do you know about mom?” asked Nat.

“I was a spy before the war Nat. Nick and Piper know. Now you guys do too,” said Nora.

“Cool. Like James Bond?”

Piper cracked up, and even Nick chuckled. “EXACTLY like James Bond,” Piper laughed.

Nora made a face, “I don’t even like martinis.”

“Really, mom?”

Nora rolled her eyes.

This whole thing is trivializing...

It’s trivializing a 210 year old issue. I wonder how important I would have thought it was, if I discovered that my mom, or Nate, had been a spy for the Union against the Confederacy? Even if they were a professional assassin, how much would I really care that they gunned down 49 plantation owners?

The issues are dead. I still have to deal with MY feelings, but really. If I’d refused? Gone to jail instead, how many of my victims would be alive now? None of them.

I still killed them, but no one here but me cares. And why should they? I tell them I killed Ling Mei, and it would mean as much as someone telling me they killed John Calhoun in 1864.

She looked at her daughter and smiled a little crookedly, “Yes, Nat. Like James Bond. I spent 3 years in China, undercover.”

Nick and Piper were watching Nora closely. They could tell some sort of corner had been turned.

Piper looked at Nat, “But it’s REALLY important that you don’t tell anyone. No one knows about your mom and we have no idea who in Diamond City might be working for the Institute. If they found out, Nora could be in trouble.”

“Ok, Piper. I promise.”

“But in here? Now you know. Your mom is Jane Bond,” said Piper.

“Thing!”

“And if Sheng ever gets out of line?” Piper mimed drawing a knife across her throat.
“Piper, damn it!” Nora said.

Nat was giggling.

Nora started ticking off her fingers, “In all seriousness, we have to debrief Dez ASAP, and then get out to see Preston. The Minutemen need to step up settlement recruiting. Deacon has to start looking after Madison, and Preston needs to make sure our patrols keep an eye on the Brotherhood. And no more air travel.”

“On the plus side,” said Piper, “I can start talking about how dangerous the Brotherhood is freely.”

“And with more material,” Nora said, holding up a holotape.

The Nora turned to the group. “But what we really need to do is figure out who is running the Institute? Shaun? Or Father? And decide what to do about it.”

“He’s your son, Nora,” said Nick. “We’ll follow your lead.”

Nora shook her head. “Not this time. He IS the Institute. He’s everybody’s problem. I can’t just decide for me.”

“You have to try, Nora,” said Piper earnestly, “WE have to try.”

“I know, Piper. The problem is, we don’t have to succeed.”
The next day dawned early when Nora and Piper left to brief Dez on what had been found. And hand over the chip. Nora needed to know as much as possible about the Institute as fast as possible, and Tom’s chip was her best bet. Nora left her Pip-Boy behind.

Within a couple hours, they were walking into Railroad HQ. Drummer Boy took one look, and went running. “It’s Whisper. Whisper’s back!”

Dez smiled as Nora and the rest walked up. “Whisper, you’re safe! And your son?”

Nora pulled a face, “Yeah, that’s an interesting story. We should talk in PAM’s room.”

Dez’s eyes widened slightly, but she nodded. She called over Deacon and Carrington and all six of them joined PAM.

“All right Whisper,” started Dez, “You implied that the story about your son was complicated.”

Nora nodded, “Let’s start with, my son was kidnapped 60 years ago, not 10, and then I need to tell you Shaun is now the Director of the Institute.”

There was simply stunned silence. Nora spoke into it, “Yes, what you are thinking is correct. The child I’ve been desperately trying to get to was the same person who ordered the strike on Switchboard.”

Dez looked at Nora, “Your feelings about synths…”

“They’re still people Dez. But Shaun is my son. I need to know…oh god, I need to know so many things, before I decide what to do. I have your tape. But I am not insensitive to the reality that you have to consider my loyalties divided.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Carrington.

“But are they really?” asked Dez. “If you see synths as humans, and your son is the Director, perhaps there is a path forward. There’s a window at least. It depends on him. And you.”

“It complicates matters. I don’t need to ‘rescue’ Shaun,” said Nora, “He’s over two times my age. It’s not like he’s not a full adult. If I were honest, I’d say it hasn’t really hit me emotionally but I’ve already lost my son. I now have a relationship with a 60 year old man, and I’m not sure what it should be.”

Piper reached out and squeezed Nora’s shoulder.

Nora went on, “I want to love him like a son, but honestly, who is he to me, or me to him? I don’t know, Dez.”

Desdemona looked over at Nora seriously. “I don’t know what to tell you Whisper.”

Nora smiled, a little sadly. “I never thought I’d be on this side of the local asset recruitment conversation. I was always where you are, trying to get someone to betray their country, maybe their loved ones, to work for me. And now?”
Nora sighed, “Well, Shaun aside, my feelings about the Institute are unchanged. As an organization, it has to go. Believe me, if Justin Ayo were in charge I’d have already planted and set off the nuclear demo charge.”

“Who?” asked Piper.

“Justin Ayo. Head of the ‘Synth Retention Bureau’. The guy who sends out Coursers. He is our main adversary, without a doubt, whether Shaun is calling the shots or not,” Nora said. “He’s vain, needy, petulant, domineering, and he runs every god damned Courser the Institute has. Apparently, he’s fond of using them to throw his weight around inside as well as outside the Institute.”

Dez nodded, “And in one sentence, you’ve told us more about the Institute and Coursers than we ever learned in decades playing hide and seek with them.”

“I know, Dez,” Nora nodded, “I’m still with you. I just…”

Dez nodded, “Have to decide who else you might be with.”

Nora nodded once, reflexively, “But not with the Institute. That is for sure. Whether Shaun would do to some other family what was done to me, the fact is that someone from the Institute DID order it. And DID kill everyone in the vault, just because they could.”

“So the question is how do we decide what we do,” said Dez.

“And the answer is there’s the equivalent of a Courser Chip in my Pip-Boy,” said Nora.

“I wondered why you didn’t have it on,” said Carrington, “I would expect there’s some kind of tracking method to it.”

“Exactly. By definition, it has to be tracking where I am, if I can use it to relay. So if I go somewhere I don’t want the Institute to know about, the Pip-Boy stays home. Or travels somewhere without me,” said Nora. “So… I will be traveling to and from the Institute. There is a chance I can communicate with PATRIOT as well. I left the message in the system. The next time he uses his code to encrypt something, the system will notify him.”

Dez nodded, “I’ll have Tinker Tom create a more refined version of that chip, as the one you used was a set of contact instructions so we could find future synths more easily and let him know who we were. Let him have some way of contacting us to set up two way communications if that were even possible. If you can go in and out…that changes everything.”

Nora shook her head, “Keep in mind, Ayo told me to my face that he’d be watching me. Now, I’ll bet that means that I will have some kind of VERY obvious watcher. But if it were me, I’d also have a more subtle watcher too. So that when my target shook the obvious watcher, they’d think they got rid of everybody. Physical meetings are a bad idea.”

Dez smiled, “We’ll set up a ‘network dead drop’ so you two can exchange info and never seem to know each other.”

Nora nodded. “Other than that, all I can think of is to go to the Institute and talk with people. And keep talking until something happens. And then I’ll react to that.”

She shook her head, “At the very least we’ll learn a TON about the Institute, while I figure out which fucking end is up,” she looked Dez in the eye, “And I won’t take it personally if we have to part company.”
Dez shook her head, “I don’t think it will come to that Whisper.”

Oh Dez. Glory can’t take me. If it came to that. And it could.

Nora just nodded and said, “On a happier note, Madison Li is willing to work with us. More precisely, the Minutemen AND the Railroad. She’s currently stuck at Boston Airport making sure that their Giant Death Robot is not a threat to anyone. But I need Deacon to keep an eye on her, and pull her out if she might be in trouble or if it looks as if matters between me and the Brotherhood are coming to a head.”

“Between you, personally, and the Brotherhood?” asked Dez.

Nora nodded, “Yes. I pulled a gun on Elder Maxson, because he discovered that Paladin Danse was a synth, M7-97, and I refused to execute him. Then he tried browbeating me, so I threatened his life. Then I made him leave. It was an interesting lunch hour.”

“Wow. You’ve been busy,” observed Dez.

“It’s a gift,” said Nora. “Honestly, I’ve been looking for an excuse for some time. I need to brief the Minutemen next. Which is going to involve a ton more walking from now on. Unless I want to have a long sensitive conversation over unsecured radio. Which I don’t. Anyway, Deacon?”

“You got it boss. One babysitting mission coming right up,” he smiled.

Desdemona said, “I’ll have Tinker Tom work up a new contact chip. We’ll get it to you in Diamond City.”

Nora nodded. “Works for me Dez. Anything else?”

Desdemona shook her head, so Nora said, “Ok. Just pop me any recent intel on Raider activities and we’ll head out to Sanctuary.”

While they waited on the Raider Intel download, Nora got several Stealth Boys from Tinker Tom. For the first time, she could see a situation where she was surprised and had to run for it, rather than doing the surprising. The ability to disappear for 30 seconds was not just attractive. It might be the line between life and death.

Once Dez delivered the information, Nora and Piper said goodbye, and headed out the back entrance. Once they’d left, they started down the Harborwalk and out by way of Bunker Hill. She crossed the Mystic so she could avoid Cambridge, and discovered that Preston HAD occupied that boathouse she’d cleared a week or so earlier.

He’d converted it to a garrison rather than settlement, which made sense as far as Nora was concerned, but what was interesting was the small artillery battery located at the site. The officer in charge of the garrison recognized her and came running up and saluted, to Piper’s considerable amusement.

“General, ma’am. It’s an honor. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” he said.

“Honestly? Dumb luck, Captain. I didn’t even know you were here. I’ve been out of the loop for a bit,” Nora replied.

He looked surprised, “Well, welcome to Camp Taffington. We actually have a caravan headed for Starlight Drive-In shortly. We’d be happy to escort you, if you want.”
Nora nodded, “That would be fine.”

*I could use a nice peaceful hike back to Sanctuary, for sure. This is a FAR cry from what this area was like a month or two ago.*

As they traveled the supply caravan leader kept up a running commentary. They routed north of Lexington still. Both central Cambridge and Lexington remained no-go areas to anyone not ready and willing to fight off waves of ferals. The Minutemen were gradually making inroads into Lexington at least, but between the remaining Raiders near Corvega and ferals elsewhere in the town it was slow going.

But the trip to Starlight was pretty uneventful. The caravan was able to make two trips a day, and as a result, the area along the trade route itself was pretty secure. They arrived at a huge Drive-In theater complex that had been converted into a combination farm and trading post, with a wall, a number of turrets covering all directions, and a concentrated construction project tearing up the west end of the drive-in to expose arable dirt.

Nora and Piper swapped for another caravan headed for Red Rocket, and followed them through the west side of Concord and up to Sanctuary. It was becoming routine, which was exactly what Nora wanted to see. If she could get a clear uninterrupted line from The Castle to Diamond City to Sanctuary? That would constitute the central nervous system of the Commonwealth Provisional Government.

When they reached Sanctuary, the guard took one look and called both Preston and Marcy. When Preston arrived he actually waited until Marcy showed up. When she arrived, she smiled, which seemed alien to Nora, and shook Nora’s hand.

“I have to say, I have nothing to complain about. The artillery is set up, people are trained, trade is flourishing, and the entire area is secure,” she said.

Nora smiled, “I never thought I’d hear you say that, Marcy.”

Marcy just grinned, “Well, if you thought I was hard to please, try the Steering Committee.”

“‘Steering Committee’?” Nora asked.

“Yep. The group composed of all the settlements that comprise the Commonwealth Provisional Government. Us, The Abernathy’s, Tenpines, Sunshine Tidings, Starlight, Oberland, County Crossing, and those malcontents way out at Somerville. The Steering Committee. The de facto core of the CPG.”

Nora hung her head, and then laughed, “Marcy,” and here she looked up, “I never for one second imagined that it would be easy. I just did the right thing.”

Marcy laughed. “I always complained. I guess because no one listened to me. But when they all started listening? Then it REALLY started sucking.”

Nora reached out and surprised all of them by hugging Marcy, “I know exactly what you mean. And you know what? I trust you.”

She pulled back and looked Marcy in the eye, “I’m doing everything I can to make this work, but I’m guessing that shutting up and letting you run the politics will get me the best results.”

“Great. No pressure. Just successfully create something that failed, epically, once before,” said Marcy, a little acerbically.
Nora smiled and said, “I might have an angle on figuring out whether the last CPG died of natural causes or was killed. That would probably help.”

Nora waved Marcy to join them in their debriefing. Preston and Sturges also joined her at her home, the “General’s Residence”.

“OK, let’s get this out first. I teleported to the Institute, and I found Shaun. But he’s 60. Because he was kidnapped 60 years ago, not 10. And he’s in charge of the Institute,” Nora got out in a rush.

There was a stunned silence.

Marcy broke the silence and said, “So you’ve come back to tell us this because you need our help to decide what’s next, because this isn’t a rescue mission anymore? And you think all of us have a right to have some input.”

Wow. Did the settlers here ever choose well.

Nora nodded, “Exactly.”

Marcy nodded. “Anything else?”

Nora smiled, “Since you mention it, yes. In the process of getting into and out of the Institute I’ve wound up on the Brotherhood of Steel’s shitlist.”

Marcy sighed. “How’d you manage that?”

“They demanded I find nukes for them. When I did that, they weren’t satisfied. Which was fair because unknown to them, I made sure they couldn’t actually USE them. But then they decided I had to kill a friend to make them happy. I declined. They were dicks about it. We parted company. At gunpoint,” said Nora.

Preston said, “I feel like there’s details missing.”

Nora shrugged, “Not material ones, but OK,” and then she outlined the full results of both her trip to the Institute and her activities with the Brotherhood afterwards. At the end of her full story, Marcy’s lips quirked.

She said, “Let me see if I have this straight. You teleported to the Institute and found a 60 year old son, not 10, who’s in charge of the whole Institute. When you came back you were shanghaied into finding nukes for the Brotherhood, but made sure they wouldn’t work. Then they asked you to kill, if not exactly a friend, then at least someone who really didn’t deserve it and then you quit.”

Nora smiled, “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

At that exact moment, a runner from Red Rocket arrived, breathless. He addressed Nora.

“Young daughter was kidnapped by Raiders. Cait’s taken The Regulars to rescue her. She was super pissed. You need to come quick.”

Chapter End Notes

This may be a series of stories about relationships, and what makes us human. But it's
also about (re)building something. The Minutemen are maintaining trade this time, and the result is that, increasingly, the areas around settlements AND the areas along the trade routes are slowly being bled of threats, as Raiders and Gunners and Super-Mutants learn to look elsewhere, and feral and critters just get whittled down.

Marcy may be the character I've taken farthest from her game portrayal. In a way, you could say I "killed" her and replaced her with a more pliable version. Just call me Institute 2.0...

And speaking of Institute, I rendered all the actions of Liam and Z1 into a series of drops and terminal conversations. The subtlety, or lack thereof, of those two means that I just can NOT believe that you, and Liam, and Z1 aren't rolled up immediately. Especially as Justin has just TOLD you he's having you watched.
“What?!?” Nora and Piper exclaimed.

The runner nodded. “The guard that brought us the news is at Red Rocket. He’s hurt pretty bad. I already sent the Doc down.”

Preston grabbed his musket and leapt up. Nora looked at him and made a snap decision. “No, Preston, I need you burning up the radio.”

He looked at her, “What?”

Nora nodded, “I don’t think this is Brotherhood inspired, but if I were Maxson and I got intel that my main rival for power over the Commonwealth had family captured by Raiders, you bet your ass I’d pick that moment to make trouble.”

Nora nodded at the radio, “So I need you getting the Minutemen up and patrolling all around the Airport and Cambridge Police Station. Piper and I will rescue Nat.”

He nodded, “Yes, ma’am. And good luck.”

He saluted and turned to the radio. As Nora and Piper rushed out following the runner, she could hear him calling the Castle first.

*Good man. The Castle IS in the most danger. I should have seen that. But he’s thinking better than me at the moment.*

Nora and Piper ran the mile from Nora’s house to the Red Rocket. They arrived just as Marie was finishing examining the Minuteman on the cot inside the office. He had multiple gunshot wounds and she’d already started a whole blood transfusion.

Marie turned. “Ah. Nora and Piper. You may ask Jonathon questions, but then I must transport him to the hospital in Sanctuary.”

The Minuteman, Jonathon, lifted his head to speak. Nora quickly knelt to let him lay his head back. “It’s OK. Just tell me what happened.”

He grimaced in pain, then looked at Nora. “I’m really sorry. I know you trusted us to get Nat to Sanctuary but we failed.”

*Huh? Doesn’t matter. Just figure out where they took Nat. The rest of it can wait.*

Jonathon was continuing. “We picked her up at Diamond City. The route’s been pretty safe. Maybe we let our guard down, I don’t know…”

Nora laid a hand on his arm, “Don’t worry about it. It happens to all of us.”

“We’d crossed the Charles like we always do, and went past those crazy robots, and we were going along the railroad west of the junkyard when we got hit by about 6 guys. I went down pretty early, so I guess they didn’t make as sure of me as they did some of the others. They shot up the caravan pretty bad, but then I saw them recognize the General’s daughter.”
“Badly”, Nora heard Piper mutter, but under her breath.

He started crying, “They took her, ma’am and I…I couldn’t…stop…”

Nora shook her head. “If you’d have tried, they’d just have killed you and nobody would know what had happened yet. Rest.”

Nora looked up at Marie and nodded to her. Two Minutemen lifted Jonathon and started walking the mile back to the hospital. Marie was right beside them, holding the bag of whole O negative blood high.

She looked over her shoulder, “It is remarkable that he made it here at all. It would have been far easier to lay down and die. He is a very brave and dedicated soldier. Go save Natalie.”

_Easier said than done Marie. But I plan to do it or die trying._

Nora looked at Cait’s maps in the office. They were highly accurate for the Northwest quadrant of the Commonwealth in particular. Piper was staring at them as if willing them to give her information. There were three major Raider hubs in striking distance of where the caravan was hit; Corvega, Walden Pond, and the Federal Ration Stockpile.

_I will bet good money Cait is running to the ambush site as we speak, as fast as her troops can move. And then 20% faster. She’ll physically track them. Maybe I can outthink those sick Raider fucks. Hey! I still have…_

“The reports,” Nora said, loudly enough to startle Piper.

Piper looked at her a little wildly, then her eyes focused. “Right, so we search for anything regarding these three sites,” and she pointed to the same three that Nora had noticed. Nora nodded.

The Railroad reports about Corvega were spotty. They were still gun-shy about Institute synths at Switchboard, but every report that post-dated Nora, Piper, and Nick’s attack over a month earlier indicated that they were barely hanging on for survival. And that the Minutemen were not letting them out of their relatively tiny pocket of Lexington. Between ferals and Minutemen, those Raiders were mainly a threat to themselves.

As for the Raiders at Walden Pond, the Railroad considered them a non-threat. A group of four that occasionally tried to strong-arm nearby settlements for food, they’d had no luck with the rise of the Minutemen in the area. While they could have been a candidate, due to the fact that kidnapping the General’s daughter might give them leverage…

_Jonathon spoke about more than four attackers. Which means it’s THESE guys…_

Nora’s finger stabbed the map at the Stockpile. “Here.”

Piper looked over, “I agree. Listen to this,” she read from the terminal, “‘Red Tourette is an ambitious Raider leader and a threat to operations in the west, especially to Dayton and Mercer Safehouses. There is some intel that she is being blackmailed into food shipments to an as yet undisclosed location. Avoid and re-route.’ That sounds like someone who’d take prisoners, if only to back us off.”

“Well that isn’t going to work. If they think for one second that they’re going to be able to keep Nat from me once I’m there…”

Piper nodded. “So if we cut straight south, along the dam and through Sunshine, we might get
there in time to help Cait.”

“And kill everyone stupid enough to get between us and Nat,” Nora added.

Piper nodded.

Running the entire 7 miles would have left them unable to do anything once they got there, so they walked swiftly. As they both grimly stalked through the woods and across the Sudbury Dam, they occasionally spoke.

“What was she thinking?”

“She probably missed me. You guys thought I was dead. I was back for a day and gone again. She came to see us.”

“Still…”

“I’m not thrilled either, sweetheart. But she had the good sense to at least find someone to escort her. She should have been safe.”

“So I don’t get to wring her neck?”

“Well, only a little…”

Once they got to Sunshine Tidings, Nora looked over at Piper. “What I wouldn’t give for my Pip-Boy right now. I’d know exactly how far to the Stockpile.”

Piper gestured to the south. “Mile or two that way. Bit past the Mass Pike.”

“That’s my point. ‘Thataway,’ vs ‘1.52 miles on heading 176’. That damn chip is a mixed blessing.” Nora sighed, “I need to save my daughter before I deal with my son. Or ‘son’,” she said making air quotes.

The two of them began heading down the hill to the south in the gathering dark. They’d traveled about a mile, when they started hearing the pop of pipeguns, and the sizzle of lasers. Nora unslung her rifle, and began moving quietly. After a couple minutes, they heard, and saw, the whoosh of a missile launcher.

Nora dropped to the floor of the forest and brought up her rifle. She could see the Raider with the missile launcher in a shanty atop the Stockpile bunker roof. He was aiming again. As much as she wanted to snap off a shot, she forced herself to estimate range, and click drop into her scope. Thankfully there was no wind, as the wind had died with the setting sun.

The missile launcher fired again, and Nora heard a scream, and some familiar cursing. Cait was definitely down there.

Nora placed the cross hairs on the center of the Raider’s back, and squeezed. He fell instantly, the missile launcher falling out of his bunker.

Nora began looking for more targets. The Minutemen had formed a firing line on the east side of the bunker compound and were exchanging fire with Raiders at both flanks in particular.

This is great. They’re all fixed on the Minutemen in front of them.

Nora began methodically wiping out the Raiders engaging Cait and the Regulars. Just for variation she started on her right and worked left, rather than left to right. One by one, they’d go down to the
mysterious hornets zipping in from their rear, with just enough casualties caused by the troops to
their front to keep their attention off Nora.

At some point, resistance collapsed. The few remaining troops emerged running away from the
Regulars. And towards Nora.

*All of you. Every last one. I’ll be merciful. I won’t hang your bodies as trophies. I’m just going to
leave you. With a note. “Leave us alone, or die.”*

She was cutting them down as they fled. And they were too panic stricken at that point to
understand what was happening to them. And they died.

From downslope Cait was screaming. It sounded like “FAWK-a’-BAL-ek” as as she rushed the
door. Nora and Piper heard Cait’s shotgun cough three more times, then a door slam. Then they
saw three more of the Regulars follow her.

“C’mon,” Nora called as he slung her rifle and drew her pistol. Because of the range at which Nora
had been killing Raiders it was a few minutes before they were able to pick their way to the front
of the Stockpile. By that time, the remainder of Cait’s force had swept and secured the exterior.

When Nora and Piper moved into the light, they all stiffened and saluted. “Guess we shouldn’t be
that surprised General. Cait thought you might be here eventually. She’s gone ahead. She has the
very Devil in her, ma’am,” one of them said.

Nora nodded, and quickly told half of them, five, to remain on guard. The other five she had follow
her. She didn’t know what she’d find inside and not getting to Nat wasn’t an option.

*I may need these guys as cannon fodder. I will get to my daughter, no matter what.*

Inside, there were stairs down, and the distant echo of gunfire and curses. At the bottom there were
two Raiders, dead, with large chunks taken out of the face and chests, as if by some avenging Irish
mercenary. And her favorite shotgun.

In the first stock room, there was a passage north. Nora ordered two of her troops to sweep that
direction, and kill every Raider they found. She looked them in the eye. “I mean kill. No one here
gets out alive. The message needs to be ‘If you mess with the General’s family, she’ll kill you, your
friends, acquaintances, people you talked with last week, she’ll dig up your dead folks and defile
the corpses. And then she’ll get nasty.’ Got it?”

The two she’d detailed grinned, and headed off into the tunnels. Piper was looking at her a little
wide-eyed. “Laying it on a little thick aren’t you, sweetheart?”

Nora shook her head, “Not thick enough. If I’d done this right these assholes would have slit their
own throats just for thinking about kidnapping Nat. I’m not trying to win this fight. I’m trying to
win the next twenty. Without HAVING to fight.”

“And that’s never come back to bite you, Blue?” Piper asked.

“No…well…OK. Maybe”

*I really WAS just trying to make sure that guy never bothered Susan again…not give the DIA a
way to blackmail me. So maybe Piper has a point. Again.*

The next major chamber had a passage north as well. Nora turned to two more of the Regulars.
“You know what to do, guys.”
The two women saluted and headed off. The door to the west had had it’s hinges blown off and was hanging in the frame. Through the door was another chamber, with a northern passage. And a Minuteman. The fire ahead was closer and reaching a crescendo. Nora looked over her shoulder, “Piper, get these two moving north. Then join me.”

And she was off. Down a hall and through a set of doors, where she heard voices.

One, unfamiliar, called, “Don’t make a move bitch. Or I ventilate girlie’s brains.”

Then she heard Cait. “Now, ya don’t want ta be doin’ anythin’ that’d make me do sommat ye’d be regrettin’.”

*Cait is PISSED. Her accent only gets that thick when she is “beyond reason” angry.*

Nora moved into the chamber fast. She could see a corpse in front of her and smoke from two turrets. And firelight to her right front, so she sidestepped right, her pistol up and ready. Very soon she saw the tableaux. There was a Raider, female, with one arm around Nat, and crouching behind her, with a pistol against Nat’s head. Nat had been crying, but now she was staring right at Cait, intently.

Cait’s shotgun was up, aimed at the Raider, and steady. Nora began moving as silently as she had ever tried to be, around and right to get a clear shot at the Raider leader.

The Raider said, “I mean it. You take your people and you go! I’m keeping this little hostage here.”

“Over me dead fecking body, you stupid cunt. The only way ye get out alive at’ all, is to give me the lass. Now. Sure and I’m killin’ ye otherwise. Slow an’ painful.”

Nora was still unable to get a clean shot, and she heard Piper coming up. Which meant the Raider would soon as well…

*God, someone DO something, I have no shot…I have to take what I have…forgive me…*

And Cait shouted, “Cíceáil air sa magairlí!”

Nat twisted down, and elbowed the woman in the crotch. The Raider winced, and Nat rolled to the side, and Cait’s shotgun spat three times. Huge gouts of blood formed as the Raider’s body was thrown back, over a low coffee table in her hutment, and her lifeless corpse flopped into her couch.

Piper came up at a run, having heard what happened and was about to leap forward to Nat, when Nora’s arm caught her. She nodded at Nat.

Cait had rushed over and enveloped the teenager in her arms. “I’ve got ye, lass. I’ve got ye. It’ll be all right. I’ve got ye.”

And Nat was sobbing, “Aunt Cait, I was so scared. But I remembered what you taught me. When you told me to kick him the balls I guessed. I guessed.”

Nora was looking at Piper, eyes swimming.

“Ye guessed right, lass. You did that cow a fair treat ye did.”

Nat was clinging to Cait. Cait was smoothing Nat’s hair. “I’ll always come for ye, lass. Always and ever.”
“Oh Aunt Cait, I…”

Piper had held off as long as she could. She’d run forward and grabbed both of them, hugging them. She kissed Nat on one cheek and Cait on the other. Nat smiled and Cait looked shocked.

Piper hugged Cait closer. “Anytime Cait. Anytime you want, you are welcome in Diamond City. Anytime you want, for as long as you want, you magnificent woman you.”

Nora came up, as Cait looked at both Nora and Piper, her expression nearly unreadable. Nora said, “You saved my daughter Cait. I couldn’t get a shot…I couldn’t. I was going to shoot through Nat and hope for the best. And you pulled a miracle from your Irish ass. You can’t ever be a guest,” and as Cait looked confused at that, she added, “Because family is NEVER a guest.”

And Nora turned and looked at Nat. “Now thank Aunt Cait for pulling your butt out of the fire. And you’re grounded for a week.”

Nat protested, “I went with the Minutemen caravan, mom!”

Nora smiled at her daughter, “That’s why it’s not a month, sweetheart. And maybe Aunt Cait can come and make prison more fun for the week.”

Nora looked at Cait, expectantly.

“Family, eh? I reckon the Regulars could use a week off from my ‘bullyin’’.”

“Then it’s settled, Aunt Cait is coming to visit.”

And Cait had a look on her face she’d never had before. It looked good.

Chapter End Notes

What Cait screams on the way into the Stockpile is actually, “Faugh a Ballagh” - Irish Gaelic for “Clear The Way”. It was a 18th century (and probably earlier) Irish battle cry which was adopted by the 28th Massachusetts Infantry during the Civil War as their regimental motto.

The 28th Massachusetts was one of the Regiments that served in the “Irish Brigade” in the Army of the Potomac in the American Civil War, and it and the 28th fought at Antietam, Fredricksburg, Gettysburg, The Overland Campaign (The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and a series of continual engagements culminating at Cold Harbor and the approaches to Petersburg), the Siege of Petersburg, and finally at Appomattax Court House. Students of the Civil War should recognize every single one of those names.
The four of them, Piper, Nora, Nat, and “Aunt” Cait made their way back to Diamond city fairly quickly, where Nora strapped her Pip-Boy back on. Cait raised her eyebrows and Nora said, “Courser Chip. The thing lets me relay into the Institute at will, but literally tattles to Father. So when I do certain business, I have to leave it behind.”

Cait nodded. Nora watched as Piper laid down the “You did something without talking to us and you’re grounded law,” though she was doing a good job of not overreacting to the raw terror both she and Nora had shared during the incident.

While Piper was occupied, Nora said quietly to Cait, “I’m going to need your help. What I’m doing is as dangerous as anything I’ve ever done before, and… I may not return. I need you to promise me, you’ll protect Nat and Piper from the Institute if it becomes necessary. I have to know they’re going to be safe or I can’t do what I need to.”

Cait, who had been listening with that semi-detached way she affected, had turned and given Nora a hard look midway through. Then she nodded. “Done. I’ll look after ‘em like they were me own,” she said.

Nora smiled at Cait affectionately, “You’re already doing that. I’m just saying, in the,” and she raised her hands, “HIGHLY unlikely event there’s a problem, keep doing it. Believe it or not, I trust you.”

Cait clapped Nora on the shoulder, “Ye were the first who ever did, back when. I’ll not be betrayin’ that trust, so long as I have breath, Nora.”

“Thank you, Cait.”

Piper looked up, “Thank you for?”

“Ummm, for rescuing Nat? You notice she’s here, right?”

Piper stuck her tongue out at Nora, as Cait squeezed her shoulder and whispered, “They’ll be safe as houses, Nora.”

There was a knock at the door, and when she opened it, Nora was confronted by a DC Guard. He handed her a small package, and said, “With the mayor’s compliments. The tax bill on your printing press.”

Nora took the package like she was being handed a dead molerat and closed the door. Piper was livid, and after she’d snatched the bill from Nora’s hands and looked at the total, vented all the anger she’d had to restrain, while dealing with Nat, on McDonough. Nora let her go on for a good long while, making sure that she came close enough to the door that the southern half of the market heard Piper’s invective.

Piper ended with, “…that man is a DEATHCLAW!” Then she looked at Nora expectantly.

Nora raised one eyebrow. “And?”

Piper looked at her and said, “YOU heard me Blue. He’s a Deathclaw. Now go. Destroy!”

Nora smiled and Piper started giggling, much more softly than she’d been shouting. Nat and Cait
were looking at the pair of them, mouths agape.

Piper handed Nora the holochip that had been folded into the tax bill, then went into the safe and pulled the tax notice amount from petty cash. Selling loot from all the Raiders, Gunners, and Super-Mutants stupid enough to take Nora on had been VERY lucrative. By Diamond City standards the Wrights were definitely Upper Stand income earners. But as amusing as Piper would find it to live up in the Right Field Bleachers neighborhood? The commute from home to the Publick was too nice, and Piper couldn’t STAND upper seats snobs anyway.

“Don’t pay it TOO fast, Thing. Let the petty little prick think he’s actually caused trouble,” Nora observed.

“I almost didn’t catch that it was Deacon that time. Wearing the helmet really helped,” said Piper. “Now are you going to have to do with that tape what you did with the others?”

“I don’t think so, and thank god for that. The container chafed,” said Nora. “It needs to be smaller.”

“Only you would say THAT, Blue,” joked Piper.

“What are you two talking about?” Nat asked.

Cait who’d figured it out, turned to her and said, “Ask me sometime when yer mom and sister aren’t listenin’.”

“Cait!” said Nora and Piper simultaneously.

“What? Someone has to teach the lass,” Cait said, “And if she doesn’t know at 14, then someone has fallen down on the bloody job!”

Nora rolled her eyes and made dinner for the four of them. A simple Brahmin stew with carrots and onion and wild celery with Razorgrain dumplings. She picked the dish for two reasons. It was still chilly and stew always went with cold weather, but also because once the beef had been browned and everything was in the cast iron pot on the stove slowly simmering, they had over two hours to themselves.

For a while, Cait was working with Nat on her Gaelic. Which Piper had briefly objected on the grounds that she could be, probably was, teaching Nat to swear in two languages. Nora pointed out that if she hadn’t, Nora would have had to shoot Red Tourette through Nat on the grounds that “possibly fatal gunshot wound” was preferable to “definitely fatal gunshot wound”.

Piper’s expression softened, “I didn’t realize. How come…?” She let the question hang.

“How come I’m not freaking out at almost shooting my daughter in an attempt to save her life?” Nora asked rhetorically. “Mainly because the last month or so has been very good for me. I have the Minutemen and Cait to talk and decompress with and really, cooking like this,” as the smell wafted through the room, “has been actually, no shit, Dr. Curie approved, therapeutic.”

“Marie has PRESCRIBED that you cook for us?” Piper laughed.

“Kinda?” Nora said and furrowed her brow. “Yeah?”

Piper laughed, “I get a wife who isn’t waking up shouting or crying in the middle of the night nearly as much, AND I get a lot of tasty food? I knew there was good reason to pull her out of that hole.”
Nora called Cait over while Nat worked on an article for the Publick. “OK, the two of you, tomorrow I’m going back to the Institute. I have the contact chip, and it’s been several days above ground. I need to get back if there’s going to be any chance of a peaceful resolution.”

“I’m going to relay from here. It seems that I return to point of origin when relaying out,” Nora said, “I promise to ask if you can join me, Piper, but in the event I can’t get them to accept that, then I think relaying right home and letting you know I’m safe will be a good compromise. And I’ll TRY not to be out of contact for nearly four days.”

Piper said, “Exactly.”

“Because you look awful with red eyes and snot,” said Nora, smiling.

“Hey!!!”

“And while it was nice to know how upset you were, it’s not fair to keep inflicting that for my own ego gratification.”

“Better. Not good but better.”

“But I am going back. Tomorrow morning.”

The next day was not nearly as portentous as the last time Nora had gone into the Institute. For one thing it was by invitation. For another, it felt weirdly like back when she was living in Sanctuary Hills. Like a working morning. Get up, get coffee from your robot butler, kiss your spouse and child goodbye.

Get molecularly deconstructed and teleport to a scientific wonderland full of killer robots and mad scientists who’d kill you with no hesitation if they knew who you really were.

Nora rematerialized in the relay room. But this time, she simply exited the chamber, went down the stairs to the elevator, called the elevator and rode it down to the atrium. She was still the object of some interest, as she was dressed in her usual clothing, Fatigue pants and T-shirt, combat boots, black denim vest, and fingerless gloves for protection without losing trigger feel.

She walked to the block of residences with the Director’s quarters.

_OK Nora. Game face on, game face. Who’s it going to be today, Shaun or Father? And who is real? What if both of them are real?


Nora went up the steps to the door where she’d last seen Shaun. She entered. The Shaun Synth was no longer there. As she peered into his office, she called, “Shaun?”

“Up here mother,” Shaun called down a set of stairs.

Nora went up and Shaun turned smiling and asked, “Were you able to take care of your surface business, I hope?”

Nora smiled back, “Absolutely. With this chip, I’m sure that we can reach a good balance.”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that for long,” Father said. “Now that you’ve had a chance to see the Institute firsthand, what do you think?”

_Careful…_what did he mean by that?
“You’ve got technology here I never dreamed possible,” Nora said, cautiously.

“I’m glad you can appreciate what we’ve accomplished. Ultimately all our knowledge and resources are focused on a single goal. That is best summarized by our motto: Mankind-Redefined,” said Father.

I’ve heard that before. It has that same quasi-religious feel that “Science/Father/Family” had. Is this a university, a research facility, or a cult?

Father continued, “Unfortunately no advance comes without setbacks. As remarkable as our synths are, they can be dangerous without proper supervision. The superior synth mind and body wrestling with something approaching free will can be a recipe for chaos.

“How so?” Nora asked.

“That is a good question. Without programming and limitations, the synth personality is literally ‘chaotic’, as in small initial variations can produce wildly different outcomes. Without our intervention, synths are no longer predictable. No longer compliant. It’s a problem that Robotics is working on before we go forward with a universal Gen 3 rollout,” Father replied.

You’re describing human beings, son.

He continued, “But however closely they approximate human behavior they are still our creations,” and now Shaun looked concerned. “A rogue synth has taken over a raider gang at Libertalia. He believes he’s man named Gabriel. Under his leadership, the raiders have taken many lives. I’ve dispatched a courser there. I’d like you to join him and reclaim that synth.”

He looks sincere. Does the loss of life to a wayward synth really grieve him or is it an act? He didn’t oversell it. Sort of ‘My dog bit someone’ level regret. Is that because he doesn’t take as much responsibility for the rogue synth or because the people getting killed don’t matter?

“OK, Shaun. It sounds important. Do I have time to visit Robotics and do some homework before I leave?”

Shaun looked surprised. “That’s…a good idea. Coursers don’t usually need that kind of information, but that’s because they’ve lived here their whole lives. By all means.”

Nora turned to leave. She heard Shaun call her, “Mother?”

Nora turned, “Yes?”

“Can you tell me anything about why Madison Li would have left?” Father asked.

“That’s an interesting question,” JADE SUN replied. “Of course it was obvious who I used to create the Signal Interceptor to get here. I can only assume that seeing me in a Brotherhood uniform caused her to recall her time with them.”

“Ahh,” said Father, “So you yourself did nothing…?” He let the question hang.

“Me?” JADE SUN looked surprised, “No. She seemed…displeased by some of the things going on around here. She made S9-23, didn’t she? Perhaps she was bothered by that?“

Father looked troubled. “Perhaps. It is no matter. I believe that Dr. Ormond in Advanced Systems has a refinement for your chip. See her before you leave.”
“Absolutely, Shaun,” said JADE SUN. And she left the room and made her way down the stairs.

As she crossed the atrium, JADE SUN fished out her contact chip for PATRIOT. This was going to be a long game. Each time the contact protocol detected her or PATRIOT logging into the system, it would kick up a prompt, and they could message. A slow, laborious, but undetectable conversation. The moment the message was activated it remained in the system only as long as the letters were actually on the screen.

She palmed the chip in preparation of getting access to a terminal. As she entered Robotics she was confronted with her first “industrial” experience. She looked about in awe. The “assembly line” was a series of stations to which robots moved hoops. Each hoop at each station collected some aspect of a human frame. First skeletons: the bones and articulating and linking cartilaginous tissues. Then a massive weaver, installing tendons and muscle fibers. Then a station that seemed to thread and fill a circulatory system. Finally the skinless assembly, spread out like a bizarre mix of Grey’s Anatomy and Vitruvian Man, was dipped in a bath that formed the outer epithelial layers.

The result was a man or woman that got up, naked but hairless, and walked to a narrow opening in a wall. Presumably for programming, because when Nora attempted to interact with them, they merely moved around her and continued to the door.

“Can I help you?” asked a scientist in front of her.

She snapped out of it and focused on him, and smiled, “I’m sorry. I’m Nora. This is remarkable.”

The man smiled, “My name is Alan. Alan Binet. It is remarkable isn’t it? And this is only the prototyping facility. When we finally get the go ahead for full production we’ll be able to produce twice as fast from this location, and were have two more full size facilities that just lack the power…well, anyway. What can I do for the mother of Father?”

“I need to see records on personality overlays on synths and their effects. I have a synth to retrieve and I need to know how they react,” replied Nora.

“But I thought we only ever used Coursers…never mind. Of course you can look. Here,” and he made terminal available.

Nora used the login she’d been given by Dr. Li when the Courser chip was installed, and deftly inserted the holochip. Then she reviewed the data. There really wasn’t much there about synth personalities. They started with the same initial conditions, and rather chillingly, most synths couldn’t manage to make it more than two years without getting themselves into a situation that the Institute deemed memory wipe worthy.

The poor bastards have human brains. Even the most boring personalities are going to do something naughty in a two year time frame. And when your every action is questioned…and examined for ‘deviance’…you’re screwed. Sooner or later, you’re screwed.

There. Message away.

Nora thanked Alan and moved on to Advanced Systems. When she got there, she found Dr. Ormond was the incredibly young woman who had been testing lasers on her last trip. This time, she had a different agenda.

Give Nora the capability to go anywhere at will.

“What?” said Nora. “Could you repeat that?”
“I said, as long as you can input ‘x,y’ coordinates on your Pip-Boy, you can relay to that location. Instantly. So if you relay from a spot to the Institute and then to another location, you can go anywhere with virtually no travel time.”

“And I thought Vertibirds were the cat’s ass,” Nora said.

Dr. Ormond looked confused then shrugged. “The Courser will meet you at these coordinates.” She entered them on Nora’s Pip-Boy.

“Ok, I’ll head up to the Relay room.”

“Don’t you want any armor or special equipment?” Dr. Ormond asked.


Dr. Ormond shrugged, and Nora went up to the Relay Room.

*Here we go. I’m going to be right next to a murderbot. On a mission with it. I am going to have to be Very Careful. What are the odds that I can let it get killed?*

Nora hit Y on [RELAY. Y/N] and she flashed to a spot in Nahant. North of the Broad Sound. Right next to a Courser. THE Courser, actually. The one from Kellogg’s memories. X6-88.

“Hello ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said.

*Holy fuck. The total lack of emotion is even more unnerving up close and personal.*

“I understand we have a situation?” Nora said.

“Yes ma’am,” X6-88 replied. He gestured at an array of fishing boats, barges, and one semi-sunken deep sea freighter and said, “The Raiders here at Libertalia are led by Gabriel. He’s actually a synth. B5-92. We have to shoot our way in and reclaim B5-92.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” asked Nora.

“Ma’am?”

“Let’s go. Make it march. Get on with it. Start. Begin. Commence. Execute. Whatever it is you need to hear…”

X6-88 was off. He moved rapidly across a footbridge and gunned down two Raiders that tried to stop him. Nora kneeled and picked off a Raider on the superstructure of one of the fishing boats when he popped up to shoot X6. At that moment, she was mildly nauseated to observe through her scope, X6 actually punched through his last victim’s sternum. His fist, holding a grisly mass, protruded from the man’s back before X6 yanked it back, tossed something to the side, and turned away as the corpse slid to the deck.

Nora jogged forward as X6 moved off to the right across a series of makeshift bridges between semi-sunken boats. She set up at the edge of a barge, and as she looked, saw flashes in a series of shanties mounted on the deep sea freighter’s hull. It looked like nothing so much as an apartment building attached to the semi vertical decking. There was a whistling and a mini-nuke went off where X6 had been 20 seconds earlier, but where he was no longer, because he was breaking the neck of a Raider two boats away.

But she had seen the shooter. He was on a balcony on the freighter about 500 yards away and 100
yards up. There was on onshore breeze, as it was midday. She could disregard wind, and 100 yards up was not enough to materially effect drop, so she clicked in a correction for 500 yards and sighted on the Raider with a Fat-Man.

Words you do NOT want to put together. Sight on his head. Squeeze...wow, that was messy. God I could use a spotter. Oh there’s one. And now she’s down. Hmm, someone’s running over, shoot him. Other eye open, scanning for gun flash...there’s one. Sight...there you are...SHIT, he’s a sniper!

Nora winced as a round zipped by her, sounding exactly like a hornet. But she sighted on the shooter. And placed a shot directly into his heart. That seemed to break the back of the resistance, so she started looking for a way aboard the freighter.

She was able to find a route to the garbage barge that had a tram to the freighter set up. She couldn’t see X6-88, but she was certain that he was perpetrating horrors on the Raiders in the loose collection of boats farther to the south. She was of two minds. One part was sure X6 was taking too much joy from the violence. The other part pointed out it was RAIDERS suffering.

She rode the tram up, and heard a commotion lower down in the Raider’s structure. She assumed that X6 was cutting his way up from the water’s surface, and headed still further up. That Fat-Man would fetch a good price in Diamond City, and while she had plenty of cash, they could always use more.

Nora quickly located her first victim and his weapon. She slung it and moved to the Captain’s Cabin. As she was entering, X6 caught up with her.

He stepped in front of the door out of the cabin, “Hold up a moment ma’am. I’m going to give you B5-92’s reset code. If he hears the code phrase it’ll reset his cognitive processes and render him docile. You’ll need to say, ‘B5-92, initialize factory reset. Authorization code gamma 7-1-epsilon’. Once shut down, I can safely transport him to the institute.

Nora rolled her eyes, “Jesus, what a mouthful.”

X6 just said, “Then talk fast. Just get it right.”

They opened a hatch and stepped out on the stern of the half sunken ship. There was a rough looking man and two cronies standing there, guns pointed. “Judging by your gear, I’m gonna guess you’re from the Institute. So tell me, is the Institute so desperate for resources that it’s stealing plunder from honest hard working Commonwealth gangs?” said Gabriel.

She simply said, “B5-92, initialize factory reset. Authorization code gamma 7-1-epsilon.”

As the two gunmen were shocked into passivity by their leader’s sudden collapse, Nora and X6-88 were not. Nora hip shot her rifle into the Raider on the right 4 times. X6, with super-human reflexes, saw which target she had engaged and peppered the other with laser fire. His target jerked and spasmed at the laser impacts, then finally fell to the deck, dead.

X6 strode forward, and said “X6-88 ready to relay with reclaimed synth B5-93.”

Moments later he disappeared. Nora sighed and opened her Pip-Boy Map and selected the Institute. When the screen showed [RELAY Y/N] she selected “Y”.


She popped back into existence inside the increasingly familiar round room. She took a deep breath, called the elevator, and descended to speak with Shaun.

*How was any of that truly unique to synths or the Institute?*

Nora headed up the stairs after getting out of the elevator. As she went up the stairs, she heard voices. As she went up the second flight to Shaun’s main quarters, the voices resolved into Shaun’s and an unknown man.

Shaun was saying, “Yes, Doctor Volkert. I feel as well as can be expected…”

The unknown man, presumably Dr. Volkert said, “Well the lab results are back, and I have to say…”

Shaun saw Nora walking in, and said, “I can read a result as well as you Dean. Thank you. I believe that will be all for today.”

Dr. Volkert said, “But…”

“I said, that will be all. Thank you,” said Shaun.

Dr. Volkert turned, and seeing Nora said, “Ah. Yes,” and then he addressed Nora, “I hope you can see your way to visiting me soon for a baseline checkup, madam. I have promised Father that we will take good care of you, and starting a file is step one.”

Nora nodded, “I’ll make a point of it,” she said.

Shaun sat down at his desk and gestured for Nora to take a seat opposite him. “I’m glad to see you return safely. I know the task was difficult but I needed you to see how dangerous a rogue synth could be.”

Nora nodded, “He was quite dangerous, but I’m a little puzzled. Gabriel WAS a piece of work. Just as bad as any other Raider. But in what way was he unique? It’s not like he was really any different than any other Raider boss I’ve dealt with.”

Shaun looked puzzled, “But after that memory wipe he was foolishly given by an organization called the Railroad, he chose that path.”

Shaun was watching Nora carefully.

JADE SUN looked back with no sign of recognition, “The Railroad? Who are they, and why did they encourage him to be a Raider?”

Shaun shook his head, “They didn’t. But they foolishly maintain that synths are sentient. That they have, or should have, free will. We believe that once they help one of our synths escape, they give them a memory wipe…so that the synth doesn’t even know what it is. Some of them…stray.”

“All of them?” JADE SUN asked.
Shaun visibly relaxed, “No. Not all of them. But once freed from all constraint some synths go quite bad indeed.”

Nora shook her head, “How does that differ from anyone else? I have to tell you, I have seen quite a lot of Raiders, and they didn’t need to be rogue synths to do some pretty…inhuman things,” she shuddered, deliberately recalling Kendall Hospital.

“The difference is that synths are machines, they should not have free will, and when they go bad, they are my…our…responsibility,” Shaun said, somewhat emphatically.

_Hmm. I'm poking at a soft spot. I should back off for now._

“You have a good point. If you make a mess, you should clean it up,” Nora said.

“Strictly speaking, it’s the Railroad’s mess, but enough about that. The task is done and you’ve returned the synth safely to us. Well done. While you were away I had quarters prepared for you. You’ll find all the basic necessities as well as arms and equipment. Go and have a look,” Father said, then turned to his terminal and began typing.

Nora knew a dismissal line when she heard one, but ignored it, “So are those quarters for a family?”

Father looked up, “I don’t understand the question.”

“I have someone, and we’re taking care of a teenager. Are they welcome as well?” Nora asked.

Father looked confused, “I don’t see where that would be necessary.”

Nora nodded, “So commuting is OK.”

Father looked surprised, “I suppose, yes.”

_THAT went about as badly I could have feared._

Nora looked at her quarters “address”. It was in the South Residential wing, one unit clockwise from the Director’s. She went down, around the corner, through a break area, and then back up. When she got there, it turned out to be a small, single person apartment. It was clean, by Wasteland standards, about like a Pre-War dorm room. It wasn’t a tenth as roomy as her Diamond City Home. And it wasn’t one hundredth as “warm”, and that was BEFORE you factored in that neither Piper nor Nat was here.

_What would I have thought, if Shaun had been there when the pod opened? It would have seemed heavenly. Now? Not so much. If his goal was to sell me on the Institute, why wait until I broke in on my own?_

_No. There was something else there. Some other reason for releasing me._

Nora shook her head. The one advantage was that there was a personal terminal in her quarters. She closed the door and sat down at the terminal.

She had no current emails, so she loaded her contact chip. When she enabled the cryptographic functions a dead drop message popped up. It read, _[Your message just said ‘Friend’. Who are you? How can I trust you?]_

_This is where my background in BLACKLIST is less useful. I never recruited that many assets._
She responded, [I am from outside. You can guess who I am. You can trust me, because I knew enough to contact you.]

Then she had some time to kill, so she went down to see Dr. Volkert and get her physical. The medical bay was yet another bay clockwise, in the Western Residential facility. As she walked up, he was standing next to a person in a synth “uniform” sitting in an examination chair. He had a clipboard and he was looking down.

“No visible reaction to the K-14 compound. We'll start the next trial, then,” Volkert said. He continued, clinically, “The dosage will be much larger this time, and the side effects will likely be more pronounced.”

The synth looked up, trusting, “Will there be any pain?”

Jesus!

Dr. Volkert shook his head, “I honestly don't know. I suppose it's your job to find out. Now hold still.” He injected some kind of substance into the synth, who sat there stoically. “There, all done. You can return to your duties, and remember to record every symptom you experience in detail.”

The synth nodded, “I hope I'll prove a useful test subject for you, doctor.”

Dr Volkert nodded. “Mm hmm.” Then he waved the synth off.

I wonder if Mengele’s subjects thanked HIM too?

Nora put on her poker face. It would NOT do for the doctor to have any idea how disgusted she was. She came up and said, “So you’re the doctor here?”

He smiled, “EVERYone’s a doctor here, but yes, I am the chief physician. Dean Volkert.”

“So people in the Institute don’t shake hands?” Nora asked.

“No. Of course we do,” he replied.

Nora stuck out her hand, and after a slightly too long hesitation, he took hers and shook it.

So I was right, it appears.

He then proceeded to scan her, look in various nooks and crannies, but nothing as extreme as a routine physical, let alone a pelvic. Nora was beginning to think that maybe doctors in this century were bad at their jobs. Are at least highly dependent on pharmaceuticals, i.e., Stimpacks, for most therapies.

He seemed quite pleased by the results. Nora looked over at her chart. “Mid 20s, good health, intact dentition, no signs of major radiation damage, still compromised from exposure. No major trauma signs.”

Well, it's nice to know I'm a ‘dirty degenerate’ with good teeth.

She thanked Volkert and returned to her quarters.

When she logged in, she found a message. [Did you send the first message? How’d you do that? I wasn’t sure anyone on the surface would have a chance to crack Trinity.]

She typed in a reply, [Who are you?]
She lay down and thought.

So if I stay the night, it might worry Piper, but I may get somewhere with PATRIOT. At some point we HAVE to start working with him. And how do I react to Father?

Her terminal, which she had rigged to notify her if a message had arrived, pinged at her.

She read, [I’m Liam Binet. My father runs synth development. And everyone knows who you are.]

She sent back, [A friend in the Railroad cracked Trinity. Are you willing to help more directly?]

Soon she received, [What? The Railroad? As in THE Railroad? I kept sending synths hoping someone would help them. I hoped the Railroad got to some of them, but I never knew. With you in the picture, I have an idea. To rescue a lot of synths at once. But we’ll need help.]

She sent back, [??]

Fairly quickly she received, [Can I give this key to another? A synth who I am working with?]

Nora sat back and chewed her thumb.

If I say yes, it exposes me. If the synth betrays me, I’m sure I can get away, but that’s the end of ‘saving’ Shaun, assuming he wants saving. On the other hand, if I’m put in touch with this sympathetic synth, then I truly have an agent in place. Alan Binet’s son? Useful, but not a dedicated asset with nowhere else to go.

I’ve dealt with his type before. Dilettantes. He doesn’t actually have serious stake in what happens. He could walk away at any time and no one would be the wiser. But this SYNTH he wants to put me in contact with? He or she is committed. They have to work with me. Or get wiped. And given the usual life path of synth personalities? In about 6 months tops.

So I say yes. 90% I get my efforts supercharged. 10%, I have to run for my life.

She replied, [OK.]

PATRIOT replied, [Excellent. I’ll make arrangements.]

Nora looked at the time, 10:35PM, and decided to sleep in the Institute tonight. First, it would assuage Shaun’s fear that she was…questionable…in her loyalties, and second, because if the exposure through PATRIOT to additional synth agents were going to backfire? It would do so soon.

The next day, she was awakened by the {Bing!} of her doorbell. She opened the door. It was X6-88.

“Father needs to see you ma’am.” he said.

“Very good, I’ll be over directly,” JADE SUN replied.

When she arrived, Father was sitting in a chair, looking over the Atrium. He had clearly heard her walk in because he said, over his shoulder, “Hello mother. Tell me. What would you do if something were stolen from you?”

Really? Of all the questions…

Nora answered, “You should already know.”
By now she was even with him on the balcony. He stood, and gestured to another of the chairs overlooking the center of the Institute. They both sat.

He nodded, “I apologize mother, of course you’re right. The group that calls themselves the Railroad has acquired several synths. They no doubt mean to free these synths in the belief that these synths are somehow sentient beings.”

_The more you say ‘mother’ in that tone of voice the less sure I am you think of me as that at all._

He grimaced, “Usually they are a minor nuisance, but they’ve become emboldened. I’m afraid we’ve reached a point where a response is needed. We’ve learned the location of these synths and need to reacquire them.”

_FUCK! Fuck fuck fuckity shit fuck._

JADE SUN looked over, “Where?”

Father looked over, “A small settlement located near the Bunker Hill monument. But we must act soon, before the Railroad gets wind of this. We also don’t want the Brotherhood of Steel getting involved. A Courser will be waiting for you outside Bunker Hill. We want to keep this small.”

JADE SUN nodded. “Absolutely. But…” she said as though needing to bring up something unpleasant.

Father nodded, impatiently, “Yes?”

JADE SUN looked back, “You’re familiar with the saying, ‘No battle plan survives contact with the enemy’?”

He simply looked thoughtful.

Chapter End Notes

So now Nora's potty mouth is coming into the light. Children may want to avert their eyes.
Nora trudged up to the Relay Room. She set the target she needed and pressed [Y].

Nora looked up at the spire of The Old North Church, and moving much more rapidly, made her way through the Catacombs to Railroad HQ. When she arrived, she waved Dez into the Records room immediately.

Dez looked at Nora, “Something on your mind?”

Nora looked over at Dez, bleakly, “The Institute knows about Bunker Hill. They’re planning to recapture the synths there.”

Dez looked stricken, “The timing couldn’t be worse. Stockton is sitting on four synths. Griswold and Dayton are still getting established.”

She reached a decision, “There’s nowhere else safe we can put them. Maintaining cover is vital…but this. This is too much to lose.”

“We’ll lose a lot more than four synths if the Institute kicks me out.”

*I will NOT lose a chance to turn Shaun, for just four synths.*

*But…be honest. Was Father worried about “collateral damage”? Did he really give a shit about the civilians there?*

Fuck me naked running in a donut. God fucking damn those cheese eating shitbags making me fucking choose. *MotherFUCKER!*

Dez spoke, interrupting Nora’s internal and profane monologue, “Then we need to make sure you stay in their good graces. Because we’ve never known when and where the Institute would strike. We have a chance to set an ambush. We wait until they’re in position and then we hit them hard. No one they send out comes back alive. Except you.”

“Rrrgh! Fine! But you give me Glory. I’m not running this thing by myself. This is going to be a Category 5 Shitstorm, Dez,” she held up her wrist, “I’m here with my Pip-Boy. I can’t return here for a good long while, if ever, now. This one trip to ‘Old North Church’ is all I get. It has to pay off in evacuated synths or a victory at Bunker Hill. Since you put the former off limits, I need Glory.”

“Are you certain?”

Nora just glared.

“OK, I’ll get her moving,” said Dez.

Nora spent the next hour loading up on ammo, and grenades. She also hit up Tom for several more Stealth Boys. When she felt that adding anything else was an invitation to clank as she walked she stopped. Reluctantly.
By then, Glory was right next to her, adding more belts of 5mm ammo.

Nora looked over at her fellow “heavy”.

“Gonna be a lot of Gen 1s and 2s. Are you Ok with that?” Nora asked, then winked to take the sting off.

“Well, if it’s gotta get done…” Glory replied. Then laughed. “I gotta say, Whisper, thanks. I don’t usually get a chance to cut loose on those fuckers like this. The mission IS killing them, not kill them if you ‘have to’ on the way to something else.”

That’s what this is about. It’s what it’s always been about. She just wants an opportunity to hurt the people that hurt her. It’s not game playing. It’s joy at finally getting to hit back. No matter what the circumstances are. Along with a cover for the sheer joy with which she throws herself into every fight with the Institute, no matter the circumstances.

“I’ve seen what the Institute does with the synths inside, Glory. I get it now,” Nora said seriously.

Glory nodded. “I guess you do, Whisper. Let’s go rock the heavens,”

And then she muttered to herself, “And get more payback.”

Nora just looked over, “Ready to play?”

Glory nodded and laughed. Then the pair of them went out and along the Harborwalk, then across the Charlestown Bridge. The place she was supposed to meet the Courser was an alley off of Washington, just short of the Bunker Hill perimeter.

He was there, waiting not entirely patiently. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Nora smiled, “Yeah. The line at the car wash was SUPER long. Took forever.”

He looked at Glory. “Who is this?”

Nora said, “I brought backup. Hired a mercenary. Never know when you might need more firepower.”

He shook his head, “I should be all you need,” when he was interrupted by the clatter of Vertibird rotors overhead. There were a number of them in fact. “The situation appears to have escalated. A covert approach is impossible. The mission parameters have changed. We go in shooting.” He turned and headed out of the alley.

Nora and Glory turned as well, but they just began shooting. Nora emptied her pistol into him. Twice. Glory emptied an entire 500 round case of 5mm into him. At first, he just stood and shook under the impact of the rounds. He turned slowly and continued jerking. Then he fell to his knees, then down on all fours. Then terribly slowly he collapsed.

He was more ‘hole’ than man at that point. And he was still moving. Nora loaded her pistol a third time.

For the love of… What does it TAKE to put these things down?

She pointed her pistol at the back of his head, and fired four times.

The Courser finally stopped moving. Dead.
Glory was just finishing reloading her minigun. “Well, that was fun. Shall we finish the job? Rock the Brotherhood back as well?”

Nora nodded. They ran up the street, but the Bunker Hill people had closed and locked the gate. And so far, the fighting was all outside the inner walls. But four Brotherhood Vertibirds were climbing away from the four intersections surrounding the settlement. The ‘bird Nora could see had dropped off two Power Armor-clad Knights, a normal soldier, and a scribe. Military standardization being what it was, she had reason to believe each corner got the same treatment.

Then three synths relayed right next to the Knights. Nora and Glory watched as the synths killed one Knight and the soldier, and as the final synth was going down, Nora chucked a plasma grenade into the cluster of combatants. When it blew, there was no one left on the corner.

As they moved around the corner they saw that the next corner had only one Knight left. There were several synths, and now Nora could see a Railroad member, presumably from one of the safehouses as she didn’t recognize them, firing at the Knight. Nora knelt and carefully shot the Knight in the neck, at the join of helmet and torso armor.

As he went down, the Railroad member waved at them, then swore and ducked as fire came from his left, Nora and Glory’s right, further around the perimeter. As expected, it was a Brotherhood soldier. Both the Knights were down, so it was a simple matter for Nora to sight on the middle of his chest, and squeeze the trigger. He jerked and fell over, dead.

*Well a three way clusterfuck will certainly muddy the waters and make it easier to maintain my cover. As long as nothing and NO ONE comes back alive. Or ‘alive’. If I can avoid finally and fatally pissing off the Brotherhood, in addition to hiding my involvement from the Institute, even better.*

She peered around the third corner, and this time she saw only synths. This side of Bunker Hill had the other entrance, a smaller person only entrance. The Institute had concentrated synths at the entrances, where the Brotherhood had attempted to control the situation by dropping blocking troops at the corners. Either way, the Brotherhood troops here had either entered or been overwhelmed by Institute troops.

Glory snarled and opened up with her minigun, shredding the synths and then led Nora into the settlement proper.

The settlement was a swirl of synths, Knights and Railroad agents. But as Glory and Nora crouched to get their bearings, they could see that the Railroad people were finally getting the upper hand. So the two of them climbed down a hatch to Stockton’s hideaway where they heard lasers, guns, and machine guns all firing.

Nora led Glory down a hallway and around a corner, where a door led to the top landing of a staircase. Normally the stars led down to a chamber covered by machinegun turrets, then around a corner to a security stop and thence to some rooms for synths awaiting transport to stay in. It was supposed to act as a death trap. And it was.

Right now, it overlooked hell. The machineguns were firing, Brotherhood soldiers in power armor were firing, Institute Synths were firing, and Railroad guards were firing. Everyone was firing at everyone else. Except the turrets, they were only shooting at the Synths and Brotherhood soldiers.

It was, as Nora had predicted, a Category 5 Shitstorm. The forces arrayed were roughly; Railroad and turrets on three vertical levels on the south side of the room, to Nora and Glory’s left; Brotherhood soldiers and Knights on the East side of the room, directly underneath the two of
them; and a cluster of synths on the west side the room and the north side of the room, across from Nora and Glory.

Nora activated a Stealth Boy and flopped onto her belly and began shooting Brotherhood soldiers from above and behind with her pistol. Glory opened up with her minigun on the synths, but Nora whacked her leg with a free hand and shouted, “Brotherhood first! Trust me, they’re more dangerous!”

Glory walked her fire back into the Brotherhood troops, who were just beginning to figure out something was horribly wrong.

*I’m going to make this cost you. None of you can get out alive, or Maxson will turn on my Minutemen like a rabid dog.*

Nora was firing down onto the small group, and then she remembered her grenades. Pulling the pin on another plasma grenade, she dropped it over the side, shouting “Plasma Out!” and then rolling away from the lip. She heard the CRUMP-sizzle of an energy detonation then rolled back and began killing the few survivors.

After the grenade went off Glory had switched back to what she loved best, killing Institute troops. Nora turned her attention to the last Brotherhood survivor, a Knight whose armor had managed to mostly stand up to the blast but whose helmet had been slagged. He had a choice between remaining blind and dying the death of a thousand cuts as turrets and synths and Railroad guards peppered him with fire, or risking all in taking off his helmet so he could fight back.

He took off his helmet. Seconds later Nora’s pistol took off the top of his head. She rolled away from the ledge again, this time holstering her pistol and unslinging her rifle. And taking the opportunity to activate another Stealth Boy.

*Now the synths. And all of THEM have to go too. Up top it was ambiguous whose side I was on, but these? If THEY get back, then the Institute would know I’m not one of them, not really.*

Nora and Glory, and the remaining Railroad agents, mopped up the few remaining synths easily.

“OK, Glory, head back and let Dez know that we managed to contain it this time.”

Glory sketched a salute, “You got it Whisper. This was a god damn pleasure.”

“You too, Glory.”

Once she was out of the facility, she looked around Bunker Hill. The last Railroad agents were clearing out, and heading back to their various safehouses, and in a couple cases, back to HQ. There were no moving synths, and every Brotherhood soldier who’d dropped in was dead as well. She was truly the only person left to tell the tale.

Nora sighed and set her Pip-Boy to relay to the Institute. When she arrived she saw that the Relay room was occupied for the first time. Dr. Allie Filmore was there. She smiled when she saw Nora.

“There you are. Father wants you to meet him on the roof of the CIT building. The one with the Great Dome?” she said.

Nora was surprised. “Did he say why?”

“Nope. Just to tell you to meet him there,” Allie replied.
“Ok then, go ahead and send me,” Nora directed.

Another flash and she was on the roof. Shaun was standing away, looking over the Charles at Downtown to the southeast.

As Nora walked up, he said, without looking over, “You know in all my years I’ve never set foot outside the Institute. Not once, since the day they brought me here. I’ve never had a reason. But now, this just confirms what I’ve always thought. The Commonwealth is dead. There’s no future here. The only hope for humanity lies below.”

_No future? Just over that wall is a city, with my wife and daughter, and several thousand people making a life for themselves. Just to your left you can see Bunker Hill, where a few hundred caravaners are doing their best to start rebuilding, yet again, this time from damage you inflicted. I can see a number of signs of hope from right here. Without even moving._

Nora shook her head, “So why come out here?”

Father looked up and over at her, “To put things in perspective I suppose. Standing here I’m reminded how fortunate I was to be spared a life in this…wasteland. I know that to you I was kidnapped from that Vault, but in truth the Institute rescued me. Both of us really.”

‘**BOTH** of us.’ _How so? How’d the Institute ‘rescue’ me? Unless he’s referring to Nate because he thinks killing his father was a mercy._

_NO! If I think that, I should just shoot him right here and now. But still, Shaun, they KILLED your father. How often does a rescue of an infant involve parricide? If you were raised in a home instead of a god damned LAB you’d know that._

“But why re-freeze me? And why let everyone else die?”

_Do you agree with the mass murder the Institute committed afterwards?_

He shrugged, “As a failsafe of course. I was the perfect candidate. An infant with uncorrupted DNA. But if something were to go wrong. If I died. A contingency plan was prudent. Another source of pre-war DNA, preferably related to their primary subject.”

Father actually smiled, “It only made sense that my parents fill that role. So you were kept alive and safe in the Vault. I’ll admit, when I had you released from Vault 111, I had no expectations that you’d survive out here in all of this. To not only do so but to find me, to infiltrate the Institute itself. Extraordinary.”

‘No expectations’? _And you didn’t answer the second question. Why??_

Nora let him see that she was surprised. “So YOU let me out.”

He nodded, “Yes, it was my decision. Certainly it was no longer necessary to keep you suspended. I suppose I wanted to see what would happen. An experiment of sorts.”

_An experiment?!? You released me as an experiment?!? Put the lab rat in the maze. Put a piece of cheese out there. Let’s see if the rat finds the cheese. Let’s see if the fucking rat dies horribly in any number of grotesque ways!!!! I was “an experiment”. And he sounds like he was only mildly interested in the result. “I wonder if it will rain today…”_

Father went on, oblivious, “Would the Commonwealth corrupt you? Would you even survive? Perhaps most curious, would you try to find me? Now I know the answer.”
Sweet Jesus. He means it. He was just sitting down there watching while I suffered. Bled. Found my wife. Nearly lost her a dozen times. Watched while Kellogg did his best to kill me. And he was CURIOUS!?!?!

JADE SUN shrugged, “Here I am. Was it worth it?”

Father looked over at her, “I believe so. Soon, I hope you’ll understand everything I’ve done has been for the future. A future which I hope is not in jeopardy after recent events. Bunker Hill did not go well. Would you care to explain?”

Sure. I betrayed you and your Institute to people would give anything to destroy all of you. In large part because you’re all morally insane. I gunned down, with the help of one of your feared “Rogue Synths”, the Courser you sent. We turned him into something more lead based than human. Then we slaughtered every single synth and Brotherhood soldier there. After that I came back here and right at this VERY moment I’m working really FUCKING hard to remember you’re my son and not some random 60 year old stranger who calls himself my son. Because if I, for one second, stop thinking of you as my son I will pull this pistol and terminate you with extreme prejudice.

“We were totally ambushed,” JADE SUN said blandly.

Father snapped, “You can imagine that I find that hard to believe given all the intelligence that said we had surprised them. Bunker Hill was to cement your place as a valuable asset to the Institute. Now it will only raise suspicions. And to see the Brotherhood of Steel. They had no way of knowing about any of this.”

JADE SUN interrupted, “You will recall I warned you that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.”

And that has the virtue of being true. I didn’t say shit to Maxson. He found out on his own. Which you would know if your head of security weren’t an arrogant bully.

He shook his head in irritation, “I will have to refrain from sharing the outcome with the Directorate. Matters are already in motion. It’s time for you to become more involved in the future of the Institute. I’d like you to join me inside at the Directorate meeting.”

He looked over at her. His expression softened. “Please join me at the meeting, mother.”

“Immediately, son,” JADE SUN replied.

Father disappeared in a flash of white light.

Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote from a gentleman named Thomas Gage, Commander in Chief of the British forces in North America from 1763 to 1775, the Royal Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay from 1774 to 1775, and the commander of British Forces at the Battle of Bunker Hill. After the pyrrhic British victory at Bunker Hill he was relieved and returned to England.

Apparently, he was not fond of Bostonians.
Our Kind of Director

She sighed and looked at the spot where Father, or Shaun, had been moments before.

So he released me as an “experiment”. He tried to imply earlier that it was vengeance against Kellogg, and certainly Kellogg wondered if that’s what it was, but that was obviously secondary as a concern. At best. He just wanted to see what would happen. If “mommy” would come for him. And if I did or if I didn’t? I think he’d have been almost equally satisfied. And in either case, he seems to have been indifferent about my survival.

If I turned into one of those human pieces of garbage, it would have confirmed everything he thought about the surface. And If I came for him, then I was worthy of being in the Institute. Heads he wins, tails I lose.

But he doesn’t know there’s actually a third option. Balanced right on the edge. Because ‘mommy’ has skills no one knows about. Because almost alone among the population, she can destroy everything they’ve built, if she really wants to.

They killed everyone else in that Vault because they didn’t ‘need’ them anymore. Not because they were a threat. Because they weren’t actively useful. Then he let me out, because they didn’t ‘need’ me, not anymore. And he wanted to “see what would happen”. But they made a fatal mistake.

Because you chose to wake ME up, Father. You didn’t know what you were doing, but you did it anyway. Which might as well go on the headstone as the Institute’s epitaph.

So now what? I have to destroy the Institute. That doesn’t have to mean that Shaun or the people there have to die. But this can’t go on. Not like it has been.

She set the Relay for the Institute, and hit [Y]. When she rematerialized, the reception room was empty. As he went down in the elevator, she could see department heads filing into the boardroom above Shaun’s quarters. She decided to stop off, briefly, at her room and change into an Institute Jumper.


Changed, she went up a flight and through a connector to the Board Room. She saw Justin Ayo coming the other way. He and JADE SUN exchanged neutral nods and she filed in immediately behind him. Father’s expression eased, slightly, when he saw her behind Justin.

“We’re all here. It’s time we begin,” Father said.

Justin took his seat and did a double take when he saw that JADE SUN had entered as well. He cleared his throat and gestured at her, “Sir, what is she doing here?”

Father looked impatient, “I will address that issue but there are other subjects that require our attention first. The level of unrest in the Commonwealth continues to rise. Your report?” he turned to Allie.

Allie said, “All institute facilities remain completely secured with the exception of the…notable…breach,” and here she glanced at JADE SUN. She then continued, “Otherwise internally things are as secure as they’ve ever been. Dr. Ayo has been keeping an eye topside.”
Justin nodded, and coughed delicately as he looked over at JADE SUN, “Yes. Er. Watchers show no additional threats beyond those previously identified. We’re still monitoring the increased activity around Ft. Independence, but there are no immediate concerns. Boston International remains occupied with the Brotherhood presence noted at several other points in the Commonwealth. Intelligence suggests that the Railroad continues to operate and is becoming more ambitious.” He blinked rapidly several times, “We are monitoring all known situations.”

_Not well, you’re not._

Father nodded, “Thank you,” and then turned to Evan Watson, the new head of Advanced Systems, “Where are we on Phase Three?”

Evan looked shocked, “Excuse me sir, but are you sure we should be discussing that given all parties present?”

Father appeared to give this some thought, “Ah yes. That’s true.” Now he turned to JADE SUN, “Have you heard anything about Phase Three?”

“I have no idea,” she answered.

He smiled thinly, “It’s a classified project, which means I’m sure everyone already knows all about it.”

He continued, “Power is, as I am sure you’ve seen, a valuable commodity. I’m not talking about an abstract concept. I mean the kind that keeps the lights on.” Again he smiled.

He gestured at the window behind him, “With every advance we make, our need for power increases. Many compromises have been made over the years to allow progress to continue. But no longer. Phase Three is simply the activation of a nuclear reactor that can provide enough power for now and forever. It will ensure not just our survival but our prosperity.”

Now he was looking directly at JADE SUN, “The reactor is close to ready but recent tests have determined we have few more tasks ahead of us. Thus, Phase Three. And to how you will help.”

Justin attempted to interrupt, “Sir…”

Father glanced over impatiently, “Yes Dr. Ayo. In the past we would have relied on Mr. Kellogg, yes? Well, he is gone. While I am not overly fond of putting my mother in harm’s way, she has proven capable.”

Justin, tried again, “Yes, but…”

Now Father was visibly irritated, “This is not a matter for debate. Now there is one more matter to discuss.”

Clayton Holdren, of all people, interrupted, “I don’t know that this is the time…”

Father raised one hand, but it was a gentler admonishment than he’d just administered to Dr. Ayo, “Dr. Holdren, it is time, please. As some of you may know I have been under Dr. Volkert’s care for some time…,” and here Shaun’s voice caught, “This is difficult…Our best efforts have failed. I’m sorry to say I am dying.”

There were gasps around the table. Then the beginnings of a babble, that ended when Shaun raised his hands again, “Please,” he turned to Nora, “I’m sorry. This isn’t how I wanted to tell you but we’re running out of time.”
Nora looked at Shaun, “You’re dying.”

He looked at her, “I’m afraid so. A very aggressive form of cancer,” he said gently. He turned to the whole board. “But now the future of the Institute is at stake. The Institute must have leadership. The Directorate must continue with the best interest of all in mind.”

He looked at each of his Department Heads, “To that end, I am naming my mother as my successor.”

The room, not to put too fine a point on it, went bonkers. Everyone was speaking over each other. Nora could just pick a few comments from background babble.

Clayton just said, “Oh, boy…”

Justin looked appalled, “You can’t be serious…”

He was interrupted by a loud, “Really?” from Allie.

Justin’s voice finally cut through the babble. “How can you justify this? She isn’t even a scientist!”

Shaun was actually glaring at Justin, who finally seemed to understand that he’d overstepped, “Ignoring your borderline insubordinate tone, I will say this. The Institute has enough scientists,” said Shaun. He shook his head, “What is needed is a leader. I believe my mother has already more than proven herself in that regard. This meeting is concluded. That is all.”

The room cleared. Nora turned to leave, but Shaun waved for her to stay. She sat back down and waited while the room cleared.

“I had no idea,” Nora said, leaning forward.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Shaun said. He looked concerned, “I hope it wasn’t presumptuous to put you in charge without asking first.”

Nora thought for a second.

*There’s a whole universe of possibilities opening up. There are pathways to a number of potential futures that didn’t exist a half an hour ago.*

Nora said, “I can do the job.”

Shaun nodded, “Of course you can. It’s why I put you in charge. There’s no question that some of the Directorate, and the Institute at large will need reassurances.”

“About that,” Nora started, “Exactly how much control does the ‘Director’ have?”

“In and of itself? Not that much. I can assign resources and mediate disputes between departments. Beyond that, a Director only has as much influence as she or he can accumulate. By doing favors, by being right about difficult decisions, any one of a number of ways,” Shaun smiled.

“So if I wanted to bring my wife and daughter to the Institute?”

Shaun looked troubled, “Well, resources here are very tightly balanced. It would definitely take time.”

Nora nodded, “So the political arrangement is much like the Chinese Politburo. The Director has a lot of nominal power, but the need to balance potentially competing power centers limits what he or
she could do in practical terms.”

Shaun nodded, pleased and relieved. “Exactly so. I knew you were the right person for the job.”

Nora leaned forward and asked, “Did Dr. Volkert give you a time frame? Not to be morbid, but I just got here. I’d like to know…” She trailed off.

“How long we have? Long enough, I think,” Shaun answered.

“Good. I guess,” Nora sat looking over at Shaun. He seemed little tired.

Am I imagining that? He did look awful just after I arrived the first time. I definitely didn’t imagine that.

Nora chuckled, “So I guess the regular tail Justin has on me can get called off.”

Shaun said, “What?”

“He didn’t tell you? Yeah, I’m an outsider. Who he doesn’t trust. Of course, now that I’m to be Director…”

Shaun frowned, “I’ll order that discontinued immediately.”

“Don’t bother. He’ll ignore the order anyway,” Nora observed.

“You’re probably right.”

Nora leaned back and then a thought struck her. “A Director can deploy resources? Say a Robotics project?”

Shaun nodded.

“That’s very interesting. Thanks,” said Nora. “I have a project I’m thinking about. I need to retrieve something from the surface for it. I’ll be back in a while. Let me know when you need me for something you’d have had Kellogg do,” Nora said.

Shaun nodded, the irony lost on him.

Nora headed back to her quarters, to pick up her regular clothes, and her Institute Jumpers, and to check her terminal. When she checked in, she saw a message, [I am the synth to whom Mr. Binet spoke. How do I know I can trust you?]

She thought for a second. Then she wrote back, [I am Shaun’s mother. And I am infiltrating the Institute for the Railroad. To find a way to liberate synths. And if you told someone about this, maybe they wouldn’t memory wipe me, but I’d lose any chance of finding a peaceful solution. We may not be at equal risk, but you know more than Liam knows now. I hope you can trust me.]

She got lucky. Apparently the synth was online, [My designation is Z1-14. A simple maintenance synth.]

Nora sent back, [It’s a pleasure to ‘meet’ you Z1. Is there a way I can help you?]

He replied, [Mr. Binet has a plan. I will let him tell you. I will inform him that we can work with you.]

She answered, [That’s very good. Good luck.]
Then she signed off, blanked the terminal to remove any trace of the conversation and headed for the relay.

She chose to relay directly home. It had been nearly two days. When she hit [Y], she popped into the middle of the living room at home.

“What the f-“ she heard Piper exclaim.

Nora just grinned. “That was even better than I imagined. You should see the look on your face, Thing,” she said.

Piper came over and waved a finger under Nora’s nose, “You didn’t come see me after Bunker Hill, Blue! You are so lucky Glory let me know what had happened.”

Nora looked guilty, then remembered. “I was going to come by, but something came up,” she said.

“What? What could be more important than letting me know you were Ok?”

“Attending an Institute Board Meeting where Shaun named me his successor,”

“What?!? He what?”

Nora nodded, “He named me his successor. Because he’s dying of cancer.”

Piper sat down with a thud. “This is starting to come at me too fast Blue.”

“Tell me about it sweetie. Seems like just yesterday I was coming to grips with Shaun being ten. Now he’s sixty and dying. And wants to put me in charge of the organization I’m supposed to be destroying.”

Piper looked stunned, “Now what?”

“Believe it or not, I need to go see Ellie.”

“Ellie? Why?”

“She takes pictures for Nick, right?”

“Sometimes she sketches too,” Piper said.

“Even better. What are the odds she’s taken a picture or two of Nick?” Nora asked.

“You know the answer to that Blue.”


“OK, why do you need a picture of Nick?”

“I plan to test the limits of what the future Director of the Institute can get away with,” Nora replied.
On her way to Valentine’s, Nora dead dropped a report and a request that Dez and if possible, Carrington, visit her in Diamond City. Her reason simply was that she’d run the risk of burning HQ by running over about Bunker Hill with her Pip-Boy on, and that she’d have to lay exceptionally low now.

Even though Diamond City was a hotbed of Institute activity, it also had the advantage of being crowded enough, and with enough in and out traffic that visitors weren’t a 90 day wonder.

When Nora got to the agency Nick and Ellie were both there, and Nora brought them up to speed on the…interesting…developments.

Nick just shook his head, “Every time I think this case can’t get any weirder, it finds a way to top itself.”

Nora looked over, “You still think of this as a case?”

Nick shrugged, “Have you gotten your son back from the Institute?”

“No, but shortly, it’ll be a moot point now won’t it?” Nora said.

“When that happens, I’ll close it. Not before,” said Nock.

Ellie looked over, “Save your breath Nora. I recognize that look. You’d have more luck trying to argue with a brick wall.”

Nora laughed, and even Nick chuckled. Nora waved Ellie over, “Speaking of brick walls, can I talk to you privately?”

Ellie nodded and stepped outside. The two of them walked out to the fields near the Green Monster. The Wall, as the residents called it. She looked at Nora, “What’s up?”

Nora looked at Ellie and said, “Do you have any pictures of Nick? Especially ones you might have sketched?”

Ellie look surprised. “Why would you assume I’d made pictures?”

Nora just raised one eyebrow, “Pull the other one Ellie. I’m not blind.”

Ellie gave Nora a miserable look, “Please don’t tell Nick.”

Nora rolled his eyes, “Nick may the only one who doesn’t know. You two are really good at avoiding talking about feelings. But this isn’t actually about telling Nick.”

“What is it about then?” Ellie asked.

“I’d rather hold off talking about it until I know I can do what it is I’m trying to do,” Nora said.

“But you’ll tell me if whatever it is works?”
“Ellie, if it works, I promise you, you won’t be able to miss it,” Nora said seriously.

“Fine,” Ellie said. She went back to the office and a few minutes later returned with a dog eared sketchbook.

Nora flipped through the pages, and smiled. It was perfect for her needs. She nodded at Ellie. “This’ll work. Can I borrow it for a while?”

Ellie nodded, looking a little confused.

Nora smiled and left. As it was getting later in the day, she stayed at home that night.

Once again, it was a strange combination of typical and far-fetched. But the typical was getting more typical, and the far-fetched was getting a little less so, every time. They ate dinner, watched Nat do homework, went to bed, and then got up to face a new day, where Nora commuted via teleport.

Nora descended in the elevator, but a Institute scientist met her at the door, highly agitated.

“I’m Newton Oberly, and I need you immediately,” he said, running up.

“Calm down, what’s happened?” Nora asked.

“It’s Doctors Higgs and Loken. They’ve locked themselves in Bioscience and are refusing to come out unless you resign,” he said.

“How bad could it get, assuming they don’t get their way?”

“Well, in theory if they destroyed Hydroponics, we could have to evacuate due to lack of food and oxygen,” Oberly said.

_Hmmm. They’d WANT to leave under those circumstances._

“But practically, we could use scrubbers until raiding parties on the surface gathered enough plant life to replace our hydroponic stock.”

Nora’s head hung.

And _I’m sure they’d ask real nice and not shoot anyone who was in their way extra-dead. Fine. Get those two out of there without losing hydroponics it is._

Nora went over with Oberly to Bioscience. The inner door was sealed, and through a viewing slit, she could see Higgs and Loken talking. Actually, Loken was talking. Higgs seemed to gesticulating wildly.

That was all well and good, but they were surrounded by a half dozen or more synths. All armed. Nora heaved a great sigh.

Oberly looked over, “They’ve sealed this door. I’ll have to open this side passage. It’ll get you to the back offices. Eventually. But you have to look out for turrets.”

“Ok, why does your farm have turrets in the back hallways?” Nora asked.

Oberly looked troubled, “Because of the FEV…ummm, never mind. Because we needed them at one point.”
Nora nodded.

So Virgil’s cure is in here somewhere. I’ll need to start poking whenever I get a chance to do it without causing suspicion.

“Can’t be helped I guess,” Nora said, and drew her pistol.

“There we go,” said Oberly stepping aside from an open doorway.

Nora peeped in, and when she saw no turrets, moved into the hallway. Oberly looked at her quizzically.

“Assume nothing, Dr. Oberly. For all I knew I’d come around the corner to a turret.”

He looked confused and shrugged. Nora simply moved further into the complex, quietly. Fortunately, the turrets were all easy to spot and easier to deactivate. Before long Nora was at a window overlooking the rear of Bioscience. She saw movement by the window.

“Aha! I thought I heard something,” Higgs said as he spotted Nora in the room, “Made it past the turrets, hm? Impressive.”

Nora looked him over, “Can we talk about this?”

Higgs shook his head angrily, “Father chose not to talk to the Directorate before anointing you his successor, so how about I follow his fine example?”

Nora sighed. “Father believes in me. The least you can do is give me a chance.”

C’mon old man. Work with me here.

Higgs scoffed, “How could you hope to lead us when you hardly know anything about what we do? I’m sure you mean well, but you must see that it’s an impossible task.”

Nora looked at Higgs. His upper lip was sweating. He was nervous. He had to be thinking that here was the woman who’d killed Kellogg. She said to him, “Maybe, maybe not. All I’m asking is that you keep an open mind.”

Higgs shook his head again, “I’m sorry, but our minds are made up. Both Doctor Loken and I have resolved to stand our ground.”

Nora tried again, “Shouldn’t you at least give me a chance?”

Higgs looked nervous, “A chance? Hm. What do you think, Max?”

Nora heard from one side, “Even the most fastidious researcher must sometimes take a leap of faith. I say let’s give it a try.”

Higgs shoulders slumped, “Very well, then. Open the door and let’s return to the fold.”

Nora heard Dr. Loken say, “Synths, abort command override and resume normal functions,” and the door opened.

Nora stepped through. She looked the two men over. “Alright, let’s head out.” And she holstered her pistol. Higgs looked surprised at that.
Once outside, the three of them met Oberly and a pair of synths. Newton looked at Nora, “I admit, I was fearing the worst, but I can see that I underestimated you.”

Nora shrugged, “I’m just glad they listened to reason. Eventually.”

Oberly looked at her, “So what should we do with them.”

Nora looked over both Higgs and Loken, “The only thing that makes sense is to put them on probation. They can either be at work or in their quarters at all times. Until further notice.”

Oberly nodded, “That’s more than fair.”

Nora sighed, and finally got back to what was there to do in the first place. To check her messages. And, most importantly in the long term, to talk to someone in Advanced Systems. Maybe Robotics.

When she finally returned to quarters, she found a message from PATRIOT.

[I spoke with Z1. He says we can move forward. I have a plan. Z1 knows of 13 synths right now who want to escape. One at a time, that’ll take forever. And some will receive memory wipes in the meantime. I say we free them all in one go. But in order to get that large a group up to the Relay, I need to be able to open some service tunnel accesses. In order to do that, I need to crack the security system. And it’s state of the art SRB stuff.]

[But I think there’s a loophole. All our security software is based on the network security package that CIT was using at the time of the war, Code Defender. If I could get an admin password for the original version 3.6 Code Defender in use at CIT at the time of the war, I would have root access of all Institute systems. Ask your friends in the Railroad. There must have been someone besides the original Institute members who were admins.]

Nora shook her head. This seemed a needlessly brute force scheme. Mass breakout. Still, until she knew what she could do as Director she should continue to try and get these poor people out.

And on that note...

Nora turned her attention to her final task for the day. She headed down to Advanced Systems to find Dr. Ormon. Firstly, because Dr. Ormon was brilliant and could no doubt manage to do what she was asking, and secondly, because Dr. Ormon was young and inexperienced, and thus a little gullible.

She seemed cheery when Nora walked into her little office. “What can I do for you ma’am? And can I say, it’s exciting to think about a new, young director,” then her face fell, “Oh! Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think it through.”

Guilt. Always useful... Not to mention social ineptitude.

Nora raised her hand, “It’s Ok, Dr. Ormon. I’m beginning to make my peace with it. In fact, I’m curious. As director, can I commission certain projects?”

Ormon nodded enthusiastically, “Like the Synth Shaun project. In fact, he’s in Dr. Li’s old office. If you’d like…”

Oh god. No...

Nora interrupted, “Um, I’m not sure...that would be a good idea at this point. I’m here for something very different.”
Dr. Ormon nodded, “Sure. What can I do for you?”

“What I’d like is a Generation 3 Synth, but I’d like to specify its sex and what it looks like. And finally, I don’t want it to have any personality. I want it to be, for intents and purposes, brain-dead from the moment of completion.”

“OK, why? I don’t get it. It would require a great deal of resources to maintain once constructed.”

“Leave that to me. I know where I’ll be putting him.”

“Him?”

“Yes, I need for the synth to be male, and look as much like this as a Gen 3 can,” and here she handed Dr. Ormon Ellie’s sketchbook.

Ormon looked to over a while and seemed to be thinking. “I’m pretty sure I can do this, minus the gaping holes in the outer integument, which I’m guessing you don’t want reproduced. And it won’t really take up much in the way of actual resources, as I can slip it into production at any time at the cost of the cycle time only. I could have it for you in a couple days. Would that work?”

Nora nodded. Then she left to try out her newfound ability to teleport anywhere. First she teleported to Sanctuary, where in addition to shocked gasps, she secured a promise from Dr. Marie Curie that she would set aside a bed, and sufficient life support to keep a “brain-dead”…strictly, “never actually alive”…synth in good health until…

Then she relayed to the Institute and then up to her home in Diamond City. Where she startled but didn’t shock Piper, whose face lit up when she saw Nora.

“Hi Honey, I’m home!” Nora called.

Piper kissed Nora, then stood hands on hips. “Anything exciting this time? Aliens? Broker a peace deal with the Brotherhood? Sight a great ghoul whale you need to hunt obsessively for the next decade?”

“No, I have not found Moby Rot, sweetie. I just wanted to come home. Be with you and Nat for just an evening. Feel as normal as the teleport hopping, soon to inherit the Institute lifestyle can make me.”

“Speaking of which…” Piper started.

Nora shook her head, “Yeah, they’re being jerks about it. I don’t know what I’d be doing about them if they said, ‘Sure! Bring your family down, here’s expanded family quarters. Here’s Nat’s school assignments, welcome!’ As it is, the way they talk and act, I’m all but certain I and I alone am enough ‘dirty degenerate’ for them to tolerate for the next decade.”

Piper shook her head, “Damnit.”

“It makes me less conflicted.”

“How so?”

“The Institute simply cannot continue the way they have been. The new Director is going to insist that they leave their underground hideaway and join the Commonwealth. One way or another.”
This one is specifically for SodaMeltsMouse :-)

Nora is carefully going around that corner no matter what Newton Oberly does because I once epically and memorably got myself "killed".

I was at Officer's Candidate School in Ft. Benning. It was our second of four Field Training Exercises (FTX...the Army loves their TLA's...Three Letter Acronyms) for OCS (see previous parenthetical comment..). The particular exercise that morning was "Clear a Minefield." This was NOT a damn surface laid field. This was a "crawl on your belly probing the ground with bayonet" type minefield. So here I am carefully and gingerly poking a fucking knife in the ground, when the OC (Observer Controller) stopped me. I had been "killed" in a messy way...a gaping chest and abdomen wound created by the anti-personnel mine that I'd crawled over that was emplaced two feet BEFORE the marker indicating the "start" of the god damned minefield.

Assume NOTHING.
The next day, before breakfast had been cleared by Codsworth, there was a knock on the door. A nice, married elderly couple from the Minutemen were there to see how “The General’s daughter was settling in after her excitement.”

Nora invited Dez and Carrington in, and as soon as the door was shut, smiled and gestured for them to sit.

“Your drop says you have a lot of news,” Dez began.

Nora nodded emphatically, “It’s good that you’re already sitting. Ready?”

They both nodded. “So the person you most have to worry about, even more than Justin Ayo, is the Director of the Institute. Who happens to be my son.”

They both nodded, Carrington a little impatiently.

“Patience Dr. Carrington, I promise I’m going somewhere with this,” Nora said, “And the fact that he is my son raises the possibility, however slight, that I and the Railroad might come to loggerheads at some point.”

Dez opened her mouth to contradict Nora, but the latter raised a finger, “No, Dez. You and I both know that’s a real possibility. Or was.”

“Was?”

Nora nodded. “I have been informed that Shaun has cancer and will die soon.”

Dez, to her credit, looked concerned for Nora, “Are you sure?”

“Since it was Shaun who informed me, and I’ve seen bits and pieces of the symptoms before this, yes. I’m certain. He’s also named his successor,” said Nora.

Carrington said, “And?”

“It’s me.”

This time, instead of bedlam, the room was suddenly, eerily silent, as both the senior members of The Railroad realized they were in the same room as their most senior agent and advisor, and the prospective head of their adversary, and it was in the form of one person.

It was Carrington who spoke first, “And you will…?”

Nora said, “Be taking the position, yes. Because when the time comes, I will be issuing my first, and only order.”

Desdemona asked, “And that will be?”

“That the Institute must vacate its underground ‘paradise’ and join itself to the rest of the citizens of the Commonwealth.”
“And the synths?” Dez asked.

“There will be no slavery in the Commonwealth. And Synths are human beings,” Nora said.

“Will the people in the Commonwealth accept that?” Carrington asked.

“Not all of them, and not all at once. But this country has seen worse in its time. It will again. It’s our turn in the abolitionist and civil rights barrel, Stanley,” Nora said.

“Will they still be making synths?” Dez asked.

“Maybe,” Nora replied, “Who knows? I do know that if they make synths, the synths will be full citizens of the Commonwealth from the moment they wake up. I’m not going to tell everyone how they can do everything. Just lay out some guardrails. Like, ‘If it can think for itself, it’s human.’”

“You’ve laid out some ambitious goals Whisper.”

“That’s not all,” said Nora.

“There’s more?”

“Yeah, not as earth shattering…I got that part out of the way early,” Nora said, “I also made contact with PATRIOT. His name is Liam Binet, and he put me in touch with a synth, for lack of a better term, resistance ringleader.”

Dez nodded. Nora continued, “He wants to liberate 13 synths at one time. He has a plan, but it requires that we get a 210 year old set of Admin credentials for a piece of Pre-war software called Code Defender.”

Dez looked doubtful, and she said, “I’ll have to run the whole plan past PAM. She’s been doing the analysis on the information you downloaded from the Institute. We need her to look at what PATRIOT’s plans would inspire in the way of counter moves by the SRB, given what we now know.”

“For what it’s worth Dez, I agree with you 100%,” Nora said, “I just need to keep spinning the plates and hope nothing falls.”

“I hope so too, Whisper.”

Then Nora looked at everyone, and said, “I’m afraid I need to do an overnight at the Institute. I have some things I want to figure out.”

“You mean you want to risk your ass hacking terminals and snooping, Blue.”

“Guilty, sweetheart, but at this point? I know I can be up and out of the Institute before anyone or anything could stop me. And I always have a couple Stealth Boys on me at all times,” Nora said, “It’s a lot less risky than I think you think it is.”

When Nora left she stored her rifle but kept her pistol.

_I can always relay back and get the rifle for a mission. And no one at the Institute has said anything about my pistol so far. I keep pushing it with this huge sniper rifle, they might say something about both weapons._

She relayed back to the Institute and as she was descending in the elevator, noticed that the Institute had a day night cycle. The lights had been dimmed. She thought for a short bit and headed over to
the Directorate Boardroom.

She was checking for some files, anything she could find, about the first CPG. There were differences of opinion about how the CPG had come apart. Nick said it had been deliberately sabotaged by the Institute, while Shaun had said it had come apart despite the Institute’s work. Shaun could have been lying. Nick was unlikely to lie, but he wasn’t immune from being wrong.

And it was important. Marcy and the other settlement leaders were trying to do something that they thought had failed once before. It was kind of important to know whether it had died of natural causes or been murdered.

Eventually, Nora found files concerning the CPG. It had eluded her for a while because it was filed under “Surface Affairs”. Which was not where Nora had started looking.

Let’s see. The Institute kept some good notes of meetings. When they noticed the CPG forming they were interested. Several of them considered it a good sign. They wanted a single group that they could negotiate and work with.

That makes sense. So far Shaun’s account is holding up. They sent a representative. A synth, but they sent a rep. Best that I suppose the contaminated specimens could expect.

The next few reports are progress reports. The Institute seems to be getting nervous about how disorganized the CPG was. And so forth. For two years. Then...

Oh. They tried to control the CPG. And they did it by “Divide and Conquer”. Look here. They set the Diamond City rep up against the Bunker Hill one. While letting the people in Quincy worry about how those two were trying to control trade.

Oh lord. They set everyone in the CPG at each other’s throats, because they imagined they could control the result. And then...

There was a blowup. The Bunker Hill and Diamond City rep got into a fistfight. Bad, but not exactly unprecedented. Fuck. The synth overreacted. He assumed that the fistfight was the start of actual war. And he “neutralized” the situation. With a laser.

“What are you reading, Mother?” Shaun asked.

“About the CPG Shaun. You know how it came apart?” Nora asked.

“Yes, in infighting.”

“Infighting the Institute encouraged. Your predecessor decided to encourage mutual suspicion as a method of controlling the CPG. It backfired.”

Shaun shook his head, “A unified Commonwealth could become a threat. We had to control it. You understand, don’t you?”

Nora sighed, “I understand that you believe that, yes. But I lived in a messy world Shaun. You couldn’t control everything around you all the time.”

Shaun nodded, “Exactly. And you saw, with your own eyes, how that turned out. You alone of all the people in the Commonwealth saw a thermonuclear warhead, an H-Bomb, go off. For real. Can’t you see? We have to protect ourselves. We’re the last, best hope for humanity. If we fail…”

He shook his head, “The risk is too great. If we can’t control it, then we have to make sure it can’t
BE a threat. We have to.”

“Shaun, absolute control is a fiction. Believe me. If you think you are in control, that moment when you think everything is coming up Shaun? That is when you are least in control,” said Nora.

Shaun shook his head, “It’s late. I should get to bed. If you would be so good as to refile those records?”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t read them?”

Shaun looked utterly shocked, “Absolutely not. You should be reading them. And more besides. Just clean up after yourself, mother. And do me a favor. Dr. Karlin in Bioscience is asking for your help. It would be…politically expedient…to help them, given the recent unpleasantness there.”

“Are you saying I did the wrong thing with Higgs and Loken?” Nora asked.

“Quite the opposite. You handled it perfectly, mother. No. I’m saying that given that their facility was misused, the people who work there are feeling unhappy about the role Bioscience played. Reinforcing their essential nature, by having the future director helping them with a problem, would be immeasurably useful. That’s all,” Shaun said.

“Oh. In that case I’d be happy to, Shaun.”

“Good night, mother.”

Nora neatened up after herself and went to get some sleep. Given the close call she’d had with Shaun, she decided to hold off any cyber snooping. In fact, probably best to hold off on that until she got the Code Defender admin codes. The next morning dawned, or rather rheostatted, bright and early, and Nora went down to see Dr. Karlin in Bioscience.

She soon discovered that Dr. Karlin was “Scientist Number Two” from her first visit to Bioscience. The one who wanted to help Commonwealth folks. Nora smiled, quite genuinely, at him as she walked up.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, “Normally I’d request a Courser or someone to do this, but you’re available and well, you can get around the Commonwealth better than anyone in the Institute these days. I’m, well, would you mind delivering these seeds for me?”

“Seeds?”

“Yes. We test them. There’s a synth we embedded at Warwick Homestead in the south of the Commonwealth. Near Houghs Neck. We need you to deliver them so he can test them and deliver a report.”

“Why not test them here?” Nora asked.

“If there were some sort of genetic abnormality that caused a cascade collapse? No thank you. We test them at Warwick.”

Nora nodded.

What the hell is a cascade collapse? Doesn’t matter.

“One seed delivery, coming right up.”

“Make sure to tell Roger, he’s the synth, that Bloodbugs chased you over half the Commonwealth
when he asks how the trip was.”

“Got it, Bloodbugs, countersign.”

She walked up to the relay. Thanks to it, this was about to be the easiest delivery job she’d had since Piper asked her to hand her the water on the bedside table.

She relayed a distance away from the farmstead. But not far enough that she couldn’t smell it.

Chapter End Notes

This seems to me to be the best way to reconcile with Nick's account (and remember he was around for it) and Shaun's statements and recordings found in the Institute. Because you have to start with the axiom, "Nick will not lie to you," and the postulate that, "There's a level of coverup the Institute simply won't go to, given that you're going to be Director."

A somewhat self-serving but supportable bit of rationalization on Shaun and the Institute's part makes sense to me.

Ironically, Warwick Homestead, the “stinky sewage plant” place of fertile soil? Near the current Quincy Yacht Club. Spectacle Island is somewhat out of place for this, but there’s no way, given the location of Quincy Ruins, that Warwick Homestead could be at Squantum, which has the proper relationship to Spectacle Island rather than Houghs Neck, which has the right relationship to Quincy.
Nora walked over. While the place was ripe, it had the blackest dirt she’d ever seen, several cement facilities for shelter, and easy shore access for water purification.

This is practically the Platonic Ideal of a settlement location. Just look at it. And you can literally see the Castle from here.

As she walked through the gate, she was met by a middle aged man. He came over and introduced himself, “Hi I’m Roger Warwick. I hope the trip out here wasn’t too bad.”

“Well some Bloodbugs chased me over half the Commonwealth, but other than that, it was like snapping my fingers,” Nora replied.

Roger looked at her, blinked once then said, quietly, “Walk with me.” More loudly, he continued, “We have a fine spot here. I know the smell can seem a bit much at first, but you get used to it. And we have the best soil in the Commonwealth.”

By now they’d walked over to the shore, and a bare tilled patch of ground. Roger looked at Nora, “Do you have a shipment for me?”

Nora nodded, and handed him the seed packet. Roger took it but said, “I need your help now. I think my foreman, Bill Sutton, suspects me. You have to find out what he’s doing, and what he knows. I can’t do anything about this without blowing my cover.”

Nora nodded. “I suppose a nice simple delivery was too much to hope for. Why do you think he suspects?”

“Well for one thing, it’s the looks he’s been giving me,” Roger said.

“Oh sure,” Nora said, “I start asking, ‘Why are you giving Roger the hairy eyeball, huh?’ and I guarantee that if he wasn’t suspicious before he will be when I’m done with him.”

“Ok, Ok, I also saw him talking with a farm hand, Cedric Hopkins. Shortly after that, Cedric left,” Roger said.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can find out,” Nora said.

As she was walking over to see Bill, she was intercepted by June Warwick. “I saw you talking to my husband. What were you two talking about?” She sounded accusatory.

Nora put her hand up, “Whoa, ma’am. I’m married. Nothing happened there.”

The woman looked confused for a second, then her expression cleared. “Oh! No. Not that. I…I…nevermind.” She turned to walk away.

“Wait,” Nora said, “What’s your name?”

The woman turned back, “I’m June. Roger’s wife. I didn’t think you were trying anything. I just…this is ridiculous.”
“You’d be surprised how little I consider ridiculous, June. Try me.”

“Ok. I’m concerned for my husband. I guess I’m…conflicted,” June said.

“Conflicted how?” Nora asked.

“Well, it feels like my husband has changed. But that’s not really a bad thing. He used to drink a lot. And he wasn’t…good…with the kids. A while back, we were almost wiped out by a Super Mutant attack, and it got really bad for a while. But then Roger, he just stopped drinking, and he really started helping. He was good with the kids…and me.”

Nora nodded, “Go on.”

“I mentioned it to Bill and he said he’d noticed the same thing. And that he thought Roger had been replaced. With a synth. I said if they replaced every wife b…anyway, I’d take the replacement any day,” June said.

“But Bill got really quiet. After that I saw him talking with Cedric Hopton, and handed him a bag of caps. Said something about Goodneighbor,” June finished.

Nora patted June on the arm, “I’ll see what I can do. I’ll be back in a while.”

She walked quickly off the farm and behind a dune.

So basically, the Institute kidnapped an abusive piece of shit, and replaced him with a loving, caring synth that’s brought the family back from the brink. If only that had been the INTENT. I mean I feel vaguely bad about the original Roger Warwick. But it seems like his family is better off. I’ve killed people for less…useful…reasons.

Nora relayed in quick succession back to the Institute and then to the intersection outside Goodneighbor.

This takes some getting used to. And I’m sure, just like the Vertibirds, about the time I start taking it for granted it will be gone.

She walked into Goodneighbor and headed right for the Third Rail.

It’s not like I need a hint about where a guy with caps to spend on a bad man is going to go.

She went down the stairs to drop the word with Magnolia and Whitechapel Charlie to let her know about anyone meeting Cedric Hopton’s description, when she saw someone meeting Cedric’s description. Talking to MacCready.

Figures.

Nora slid up. MacCready was just finishing bragging about his ability to hit anything out to 600 yards. She signaled Charlie, “Whiskey, neat. Thanks Charlie,” and turning to the two of them, said, “Six hundred? That’s all? That’s a little…short, don’t you think?”

MacCready glared over Hopton at Nora. “If it isn’t the lady looking for a big, scarred, bald man. Ever find him?”

Nora nodded. Took a sip of whiskey. “And killed him.”

“Bullshit. No way you killed Kellogg,” MacCready said.
“As a damn doornail, sparky,” said Nora, then she turned to Hopton, “You really gonna hire someone of such small…talent?”

“Hey! Who you callin’ small,” protested MacCready.

“Just a lucky guess,” Nora said.

“You don’t walk in here and queer my deals, sister,” MacCready said, and stood up threateningly.

Nora was up in a flash, her pistol out, and pointed at MacCready’s crotch. She took two very deliberate steps back before anyone could react, putting herself about ten feet away from MacCready.

“I’ll walk in here and do whatever I goddamn well please, MacCready, you two bit hustler. You knew who Kellogg was and you did not tell me. For that I’m seriously thinking of ventilating the part of you I suspect you like best.”

She smiled nastily, “I don’t need that info anymore, because that bald rat bastard is dead, dead, dead. Because I personally made him that way. Now all these nice people are all trying to figure out what to do about the woman holding a gun on you. The ones who know who Kellogg was are deciding that fucking with the woman who killed him is a death sentence. The rest are deciding that the ones who know are worth emulating. The one thing I can guarantee is that if anyone starts anything, you personally, MacCready, will be displeased with the result. Either you will bleed to death, fairly slowly, or people will have to start referring to you as ‘it’.”

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Her eyes flicked to Hopton, “Cedric here is the only person in this bar in a position to keep me from shooting ‘Teeny, weeny, widdle MacCready’ right off your fucking body. And the only way he could do it is by making me shoot him. He isn’t going to do that. In case it escaped your scintillating intellect, I am really royally fucking pissed about you not telling me about Kellogg. So here’s what’s going to happen.”

Her eyes bored into him. “We are going to call this even. You’re going to keep the caps you took off me to tell me dick. And I am going to let you keep that ridiculous appendage. You are going to leave me alone. I am going to leave you alone. And you had better hope no one ever takes a long range shot at me. Because my personal best is 1400 yards. If I ever suspect you took a shot at me, I will shoot you in a non-lethal spot, starting with your right hand, once a week for five weeks, culminating in your ‘little soldier’. And you will never ever ever see me.”

She nodded, “If you survive that, I might let you live. Or maybe not. You never know. A girl can change her mind. Now get lost.”

She waited. MacCready stared at her. She waited little longer, then raised one eyebrow.

He turned and left the Third Rail, quickly, but not running. Quite.

She holstered her pistol and sat back down. Conversations restarted. She raised her whiskey glass to Hopton. He as looking at her, wide-eyed. “Was all that true?” he asked.

Nora shook her head. “Nah,” she smiled, “My personal best is closer to 1800 yards. But that seemed like bragging.”

She took a sip, “So you’re here for Bill Sutton.”

He looked surprised, then squared his jaw, and said, “That’s right.”
She put her glass down, “Walk away.”

“You heard me. Pocket the money Bill gave you. Move along. ‘Darken our doorway nevermore.’ Scram,” she said.

He looked in her eyes. She just stared back. He blinked. She kept staring. He looked down.

“Bill hands me a fistful of caps and says, ‘Go to Goodneighbor. They got all kinds of shady characters there. Find us a mercenary.’ So I'm supposed to find some contract killer, like I'd know how, and then hire him to take out Roger,” Cedric said, then went on, “At first I agreed, but now I'm thinking to hell with Bill Sutton. I'll just stick around here for a while. Of course, he's probably figured out that I ain't comin' back. Might just take matters into his own hands.”

Nora looked at him. He nodded. She looked at Whitechapel Charlie, “I'm paying his tab.”

After she’d settled Cedric’s drinking up to that point, she hurried out, and when she stepped out of Goodneighbor, she immediately relayed through the Institute back to Warwick homestead.

It was easy to see that something was wrong. It was midday and no one was in the field. As Nora went up the steps to the main cement building she heard raised voices.

When she peeked around the door jam, she saw Bill with a pipe revolver, pointed at Roger, “One way or another, you're going to admit what you really are.”

She drew her pistol, trained it on Bill and side-stepped her way into the room, stopping when there was no one in her field of fire but Bill.

He was speaking, “When you do, everyone will know the real Roger Warwick is dead and gone.”

Nora barked, “Bill!”

He looked over at her, with her pistol drawn, “Who the fuck are you?”

Nora said, “The person who’s going to shoot you if you don’t put that gun down. Why do you want to shoot Roger, anyway?”

“That’s not Roger. That’s a synth.”

“Why? Because he doesn’t get drunk with you anymore? Because he doesn’t beat his wife and kids like a god damn gong? He has to die, because he decided to stop being a piece of shit? Really?” Nora asked.

“I...I…just...I rrrgh.”

Nora nodded, “Exactly. Put the damn gun down and walk away.”

He gobbled for another couple seconds. Then he walked out. Nora never saw him again. He may have found a new place and settled down. He probably ran across Raiders and died horribly. But Nora never found out one way or another.

When he left, Roger all but collapsed. June held him up. Nora walked over. “Are you Ok?” she asked.

“I think so,” he answered.
June looked at Nora. “How did you know all that?”

Nora shrugged, “You guys weren’t exactly subtle, June. It didn’t take Nick Valentine to figure it out,” Nora looked into June’s eyes, “You have a good man here. He’ll take care of you. He loves you all. Believe that. It’s all that really matters.”

“You have that right,” June said.

*Sometimes the most f**cked up things produce a small blessing. When you find them, you cultivate them.*

And Nora walked out, into the light, and relayed away.

Chapter End Notes

If you're big MacCready fanboy or fangirl? Maybe think of this as an AU. MacCready *could* be this way, or he could be noble. As written he's a much nicer guy than I depict here, and I'll say I don't DISlike MacCready. I just need someone to fill a certain spot for Nora at this point in time, and Mac volunteered. Nora had to act a certain way here because reasons, and I needed MacCready to be the butt of the anger. Sorry 'bout that.
Nora traveled home. When she relayed to Piper, she wordlessly hugged her wife. Piper just held Nora for a while.

She pulled back, “Blue, are you OK?”

Nora shook her head, “I’m not. I’m really, really not OK. It’s too much, Thing. I just let a synth spy for the Institute who replaced a human being go. Hell, I encouraged his family not to question things. Because the original was an abusive piece of shit, and the synth was warm, and loving, and was taking care of them. His ‘wife’, ‘daughter’, and ‘son’.”

Nora sat, and Piper sat with her. “Piper, I just can’t… It’s too much. My son is dying. His whole life was taken from me, and what little I have left, I can’t even spend with him. Because he’s in ch-ch-charge of the b-b-biggest th-threat I’ve ever seen. I just can’t. I can’t.”

She stood up, and giving Piper a sad look, she went upstairs. She slipped off her clothes and went to bed.

A while later, she heard the door open. She didn’t move. Piper stuck her head in, “Blue? Blue, I ruined a dinner for you. Want to come fake it?”

Nora just shook her head. Piper closed the door. Nora slept.

Later she heard voices downstairs. It sounded like Nick and Piper. They talked for a while. Then Nick left. Nora slept again. There didn’t seem to be anything better to do.

When she woke, it was because someone was turning on her lights. She rolled over. It was Marie Curie. And Marie was wearing her doctor’s coat. Nora sat up partially. Marie smiled at her and sat down, and then said, “I was expecting this. You are being very efficient you know. It has only been a few days since you realized that your son was 60 and lost to you forever.”

Nora squinted, and said, “What are you talking about?”

Marie said, “Depression. The fourth of the five stages of grief. I never even got to see denial. I suspect that you moved through denial quickly. Your training would have seen to that. I did see you bargaining, of course. You spoke of ways to integrate all the factions now that you had special access to the Institute and about ‘rescuing Shaun’. Dez and Glory have told me about your reactions at Bunker Hill. And Magnolia told us of your performance with MacCready. I must say, if you are going to be angry, you at least found socially useful outlets.”

“Have you been following me around?”

“Non. Your friends are worried for you Nora. Including your friends from The Railroad. I have been speaking with them. I have been watching your progression through the stages.”

“You’re telling me I’m working through some kind of script?”

“Yes. And Non. You do not have to go through all five stages, and you do not have to come out all the way to acceptance. You can especially get stuck in depression.”
“Whatever. Just leave me alone.”

“Briefly, yes. I want you to think about what I just said. I will be back in a while,” Dr. Curie said.

Nora stared at the ceiling. She didn’t really think. “Marinating” would probably have been a better descriptor. At some point she fell asleep. When she woke, Marie was sitting there, smiling faintly.

“What time is it?” Nora asked.

Marie said, “It is after 4. In the morning.”

“How is it that you are here?”

“Detective Valentine called me on the radio. I came immediately. I got here about 10 last night after Nick and your wife decided they needed professional help,” Marie replied.

“No, I meant, awake, watching me?”

“Oh. I am a synth. I do not require sleep. For me, it is optional. You require my help, so I am not sleeping,” Marie said.

“I can’t get away, is what you mean,” Nora observed.

“If that is how you wish to think of it. No, I will be here. You have some tendencies towards depressive behavior, Nora. Your PTSD has tended to manifest as sadness rather than anger. I have always been concerned that if you got stuck, here is where it would happen. I have been waiting for this since you told us that Shaun was 60, and I have made sure Piper and Nick were looking for it. I believe that the news about his impending death has advanced the grieving process,” said Marie.

“And exactly what am I grieving?”

“The loss of your son of course. At first you hoped to rescue your baby. Then you hoped to rescue a ten year old boy. Not a baby, but still your child. Still needing you. But now you learn, your ‘son’ is a 60 year old man. Nora, whatever your relationship to Shaun, you will never truly be his mother. You have had to grieve the loss of a son who nevertheless is still right there, in front of you. And so, in addition to your loss, you feel guilt.”

“Guilt?” Nora looked skeptical.


“Why are you telling me this? Aren’t shrinks supposed to sit back and make the patient have the realization?” Nora accused.

“You are not like other patients, Nora. Your training compels you to always evaluate what you are feeling. To compartmentalize. To function in abnormal situations. It is both a blessing and a curse. I can tell you what is going on, bluntly, because the part of you that is always evaluating yourself is compelled be honest with yourself if no one else. A curse in that you are skilled indeed at lying,” Marie said.

“And?”

“You are lucky that you love your wife so much. I have observed that no matter what, unless you are telling ‘little white lies’, to preserve a surprise for instance, that since your past was revealed
you are always painfully honest with Piper,” Marie said. “It is good, because you did not attempt to hide your distress from her. Part of you wants her to have gotten help. Part of you wants me here, talking to you.”

“Uggg. Just let me sleep!” Nora said.

“And part of you does not. Very well, I will accede to your request. For now.”

Marie went down the stairs, and Nora rolled over. And laid there. She might have slept, perhaps, or maybe she just lost track of time.

Her next visitor announced herself rather less delicately than Marie had.

“Oi. Get yer bloody arse out of bed, you daft cow,” said Cait as she opened the door.

“And why should I?”

“Because yer worryin’ yer wifey. Piper’s down there cryin’ her bloody eyes out, and she’s doin’t quiet fer yer stupid sake. And I reckon that’s between th’ two of ya, but Nat’s right down there with ‘er, cryin’ her bloody eyes out too and I’m not fecking having any o’ THAT,” Cait poked Nora, for emphasis.

Nora waved behind her, irritably, and Cait caught her arm and levered her out of bed. Nora rounded on her, but Cait had already danced back, eyes twinkling.

“And that’d be why myself is up here, missy. Now yer gonna sit up in that chair there, and Marie is gonna come up here and shrink yer head good an’ proper and yer gonna bloody cooperate, and stop fecking rolling over and waitin’ ta die. ‘Cause there’s two ladies I bloody care about down there, and one up here, who taught me ‘family’ isn’t a goddamn curse word. So yer getting’ better if I haveta beat you bloody,” and with that Cait left, calling down the stairs, “She’s all yers, Doc! And if she gives ye trouble, call me and I’ll kick her bloody arse.”

Marie walked into the room and after a pulling a chair over to Nora’s, sat down.

“Is this where I tell you about my childhood?” Nora said sarcastically.

“If you wish, but I thought we would discuss Shaun’s childhood,” replied Marie.

“Shaun didn’t HAVE a childhood,” started Nora.

“Ah, but he did. Just not with you, Nora.”

“OK. He had a ‘childhood’ surrounded by a bunch of scientists, poking and prodding him for samples so they could make a bunch of synths, so they could just sit back and be waited on by slaves.”

“Hmm.”

“What was that LIKE?” Nora said, voice rising. “How warped would that make you? I guess I don’t have to guess. It leads you to talk about your fucking father’s death as ‘collateral damage’. You release your mother as an ‘experiment’.”

“He sounds like a monster,” observed Marie.

“No! That’s not true. He was never given a fucking chance. Raised by a committee of bloodless sociopaths who were only interested in getting what they needed from him. I can only imagine
what his childhood was like. Benign emotional neglect would have been the best he could hope for."

Marie nodded.

“He could have been so much worse. He cares about things. He’s decided to view the Institute as parent and child simultaneously, but I can tell he feels for something other than himself and his curiosity,” Nora said.

She went on, “When I think about his childhood, I’m actually a surprised he isn’t a monster. He has problems, but underneath that…”

Nora sat up straight. “God DAMN it Marie! You sneaky bitch.”

“Are you angry at me, Nora?” Marie asked.

Nora thought. “No, I guess not. But you’re annoyingly good at manipulating me,” she said.

“I merely thought that, given what I knew about your training, angering you, a little, might jump you out of depression. But only you can begin to reach acceptance.”

“But I still feel sad,” observed Nora.

“Oh Nora. Feeling sad is normal. Your son was stolen, and his life was stolen from you. Soon he will be stolen from you, yet again, and for the final time. You should feel sad. Sadness is not depression. Sadness is crying because of what has happened, from time to time, but fundamentally moving on. Just as I expect from time to time you may think, ‘If only I could have raised Shaun’ or get angry about the unfairness of all of this, or feel sad about what you have lost. Feeling some parts of the five stages at times does not mean you have failed to reach acceptance,” Marie smiled.

“All that means is that you are human, Nora.”

Nora smiled wanly, “I suppose the fact that I’m hungry is a good sign too.”

“Oui. I believe that lunch could be made,” said Marie.

“As long as Piper doesn’t make it. I’m not suicidal,” Nora said. Marie laughed.

Nora smiled again, and went downstairs, where she saw that she had an audience. Piper and Nick were sitting together and Cait and Nat were in a corner, playing a boardgame. Dogmeat was at their feet. Codsworth was in the kitchen alcove. As she came down, they all looked at her.

Nora took a deep breath, and said, “I’m sorry if I worried you. I’m feeling better now. Not ‘good’. But better. I especially want to apologize to you kiddo,” she said to Nat. “I didn’t mean to worry everybody.”

Nat got up and ran over to hug Nora, and Piper and Nick were smiling, Piper with red eyes. But the big surprise was Cait. She came over, her eyes already tearing up, and she reached over Nat to hug Nora, hard. Cait whispered, “I love ye, Nora. Don’t you be actin’ so bloody stupid, you cow.”

Then Cait broke the hug and turned away, roughly wiping away her tears with the heel of her hand.
Depression is no joke. But Nora only has tendencies and a good reason to BE depressed. Persistent depression is much less easy to treat and requires, usually, both pharmaceutical and behavioral therapy.

It's not this fast, but because stopping everything for a week and accurately reflecting the course of treatment would derail the plot we short circuit it by having "super-doctor" treat "super-patient". I do get that it isn't like this in real life.
Nora’s friends, plus Ellie who came at Nick’s message, stayed for dinner. And Marie was very pleased to see that her prescriptions were followed.

As it happened, 210 years had been very, very good to the Cod population of the Commonwealth, and Nora chopped up mutfruit and tato husks…the juicy bits…and some onion and herbs to create mutfruit salsa, and then put that over some cod she’d gotten from Polly. In addition to some razor grain couscous from Myrna, Nora made baked cod with mutfruit salsa on a bed of couscous.

People forgot, all too often, that “Curie the Robot” had 200 years as a lab assistant and then primary researcher in medicine. And that she was, for all intents and purposes the most knowledgeable and skilled physician in the entire Commonwealth. Dr. Cure was exceptionally pleased with what she’d managed with her friend, Nora. Psychiatry was not her primary field. But this was Dr. Curie. She’d forgotten more about every specialty and subspecialty of medicine than most doctors currently practicing in the Commonwealth had ever known.

She had determined that Nora needed two things more than anything else. First was some amount of camaraderie. Her past in the DIA had consisted of long periods isolated from everyone. Making sure that she saw others like herself, in the Minutemen and in The Railroad, with whom she could regularly discuss feelings was one part. The other was the need to ‘mother’. Nora had lost Shaun. She truly never would be his ‘mother’ but it was a role she had taken on and come to love in the six months before the war, and the nearly three months since she was taken out of stasis. The cooking for others was helpful in letting Nora express those impulses. That Nat had decided to embrace Nora as her ‘mom’, was lucky, but not something Marie could have directed.

There would always be the efficient spy in Nora. It was needed, to be honest. But Nora needed to be more than just an agent. She needed to be a wife, a friend, a partner, a Minuteman, and a mother. Because she had to come into the light, for her own mental health, if nothing else.

Marie nodded in satisfaction. It all started with Nora’s love for Piper. The only way any of this could have worked was because Nora would not hide things from her wife anymore. Had Nora not met Piper, and fallen in love, she would still be compartmentalizing her emotions. And in all likelihood, coming completely apart at this very moment. What she would have done then was a mystery, but Marie knew it would have been self-destructive, and probably highly damaging to the Commonwealth.

Nora looked over at Marie, who was looking somewhat self-satisfied.

*I guess she earned it. And I owe her. And Cait. And Nick. And Piper, always.*

Nora took Piper’s hand and leaned over and said, “I love you, Thing. Thank you.”

Piper just smiled and nodded. Then she leaned over and kissed Nora on the cheek. “You’re welcome Blue.”

After the guests left or went to bed, Piper was very happy to have her wife REALLY back that night. The next morning dawned too early for the pair of them, but dawn it did, and in the form of
Deacon dropping by.

Nora was bit surprised. “Aren’t you supposed to be Madison’s personal babysitter?”

He nodded, “But in this case, we’ve seen an uptick in Institute surveillance on this place. I was the only one we trusted could get in.”

Nora shook her head, “That fucking Justin. I’d like to wring his god damn neck.”

Deacon shrugged. “We have info on Code Defender. PAM ran a process of elimination with Commonwealth records. We have CIT records. The Railroad made sure of that a LONG time ago. So she ran her record of Pre-War CIT researchers with admin privileges, with 2077 census and business records, with a list of surviving structures. The best chance is a guy named Wilfred Bergman. PAM estimates a 81 percent chance that you can find admin credentials at a place called Cambridge Polymer Labs.”

Nora shook her head, “Great. Another Cambridge trip.” She looked disgusted.

Deacon shook his head, and unrolled a map. “Cambridge Polymer Labs is located here, on the southwest edge. All you have to do is cross at the Mass Ave bridge, jog left along Memorial a really short distance, and you’re there. You’ve been right past it several times. Hell, the CPG caravans go past it regularly. You’ll just have to stroll over at this point.”

Nora smiled at Deacon, “Good news for a change. Thanks Deacon.”

Then she had a thought, “Hey. I suspect that you may need to pull Madison out fast if it comes to it. Do me a favor. Monitor Radio Freedom. If there’s a message for ‘Regular Churchgoers’, stating that ‘Flowers are scarce this season,’ get her out immediately.”

Deacon nodded. “Can do, boss.”

*That takes care of that nagging itch at the back of my brain.*

She smiled and turned to Piper. “Want to go out and find a password?”

“Sure Blue. This article on the Brotherhood is coming along, but I could use a break,” Piper said.

“Can I see it?” Nora asked.

“When it’s done. Not before. I am doing a Grade A hatchet job on them. And all I have to do is accurately report what they’ve done here, and in the Capitol Wasteland, and out west,” Piper said smiling.

“You tease.”

“That’s not what you said last night…” Piper started. Deacon coughed discreetly.

“Oh, you’re still here,” said Piper, “I missed you what with you dressed like a plant and all…” she smirked.

Deacon laughed. “That sounds like a great idea. What are the odds I can make the next recruit think I’m a sentient potted plant the Railroad recruited?”

“If anyone can, Deacon,” Nora said. “Don’t forget, monitor…”

“Radio Freedom,” he finished, “And if regular churchgoers are told flowers are scarce this season,
I pull Madison Li out before the next song is over.”

Nora nodded. “You got it. Head on out.”

She and Piper got everything ready and let Deacon get clear, then went out. As they left Diamond City, they saw that CPG caravans from the Northwest had set up a trading post right outside.

*At some point I’m going to have to check in. I wonder who’s joined on Ronnie’s coattails.*

She and Piper did in fact stroll out Yawkey Way to Mass Ave, and across the Charles. While there HAD been Raiders in the tug boat jammed under the drawbridge, her people had long ago cleared it out and built a proper ramp over the break. Deacon’s guidance was accurate and a few minutes later they were standing outside a building labeled ‘Cambridge Polymer Laboratories.”

Nora turned to Piper, “This is almost anticlimactic. If we just go in there, find a desk labeled ‘Bergman, W’ and find the admin credentials, I’m going to be obscurely disappointed.”

Piper laughed and hugged Nora. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Blue.”

Nora smiled a little sadly. “It still sucks, and it hurts, Piper. But it’s stupid to forget the fact that I have a REAL family by way of mourning the one I lost.”

“On behalf of your wife and her sister, your daughter, we thank you for your insights,” said Piper, but she was smiling.

“Piper, in case I haven’t said it quite this explicitly, if it means I get to be in love with you and be loved by you, anything that has happened or will happen is small, small payment for the privilege of being your wife.”

“Goodness Blue, you know just what to say to sweep a girl off her feet,” smiled Piper.

Nora leaned over and kissed Piper. “I love you, Thing.”

“I know, Blue. Me too.”

Nora turned and walked into the building, followed by Piper. Inside it was well lit, as the skylights were both mostly intact and mostly transparent. A Ms. Handy floated up.

“Welcome to the Cambridge Polymer Labs. Employment opportunities await in the field of scientific research. Shall we begin your application now?” the robot asked.

Nora looked over at Piper who shrugged and smiled.

“Sure, why not,” replied Nora.

“Let's begin the interview. Due to increased demands for staff in all fields, we have condensed the employment test accordingly. Question one. Do you possess previous experience with Polymer Synthesis?”

Nora said, “Ummm…yes.” She looked over at Piper her eyebrows up.

The robot simply said, “Calculating test results. I am pleased to offer you the position of ‘Researcher.’ Expect a bright future in Polymer Research.”

Nora just shook her head, “That’s it?” she asked.
The robot said, “Please follow me for orientation,” and as it led them both into a small conference room, turned and said, “Please find a seat.”

Nora and Piper, bemused, simply found seats. The robot floated at the remains of a podium. “John Elwood, Erika Woolum and Wilfred Bergman met during their time at CIT.”

Nora and Piper perked up at the last name. The robot continued, “Their research into nucleostrictive and piezoelectric polymers caught the attention of Col George Kemp in the fall of 2073. In spring of 2074 the Cambridge Polymer Research was founded with a generous grant from the Defense Experimental Research Project Initiative, or DERPI.”

The robot began gliding away, “Please follow me to the labs so you can begin your work.”

She led them through ‘break’ rooms that were more broken rooms. There was some stuff about labeling personal items. Then the robot handed both of them lab coats and gestured to the changing rooms. Nora and Piper decided to leave their armored clothing on and simply came back out moments later. The robot said nothing, merely leading them to a decontamination chamber and gesturing them inside.

Once they were in the door clicked shut. Then there was a thunk of a deadbolt. The robot spoke over the intercom, “I have been instructed to inform you that Director Elwood has issued mandatory overtime due to uncompleted milestones. Consequently staff will not be allowed to leave the lab until the Piezonucleic plating project is completed. Please report to the project lead, Dr. Elwood-Woolum for specific research assignment.”

Then emitters began humming and Nora’s Pip-Boy Geiger counter went nuts. Both women scurried through a collapsed wall, and into a hall way, where there was no radiation according to the Pip-Boy.

They walked into room with some advanced manufacturing apparatus along one wall. There was a terminal on one of the work tables. There was no actual security on it. It was the terminal of the primary researcher, Ericka Elwood-Woolum. The first few entries were of project process, and apparently they’d been put on mandatory OT.

But there’d been some sort of falling out between Bergman and Jon Elwood, the Director. The entry read, [We've been unable to gather the samples needed to try the new dosing pattern. Wil has locked himself in one of the labs, and has been attempting to hack into the administrative systems. When we tried to get the U-238 we need from the isotope containment, he locked it down leaving Mary stranded inside. He said he is going to set the facility defense systems so that it looks like the lab has been breached. This will unlock the clean room, but will also activate the automated defenses which will see us as attackers.]

It went on, [He means to fight his way out, but that's suicide. He's the only one in the lab with military training, and we don't even have real weapons. I've tried to tell him that we can complete the project, that we have the answer now, but he refuses to see reason and doesn't believe Jon will actually let us out. We've managed to pull down part of the ceiling in C1, which will get us into the utility crawl space. It can't get us out, but it should be able to get us above the lab Wil has barricaded himself in. I don't like it, but we have to get the drop on him.]

Her personal email revealed what had happened. [Ericka, I've sent an explanation to the team, but I need you to know what is actually going on. Please do not share this with anyone else, it may start a panic. This morning I got a call from Col. Kemp and he told me to keep our team in the lab, but
before I could ask he hung up. The sound you heard outside was an atomic bomb going off. It
seems to have hit south west of the city. The phone lines have been jammed, but I found a way to
reach Kemp's liaison and he informed me that they could only afford a detail to escort us to safety
if we have vital military assets or intelligence. That is why we need to get the project finished. I
love you and I know you can do this.]

Nora shook her head. If only Bergman had listened. The terminal controlling the manufacturing
apparatus was already set with Elwood-Woolum’s parameters. All they had to do was collect the
proper samples.

Which was easy. With easy defined as ‘shoot a ton of ferals’. But after over three months in this
new world, and with her training and experience, ‘easy’ really was the only way to describe it. Not
pleasant, but easy. The trip into the reactor to harvest the radioactive isotope needed required a
quick dose of RadAway, but that was about it. The lithium hydride was easily found as well, but
the gold eluded them, until they found the passage that Ericka’s people had opened to the ducts.
After that they followed the ducts around. Just before they reached the end, there was a skeleton in
a dress.

Nora looked it…her…over.

Probably Dr. Elwood-Woolum. And…bullet notches in her femur. No signs of bone healing. 10 to 1
she got shot, probably by Bergman, trying to get in, and climbed back up here to die from a
femoral artery hit. I’m sorry, Ericka.

Nora and Piper dropped into the office. Where a feral they assumed was Wilfred Bergman attacked
them. Nora just shook her head as she killed him. Sure enough, there was a gold sample, and a
terminal. When she logged onto the terminal it was easy to find and download the Code Defender
admin privileges.

They turned away from the desk, and opened the main door overlooking a torn away balcony, and
dropped to the main floor, and went into the lab, where they quickly and easily made the damned
Piezo-Nucleic plated armor. 210 years after it would have done anyone any good.

Lugging the piece with them, they showed it to the robot at the decontamination room. “The
director will want to see this immediately. Please follow me.”

It unlocked the door and led them to the director’s office. It entered and was immediately accosted
by a feral ghoul. “I must apologize for the director, He hasn’t been himself lately. It must be the
flu.”

About then, the robot was destroyed by the ghoul and, sighing heavily, Nora sent Jon Elwood to
join his wife.

Chapter End Notes

This is another one of those times where I found a little hidden gem in the game. I had
happily bopped my way through that orientation lecture a batch of times, and then,
because I was transcribing the dialog, I hit, "Defense Experimental Research Project
Initiative" and the part of my brain that handles "acronym to English" and "(pseudo-
)English to acronym" suddenly screamed at me: "DERPI!!" then repeated, "Derpy,
derpy, derpy!" over and over inanely. Now you can all enjoy the revelation too. You're
welcome.

Also, my next writing project is going to done in professional software. I'm informed via author's blogs and tweets that "Scrivener" is good. ANYthing would be better than Pages, which has one significant quality...free with Macs. I say all this by way of noting that the integral dictionary with Pages includes "derpy" as a word.

Oh, one last thing. You may have noticed. Nora, especially in the form of Minuteman/CPG supply caravans, has been taming vast swaths of the Commonwealth. This is deliberate. You don't have armed convoys passing over the same ground day after day without markedly pacifying that area. I keep track of where they have settlements, and thus caravans, and after a while, you just don't need to worry about it. In the book. The game still respawns enemies annoyingly rapidly. Except on survival.
Piper and Nora left the building, and as Nora trudged over the Mass Ave Bridge, Piper looked over at her.

“You know, we’re not going to end up like that, right Blue?” she said.

“What?” Nora said, looking up.

Piper shook her head, “Yeah, it was sad, but we’re not going to end up like them, tragically separated and unable to spend their last moments together.”

“How can you be so sure?” Nora asked.

Piper stopped and looked at Nora.

“Because you came back. Just when I was sure you never would, you walked through our door. I know you, Blue. You’ll always come back. Because there isn’t anything in the Commonwealth capable of stopping my holotape hero,” and she smiled, but Nora could tell she was serious.

“Great,” Nora laughed ruefully, “No pressure.”

Piper took Nora’s hand and they finished walking back to Diamond City. Piper went back to her Brotherhood Exposé, and Nora made a dead drop and waited for her nice Minuteman couple to visit.

When Nora stepped into their house, Piper was rapt, writing her article and didn’t notice when Nora snuck in and looked over her shoulder.

‘The Capitol Wasteland wasn’t ready for what happened next. With the convenient deaths of Owen Lyons and Sarah Lyons in quick succession, the leadership devolved to Arthur Maxson, a teenager with little experience, but who immediately put his stamp on the organization…’

“Are you saying he killed his predecessors?!?” Nora asked.

“Blue!” Piper exclaimed, “Dammit, you startled me! No fair reading ahead!”

“But you won’t share, even with your wife…” Nora fake whined.

“Fine,” Piper said, shaking her head. I’ll print what I have, and by the time you finish that, I’ll be done.”

“I don’t read that slow,” Nora protested.

“Blue, your lips move,” Piper said, smirking.

“They do NOT! Do they?”

“It’s adorable that I can get you going. No, sweetie, I’m just really close to done. Here,” and she handed Nora some papers.
Lords (and Masters?)
by Piper Wright

We’ve all seen the enormous airship moored over Boston International Airport. And we’ve all wondered from time to time, who is up there. As we all now know, the organization known as the Brotherhood of Steel is “who is up there”.

But that only begs the question, “Who is the Brotherhood of Steel”? The answer to that question is not as simple as we would like. Due to some intrepid reporting by people we will not and cannot name, we have learned much of the history of the Brotherhood of Steel, and yet the more you learn, the harder it is to answer that question.

Is the Brotherhood of Steel the same organization that started at the time of the Great War as soldiers asked to do the unthinkable, the immoral, the abominable? Shortly before the war, Captain Roger Maxson found out that he and his men were guarding a facility dedicated to testing Forced Evolutionary Virus, or FEV, on prisoners.

FEV is not a term many of us know, but it is one we should. Because every Super-Mutant, every Deathclaw, every Radscorpion, and many other horrors are the product of FEV and radiation working together. Maxson mutinied, executed the scientists responsible, and brought his family and the families of his men into his bunker, just in time. The next day, the bombs fell.

As they awaited the abatement of radiation, they began telling themselves that Science had created this problem, forgetting that science is nothing more than a tool that can be used for good or evil. They decided that only they could be trusted with certain kinds of technology. They wrote down their tenets into a document called The Codex. And they’ve never fundamentally modified it. But for one time.

Is the Brotherhood the organization that nearly 90 years after the Great War, faced its first real test? In the wake of a campaign against a Super-Mutant known as the Master, during which the Brotherhood left its isolation to help soundly defeat the Master’s plans to infect the West Coast with FEV, the Brotherhood failed its test. It once again chose to isolate itself, to hoard for itself technology and to once again turn its back on the Wasteland.

Is the Brotherhood the organization that 60 years ago made yet another mistake, a very nearly fatal one? They allowed another descendant of Roger Maxson, Jeremy Maxson, to become their leader. That the Brotherhood has been led for most of its existence by a Maxson, adds that extra little touch of inherited privilege to its feudalism. This particular ‘king’ led the Brotherhood into a fatal war with a nation called the New California Republic, or NCR. The NCR nearly wiped out the Brotherhood, as the former had a large pool of population to draw from and the latter remained elitist and isolated. Forced into hiding in bunkers….

Ha! Called it!

…the Brotherhood was then nearly wiped out in conflict with a racist and fascist organization called the Enclave, the remnants of the US Government that had retreated to an offshore facility.

While the West Coast Brotherhood was picking unwinnable fights with its neighbors over who got to have technology (hint: not you or me), it also sent a detachment east, 33 years ago, to see about an earlier group of them that had pursued what was left of the Master’s Army east.
Apparently they never found that group. What they DID find was a Washington DC under assault by Super-Mutants in exactly the same way that the West Coast had been four generations earlier. This group passed the test that they were faced with. Instead of hoarding technology to themselves, they shared it judiciously. And they placed themselves at the front of fighting with Super-Mutants. That leader, Owen Lyons and his daughter Sarah, were instrumental in defeating a threat from the Enclave, who had also fled East after being defeated and run out of the west by the NCR over 30 years earlier.

Using an enormous war robot, and by being willing to recruit locals into their ranks, they succeeded where previous campaigns had failed. They defeated the Enclave and brought power and clean water to the Capitol Wasteland.

“OK, Thing, tell me you’re done with the rest of this. Because I have to tell you, I don’t recognize this Brotherhood. If I did, we’d still be working with them,” Nora said.

“One foolishly dynastic fall from grace coming right up, Blue,” said Piper as she handed Nora the conclusion.

The Capitol Wasteland wasn’t ready for what happened next. With the convenient deaths of Owen Lyons and Sarah Lyons in quick succession, the leadership devolved to Arthur Maxson, a teenager with little experience, but who immediately put his stamp on the organization.

Returning to the technology hoarding ways of the earlier brotherhood, Maxson added a human purity policy that fundamentally undid the Brotherhood’s earlier victory over the Enclave and its particular vision of human purity that was coincidentally, maybe not so coincidentally, similar to Maxson’s.

But because he had returned to the fold in upholding the Codex’ proscriptions against sharing technology, holding “Science” responsible for the ills that have befallen all of us, he was named Elder by a council back on the West Coast. It was strongly implied to him that once he is able to fly the Prydwen back to California, he will take his place amongst his other ancestors as king, or rather High Elder (a distinction without, in this reporter’s opinion, a difference).

The one way in which Maxson and, eventually, the West Coast Brotherhood were both willing to change from a pure version of The Codex was in recruiting Wastelanders. They still remain willing to recruit anyone who is willing to buy into their absolutist and racist vision of control. Losing wars for lack of cannon fodder may have something to do with that.

Within a year of his taking command in the Capitol Wasteland, the last settlements in that region had knuckled under to Maxson’s feudal control, in some cases literally working one in five days for the lords. A 20% tax/tithe/offering in the form of crops or cash is a standard feature of life in the Washington D.C. area now.

And the difference between that tithe and a protection racket is name only. All that 20% buys the people in the Capitol Wasteland is an occasional helping hand when attacked, but mostly it’s only good for being left alone by the Brotherhood.

Those who refused to bend a knee were slowly squeezed out by those who did, and were ultimately destroyed by Raiders. Then reports began filtering in from patrols to the north, of signs of high technology in the area near Boston.

And now they’re our problem. Shall we bend the knee too? Or is the spirit of rebellion against
Kings and Aristocrats still part of the bloodline of the Commonwealth?

Nora put the paper down, “Well, hell, Thing, you make me want to run down to D.C. and liberate the poor bastards.”

“There’s not much you can do,” Piper said with a smile.

The next morning, there was a knock, and Nora’s Minuteman messengers visited. As they sat down, Dez looked nervously excited.

Nora sipped her coffee and said, “I’ve got my piece, Code Defender. You guys?”

Dez started, “PAM has finally finished her analysis of the records you brought back. As you might guess, the Institute is far more formidable than we could have imagined. We have to be lucky all the time. They only have to get lucky once.”

She shook her head ruefully and went on, “If we stage a mass breakout PATRIOT’s thirteen synths will undoubtedly be the last we ever save. Instead we use this golden chance to rescue all the synths. Every last one.”

Nora’s eyes widened, “How do you propose doing that?”

Dez’s eyes had a gleam, “The Institute will never let their slaves go without a fight. So the heart of our problem is manpower. Even if we call in all our agents, and we will, we won’t be able to hold against the Institute for long. Talk with Z1-14. If the synths down there want freedom they’re going to have to fight for it.”

She went on, “The synths greatly outnumber the scientists. If enough rebel the chaos will be unprecedented. Then we use that turmoil to conduct the evacuation. But as much as we owe PATRIOT, we can’t be certain how committed he is. If he learns we’re willing to kill to free the synths he may not have the stomach for it.”

“So we foment a mass uprising? And in the chaos we pull all the synths out?”

“That’s it.”

Nora shook her head, “No.”

“No?” Dez looked puzzled.

“I told you this wasn’t going to work,” said Carrington.

Nora nodded. “No. No way in hell.”

“Then we’ll…” Dez started.

“You’ll what, Dez? Get your nice backup agent who ALSO is allowed into and out of the Institute at will?” Nora crossed her arms, “Wheel ‘em out. I’d love to meet them.”

Nora stood up, “I knew we might reach this point. I have a counter offer. I am the only person who can get into and out of the Institute. So first point? We’re going to do it MY way, because without me there is no way.”

“Second, we agree that as principles, first, that all synths must be free, and second, that the Institute can no longer stay underground manipulating things to their satisfaction,” Nora went on, now
counting off on her fingers.

“Three, while the Institute is indeed ‘formidable’ in keeping hold of their slaves? They’re crap at security in almost every other way,” Nora left the room and returned shortly with a box the size of half a loaf of bread. “Anyone recognize this?”

Carrington’s eyes widened, “That’s a scalable yield nuclear demolition pack. I thought you were kidding.”

“Give the man a cigar,” Nora said. “I have walked into and out of the Institute twice carrying this. The only thing that stopped me from setting it off in the relay room and them slowly suffocating, unable to get out, is the fact that I want to convince my son and the rest of them to come out into the light and join civilization.”

“So invincible they are not. Therefore, four. We are going to do exactly everything you’ve requested, right up until it’s time to say ‘go’.”

Now Dez looked utterly baffled. Nora smiled, “Dez, just before Bunker Hill I told Shaun, ‘No plan survives contact with the enemy,’ in large part because I was planning on messing up his plans. But the sentiment is correct.”

Dez said, “My plan is about to be your contingency.”

Nor nodded. “We were never at loggerheads except in that one way. You want to rescue synths. I want to rescue synths. But I also want to do everything I can to save Shaun and many of the good… well goodish… people in the Institute too. It means that we aren’t opposites on goals. I’m just going to be more patient. But you’re also right about something else.”

Dez smiled a little crookedly, “For someone who just told me ‘No’ you’re being awfully kind.”

Nora shrugged, “You’re right about PATRIOT. He’s a kid playing games. He still hasn’t figured out that if this is a game, it’s a lethal one, with sudden death being a bit more literal than in most games. I will not let Justin Ayo get me, and if it means cutting PATRIOT loose or cutting him down? That’s what’s going to happen.”

Nora looked at the two of them. “Don’t think I don’t know what this means. You thought you were running JADE SUN and now you find JADE SUN is running you. Yes, that’s true. Because I am leveraging the power I have as Shaun’s mother. But do not for one second think that I am not fully committed to freeing synths.”

“I don’t think you understand how viscerally I understand what a slave feels like,” Nora said. She stared into first Dez’ then Carrington’s eyes, “Every time I let some man enter my body because I needed access to his terminal or his pillow talk or because the alternative was death, every time I accepted the physical abuse of my bosses in China or here in America because the alternative was death, every single time I woke up wondering if today was the day that I was found out and killed…I know how slaves feel. Don’t for one fucking second think I don’t.”

“I want to free them more than anybody you know, except for maybe Glory. Way more than any of you.”

Nora wound down. She felt Piper’s hand taking hers.

Dez stood as well, “We do it your way Whisper…Nora.”

“But?” Nora said.
Dez shook her head. “No ‘but’. We do it your way. Period.”

Carrington nodded. “Exactly. And not entirely because we don’t have any other choice.”

Chapter End Notes

The history of the Brotherhood is a slightly opinionated version of what you get from the Fallout wiki. The facts aren't in dispute, though Piper is skeptical of their good intentions.

And I've addressed a problem and gone a tad off script because there's a problem with the Railroad plot line. As I highlight here.
Before Dez and Carrington left, Nora told them to bring her another, separate, contact chip, one that she could use for Z1. “If I’m going to cut PATRIOT loose, I can’t exactly expect him to cooperate, now can I? I need a separate protocol for Z1.”

Carrington smiled, “Way ahead of you. For a change. Here.”

Nora gave them a look. Dez said, “If you were going to execute my plan, you were going to need this. You’re not the only one who knows how to be a spy. You may be in the major leagues, but we’re not the local pick-up team…”

Nora nodded, “You’re right, Dez. I was being condescending. I apologize.”

She turned to Piper, “You know what I’m about to say, right?”

“You have to go back.”

Nora nodded. “I have to go back. I’ll be back in a day or so, to check in.”

Piper kissed her, “Remember what I said.”

“I will, Piper. I love you. I will be back.”

“I know, Nora. And I love you.”

Nora set her Pip-Boy to relay to the Institute, and rematerialized in the Round Room. After descending and putting on a set of Institute Coveralls, she checked her terminal, and left a message,

[I have the admin codes.]

The she took a deep breath and headed for Shaun. She found him sitting in his office. When he saw her, he smiled and stood up.

Standing for a lady entering a room? Someone raised you right. But not me, and you really don’t see me as your mother do you? An aunt, a cousin, maybe, but not your mother. A much more remote relative at best. And I don’t think you even realize it. I’m sorry for your loss, son.

She smiled as well, and shook his hand. After a hesitation, he shook her hand back.

How many sons consider ‘mom’ to be a dirty degenerate?

They sat down, and Shaun offered Nora some coffee.

“Mmm. God Shaun, this is heavenly.”

He nodded, “Unlike the surface we do not scavenge coffee. We grow it in Bioscience, and the synths roast it. And of course, the conditions under which it is grown are technically perfect.”

Nora smiled, “Well it’s infinitely better than freeze dried Slocum’s Joe.”

Shaun sat back, “I’m sure you didn’t visit just to talk about coffee.”
Nora smirked a little, “You don’t know that. This a damn good cup of coffee. Now if we only had some pie.”

“Mother.”

Nora sighed and put her cup down. She said, “Of course you’re right Shaun. I’d like to talk about the surface.”

“I believe we’ve covered that. It’s a dead…well, dying…end,” he said.

“How can you say that? They’re rebuilding. They rebuild every day.”

He raised a finger, “Exactly. They rebuild every day…because they have to. Because the forces of nihilism out there are tearing things down faster than they can build.”


He nodded, “Stable at the cost of the rest of the region around it. Goodneighbor is a criminal cesspit, and Bunker Hill,” he made small moue of distaste at the name, “Struggles to trade in Diamond City’s shadow. No, Diamond City is stable only because it makes so much else unstable.”

Nora shook her head, “That’s because your synth controlling everything is ensuring that. Goodneighbor doesn’t have to be the place everyone thrown out of Diamond City goes.”

“And people don’t? And usually faster?”

“I believe you’re making my point for me,” Shaun replied.

Nora shook her head, “No. Going bad is a choice. Before the war we had criminals too. But society was strong enough that we could withstand them. Except for the ones in charge of the country, which I suppose undermines my point a bit. But we did manage for 301 years. And for most of it we didn’t have self-appointed lords and masters.”

Thanks for that phrase Piper. I love you.

Shaun looked truculent. At that moment he very much reminded Nora of Nate. “That is exactly our ultimate argument. The Institute started when engineers and scientists from CIT began digging down, after the war. For survival. Even with their robots and later synths, they were no match for the Cannibals, and ghouls, and Raiders. They had to control the situation. Or humanity’s only hope would be snuffed out.”

“Shaun, the Institute isn’t humanity’s only hope. But it is part of what gives me hope. There is so much good the people down here could do up there.”

“No. The only way to Redefine Mankind is to make it better. Not what it was. And to do that, we must be independent.”

“Through Phase 3? Then what? Live down here like a batch of Morlocks? Only I guess the metaphor doesn’t work. You’re the Eloi. You live off the labor of those above, sending synths to collect that you need, and recoiling from the Morlocks above whose labor is needed for your comfort.”
“That is very much incorrect. We tried…”

“You tried to control them, and it didn’t work. We both know that Shaun. You didn’t get, ‘It wouldn’t work,’ as a result. It didn’t work exactly the way you wanted it to. That’s not the same thing.”

“You don’t know. The Institute tried more than once. Before it was even the Institute the scientists tried to reach out to those above. Many were killed. Some of them were…eaten.”

Nora’s expression softened. “Oh Shaun. I know. I’ve seen…things. Even now, even as I sit here arguing for them, I know some of those above have to be killed to put the world back together. The world came apart. You were just a baby and you never knew the world before.”

Now Nora was looking off into the distance. “Yes, there was violence and resources were scarce. A few of us, myself included, knew we were living reasonably well because others were…not.”

She looked at Shaun, “The Resource Wars, the annexation of Canada, the war with the Chinese, all of it. Yes. The world is screwed up because of us, Shaun. But some of it was…beautiful. Green grass. A little house to call your own. Saturdays in the park,” she smiled at him, “Taking a baby out for stroll through your suburb.”

She shook her head. “It could be like that again. I suppose with brown grass these days, but still. It. Could. People just have to want it, which they do. They scrape at the ground and plant crops, and build shelters, and raise families. They band together to keep the night at bay. And you could help. You could. The synths could stop taking and start building. You could protect instead of terrifying.”

Shaun listened, impassive. “Perhaps, mother. Certainly, you’ll get chance to try, soon enough. But I think you’ll find that the Directorate feels otherwise. We must look to our own. You know this. You do understand the limits of what you’ll be able to do as Director. I can see it in your eyes.”

Nora leaned forward, “As Director, I know I can’t. But as Father, I think you could.”

He shook his head, “No. My mind is made up. I see that…wasteland…very differently than you do. When I am gone, you may try as you wish. I think that if you push too hard, though…”

He left the last thought unspoken.

Nora put down her cup, and stood up. She smiled at Shaun as he stood up, “You know I won’t stop trying to change your mind Shaun.”

He nodded, “I understand. There’s a part of me that doesn’t want you to stop trying.”

She nodded once curtly and turned and left.

That’s a good sign. The first genuine conversation Shaun and I have had. But I had probably better get the contingency in place before I push him any harder.

She left Shaun and returned to her terminal. There was a message from PATRIOT.

[You guys really deliver. Hooking that ancient tech to modern terminals is going to be seriously time consuming, even with the password. So I need to get started. How do we pass it?]

Nora typed, [It’s called a ‘brush pass’. We walk past each other at a specific time and place and as we pass we touch, and I hand it to you. I also need to speak with Z1, so when you and I make
arrangements, I need you to pass the contact chip off to Z1.]

She waited but nothing was forthcoming, so she looked at her Pip-Boy. 9PM. She laid her head down after setting her terminal alert to its loudest setting.

She felt like she’d only slept a few minutes when her terminal pinged. Her Pip-Boy told her it was 1AM. The terminal read, [Meet me at the dining area 7AM. I’ll be in the southeastern corner. Blond hair, Robotics coverall.]

She typed back, [OK. Pass the chip to Z1, please.]

Then she went back to sleep after setting her alarm to 6AM. There wasn’t anything else to do.

At 5:50AM, because that’s how these things happen, her terminal pinged. It read, [This is Z1. I have spoken with the 13 synths.]

She typed, [I need to hand you your own communication chip. Where can we meet for a brush pass? We walk past each other at a specific time and place and as we pass we touch, and I hand it to you.]

She quickly received, [I know, Mr. Binet explained it to me. That is how I have this chip. I will be doing area maintenance in the area outside SRB.]

Nora felt a twinge, but JADE SUN knew she could pull off a brush pass in the middle of Tiananmen Square. Because she had.

She typed, [OK. I’ll come by at 7:30AM. When you see me coming, rub the back of your neck to let me know who you are. I’ll give you a pat and say, ‘Good job’. I’ll pass it then.]

She got up and showered, and then went down to eat. Liam was easy to spot, and even easier, thanks to a convenient napkin, to pass Code Defender to.

After the first pass Nora finished her unappetizing pap.

*Forget everything else. THIS is the Institute’s true crime. What is this shit?*

She ate quickly, which she supposed was probably the point, and headed around to see what she could see, and to wait for 7:30. She stopped by the quartermaster synth and browsed his stuff. There was nothing there she was remotely interested in using, so she moved on.

Soon enough it was time. She strolled over to the gardens outside SRB and found a lone synth. As she strolled up, he rubbed the back of his neck. She walked over casually, looked at what he was doing, smiled, said, “Nice job,” and patted his chest. Placing his contact chip in a breast pocket as she did so. Then she nodded and walked on.

When she reached the center, she turned abruptly as though she’d dropped something, and then patted her pockets as if searching for something there. What she was actually doing was checking to see if the brush had been observed. It was obvious from the behavior of the guards outside SRB that it hadn’t, so she pulled her keycard out of her pocket with an expression of relief, for public consumption.

Then she went back to her room and waited.

After several hours the terminal pinged. She read, on Z1’s ‘channel’, [I have made arrangements. I can get the thirteen we discussed into position. But tell me. Do you think Mr. Binet’s plan will
work?]

Nora typed, [No. It would be the last time any synth ever left the Institute. Anyone who isn’t part of the thirteen would face a life of endless brain wipes. If we’re going to do a mass breakout, we need to save everyone. A synth rebellion while The Railroad invades is the only way that could succeed.]

The terminal pinged quickly, [And I thought Mr. Binet’s plan was too ambitious. I’d fight for my freedom. I know of a few others who would as well. But enough to face the guards? Perhaps if we stand up to the scientists more of my people would join us. But we should be prepared for some synths to fight against us. And while I admire Mr. Binet a great deal, we can’t tell him about this plan. It’s his people we’d be fighting. I will talk to my friends. I will contact you tomorrow. If I don’t, after three days assume the worst.]

Nora typed, [Are you close to getting wiped? Do I need to get you out? We can continue the one at a time rescues while we prepare, you know.]

Z1 replied, [It doesn’t matter. You need me to work with the rebels. I have to stay.]

Nora typed, [Be safe, Z1.]

The she looked around and sent Shaun an email that said she was going to spend the night with her surface family, changed into her surface clothes, and went up the relay room and went home. Her true home.

Chapter End Notes

And now the debates start. There's action all through it too. Some romance. Our heroine does love her wife after all.

But there will be a LOT of philosophical debates. Complete with a Monty Python reference. The only one, I think, as where I am in the story now, is not comedic.
A Good Idea at the Time

When Nora got back it was midafternoon, so she stepped out and went visiting the vendors. As she strolled along, Myrna waved her over. “Guess what I have,” she said conspiratorially.

Nora was curious. If it was contraband, or even merely hard to get, Nora was more than mildly interested what would cause her to whisper like that. She shook her head, “You got me Myrna, what?”

Myrna gestured Nora into a corner, and whipped a piece of burlap back. Under it was a small pile of yellow oblate spheroids. “Are those…?” Nora said.

Myrna nodded. “Lemons. Got ‘em off a trader up from Old Virginny. They grow ‘em there. Tough to get ‘em past the Brotherhood yoyos in DC, but every now and then someone manages. Have to come up the coast or else up the Appalachian valleys and then across Western Mass. Nobody’s been by that way for a while though. These came up the coast.”

“Oh wow. You know what I can do with this?”

“No, but I’ll bet you’ll write an article, and then prices will triple on these babies,” Myrna gloated.

Nora looked at Myrna in shock.

“What?” Myrna asked.

Nora laughed. “Fine. But I get the lemons free. And,” she looked over to another bin, “These mushrooms.”

“You’re killing me,” Myrna said.

Nora shrugged. “I don’t have to use the lemons, I guess,” she said.

“Fine,” Myrna said. As she turned, her scowl slipped and Nora saw her delighted smile.

Nora walked away shaking her head and smiling. Next she went to Polly’s. Polly saw her walking up, with a sack already in her hand, and she leaned forward. “What are you making this time Nora?”

Nora laughed. “Let me guess, you’re figuring that I’ll write about something and the price will go up?”

Polly shook her head. “No, it’s just that I need to lay in a good supply of whatever it is you’ll be using. But also the other thing, yeah.”

Nora shook her head, “I should insist on kickbacks.”

“Oh c’mon Nora. Ever since you started writing those articles, people are cooking for themselves more. Ol’ Tak has a little less business, but it’s not too bad. And you know it’s made her,” she said, gesturing over her shoulder at Nat, “A busy little girl.”

As if she could hear herself being talked about Nat looked up and saw Nora. She almost hopped
off her box, but a buyer came by and she settled for waving to her mom happily.

Nora raised her hands, “I know better than to try to stifle the avarice of Diamond City vendors. Just remember who brings in the business, and don’t GIVE me the business. Too badly.”

Polly laughed, “Deal, Nora.”

Finally Nora went into the Dugout and got several more bottles of white wine. She was planning on using some that she’d laid in the fridge days before, but they’d need replacement afterwards. Then she returned home and began getting out additional ingredients, including some chicken stock she’d made earlier. She measured out a cup of white wine and a cup of stock.

Then she deboned the two radchickens, and froze the thigh, back, wing, and drumstick meat, and put most of the bones in water to boil, then simmer, to make more stock. She made some egg noodles using razorgrain flour and pinch of salt then mixing in with 2 beaten radchicken eggs, a small amount of Brahmin milk and butter. When it was stiff she rolled it out and cut it into wide strips.

Then she laid out the radchicken breast and covered them with a clean cloth and got out her trusty pan.

WHACK!

At that Piper came around the corner. She pointed at the lump, “It moved! God, Blue it’s moving! Hit it again! Kill it! Kill it dead!” she shrieked.

Nora started laughing. What really did her in was when Nat came in, and said, “Mom? What did the chicken do to you? Are you being a bully? Mr. Zwicky says bullies just don’t like themselves, but it really looks like you just hate that chicken.”

Which was capped by Piper shrieking, “It moved,” snatching the pan out of Nora’s hand and hitting another breast.

Nora doubled over. “Did…did you two…plan…that?” she asked between bouts of laughing.

Piper looked innocent, “Us? Never. What makes you think that?” Then she batted her eyelashes at Nora while smiling inanely.

Nora leaned on the table, “OK stop, just stop, before I lose it,” she said, giggling.

Piper slipped into her arms, “I love you Nora. We miss you sometimes. But we’ve been waiting for you to sauté chicken again for like forever.”

Nora took the four breasts and began cooking them, 3 minutes and 2 minutes per side, while she sliced the lemon into halves and squeezed the juice into the stock. Then when the breasts were done, the stock went in, and two tablespoons of flour went into the wine. She deglazed the pan with the stock this time, and then poured in the wine mixture to boil. When it started thickening, she tossed in the mushrooms, and set the heat to simmer and put the breasts in with the sauce and mushrooms to simmer as well.

When it was all done she plated the breasts, then set the egg noodles to the side and spooned the mushroom wine sauce over it.

When they ate it, Piper noted, “Didn’t you once tell me, you boil the wine first to burn off the alcohol?”
Nora nodded. Piper said, “You didn’t do that this time.” Nora shook her head. Piper said, “Because…you wanted a little alcohol left. In Nat?”

“Not specifically. It’s just that this is better with a small kick of bitter alcohol and bitter lemon with the earthier chicken and mushroom flavors, where in saltimbocca the counterpoint flavor is the sage and a little from the prosciutto,” Nora grinned. “Speaking of wine, Nat, you’re fourteen. Would you like some watered down wine?”

“Eww,” Nat said.

“Your loss. I need a second glass,” and Nora smiled to herself. This was home.

The next morning, Nora got up, checked her dead drops, and then relayed to the Institute.

When she arrived, a messenger came and met her at the elevator. “Father needs you.”

Nora shook her head, and went to Shaun’s quarters immediately. He looked up at her. “I need you to see Allie Filmore, immediately. There’s been a development on Phase Three.”

“Well, shit. I have to go along with whatever he’s got in mind. My contingency isn’t in place yet. And you never know. I might actually agree with he has in mind.”

Nora nodded, “Sure thing, Shaun,” and she left to find Allie. She found her in the small office complex off the break area at the base of Nora’s apartment tower.

Nora walked and Allie looked up and smiled, gesturing for Nora to sit down.

Allie put some coffee in front of Nora and said, “Busy day for you? It’s about to get busier. You’re going to lead this operation, I’m told.”

She sipped her own coffee, and said, “Let’s go over the details. Recent events have upset our Phase Three timetable. Getting the reactor up and running has become the number one priority. It needs to be running yesterday.”

“What kind of events?” Nora asked.

Allie said, “The Brotherhood’s arrival mainly. We need to minimize our surface footprint. So we’re going to have to cut some corners. I’m not thrilled, but it means we need to rely on some pre-war tech. You’re going to the Mass Fusion Building to acquire a Beryllium Agitator.”

Nora’s ears perked up.

A beryllium agitator is what Ingram needed. If there was ever a time to do exactly what Shaun wanted this is it. The Institute is going to use it to start a reactor. The Brotherhood wants to use it to start a war robot.

“Consider it done,” Nora said.

Allie frowned, “I’ll consider it done when it’s in my hands, because I’m going with you.”

Nora gave her a direct look, “Are you sure? It’s dangerous and contaminated up there.”

Allie nodded, “I hate to go above ground unless there’s no other option. But our options are in fact dwindling. And not to add pressure but we have to move quickly. We believe the Brotherhood is nosing around the area. We don’t want them getting the Agitator before we do. Head up to the relay. I’ll meet you there.”
Yep. As Glory says, ‘If it’s gotta be done…’

Nora said, “OK, I have to relay home briefly and pick up some gear. I’ll get there, and then back, shortly. You’re right. We have to move fast.”

Nora went to her room, stripped off her coveralls, and put on her armored up Wastelander outfit. Then she moved quickly up to the relay. Allie hadn’t gotten there yet, so Nora quickly relayed to her home.

Piper looked up, shocked. “I thought you’d be gone longer. What…,” her voice wound down when she saw the look on Nora’s face.

Nora all but ran to the radio. She called the Castle. When she was acknowledged, she said, “It’s critical that Radio Freedom begin transmitting the following during every break, ‘Regular churchgoers are advised that flowers are scarce this season.’ Every break until I tell you to knock it off.”

She was assured that it would happen immediately. Piper was looking at Nora with horror.

Nora shook her head. “It’s not the end of the world. Yet. But Shaun has me doing something that is going to put me on a collision course with the Brotherhood.”

Nora picked up her rifle and checked it quickly, then loaded it, safed it, and strapped it on her back. “The worst part is I have to agree with him.”

Pier asked, “You do?”

Nora nodded, “Yeah, the Institute wants me to get a ‘beryllium agitator’. They need it to start their reactor. The Brotherhood wants it too. To start Liberty Prime.”

Piper nodded sharply, “And you can’t let them have that, Blue.” She kissed Nora soundly, “Go. I love you.”

Nora gave her wife a grateful look.

Piper waved. “I’ll make sure Deacon gets Madison out OK.”

Nora smiled and relayed back to the Institute.

By then Allie was there as well. In a contamination suit that Nora had seen four times before. Once in person and three times in her memories. On the Institute scientist that had ripped Shaun from Nate’s grasp.

She, or her faceplate, looked over at Nora, “Why on earth are you smiling?”

“Because I was just with my wife, Allie.”

The suit nodded, “Oh yes. The surface family.”

I’m starting to think they have no intention ever of letting Piper or Nat in under any circumstances. What they don’t understand is that every time I take another step towards thinking that, they take one more step towards me ending them.

“Yes, Allie, my family,” Nora said, a little pointedly.

Allie just nodded, and inadvertently took a step back from a precipice she didn’t even know was
there, “I was saying good bye to my family as well. I hope we get back.”

Nora smiled at Allie. “I will personally make sure you get back to them, Allie.”

Chapter End Notes

Some background worldbuilding notes here. In case it hasn't become obvious, the world is experiencing anthropogenic climate change. Although the nuclear winter would have depressed global temperature 3 to 5C it would have done so for only about 20 years. I'm discounting the 'nuclear summer' hypothesis, since I think the level of CO2 emission implied in a society that literally ran through all of its carbon fuels in 300 years (The Industrial Revolution began in Britain over a period of about 20 years from 1760 to 1780) has to be quite high without 'bouncing the rubble' on global warming. And while I don't have access to crop growth regional models, but I feel safe in saying that citrus growing regions have extended as far north as Virginia. And I can easily see the inhabitants thereof renaming the region "Old Virginy".

Also, East Coast regional trade is implied in both the Far Harbor and Nuka-World DLCs.

And if someone like Nora ever did do a cooking column, is there anyone on the planet who's played the game who thinks the vendors wouldn't act exactly like this?

The recipe is one I came up with when I was out shopping one time and saw some particularly juicy shiitake mushrooms, and though they'd go well in a sauce. My sauces end up wine sauces 80% of the time (but not sausage gravy, because ewww). And I also use a lot of lemon because I like the bitter zing.
Together they relayed into, or as it turned out, onto Mass Fusion. The question of Brotherhood involvement was settled instantly, as a laser bolt sizzled along Nora’s shoulder.

The polymer weave bore the brunt of the shot, dissipating it all over Nora’s torso and becoming warm to the touch instantly, but enough got through to singe her shoulder. Not badly enough that she couldn’t return fire. Nora crouched and shot the soldier in the main building that had shot her in the shoulder. She shot him in the face. He flopped back, killed instantly.

Allie was just goggling at Nora, and when she yanked Allie down, she hissed “Stay here. Where it’s safe!”

Nora unslung her rifle and went hunting.

The roof she was on was a flat expanse peppered with machinery surrounding a central structure that went up an additional two stories. She began moving carefully among HVAC equipment and soon got the drop on a Knight in power armor.

*Aim at the join of helmet and torso. Squeeze the trigger. Ew. Nasty.*

Frequently a bullet from a rifle, especially at short range, will go through the target. When that happens to a target in Power Armor it turns out that the same armor that’s so good at keeping bullets and shrapnel out is equally capable of keeping it inside once it gets in.

In this case, with one bullet, Nora shot the Knight three times. In the head.

As she moved around the outer edge, she was able to find and kill three more Brotherhood soldiers.

*So far, it’s possible that the Brotherhood doesn’t know it’s me.*

“There’s her. The traitor.”

*I have GOT to stop saying shit like that to myself. Ah well. At least The Minutemen can stop pretending.*

She looked up. Another Knight in Power Armor. Which, given the radio in the armor and the very clear Electronic Line of Sight to the Prydwen, meant that it was certain that Maxson knew that Nora was acting against him.

*What, you thought you were getting out of this without breaking a bunch of eggs? I just hope the Preston has patrols up and running, and the Castle on full alert. And that Deacon got Madison out.*

She sighted up at him. At this range, her optics let her aim at his eye lenses. Which she shot through, killing him instantly.

She finished her careful hunt around the perimeter. She figured she’d drawn them all out, so she shouldered her rifle and stimpacked her left shoulder. She drew her pistol and walked back around the roof to Allie, who had followed Nora’s instructions to the letter.

Nora looked down, “You can get up now.”
Allie looked up, “Are they all gone?”

“All of them? Almost certainly not. No one is shooting at us at the moment though,” Nora replied then extended a hand to help Allie, who took it without hesitation.

“So as long as you’re wearing a contamination suit, you’re good with touching me?” asked Nora.

Allie gave a start. “Oh! I guess so, I’m sorry.”

“I won’t kid you, it’s a little offensive,” said Nora.

Allie stood very still for a moment, and then said, “I’ll try to remember when we get back.”

“OK then.” Nora said and turned and went into the complex.

They began looking around. Allie said, “If I was a pre-war tech conglomerate, where would I keep all my best toys?”

Nora saw a lab and went up the stairs to check it out. What she found was a bunch of trash, an ID Keycard, and a terminal. The card read, “Karl Oslow”. The terminal gave her the target: [As per your instructions, the Beryllium Agitator has been installed in our primary reactor on sub-level 01. I've also increased security on all of the keyreaders in the building, so you'll need your executive keycard handy if you want to use any of the elevators.]

“Sub-basement. Fortunately, this card works with that elevator.” Nora gestured at the glass cylinder.

“This wasn't really what I planned on doing today,” joked Allie.

Nora grinned. “I do this more days than I'd prefer.”

The entered the elevator, and swiped the key card and pressed the ‘1’ button. It began descending and very shortly they were looking northwest over the Commonwealth from one of its highest buildings. From right to left Nora could see the USS Constitution, implausibly perched on top of a building, then Bunker Hill, and Greenetech and the Great Dome of CIT, then Fenway and home. Her heart ached to return.

Who knew seeing the floodlights and the Monster would affect me like this? That little corner of the market is more home than Sanctuary Hills ever was. I can almost smell Takahashi’s noodle shop, and hear the vendors.

It took a while, but Piper turned me into a Diamond City girl.

She smiled. Allie looked her over and asked, “Why the smile?”

“Oh, just realizing that I really do have a place in this world.”

Allie nodded, “And we’re happy to have you.”

Nora didn’t bother correcting her.

Then they entered the main building. Or it swelled out to meet them. Depended on your perspective. Nora and Allie turned to observe the descent inside the building. So neither of them were surprised when some of the doors on the far side of the central atrium opened and Brotherhood soldiers emerged.
Nora swore colorfully, and in one movement knelt and unslung the Type 79. She brought it up and then entered her shooter’s zen. Both eyes open and orienting her on her target, then closing her left eye as she tucked the stock in and snugged the butt into her shoulder. She sighted on the soldier, center of mass, and squeezed. And the soldier dropped, dead.

Nora didn’t let herself think about that dead soldier. Her left eye opened and she began scanning again. She was existing entirely in the moment. If she weren’t, she might die. There was one of her, plus the dubious value of Allie and her laser pistol, against god alone knew how many Brotherhood soldiers.

*Another one. Peeking out, and down they go. Scanning, scanning, two to my right, same doorway. Shot one, shot two, shot three…both gone down. Scanning. The elevator is sinking sooo slowly. Two more, opposite sides, left one, down, right snapped off a shot but missed because Allie shot first. And dead.*

*It’s you or me. I vote me. Nothing personal guys.*

*Three? Getting clever, but Allie is shooting wildly, and they are, that’s one… all trying to hide, that’s two…and there’s not really…that’s all three, any cover from me.*

*Reload. Scanning, scanning.*

“**BLOW THE CONDUIT!**” someone shouted. There was a muffled bang, and the elevator dropped a floor and a half to a glass floor. Nora could glimpse more of the tower below, but the glass seemed structurally sound. Which fact was demonstrated by the fact that a Knight in Power Armor dropped three stories with a thump and a scythe of compressed air that rattled the door of the elevator. Then the door opened and Nora was firing. Sending round after round of 7.62mm steel jacketed ammo into him. Several rounds found joints.

He spasmed and went down. She drew her pistol and moved into the center of the floor. The Knight had dropped his laser rifle and was scooting back, whimpering. Nora leaned down, and removed his…no her, helmet.

She aimed her pistol. “I’m sorry. But it’s not personal. It’s just that I pick me,” said JADE SUN. And she pulled the trigger. The Knight’s head rocked back and a splash of blood and brain gouted over the glass.

Allie was clearly staring at her. Nora rolled her eyes. Then she stopped.

*That could have been Kellogg saying that. What am I fucking turning into? And the bitch of it is that if I let up for even a second, the Brotherhood has me.*

*Nora. You…I need to make sure the ends justify the means. I need to be positive that it’s worth what I’m going to do. Just because you got married, because Marie came to help you, doesn’t change who you are. Who I am. I can NOT just let myself be pushed into doing things, because this is what happens. It doesn’t matter that they did something to put me here, what I do is on me.*

Nora looked around, and heard a scream, “No!” from above. Another Knight began peppering the area with laser fire. Nora plucked a plasma grenade from her vest, and chucked it up at the Knight’s feet. When it went off, the Knight began firing wildly, their optics clearly completely destroyed. Nora ran up the flight of stairs and then got next to the Knight, who was still firing blind.

She pointed her pistol not at the neck joint, but their knee. She fired twice, and the Knight
Nora removed the helmet and looked into the eyes of a young woman.

Nora leveled her pistol, and said, “I don’t know if it’s a newfound appreciation for life but I’m not going to kill you unless I have to. Exit your armor.”

The knight glared, but did as she was told. When she was out, Nora took some duct tape she found and taped up the Knight’s wrists and feet.

“You can take a message to Maxson,” Nora started, “It can end here and he can leave and go back to lording it over ‘peasantry’ in the Capitol Wasteland, or he can push his luck here. He can try and take out the Institute and then lord it over the Commonwealth. But if he does stay and try to run this place, I am NOT responsible for what happens next. There are children on that airship.”

Nora shook her head, “I won’t even mention what it means that you use child soldiers. Get them, and yourselves, out of here. Or it’s on him. And you.”

Then Nora saw the fuse panel. She threw the breaker and the hum told her that the elevator had been reactivated.

She and Allie reentered it. As it sank once more, she could see all the way down to the main floor. And the tail end of an epic fight. The Gunners that had been here had put up a spirited resistance. But it had been futile. At least from the Gunner’s point of view. From where Nora was sitting? Very profitable. There were only two Brotherhood soldiers left, one tending to wounds. The one who wasn’t, Nora killed immediately. The other, she watched as he waffled between going for his gun and surrendering. He opted for going for his gun.

Nora and Allie then went to a side hall. Allie consulted a map and pointed at the elevator. “That one.”

They entered, and Nora turned to Allie. “What do you think of the surface?”

Allie laughed, “I try not to.”

“Seriously.”

“You want to have this conversation now?!”

“No time like the Gunner and Brotherhood infested present,” Nora said.

Allie sighed, “It’s horrible.”

“Ok, and keep in mind I want to know your honest answer, why?”

“Why?!?”

“Yes. Why? Why is the surface so horrible?”

“It’s full of people who want to kill me. It’s dangerous. It’s full of radiation, and, no offense, it’s full of contaminated degenerates.”

Nora smiled, “I can work with that. Thanks Allie.”

“Wait, what?”

Nora smiled, “You’re a member of the Directorate, and you just told me your problem with the
surface is one lie, two half-truths, and one fact. I want to affect how the Directorate treats surfacers. You just informed me that I have to deal with the one truth, that it’s dangerous, which obviously it is,” and here Nora waved around her.

Then she looked over at Allie and said, “And the lie is obviously that it’s fun of contaminated degenerates. Most of us rarely get into rads, and those who do decontaminate immediately. And sometime I ought to take you for noodles at Takahashi’s stand and the Diamond City Market. We’re not degenerates. We’re just people, making a living.”

“The two half-truths, that there are people who want to kill you would be hard to argue at the moment, but it’s not that many. Most want to make caps off you, and the vast majority recognize that life isn’t a zero-sum game. And second, that it’s full of radiation. Yeah, true, and yet no. The people here are doing what they can, and even the edge of the Glowing Sea is getting…invaded. By life. Clean life. Trees. Grass. Brown grass, and god, I’ll never get used to that, but grass. When the land was invaded 350 million years ago, you know what it that first animal found? Grass. Lichen. Plants’d been there half a billion years.”

“The surface is NOT lost Allie. You have to see that.”

Allie shrugged and said, “Maybe. It’ll take a lot of convincing.”

“That’s fine. As long as you’re convincible.”

The door slid open, and they emerged into a small room. It was covered by a turret and two doors that had no obvious handles.

*If this doesn’t scream trap…*

Nora checked the terminal, which was criminally easy to hack. Sure enough, the terminal told her that there were two separate traps; two turrets, which she immediately redirected to be friendly and then activated, and behind the two doors were two assaultrons. Reasoning that they’d be better off deliberately tripping whatever this was than waiting for when the system thought best, Nora hid behind the desk, and gestured for Allie to join her.

She clicked activate and as the two robots cleared their doors, Nora, Allie, and the turrets all began firing. A few frantic seconds and the two war robots were down. They went through the door, and there it was. The reactor.

“At least we got to it first,” Allie said, “Normally I wouldn’t advise sticking your hands into strange fusion reactors, but I suppose this is the exception.”

“Look at the size of the thing,” said Nora.

It was huge. The windows overlooking it were three stories tall and that only covered half of it. Allie went to a console and checked. She noted, “Yep, radioactivity levels are off the charts. I hope you have a way of dealing with it.”

Nora smiled, “I was planning on going in naked. Fingers crossed, I get superpowers.”

Allie shook her head, “See this is why I wore the suit! This facility has to have some lying around. Find a Hazmat suit.”

Nora nodded, “I saw one in a locker room back there.”

She headed back and climbed into the one she’d found, and with a hiss the helmet sealed down.
She took a deep breath and headed back.

“Ta Da!”

Allie pointed, “Ok. There’s your target,” she pointed at a platform two stories up.

Nora took a look and headed for the radiation lock. “Ok, Allie, let’s do this.”

The actual retrieval was almost anticlimactic. Nora shut down the reactor and exposed the beryllium agitator. The almost part came in when the security measures kicked in. Two turrets came alive, but lost Nora in the radiation and clutter from the machinery and fired ineffectually. Nora, and her rifle, did not.

She thought that was it. She was wrong, and realized it when she heard Allie shriek. That was when she ran down the ramps and through the rad-lock.

When the door opened, Nora saw that a sentry bot had cornered Allie and was chewing at her shelter behind a desk and counter with a 5mm minigun. But its cooling cycle had kicked in, and Nora easily dispatched it as it vented its twin fusion cores. By shooting one of them until containment was breached. The explosion was…remarkable.

Allie came out, “IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED ME TO APPRECIATE?”

“Allie, I think the explosion affected your hearing…”

“What? I CAN’T HEAR YOU.”

“You need to wait…”

“I THINK I NEED TO WAIT UNTIL MY DEAFNESS SUBSIDES,” shouted Allie.

Nora nodded. Enthusiastically.

They waited until Allie could at least hear Nora speaking loudly. Then they went back up to the main floor in the elevator. The door opened onto pandemonium.

Synths were porting in, in reaction to Brotherhoods troops entering. Probably somewhere at the root of all…this…had been a Courser with relay grenades encountering a Knight. But by this point, operating on its own logic, it had reached in Nora’s professional opinion about a Category 3 Shitstorm.

“These guys just don’t know when they’re beaten, do they?” observed Allie, “I’ll help the synths buy some time. Make sure you get back to the Institute with the Agitator!”

Nora shook her head. If anyone should relay out with the agitator while someone stayed back it should have been Allie leaving Nora behind. So Nora began shooting.

Knight to my left front. Shooting, and there’s a synth relaying in right behind him. Uhnn. A scribe behind the counter. Plasma grenade out. And three pop up. Shoot, and shoot and detonation. He’s dead.

Another Knight. On the walk way. You know there’s a weak spot in your crotch, yes? Guess not. Ouch. Probably best you’re dead. How’s this square with your moral qualms?

There’s like an even dozen shooting at me from all directions. Think about morals when we’re down to two or three and I’m not fucking fighting for my life.
So you like yourself at times like this?

I just accept that it’s needed. There’s a difference. Morals are a luxury that people not getting shot at from three fucking directions can afford. And he’s…no she’s…down. Seriously self. Sometimes it really IS them or me. And it’s Ok to vote me.

The last knight went down. Most of the synths that had been sent were down. But that was not really important, because every Brotherhood soldier was down. Nora glanced over at Allie.

“Let’s go home.”

Allie was inscrutable. Which wasn’t shocking. She was wearing a contamination suit. But then Nora was wearing a Hazmat suit. So she was inscrutable too.

Chapter End Notes

As it turns out, I have a real life. One that requires me to travel Tuesday through Friday. I went back and forth, since I’m currently writing about 35,000 words further downstream than what’s been posted, on just posting one per day. But that would basically utterly annihilate the buffer I have created.

SOoooo…this will be the last update until the morning of Saturday, Jun 30, 2018. If you are reading this in the far future and the entire trilogy is complete congrats or condolences as appropriate. I still have NO IDEA if I can stick the landing on this book, let alone the final one. Otherwise, I *will* be hooked into my mail account and respond to comments if you have one you want to make.

Nora’s radioactivity dialog is actually from the discussion of the Glowing Sea after you probe Kellogg’s memories. For story reasons, the sarcastic option was unusable then. But I love that piece of dialog, so I lifted it.
When she got back to the Institute, Nora went to see Volkert for a rad cleanse. He was visibly queasy about the entire process. Which only highlighted the problem.

_These guys have a positive phobia about radiation. It goes beyond concern. They’re scientists, getting ready to activate a reactor, while entertaining an unreasoning fear of radiation. And I thought the Brotherhood was self-defeating._

When she was done she was tired but she had to at least check her terminal. To her very great relief there was a message from Z1, [I asked my friends if they’d take up arms for their freedom. I was surprised at the number of volunteers. Perhaps once the fighting starts even more will join us, but if we fight we will die very quickly without weapons. A lot of them. Given the right materials we can produce serviceable weapons. Unfortunately we’re missing a few critical ingredients.]

Nora entered, [What do you need me to do?]

When she hit enter, nothing further happened. She waited a bit, then when it reached 5 in the afternoon, she went to the relay room and relayed home. When she arrived, Nat was just walking in, and saw the afterflash of the relay and came running up and hugged Nora.

“Mom, you’re home!”

“Yep, kiddo. Maybe just for a little bit. There’s all kinds of things going on right now,” said Nora hugging Nat back.

“Spy stuff?” asked Nat breathlessly.

Nora nodded, “Yes, actually, ‘Spy stuff’ just about describes it perfectly. I hope you understand if I don’t talk about it though.”

Piper came around the corner with a wide smile and kissed Nora hello. “I take it everything went Ok?”

Nora waggled her hands. “Did Deacon get Madison out?”

Piper nodded. “I just came from debriefing them; Madison is hiding out with the Railroad for now. We need to find someplace else to send her, fast, though.”

Nora asked, “Why?”

“I’m seriously concerned she’ll actually kill Tinker Tom. He keeps trying to get her to confess to putting tiny reporting robots in the food. By the time I’d left she was reduced to growling at him whenever he got close,” Piper said.

“Can we send her to Sanctuary for now? Ever since we began stopping Trashcan Carla at Red Rocket, there are no more Caravan informants visiting all the way inside the wall,” Nora said.

“It’s probably best and I’ll get moving on that.”

Nora turned to the radio and called the Castle, “You can discontinue broadcasting the
announcement in 8 hours. In the meantime, increase anti-Brotherhood patrols in all sectors of identified activity."

“Why 8 hours, Blue?” asked Piper.

“So the Brotherhood doesn’t immediately link the broadcast with Li’s extraction. Now I just have to hope no one finds Madison’s code hack.”

“Can you stay?” Piper asked, hope on her face.

“I wish to god I could. But there’s some stuff going on that needs me back at the Institute. Maybe after that I can come home. Tomorrow or the day after.”

Both Nat and Piper’s faces fell. But then Nat said, “Aunt Cait told me that you have important stuff you have to do so I guess I just have to give you a hug and say bye for now, huh?”

Nora nodded seriously, then hugged her daughter and kissed her wife, and the set her relay to return.

When she arrived, she was lost in thought as she headed for the dining facility.

*I can’t live a double life. At some point, even if Shaun doesn’t come out of this hole, I have to. I want to try and save him, but not at the expense of my family.*

She once again sat down to a robust meal of “food supplements”.

*How can it be a food “supplement”? It’s not “supplementing” anything. I suppose even the Institute just can’t quite see their way to calling it “Food Paste”. “Abomination” is what it is.*

Allie Filmore sat down across from her. “I can’t stay long, I’m eating with my family,” she said, waving at a grey templed man and red headed boy who looked like nothing so much as Austin Engill from Vault 81 in an Institute Jumper. “But I wanted to thank you. You saved my life up there, twice. Even if my ears are still ringing some.”

She went on, “You certainly gave me something to think about,” she said, then looked in Nora’s eyes, “And I promise I will.”

Nora nodded and smiled. Then she said what was uppermost on her mind, the one thing she had to know. “Do you guys ever get real food or is always this…stuff?”

Allie looked confused. Then she smiled, “Oh we never eat any of those surface foods. Too many carcinogens, trace toxic elements, and allergy inducing long string proteins. Food supplements provide perfect nutrition, with no long term dietary negative effects.”

Nora grimaced, “You and I have a lot to discuss about items you need to be keeping an open mind about then,” and she shuddered.

Allie laughed and patted Nora’s hand before she went back to her family.

*Huh. That’s new. Maybe they CAN be a little more flexible.*

She finished ‘eating’ her ‘food’, and made her way back to her room. It was tiny and cramped and sterile. It had exactly one redeeming feature, unlimited hot water. She checked her terminal. No messages yet.

*No reason to worry quite yet. Synths don’t get time off, and the best time for him to use terminals*
is in the wee small hours.

She stripped and began showering. It was one of the few unalloyed “good things” about the Institute. She had just gotten soaped up, when…

PING!

Or he can get terminal time just as I get a good lather on. Dammit.

Nora left the shower and wrapped herself in a towel.

She read, [There is an excavation that was just completed. The mining equipment has been packed but not moved yet. And that equipment has everything we need. The construction crew is populated entirely by my friends. But they’re under constant supervision. How do you feel about killing some guards?]

Nora typed back, [What kind of guards?]

He terminal pinged immediately, [Synths. Not coursers.]

Nora relaxed. [How many?] 

She received, [Five or six.]

She tensed back up. [Ok, I’ll do what’s needed.]

I hope.

She hopped back into the shower, and after rinsing, then drying off, put on one of her Institute Coveralls altered by Tinker Tom. She put a plasma grenade in one pocket, as well as her pistol and a pair of Stealth Boys. She thought for a few moments and, then grabbed a clipboard and a pen.

It was 8 PM. By 10, she figured the watchers on her must have assumed she was asleep. As luck would have it, the elevator down to the dig spot was actually at the base of her apartment tower, so it was quick trip down the stairwell and into the storage area. Before she went into the elevator, she dropped her clipboard and turned to pick it up. The area was clear. She scanned the room. No cameras.

It’s a secret police. They don’t do subtle. I really hope.

This was without question, the most dangerous thing she’d done since arriving. JADE SUN knew, without question, that with her stealth boys, and pistol, and the general level of activity in the Institute at the moment, that if she were blown she could make it to the relay room and the Emergency Relay.

But that would be the end of any chance of peaceful resolution between Nora and Shaun, and between the Institute and the Commonwealth.

I don’t want to have to choose. Not yet. I’m getting somewhere, I can feel it.

She entered the elevator and pressed the down button.

When the elevator stopped moving, Nora exited. She could see several Gen 2 synths ahead, and a number of human synths. She waited patiently for a minute, and as the last human synth stepped far enough away, she activated her Stealth Boy and slipped into the room.
She took her plasma grenade and activated it, rolling it into the clump of Gen 2s. Then she drew her pistol while the grenade went off with a CRUMP-sizzle.

Two synths went down immediately, and the other four drew their weapons. Nora snapped off a pair of shots that dumped number three. Two of them assumed that the problem was the human synths and one began looking around.

*It’s bad that those guys are shooting at the Gen 3s. But not as bad as it is good they’re not shooting at me.*

The remaining synth was firing in Nora’s general direction. A double tap and he dropped. By then, her internal timer was telling her she needed to use the next Stealth Boy.

Her internal timer was wrong. Had Nora simply switched targets to the remaining two synths, she might well have escaped unscathed. She had had almost 15 seconds left on the first timer.

Instead, she pulled the next Stealth Boy and activated it. By then, the last two had realized, after killing one Gen 3, that the attack was from their rear. They began pelting the far end of the room with laser fire. Nora was firing as well, and she got one before she was hit. She hissed, as the shot creased her in her side, penetrating the weave and burning an inch deep trench in her lower right ribcage.

She switched targets as the final synth located her via audio tracking. The next shot was a through and through of her outer right thigh. Had it been the inner thigh it might’ve nicked her femoral artery and she truly might have ended up like Ericka Elwood-Woolum. Her final shot dropped the synth. His final shot took Nora straight through her upper left abdomen.

As the last Synth fell, Nora stood up painfully. The remaining Gen 3s were moving fast. One of them called, “‘Remember Z1’s plan everyone. Grab everything we can use, especially the crates.”

Nora waved and nodded, and then turned and walked slowly down the hall to the elevator. She pressed the up button. By the time she had reached the Institute ‘Ground’ floor, her abdomen felt like a hot, throbbing needle had been jammed through her. She almost didn’t notice the other two wounds, except insofar as she found herself limping.

She peered out and there was no one. She moved painfully up the stairs. By the time she reached her floor, she very nearly had tunnel vision. And the needle had turned into a length of rebar.

She made it to her room, and she jammed first one, then two stimpacks into her side. She thought for a second, and then reached for the Med-X styrette she carried. For exactly this reason. Then she opened the medicine cabinet in her quarters and pulled gauze and tape out. Painfully, she stripped away her ruined jump suit.

*Fuck fuck fuck shitfuck. Thank god for small fucking favors. If those shits had used guns instead of lasers, I’d have left a blood trail a mile wide. As it is, there was just seepage.*

Nora was rational enough to know that was a VERY bad sign. Most laser wounds self-cauterized. Her ribs definitely had, and there was only minor seepage around her thigh wound. Her abdomen had actually threatened to drip in the short time it took to get back.

*Internal bleeding. For certain. I have to get out.*

*I need to get to Marie.*

She pressed and taped gauze on her abdomen and as best she could on her back, as well as
wrapping her thigh in gauze tape. Then she climbed into her ‘Wasteland Clothes’ and shoved her ruined coveralls into her satchel.

She looked at her Pip-Boy. It was 11PM. She gritted her teeth and strolled out, as naturally as she could. She went down the two stories to the ground floor and then walked over to the elevator. The red hot rebar was back, and she could feel a trickle of blood on her back.

She pressed the button for the elevator and then heard, “Nora!”

She turned and plastered a smile on her face. It was Clayton Holdren. “Heading somewhere for Father?”

Nora decided a half a truth was the best kind of lie. She shook her head, “No. I’m needed at Sanctuary by the Minutemen.”

“Oh? Isn’t that, well, pointless?”

She smiled again, and said, “Clayton, I’d love to discuss this further and believe me we will, but my ride is here and I’m afraid my surface matter is time critical.”

She could feel the blood starting to pool and be absorbed by her waistband. The rebar was now being jiggled. She kept her face a mask of pleasantness.

“Ah yes. My apologies, Director. Well, Vice Director.”

Nora waved, turned, entered the elevator, and pressed the button. She stood still, smiling. When the elevator arrived at the top, Nora moved as smoothly as she could. She assumed that this area had to have cameras. She had to look like Nora, Shaun’s mother, doing surface business. By the time she arrived at the relay room and turned to raise her Pip-Boy as a cover to check to see if she was leaving a blood trail, the tunnel vision was back.

She hadn’t left a trail. She relayed to Sanctuary.

As she rematerialized, she began stumbling down the road to the Hospital. In two steps she’d fallen to her knees. She was still slowly crawling towards Dr. Curie’s building when the Minuteman guard found her.

The last thing she remembered hearing was the Minuteman. “Oh my god. Medic! Doctor Curie! DOC!!!!”

Chapter End Notes

Back. As promised.

So, eventually Nora was going to have to make a mistake. And get hurt.

And that fight is always conducted with no back up. And the game has removed the cheesy method of running into the middle of the clump and setting off a pulse grenade. So this is where she gets hurt. Bad(ly). (Yes, Piper, thou shalt not modify a verb with an adjective.)
When her eyes opened the first thing she saw was Piper. She’d been crying. Again.

She looked around, and Nat was there as well. She looked very serious. And over Nat’s shoulder was Marie, looking professional.

Marie came over and said, “It is 10AM. You were in surgery for 5 hours. I have been letting you sleep.”

Nora tried to get up, “I have to get back…”

Marie shook her head. “Non. You must rest for at least a day.”

Nora shook her head, “You don’t understand, if I don’t return soon, they’re going to suspect everything.”

Marie looked at Nora seriously, “Nora, YOU must understand. I had to close a nick in your stomach and perform a partial splenectomy. You were bleeding profusely internally. For a while I thought I would have to remove the entire spleen. While I used topical cellular regeneration enhancers, you HAVE to remain still for another day. I can let you go then. Perhaps.”

Nora said, “No. You have to let me go tomorrow at the latest. By random chance I ran into Clayton Holdren, and with luck maybe my cover can last a day.”

Nora pulled off her Pip-Boy. She handed it to Piper. “Find Preston. If he’s still looking to take over that Outpost near Tenpines as a tripwire, then tell him to go ahead and take it. And to have the Minutemen carry this there and get it back here this evening. Ok?”

Piper sniffled and nodded. She was back within minutes. “I sent Marie’s orderly.”

Nora looked at Marie who smiled. “You remember Jonathon, yes? He did not feel comfortable returning to the field. I offered him a job.”

Nora let her head fall back. “How bad was it?”

Marie smiled, “Not too bad, actually. Your stomach was nicked and that always raises the possibility of chemical peritonitis, but luckily the bolt only nicked the serosa and muscularis externa.”

Nora looked confused and Piper smiled, took her hand and said, “I was confused at first too, Blue. It only cut partway through your stomach wall. Not all the way through.”

Nora nodded and Marie continued, “The bolt then struck your spleen in the upper right quadrant. I was able to perform a partial splenectomy. Asplenia is not preferable given the nature of the Commonwealth and your particular lifestyle.”

Piper translated, having been through this at length with Marie earlier, “She only took part of the spleen and left some behind, because while you have an increased chance of infection temporarily, if you had no spleen, you’d permanently have an increased chance of infections.”
“The majority of the operation was isolating the majority of your spleen with mattress sutures and then finding small bleaders and treating them with topical cellular regenerators.”

“She used concentrated ‘essence of stimpack’ and she succeeded because she’s a miracle worker,” said Piper. She looked at Marie, “Sorry, this is where you lost me, and I just told myself, ‘Marie saved your wife. She’s a miracle worker.’”

“Non. Nora’s wounds, though life threatening if left untreated, were well within the capabilities of any competent surgeon,” Marie said, blushing.

Nora smiled up at her doctor. “Thank you, Dr. Curie. You promise I can move around by this time tomorrow?”

Marie looked thoughtful. “Oui. I believe so.”

Nora looked her in the eye. “I have to fake being unhurt. Entirely,” she said.

Marie looked back levelly, “What is your pain threshold?”

“I made it here with three laser wounds and internal bleeding.”

“Oui. You will be able to fake it. I am currently administering Med-X, but I advise against continuing to use it after you leave.”

Piper held Nora’s hand and Nora turned to her. “What happened Blue?”

Nora grimaced, “I got fucking careless. I should have just gunned those last two down. I got 5 before they figured out where I was. But number 5 shot me here,” and she gestured at her ribs, already covered with new pink skin, “and I made a noise. Seconds later I had this,” pointing at her leg, “And this,” at her side.

Piper interrupted, “I meant, why were you in a fight in the first place?”

“Oh! Because Z1s people needed supplies for a potential uprising, should we need one. I had to eliminate synth guards so they could do what they needed to do,” Nora said, “That’s how I got hurt. What made it bad was I had to sneak out, shot up.”

Nora looked at Piper, “All I could think was, ‘I have to get out, I have to get out.’ I’m lucky I was thinking at all, or I might have relayed to Diamond City. I wanted to see you so bad. But I realized just in time that I had one relay and I needed to use it to get to Marie. How’d you get here?”

“Pfft. What do you think? They radioed us and me and Nat were on our way instantly.”

“At night?”

“Yeah. At night,” Piper rolled her eyes, “I love you Nora. You know that right?”

Nora nodded. Piper went on, “And we will not end up like those poor bastards at Cambridge Polymer.”

Nora held Piper’s hand up to the side of her face. “I love you Piper. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, don’t do that again.”

“I’ll try. Hey, I’m not actually feeling that bad. How about we ask Marcy and Preston over and ask them to tell us how the CPG is going.”
“Not a bad idea Blue. I’ll go see about it.”

A bit later Marcy came to visit. Preston was still finishing up briefing Cait and the Regulars on taking Outpost Zimonja. Marcy smiled and said, “Laying around I see. Gonna waste the whole day?”

Nora grinned back, “I was planning on just finding out what you’ve done and bask in the glory that was my decision to put you in charge.”

Marcy shook her head, but she held out a map. “Piper mentioned you wanted to know what we’d gotten up to.”

She began pointing out landmarks. “Thanks to Ronnie we picked up County Crossing, Oberland Station, Greentop Nursery, The Slog, Kingsport Lighthouse and Nordhagen Beach. We have to keep that last one quiet though.”

Nora looked at the map showing Nordhagen Beach just across a small inlet of Massachusetts Bay from Boston International and the Prydwen. You could practically throw a rock from the flight deck and reach the settlement. “I can see why. Are they OK?”

“They wind up giving up 25% of everything they make to the Brotherhood, but so far, the Knights have been willing to respond to any distress calls. And the Brotherhood wiped out a Raider gambling den that would occasionally cause them trouble. Ran a robot racing ring. Apparently it was sitting right on the route from Ft. Strong to the airport. They got rid of it.”

“Brotherhood’s raising their rates, that’s for sure,” Nora said.

“Then there’s Somerville, you got those guys to join, and while running caravans from Oberland Station to Somerville one of the caravans found another spot, just south of the bridge they use, Egret Tours Marina. There apparently was a crazy old woman, thought she was a synth. She attacked them and they defended themselves. It’s a great spot for both settlers and a garrison. Which is good ‘cause it’s down at the dangerous end. We’re busying turning that into a walled town.”

Marcy looked at Nora, “And then there’s THESE guys,” her finger stabbed the map at Warwick homestead. “They just out of the blue offered to join. We have a sailboat supply run across Quincy Bay twice a day. Which we need because that place is second only to the Abernathy’s in terms of raw food output, and I expect they’ll outstrip even Blake and Connie when they have as many farmers working.”

“All of them CPG?” Nora asked.

Marcy shook her head. “Nordhagen is not sure it would be wise just yet, and Warwick hasn’t been in long enough to get an offer.”

Nora thought for a second, and said, “I’d hold off on letting Warwick join. We can trade, and protect them. But just don’t give anyone there a seat at the table quite yet.”

Marcy looked interested, “Why?”

“I’d rather not say, just yet,” replied Nora.

“Nora…” Marcy started.

Nora spoke, maybe a little too sharply, and it might have been the pain, but maybe not. “Marcy, for
all that I’ve done,” and she gestured around her, “I’m going to insist on the benefit of the doubt here, OK? Just do it my way. This one time.”

Marcy subsided, clearly not entirely satisfied, but unwilling to fight Nora on it.

Nora smiled to take the sting out and said, “On a positive note, I know why the last CPG came apart. The Institute tried to control it by encouraging mistrust between settlements. They did too good a job.”

Marcy looked surprised, and Nora outlined the findings from her record review.

Marcy shook her head. “There’s no guarantee that we won’t wind up at each other’s throats even without Institute manipulation.”

Nora nodded, “I know. But I also imagine that telling everyone what happened and why might well reduce the infighting. No one wants to be seen as a possible Institute stooge.”

Marcy got a nasty smile, “I hadn’t thought of that. You’re right. There’s something else. Bunker Hill has asked to join. Apparently they were attacked by everyone under the sun simultaneously, and are rethinking their isolationist stance.”

Nora smiled. “That would definitely bring Diamond City to the table eventually, and that would bring Goodneighbor. Hancock would never let McDonough get one up on him.”

Piper perked up, “Why would you invite McDonough to join? That’s just letting a synth on the Steering Committee.”

“Sweetie, we can’t actually prove that,” said Nora.

Piper turned, “We could! Find out Blue. Please?”

Nora shook her head, “Ok, Ok. I know when I’m beat.”

Preston walked in, “Beat about what?”

Piper turned, “She agreed to prove McDonough is a synth. You’re all my witnesses.”

Nora gave Piper an earnest look, “I’ll do it because you’re my wife, and you deserve to be able to say you were right, and that everything you and Nat suffered before I showed up was worth it. You don’t need witnesses.”

Piper leaned down and gave Nora a kiss on her forehead, “Yeah, Blue. But ‘witnesses’ was just way more dramatic.”

Preston was watching all this with a bemused look, which he lost when Marie kissed him and said, “Hello, my love. Please do not wear my patient out.”

He smiled at her and turned to Nora, “I’ll be efficient then. I just got done briefing Cait. Who wants to see you when she gets back, by the way. She’ll be taking your Pip-Boy to Zimonja and back. I assume it’s a cover story for why you left the Institute in a hurry and aren’t back while you heal?”

Nora nodded and he continued, “So we currently have three main garrison points and are installing a fourth. Red Rocket, Taffington, and The Castle you know about. Then there’s this place,” and he pointed at the map just outside Diamond City, on the Charles. “Hangman’s Alley. We can site a
battery of artillery covering the parts of downtown that can't be reached from Taffington or the Castle, and it's a perfect spot for patrols of downtown to the outskirts of South Boston.”

He continued, “We’re also co-locating a major garrison with the settlement at Egret Tours. Normally I wouldn’t put a garrison in a settlement, but places to site a garrison are thin on the ground the south, and it’s close enough to the damned Gunners that I want a sizable force of Regulars ready to go.”

He looked at Nora expectantly and she gestured for him to continue, “After Cait turned her crew her into ‘The Regulars’ I got to thinking about your ‘specialization’ idea. I’ve encouraged the garrison troops to see themselves as full time soldiers rather than part time Militia like the old Minutemen. We still have those of course, but the Regulars are our firefighters, first to react.”

Nora looked up at him, “I’m pretty proud of you for being more flexible. If the CPG is going to work, it needs a military that isn’t subject to the whims of single settlements. Even if that isn’t the ‘Classic’ Minutemen.”

He smiled and nodded, “And we’ve identified the Gunner equivalent to The Castle, here,” and he pointed at the map, south of Roxbury, “At the old Galaxy News Network building. So now we know where to watch.”

“How’s The Castle set up now?” Nora asked.

Preston said, “Very well defended. We have several batteries of artillery there, as well as those new missile turrets Preston came up with – we’ve put them at the point of every bastion for the largest field of fire. And there’s a number of machinegun turrets covering both approaches.”

Nora nodded, but said, “Don’t forget to cover the courtyard as well. The Institute can relay right into the center if they really wanted to.”

Preston nodded. “Will do General. Other than that, we have artillery batteries at most settlements, except for Warwick and Nordhagen.”

Nora thanked Preston just as Marie came up, “I believe that it is time for you to get up and walk a short distance, Nora. Piper, please stay close.”

The two nodded, and Nora carefully got out of bed. Piper peeked behind Nora. “Oooh, sexy.”

210 years after the Great War, hospital gowns were still open at the back for maximum humiliation.

At least Piper brought me panties. Thank god for that. ‘There goes the General, super-spy extraordinaire. And her bare ass.’

Nora slowly, but with growing confidence walked around the hospital. She even peeked out the door of the building. The weather was nice, but not “hospital gown, panties or no panties” nice.

Her ribs didn’t hurt at all and her leg barely twinged. There was still a pulling feeling in her left lower chest/upper abdomen as she walked. When she spoke to Marie about that, Marie nodded, “You have only been out of surgery 12 hours Nora, what do you expect?”

“Well I-“ Nora was interrupted by the Minuteman radio operator for Sanctuary.

The young soldier ran up to Marie, “Doc! You gotta get ready. Cait says she’s coming in with the General, and Cait says she got shot in the gut, bad.”
“Badly,” said Piper.
The Minuteman turned and nodded at them both, “Ma’am. General.”

And he turned back to Marie, for one second…

*He really should have had a mouthful of water. That would have just made it perfect.*

He turned back and gobbled at the pair of them. Nora smiled and slowly put a finger to her lips.

He gulped, nodded, and left.

Piper looked over at Nora, “Well Cait just saved our asses. Again.”

Marie looked confused.

Nora explained, “I didn’t think of it, probably because I’m high as a kite on Med-X, but Cait realized that this,” and she gestured to her chest, “Is likely going to scar, even if my ribs haven’t and my leg probably won’t.”

She continued, “And I may have been caught on camera or Justin might just get generically suspicious, so Cait just gave me a cover story in case he decides to be a dick and poke me, or demand to see if I have a scar.”

Piper nodded, “Now you have a reason to stay an extra day, recover that much more…”

Nora nodded. “Because Cait is just that good.”

“You betcher arse I am,” said Cait, standing in the doorway. She was smiling broadly, holding TWO Fat-Men. “And it’s good ta see ye up an’ about, Nora love. Even if you ARE a great stupid cow for gettin’ shot up like that.”

Nora smiled then asked, “How do you have two Fat-Men?”

“Oh. The lovely piece of Raider filth we ran into had a Fat-Man too. But he was careless about shootin’ before he had the knowing of where we really were, and he didn’t know I had one too. Well he did, but not for very bloody long.”

Nora smiled and then reached out and hugged her. “We missed you, Cait.”

“Well next time, find a better way of makin’ an excuse ta see me. You scared the pants off me, not that getting me pants off is all that much of an accomplishment,” said Cait.

Chapter End Notes

Another longish "state of the world" exposition chapter. Someday, I'll learn (have to learn) a better way of doing this.

In thinking about what a "stimpack" is, and in trying to write about its effect, the name factored in. It STIMulates something. Healing, i.e., cellular regrowth was one option, and generally perking up the injected person was the other. In the (VERY) old days of D&D your hit points were described as your store of energy and luck until you got
down to the original 1st level number. If Fallout HP were treated like that, then the
latter interpretation made sense. But every time you get hit, from the first to the last,
you bleed, etc. So it must be the former.

If so, they must use it concentrated and not injected during surgery, directly on injured
areas. Thus "topical cellular regeneration enhancers".

But it turns out that even without them, Marie could have done what she did. Some
time ago (back in the old days of the 20th century), if you injured a spleen a total
splenectomy (with the results and complications I've described) was the only option.
I've had it described as a twisty mess of blood vessels, and the damage likened to
driving a bulldozer through a very complicated refinery with pipes made entirely of
aluminum foil. But these days, using various surgical techniques, partial splenectomies
are possible, with results, again, as I've described.

So I spent a pleasant half hour peering at images of the human torso, plotting a route
through Nora's body that would be serious, but leave her able to recover (fairly)
quickly, all the moreso for having "topical cellular regeneration enhancers" available.

Finally, Hospital gowns have always been a practical joke on the patient. I see no
reason for that not to continue, even through a nuclear apocalypse and high tech
pharmaceuticals.
A day and a half later, with only a little discomfort left, Nora relayed back to the Institute.

_As long as there isn't specific footage of my shot up ass coming out of that storage room, or from inside my quarters, I should be OK. And I don’t think even at his most 'Father', Shaun would agree to let Justin Ayo peep on me._

Nevertheless, Nora moved through the Institute to her quarters on high alert, ready to bolt at any moment. When she got to her apartment, she found it completely clean, with a note on the table, “Ma’am. It’s a pleasure to see to the quarters of Father’s mother, [signed] Z1-14.”

Nora breathed a deep sigh of relief. Then she booted her terminal, and as she changed from surface to Institute clothing, typed, [Was there anything incriminating? How much should I worry? And any news from Liam?]

She decided to go beard Shaun in his office. She went out, up a flight and through the connector tube. Then back down from the Directorate Board room to Shaun’s place. He looked up when she entered, and smiled, “Mother. Good to see you. You are well, I trust.”

Nora shook her head, “Unfortunately, while I was on the surface with the Minutemen, I zigged when I should have zagged.”

Shaun looked confused. Nora smiled, “I took a nasty laser wound from a Raider. I spent yesterday recovering.”

Shaun said, “You should have relayed here, we would have seen to your needs.”

Nora shook her head. “I was unconscious for most of the trip back to Sanctuary. And our Doctor is very good.”

Shaun looked dubious, but said, “Sit. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

Nora looked at him and said, “Philosophy.”

Shaun’s brow furrowed, and he said, “How so?”

“I wanted to revisit the discussion we had on the roof. You said you released me as an experiment,” Nora said.

“Of sorts, I said. I also wanted us to have some measure of revenge on Kellogg.”

“Shaun. Do you have any idea how dangerous Kellogg really was?”

Shaun nodded, “Certainly.”

Nora went on, “Then you know that the overwhelming likelihood was that I would die facing him. It’s only because I had friends who were good shots with me that day, and a dog that didn’t care about Kellogg’s Stealth Boys, that I’m not dead. No Shaun, if you wanted revenge on Kellogg you were far more likely to achieve it by using your power as Director than a needlessly Byzantine plan involving me.”
Nora sat back, “Likewise, if you truly wanted me to join you in the Institute you should have been there as my pod opened, and relayed me right back here before I formed any attachments to the surface world.”

Shaun nodded, “Yes. Your family.”

“As it was,” Nora said, not rising to the bait, “You left me to wander the Commonwealth for 3 months, forming attachments that would, are, proving problematic to any plans involving me.”

Nora crossed her arms, “So why thaw me out?”

“I suppose I was really was curious how you’d turn out,” he said.

Nora nodded. She raised a finger and said, “And therefore the philosophical discussion. Have you heard of Immanuel Kant?”

He looked confused, “Vaguely. How do you know of him?”

Nora rolled her eyes, “I’m a lawyer Shaun. Do you think that lawyers are utterly defective with regard to morals and the examination thereof? We studied Mill and Kant, although I suspect you have more in common with Nietzsche.”

“How does that pertain to our current discussion?” Shaun asked.

“Does it occur to you, that perhaps you were little selfish in thawing me out?”

“Would you prefer to have remained frozen until a malfunction killed you?”

“Not really, but if you’re only now coming up with this argument, we can be sure it wasn’t the reason. How long were you director before you thawed me out?”

Shaun thought, “Twenty seven years.”

“And had the cryogenic stasis failed during any of those years, I would have died. No, saving me wasn’t your reason. You thawed me, when and only when, you learned you had cancer.”

“What you’re implying is not the case,” Shaun said.

“And here is where I tell you about Kant. Kant was worried about the difference between ‘right’ or moral, and that which is merely ‘good’, as in desirable to one person. And he did this through a mechanism he called the ‘Categorical Imperative’. Sort of a secular ‘Golden Rule’, but with wider applicability.”

“This is all well and good, mother, but…”

Nora interrupted, “I’m getting to the part where it pertains to you. The Categorical Imperative says “Act as though the maxim of your actions were to become a universal law.’ For example, if you feel that you were justified in releasing me to see what would happen, by the Categorical Imperative, if your actions were right, then I should be able to say to you, ‘I’m curious how every person here in the Institute would react in exactly my situation, so I am going to force all of them to abandon the Institute and flee to the surface. Let’s see what happens.’”

“Mother!!”

“I can see by your outraged expression that you would not be in favor of that, and so you yourself can see that your actions were not motivated a by a higher sense of ‘right’ but only that which is
'good’ for you,” and now Nora’s eyes burned into Shaun’s, “So what about dumping me on the surface and leaving me to wander was ‘good’ for you?”

“I wanted to know who you were! Really were!” he exclaimed, frustrated.

“Jesus, Shaun! It didn’t occur to you to just wake me up and talk to me?? You had to run me around like a lab rat? How fucked up were your caregivers that you even thought that was OK?” Nora asked.

“The research team was perfectly solicitous of my health and well-being,” Shaun replied.

Nora shook her head, “Well if that doesn’t say it all. They didn’t even appoint a couple to act as your parents? I know family isn’t a foreign concept down here, I’ve waved at the Filmores as they’ve had a meal. You didn’t have a family, you had ‘a team’.”

“I fail to see what this has to do with our discussion on the surface,” Shaun said.

“It has to do with it because if you’d been raised by parents instead of a committee, you’d know it’s unethical to experiment on people,” Nora said.

“All of our experiments have to pass rigorous review,” Shaun said.

“Ok. This is getting us nowhere fast. Let’s table it. I’m famished. Want to go and get some of what passes for food around here?” Nora asked.

“I’m afraid I have too much to do at the moment,” Shaun replied.

Nora shook her head slightly and turned to leave when Shaun said, “But I’d love to another time, mother.”

Nora turned and nodded, then left.

*What a god damned dumpster fire. He was testing me. He got old, found out he was going to die, and decided to find out who or what he came from.*

*Then I did the utterly unexpected and not only won against Kellogg, but found a way in. But be honest with yourself. He didn’t expect you to survive Kellogg. That old bald rat bastard was right. That fight in Ft. Hagen was supposed to tie up loose ends. Just not the ones Kellogg thought.*

*Everything since then has been Shaun opportunistically winging it. He may want me as Director now…but that was NOT the original plan.*

Having reached that grim conclusion, Nora headed for the Directorate boardroom. Shaun had given her carte blanche with the “and more besides” comment. And Nora had the Code Defender privileges. In the unlikely event that some kind of remote access was traced having it come here, to this room, would definitely muddy the waters.

She sat down at the terminal, and using her Code Defender privileges, began breaking into the most secure ‘figurative vaults’ in the Institute. She felt crippled by an inability to swear sulfurously. Normally a hacking job on security this tight would…HAD…caused Cait to turn green with envy at Nora’s swearing. It was almost like hacking with one hand tied behind her back.

Eventually, even without the ability to swear, Nora penetrated the system. She made a beeline for SRB records. There were two reasons. First, that was where the really good info would live, but second, if there were going to be problem, it would show here, and she could run for it.
Starting with McDonough, for her wife’s benefit, she found an entry from Alana Secord.

[I'm starting to wonder if M7-62 (the Infiltrator unit "McDonough") hasn't begun to outlive its usefulness. Assuming the identity of Diamond City's mayor has provided us with invaluable intelligence over the years, but suspicions have only continued to mount. This latest incident - the publication of that newspaper article specifically calling McDonough's humanity into question - might just be the tipping point.]

[I've spoken with Ayo, and we both agree - if the situation does become untenable, reclamation seems unfeasible. M7-62 was specifically engineered to mimic the actual human McDonough. As such, the unit's synthetic biology is that of someone overweight and grossly out of shape. A mem wipe would kill any psychological weaknesses attributed to self-perceived old age, but that body? Lost cause.]

[The real irony here is that M7-62, in one of its dispatches back to the Institute, requested a future posting in the Coursers, citing loyalty and years of surface. And that request alone was evidence of enough self-awareness and independence to completely eliminate him from contention. Never mind the fact that he wouldn't even fit into the uniform.]

[ Determination: When and if M7-62's identity is eventually compromised, the unit is effectively decommissioned in-field. No reclamation. No Institute assistance. Given its relative age and physical condition (not to mention the danger inherent in an Infiltrator unit's discovery), further lifespan estimated at two weeks maximum.]

Nora laughed to herself.

Well if that isn’t the ultimate payoff for Piper. Yes, McDonough is a synth. You were right on literally every count. What’s more, the Institute has no intention of ever pulling him out. More like letting him die in place.

So what else does that prick Ayo have to tell me?

[The following individuals have proven useful in our reclamation operations. In exchange for caps, these persons have in the past provided information on escaped synth sightings and suspected Railroad activity. If you make a new contact, add the individual to the database.]

- Director Ayo

==INFORMANT LIST==

CRICKET
Occupation: Caravaner
Location: Mobile

TOMMY LONEGAN
Occupation: Owner/Proprietor, Combat Zone
Location: Combat Zone

TRASHCAN CARLA
Occupation: Caravaner
Location: Mobile

DOC WEATHERS
Occupation: Caravaner
Location: Mobile
So the caravaners, plus AJ, Henry Cooke, and Tommy Lonegan. And won’t Cait be thrilled.

Nora quickly downloaded the SRB data. There was some stuff for Robotics and Advanced Systems, but nothing Nora didn’t already know. And Father’s terminal was still off limits.

**Interesting. He has an extra layer of security. What are you worried about, Shaun?**

Nora logged off and went back to her terminal. Where she found a message from Z1. [All I had to do in your quarters was restock some gauze. You were unusually careful. In addition, Liam has the terminal working. When the time is right we have someone who can use it.]

She sent back, [Very good. Standby. Whenever the institute is struck by surface attackers, if it is, rise up. I am still trying to find a peaceful solution but if it fails, and you’ll know if it does, standby to strike. Can you do that? Do I need to pull you out?]

She napped, until the terminal pinged. [I understand. Do your best, but we stand ready.]

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand THERE'S the Monty Python reference. From the "Bruce Song".

And as a result of all the philosophizing about morality (Kant and the Categorical Imperative and the implied look at Mills' Utilitarianism..."Right is the greatest good for the greatest number"...and the Neitzsche dis...richly deserved IMO) the central nature of Nora/Shaun's relationship comes into better focus.
When Nora went to sleep that night she half expected to end up running for it when she woke up. Instead, she went to breakfast, where she was joined by Allie, Nathan, and Quentin.

Nora stood as they approached and Allie smiled as they sat across from her. Allie introduced Nora to her husband and to her son.

Quentin looked at Nora and looked confused, “You’re Father’s mother? How come he’s so old and you’re so young?”

Allie tried to shush him, but Nora just smiled and said, “We were both in cryogenic stasis. He was a little baby when we went in but he was taken out 60 years ago and I was only taken out last year. If you count the time in the pods, he’s 210 years old and I’m 237.”

Quentin looked impressed. “You look real good for a 237 year old lady!”

Allie said, “Quentin!” but Nora just laid her hand on Allie’s arm.

“He’s right. I do look pretty good for a woman my age, don’t you think,” then Nora winked at Quentin.

Nathan had been watching with a fond smile, but he chuckled at Nora’s line.

“So how are you doing?” he asked.

“Well, it’s all been a bit overwhelming. Keep in mind that until a few weeks ago, I thought my baby had been kidnapped. And now I’m here, and my son has named me his successor,” and she looked at the two of them carefully.

Allie looked thoughtful. “You know at first I thought he was making a horrible mistake. No offense,” she said to Nora.

“None taken,” said Nora.

“But I’m starting to rethink that, and not just because you saved my life twice on the surface,” said Allie. “Maybe it’s time we tried something different and put a lawyer in charge. Sometimes I think we all get caught up in our pet projects. We could probably use an ethical perspective.”

Nora laughed, “What a refreshing difference! In my time, everyone wanted the lawyers to step aside and let professionals and people like scientists govern.”

Allie looked confused. Nora nodded, “Back in my day the government was wall to wall lawyers and everyone thought other people should be in charge. Here, the ‘government’ is wall to wall scientists, and you think maybe lawyers should be in charge.”

Nora smiled, “I’m beginning to think people are just malcontents.”

Nathan and Allie laughed at that, while Quentin said, “What’s a malcontent?”

Nora smiled at him gently and said, “So let’s take the word apart, sweetie. ‘Content’ is a word you
know, right?”

Quentin nodded. “It means happy or satisfied.”

Nora went on, while Allie and Nathan looked on, fascinated, “So can you guess what ‘mal-’ might mean?”

Quentin shook his head, and Nathan looked like he was about to say something, but Nora, smiling, held up her hand.

“So now we can take clues from context,” Nora said. “When I said ‘I think people are just malcontents,’ did that sound like a good thing or a bad thing?”

Quentin thought for a second then he got an ‘ah ha’ expression on his face, “A bad thing. So ‘mal-’ is probably bad. And ‘malcontents’ are badly contented…they’re not satisfied.”

Nora nodded with a wide smile.

Allie smiled at Nora gratefully, “Are you sure you want to be Director? Because Quentin could use a 5th grade teacher like you.”

Nora chuckled, but Allie said, “Now I’m really starting to get why Father chose you. If you can get Quentin to pay attention to this kind of thing, maybe you can eventually get Justin Ayo to play nice with the other children.”

Nora smirked, “I’m a lawyer, not a miracle worker, Allie.”

Allie snickered than turned serious, “I meant it. I’m starting to think this isn’t crazy. But then that makes me wonder.”

Nora nodded, “If there are other things I’m not crazy about?”

“Maybe,” said Allie.

“Well then, let me start a smoke-filled room conversation with a fellow Directorate member,” Nora said.

“Smoke filled-room?” Allie asked.

“Figurative, named for the cigars politicians were supposed to smoke while making closed door deals.”

Allie smiled and nodded.

“So,” Nora started, “You know, obviously, that I lived for quite some time on the surface, after I left the Vault, and yet I am not some kind of spittle dripping serial killer.”

Allie said, “Hey! I never said you were.”

“Exaggerating for effect, sorry,” said Nora, “Anyway. I’ve seen how they really live up there. Some of them have harder lives and some easier, but in the main, they live just like people down here. They raise families, they make a living, scientists do research but with fewer facilities, they grow crops, they trade with others, and they build a life.”

“But?” Allie said.
“I won’t lie. The surface is dangerous sometimes. Too many people have decided that ‘nature red of tooth and claw’ must rule. And they act that way.” Nora said. “And sometimes it’s hard for the good people to fend off the bad people, just because the bad people are quicker to violence.”

“You’re not selling me, you know,” said Allie, as Nathan nodded. Quentin had long ago run off to play before school.

“I’m being painfully honest Allie. That way you can’t possibly say I misled you when something bad happens. Because I guarantee that no matter what the Directorate decides, bad things are going to happen.”

Allie nodded and Nora continued. “But the main problem is that good people are too fragmented and the bad people take advantage of that. But if I had my way…”

Allie nodded, and Nora finished in a rush, “The Institute would work with the surface, not try to control it, and the synths would help people up there, not knock them out of the way to grab stuff you need down here.”

Allie looked at Nora. “We tried working with them. It failed.”

Nora shook her head. “No, Allie. I’ve seen the records. The Institute tried to CONTROL people on the surface. And it was, no offense, incredibly ham-handed in the way it went about it.”

“What do you mean?” Allie asked.

“The Institute tried to set itself up to be in control, by making sure that the surface settlements didn’t cooperate. It set them up to be in competition. What it should have done, instead, was convince the rest of the CPG that it had something to offer…help. Scientific help. Nutritional supplements. This really fucking great coffee. And synth protectors,” Nora finished.

Nora looked Allie in the eye sincerely, “You want security? Make yourself way more valuable as a partner than you are threatening as an enemy. If this reactor will last for you forever, what do you think it would do, hooked to a general power grid, along with the power plant in Diamond City, and others around the Commonwealth?”

Allie shook her head, “You’d have hard time on that last point.”

Nora said, “Fine! But imagine if people on the surface greeted synths or even Coursers as protectors. Think what that would look like. Think what kind of goodwill the Institute could generate with reliable vitamin shipments up top.”

Nora looked Allie in the eye, “Allie, there’s five of us on the Directorate, or will be. If you and I agree, all we need is one more, and all that could be a reality.”

Allie nodded, “Well you’ve really given me something to think about. And it’s not crazy, Nora. I’m not sure you’re right, but I can say I’m also not sure what we’ve been doing is working either.”

Nora stood up and said, “That’s all I ask for Allie. A shot to convince you.”

As she finished her food paste and coffee…

*Uggg. Why can’t I have a decent bagel or sweetroll? No, this coffee has to go with that utter crap…*

…a synth came over. “Father would like to see you.”
Nora shrugged and went to see Shaun. She was pretty certain that her life and spleen endangering extra-curricular activities had remained concealed.

When she arrived Dean Volkert was doing a check-up on Shaun.

*I will never think of that man as a Doctor. Not after the torture I saw. That he doesn’t understand that is not my problem…*

Dean was saying, “Any additional pain or tenderness?”

Shaun sounded exasperated, “No, doctor. I’m taking all my little pills.”

Nora cleared her throat as she entered, and Shaun turned to Dean and said, “Thank you doctor, I think that will be all for now.”

Dean took a look at Nora and gave up, and left.

Nora sat down across from Shaun, “Admit it. You just sent for me because Dean was getting on your last nerve.”

Shaun actually laughed at that. Nora hadn’t been certain he hadn’t had his sense of humor removed.

He said, smiling, “No, this is a different matter, although now that I know I can call on you for that as well…”

Nora smiled back, “Then to what do I owe the pleasure?”

He said, “I’m afraid we’ve had a situation develop on the surface. This situation, I’m afraid, is something of your creation, however unintentional.”

Nora looked up sharply, and he raised a hand, “While you were assisting Dr. Filmore, a second team was sent out to... invite someone from the Commonwealth to join the Institute. Apparently there was some miscommunication, and this individual called for help, which arrived in the form of your Minutemen. My understanding is that no shots have been fired. I would like it to stay that way.”

He looked at Nora and he seemed sincere, “I need you to go there, and speak to your Minutemen gathered outside. Insist that they stand down at once.”

Nora said, “Well, whether I can ‘insist’ is going to depend on who got sent. But go on.”

Shaun nodded, “Dr. Thompson is on site, and he will be your primary contact. I know you can resolve this situation, but it is of paramount importance that this special individual be brought to the Institute immediately.”

Nora raised an eyebrow. “Why all this effort? What's so special about this person?”

*And if you’re bringing in more ‘contaminated degenerates’ why can’t I bring my wife and daughter?*

Shaun said, “Mr. Wallace? Despite a lack of formal training, our surveillance has shown he has an incredible intellect. With his help, we may be able to drastically speed up work on the reactor.”

He stood up, and asked, “Please. Bring him here safely, and find a way to resolve this peacefully.”
Nora nodded, “I will.”

She stood up and left and went directly to the relay room and entered the coordinates for Wallace’s house. When she materialized she saw Cait, and several regulars just downslope from a partly ruined structure, but that still showed signs of habitation.

Well, this just got easy.

Nora walked up and even before she arrived she said, just loud enough for Cait to hear, “Don’t smile. They could be watching.”

Cait barely nodded, then snapped off a salute. Nora made sure she was standing so no one in the house could see Cait’s lips and said, “The guy in there is someone the Institute wants because he’s some kind of reactor design genius.”

Cait, said, “And I’m guessin’ you’d not be wantin’ the batch inside to think we’re lettin’ ye off too easy?”

Nora smiled, “Exactly,” and she gestured.

Cait pointed up at the house and spread her arms wide and said, “How’s the missus and the wee lass?”

Nora pointed back at the house then in Cait’s face, “Great. Nat misses you, you know. When can you come by for dinner?”

Cait shook her head hard, and pointed at the ground, “So long as it’s yourself cookin’ I’m there. When you were crawlin’ up yer own bunghole, last time, Piper cooked. Never again.”

Nora smiled, but pointed down the road, rather emphatically, “Fair enough. Hey, isn’t that way the Water Treatment Plant?”

Cait thought for a second and nodded, “What ye got in mind, Nora?”

Nora drew a shapeless diagram on the ground with her boot, “Those loonie bots up the slope asked me to take care of the water from there, a couple three months ago. Never got round to it. Want to take the Regular’s out for an exercise? Maybe we can add a robot farm to the CPG.”

Cait stood back and gave Nora the finger, and said, “Sounds lovely. I can play with me artillery again. Kisses fer you and the missus and hugs fer Nat,” and she was sporting a grin for a second before she made it a scowl. The rest of her crew had just watched their bosses’ antics with poker faces but as they turned Nora could make out a couple smirks.

Nora put on her own grim face and turned back to the building, and walked up the hill and stepped inside. There were a pair of synths and Enrico Thompson, in another Containment Suit.

He looked at Nora, “Oh, thank god you're here. I was starting to worry we might not make it out of this mess.”

Nora looked at him, “How exactly did this happen?”

Thompson shrugged, “I'm not suited for field work. I've said that over and over... and they sent me anyway. There was no indication that Wallace had been in contact with anyone, or was aware that we might be watching him. If I'd known, I'd... I don't know, maybe I'd have tried to handle things differently. I know he's potentially important to Phase Three and all, but I'm not sure it's worth
putting ourselves in harm's way…”

Nora shook her head, “What does this Wallace guy have to do with Phase Three?”

Thompson said, “Wallace is... well, brilliant by all accounts. Like nothing we'd seen in the Commonwealth prior. He truly has a gift when it comes to theoretical physics. He'd be an asset to the Institute, specifically in getting the reactor running. With his help, we could accelerate the timetable immensely. There's just... well, there's a slight problem with that. He doesn't want to go with us. I was thinking... Maybe you could try and talk to him.”

Nora sighed, “Any advice on how to talk to him?”

Thompson shrugged, “Don't make him angry. Let him know we're not going to hurt him... In fact, his life would improve considerably.”

Nora walked over to the locked door, and knocked. “Dr. Wallace?”

She heard from inside, “You're another one of... of them, aren't you? Are you a robot?”

Nora shook her head, “Sir, are you okay? Have you been injured in any way?”

The voice inside turned petulant. “I'm locked in a bathroom to avoid killer robots... Of course I'm not okay!”

Nora tried the direct approach, “Dr. Wallace, would you be willing to help the Institute?”

Now he sounded more confused than scared. Progress. “Help... the Institute? But... aren't they... you... I mean, the bad guys?”

Thompson walked over and said, “The Institute has an engineering problem that your scientific expertise could help solve.”

Nora added, “Think about your future, Wallace. This is a way to secure it.”

They heard, from the other side, “I suppose that's... one way to look at it. Okay, fine. I'll go.”

Thompson turned to Nora, “Okay, I think we've got this under control now. Thanks... I mean, thanks for the assist.”

Nora said, “Hey, I'm here to help. You're welcome. But…”

Thompson said, “Yes?”

“What is I hadn’t been able to talk him out? What then?”

*Was this ever a choice for Wallace?*

Thompson took a step back to where he was standing when Nora walked in. “The inside of that room is 5.4 feet on a heading of 192 degrees magnetic.”

Nora nodded. “Got it.”

Chapter End Notes
I had inordinate fun writing that scene with Nora and Cait.

Also, a commenter once asked if Nora is "faking" wanting to bring her wife and daughter down, or just checking as another piece of data about how the Institute thinks. And of course it's the latter. Possibly, Piper has made her enough of a Diamond City Girl, but, really, I hope you all understand her character enough to get that she'd NEVER live somewhere that thought food "supplements" were a good idea...

And since Nora was born on New Year's Eve, the same as my daughter, she's now 27 subjective and 237 actual years old.
When Nora got back to the Institute, there was an email to her from Dr. Ormon. [Director. Your special synth is ready for pickup. Advanced Systems.]

She emailed, [I’ll be by to pick him up in about an hour.]

Then she went to visit Shaun, who smiled as she walked into his office, “Ah, there you are. I cannot express how pleased I am. Our new guest is familiarizing himself with his surroundings, yet he’s already pointed out several inefficiencies in our methods. With his help, Phase Three will be ready in no time. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“I’m glad, but Shaun, do you mind if I ask a question?”

Shaun nodded, “Go ahead, Mother.”

“When I spoke with Enrico, he left me with the impression that Dr. Wallace wasn’t going to be given an option,” observed Nora, “Is that true?”

“In the event, force was not needed. You did an admirable job of convincing him,” said Shaun.

“That’s not the point, Shaun. What would have happened?” Nora asked.

“Phase Three is very important to the future of the Institute,” said Shaun.

Nora sighed, “And thus, in your eyes, the future of humanity.”

Shaun raised a finger, “Objectively critical to the future of humanity.”

“Shaun, listen to me. The surface is not a lost cause. It’s not an easy cause, but writing off most of humanity because it’s easier to hide down here isn’t the answer. You know that,” she said.

He shook his head, “We keep going over the same ground over and over, mother. My mind is made up.”

“What if I got a majority of the Directorate to agree? Three including me? What would you say then?” Nora pressed.

Shaun sighed, “If you manage to get two more Directorate members to join you in this utter folly? I’d at least have to study the feasibility.”

Nora looked skeptical. “No offense, but exactly how objective would this feasibility study be?”

Shaun looked scandalized, “Mother! I would never falsify data.”

“Nor set your initial conditions too stringently? Set the conditions for accepting the proposition unreasonably high? There’s more than one way to lie with data Shaun.”

Shaun still looked as if she suggested he ate babies. “You and I can agree on success and failure conditions before the study starts and each name one researcher out of three total.”
Nora countered, “Which gives you two picks, Shaun.”

He shook his head, “No, one appointed by the Directorate by a four fifths vote.”

Nora nodded. “Done.”

“You drive a hard bargain, mother,” Shaun said.

“You have no idea,” Nora smiled.

He smiled as well, and Nora, sensing her dismissal, left, and headed for Advanced Systems.

When she arrived Dr. Ormon was waiting. She smiled, “You know, Director, that was a lot of fun. Not just making the synth, but hitting very specific targets without a specific DNA blueprint. Fascinating. He’s through here,” and she gestured at the door to Li’s office.

Nora froze. “Synth Shaun is in there, yes?”

Dr. Ormon looked confused for a second. “Oh! S9-23! Yes, he’s in there.”

Nora shook her head, “Rosalind, I…really do not want to see him. It’s too…”

Dr. Ormon looked confused, but said, “OK. I’ll bring out F4-78. Wait here.” And she went in.

Way to go Nora. Chicken out a second time.

I can’t. It’s too much a reminder. What I…we both lost.

Dr. Ormon wheeled out a synth in a chair. He had a nutrition drip in, and was dressed in a hospital gown.

He looks…familiar. And the hospital gowns here are just as awful as everywhere else. God, who does he look like? This is going to bug me now.

The pair of them wheeled the synth into the elevator and took him to the relay room. Shortly, Nora was in Sanctuary with F4-78. She wheeled the synth down to Dr. Curie’s Hospital.

When she brought him into the main room, Marie took one look at the synth and said, “Why did you decide to make him look like Humphrey Bogart?”

Oh my god! THAT’S who he reminds me of. Jesus, he’s the spitting image of Bogie.

Nora looked at Marie, “Honestly, we just followed the template. I didn’t realize how much he looks like Bogart until you said something. But you’re right.”

“At any rate, we need to put him the long term care beds,” said Marie.

Nora nodded and helped Marie get the synth into position, and then Marie checked his vitals.

They were interrupted by Madison Li, who came in and looked over the synth with a critical eye. She looked up at Nora, “You got Rosalind Ormon to do this, didn’t you?”

Nora nodded. “How’d you know? And how are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Your babysitter really made an impression on the Brotherhood though. When he pulled me out, he put a corpse in my place, and set the whole thing on fire. Made a great distraction, and
I’m not sure the Brotherhood knows I’m not dead yet. And to answer your first question, because only Dr. Ormon is even close to as good as I am. She did well with this one.”

“So he’s set?”

Marie and Madison both looked at Nora, and Madison said, “That depends on what you need him to be set for.”

“Marie would know,” Nora said nodding at Dr. Curie.

Marie nodded her affirmation. Madison raised an eyebrow, but Nora interrupted, “Have you given any thoughts to what you want to do now?”

Madison looked a bit sour, “First, I want to remain free of the Institute and the Brotherhood. They’re going to have to be dealt with.”

Nora sighed. “I know. Are you aware Father appointed me his successor?”

“No! Hmmm.” Madison looked thoughtful.

“If you’re thinking that you might get back when I’m in charge? If you want. But I’m trying exceptionally hard to get the damned Institute to join the world.”

Madison looked at Nora, “How so?”

“Well, in a perfect world they’d come out of that hole in the ground. On the other hand, if they made the relay available to everyone…” Nora trailed off.

“You have any idea how much energy demand spikes when you use that? We’d need the reactor online,” Madison said.

“I’m already working on Phase Three,” Nora interrupted.

“How close are you?” Madison asked.

“I think pretty close, based on the way everyone is acting,” Nora said, “I’m a spy not an engineer.”

“If you get the reactor running, you could probably figure on virtually unlimited relays. If you linked the Institute with above ground power sources…” Madison started.

“Or even used Institute skill to add surface power plants…” Nora added.

“You could just leave them down there, and add the Institute Reactor to the Commonwealth Grid…” Madison continued.

“And the CPG would a beacon for freedom loving people all over New England,” finished Preston.

“When did you get here?” Nora asked.

“It’s my standing lunch with Marie, but you two were winding each other up so much, I had to finish it for you,” he said, smiling.

“Nora,” said Madison. “What have you gotten Father to agree to?”

Nora shook her head. “If I can get two more Directorate Members to agree that the Institute should help the Commonwealth, he agreed to commission a feasibility study.”
Madison sighed, “Feasibility studies can be real or shams.”

“I was also a lawyer, Madison, and I got him to agree that he and I would have to mutually agree on failure or success criteria, and I get to name one commission member, he gets to name one, and one gets named by a four fifths vote of the Directorate itself.”

Madison looked impressed. “And who were you going to name?”

“Isaac Karlin.”

“Why?”

“He’s sympathetic to surface people, and I figure he’s reliable,” Nora said.

Madison looked confused. “Not Rosalind Ormon?”

Nora smiled, “No. I figured I propose Rosalind for the Directorate’s choice. She’s sharp as a tack, but she’s also open minded, and I may well be able to influence her.”

Madison looked impressed. “You’re trying to get two commission members by leaving the obvious choice to the Directorate?”

Nora sported a feral grin as she nodded.

Madison’s grin was a mirror of Nora’s. “Then maybe you know that it takes forever to appoint a new division head, yes? Look at how long Justin has been ACTING director of the SRB. Zimmerman has been out for more than a damn decade.”

Nora nodded. Madison continued, “So if I ever went back, guess who would be instantly one of two additional votes you need?”

Nora’s jaw dropped. Madison’s grin threatened her earlobes as she nodded. She said, “Who are you working on?”

“Allie Filmore. I was figuring on Clayton Holdren, just based on the fact that he’s a horrible brownnoser, as the second, but I suspect you’re a way more reliable vote.”

Madison laughed, “Well that was succinctly accurate. Keep working on him. You may need him as a fourth to get Rosalind, but I agree that Allie is more viable target. She’s already primed to think of the surface as an asset. Clayton just goes whichever way the wind shifts.”

“Madison. We might really be able to do this,” Nora said.

Madison nodded. “Yes. Based on you being director, and everything that’s going on? It’s really possible, Nora.”

Nora looked thoughtful. “Under those circumstances, maybe I can get Maxson to back off and return to the Capitol Wasteland.”

Madison shook her head. “No way. He’ll force the issue. You need to have a way to counter him.”

“I’m hoping to impress on him the difficulty in opposing the Minutemen, the Institute, and the Railroad together,” Nora said, then looked out a window at the artillery battery in Sanctuary with a significant look.

Madison looked out at the three heavy mortars with a thoughtful look. “It might be better for him
to just leave. Pity I don’t think he’s smart enough to do it.”

Chapter End Notes

The next couple are WAY off Canon (but Canon Plausible) for obvious reasons. Also necessary for, I hope, equally obvious reasons.
Nora relayed through the Institute to Diamond City. Piper was working on one of a series of articles about the old CPG. The idea being that the more the Commonwealth knew why and how the original CPG came apart, the less likely the second one would.

Nora smiled on seeing her wife. Piper looked over at the sound of Nora teleporting in, and smiled herself. She moved, liquidly, as she stretched in ways that Nora never got over. She was not only head over heels in love with her wife but just the thought of Piper’s curves, or the sound of her voice, turned Nora on.

*What a shame, I love her and want to sleep with her. And she feels the same. The horror.*

As Piper stood up, Nora’s heart thumped. She slipped into Piper’s arms and kissed her tenderly. “How’s work in the salt mines going, Thing?”

Piper pulled her face back and said thoughtfully, “Actually? Not too bad. With the stuff you found, and the other historical records we’ve got I can pretty much second source everything you found in the Institute.”

Nora gave Piper a loving smile. Piper looked at Nora, “What’s gotten into you, Blue?”

Nora shook her head, “Honestly? I think this is the first time in weeks where I’m not mourning Shaun. I just had a chat with Madison and there’s a real chance I can get the Institute to work with the Commonwealth.”

Piper stepped back as she looked at Nora in shock. “You mean that?”

Nora nodded. “Piper I am this,” she held her fingers millimeters apart, “far from making it happen. I have Madison ready to swoop in the second I convince Allie. Shaun is primed to commission a group. I have the group figured out so I should have two of three votes. We’re that close.”

“And McDonough?” Piper asked.

Nora nodded, “I have proof. Synth.”

“Yes!!” Piper said. “So now what?”

“Now I see what I can do to make the MOST intransigent problem in the Commonwealth work out.”

“Hmmm. What’s that?” Piper asked.

“Nick and Ellie.”

“OK, I’ll give you that one,” Piper said.

Nora nodded, “And keep the McDonough thing under wraps until I’m formally director.”

Piper pouted. “Really?”
“Well, if you want to walk by and quietly say, ‘I know,’ just to mess with him…”

“Deal!”

“OK. Need to talk to Nick, but I suggest you think about ways to ravish me tonight, I plan to spend the night. I have almost everything the way I want it, so I figure a brief vacation to have sex with my wife is permissible.”

Piper blushed, but said, “That’s a deal, Blue!”

Nora smiled as she left the house and headed across the market and around into the alleys leading to Valentine’s Detective Agency. When she arrived, she squared her shoulders and walked in.

Ellie was in her usual spot at the front, and Nick at a desk in the back. Nora winked at Ellie and went over to Nick, resting one hip on the corner of his desk. She crossed her arms and looked down at him.

He looked up at her, “You seem satisfied with yourself.”

“Nick, if I told you all the ways it was coming up Nora, we’d be here for a week. I am insufferably pleased with myself.”

“So why visit an old broken down private eye?” Nick asked.

“Walk with me?” Nora replied.

Nick nodded. The two of them walked out and began walking at random. “Nick,” Nora started, “I know you think of yourself as Nick, version TWO, where I think of you as NICK, version two. Right?”

“I suppose that is probably the fairest way to describe our differences, yes.”

Nora stopped and looked at Nick, “What if I told I have a way for you to be Nick, Version THREE?”

“What?!!?”

Nora nodded. “There’s a Generation Three synth in Sanctuary that I have in mind.”

“Nora. Are you nuts? I won’t accept a dead synth for me to have a new body.”

Nora looked down and scuffed her boot into the ground, and then looked up, “Yeah. That’s the kicker. This synth was never alive. I kinda took advantage of being the ‘Director in Training’, and commissioned a special synth.”

Nick looked at her in shock. Nora nodded, “Yeah. So I kinda modeled it on you, the mechanical you, since all we have are current Nick images. But he’s fully human. And we could put you right into the body. He was, for better or worse, made for you.”

Nick just stared.

Nora shook her head, “I’ve been saying you’re the ‘real’ Nick, and you’ve been insisting that Nick, Version Two is too different, being a metal man and all. Fine! I say settle the fucking argument by going to Nick, Version Three.”

Nora looked at Nick, “So it won’t matter. We can just keep arguing first causes and philosophical
principles, but in the end you’ll be a human. Don’t you want to be human again Nick?”

“I won’t be human.”

“Ok, slightly better than merely human. Only so much I can fucking do, Nick. It’d give you an edge. Think, damnit, how much could you do, with the equivalent of a Courser body, and all your knowledge and skills? Nicky! Work with me.”

“Ok, Nora, say I buy into this, how long until we’re ready?”

“Today. You can walk to Goodneighbor and Amari, and I can meet you with the…new you.”

“Are you rushing me?”

“Maybe…”

Nick shook his head. Nora pressed. “We can reconcile our bullshit freshmen philosophy distinctions. Whether the result is NICK, Version Three, or Nick, Version THREE, we’d be on equal footing.”

“But if I see myself as the same person afterwards…”

“Then, Nick, you’ve conceded my fucking point.”

Nick sighed. “Fine. I’ll meet you there.”

Nora smiled and relayed to Sanctuary before Nick had a chance to even say “goodbye”. She ran down to Marie. “I think we’ve got him ready.”

“Detective Valentine?” Marie asked.

Nora nodded, “But we’re not waiting. You want to see him, bring yourself and Preston down to Diamond City tomorrow. I’m not letting him think about this one second more than I need to.”

And with that, Marie put “Bogie” in a wheelchair, and Nora relayed, via Institute, to Goodneighbor. She wheeled him through the gate, down the alley and around the corner to the Memory Den. When she wheeled F4-78 through the door to the Memory Den, she immediately started calling Dr. Amari.

Irma met her near the entrance.

“Who’s tall, dark, and comatose here? He’s awful handsome for a vegetable,” Irma said.

Nora smirked, “Help me get him down to Dr. Amari’s lab, and I’ll tell all.”

Irma nodded, “Deal. Amari is already down there, or she would’ve heard you come in.”

The pair of them carefully bumped the wheelchair down the stairs and into Dr. Amari’s lab. Amari took one look and said, “Don’t tell me. You have another robot.”

Nora shook her head. Irma looked at Nora, “What is going on here? You promised to spill, so spill, sweetheart.”

Nora gestured at F7. “Ladies, I give you the once and future Detective Nicholas Valentine.”

Irma’s jaw dropped, while Amari looked thoughtful.
It was Amari who spoke first. “So you want me to do the same thing for Detective Valentine as we did for your friend, Curie?”

“Marie, but yes.”

Amari’s eyebrows went up, “So she’s Dr. Marie Curie. Very apropos. But getting back the matter at hand…”

Irma interrupted, “You mean to get Nick into this body? Because then I might have plans for it…”

Nora playfully slapped Irma’s hand, “Back off lady. I already have plans for this one.”

Irma said, “You’re already mar-… Oh! Oh, my!”

She looked at Nora and said, “Honey, anything you need, ANYTHING…just ask. I will be there to help.”

Nora looked at Irma and smirked, “I’ll be sure to whistle.”

“Why are you smiling like that?” Amari asked. Irma nodded in agreement with the doctor.

“Long story. A gag only a few people around here would get. One of them being Nick himself,” Nora replied.

Amari said, “This will be considerably easier. First, Nick was already human once. His memories and reflexes were transferred pretty much intact to his current body. And many of his synthetic subsystems are already optimized for a humanoid shape. I should be able to transfer him as soon as he gets here as long as we prep this synth.”

Nora nodded, “That’s what I was hoping to hear. I don’t want Nick to be able to come up with 8 million reasons why we can’t do this. He’s walking over from Diamond City. Should be here soon.”

They got F7 situated in one lounger and then the three of them waited about 20 minutes upstairs, chatting and generally catching up. Just before Nora started thinking about sending out a search party to find a synth with cold feet, Nick and Piper walked into the Memory Den.

“Piper! I should have thought to have you escort Nick,” Nora said.

Piper smiled and said, “He actually came to see me. Started the conversation with, ‘Do you know what your crazy wife is up to?’ I’ve spent the last hour batting down all the objections.”

Nick shook his head. “This still feels like suicide.”

Nora opened her mouth, but Dr. Amari stepped in and said, “Let me. Detective. I can tell you that the transfer is comprehensive. At no point are there TWO Nicks. You will be in this body,” and she pointed at Nick, “and then I will transfer you, all of you, to that body,” and she gestured downstairs.

“You will be here and then you will be there,” she said. “Not a suicide. A transfer.”

“Well, and this is going to sound petty, but I’m always had a hankering to try Takahashi’s noodles. There are things I miss about having a body,” said Nick.

Piper smiled, “And as I keep pointing out,” and here she literally poked her finger into one of the gaps in Nick’s neck, “You’re getting a little beat up.”
Nick swatted Piper’s hand away. “Ok, already. Let’s go see my future body.”

Nora smiled to herself. It was a win that he even formulated the statement that way.

When they got around the corner, Nick looked at F7 and said, “You’re kidding me, right?”

Piper just looked at it and said, “What’s the problem Nick? You’re kinda handsome, if you go for that kind of thing. And it does look a bit like you, if you humanized your current body.”

Nick simply said, “You think my current artificial body looks a bit like Humphrey Bogart?”

“Well, yeah, the shape of the mouth, the lines around your face, your eyebrows. He does have a lot more hair, and brown rather than yellow eyes. But yeah, he looks a lot like you. Who’s Humphrey Bogart?” Piper asked.

Nora said, “He was a famous movie star about 350 years ago…the 1930s to 50s.”

“Huh. Who knew Nick was such a dreamboat?” Piper said.

Nora raised an eyebrow at her wife. Piper thought for a second, then blushed.

“Ok,” said Nick. “As ridiculous as this has gotten, those noodles aren’t going to eat themselves.”

“And,” he added under his breath, “I might chicken out otherwise.”

Dr. Amari had him sit in the memory lounger he’d used for Kellogg’s memory dig, and as he settled in, he kept repeating, “I must be crazy, I must be crazy…”

Dr. Amari said, “Here we go. Initiating link. Beginning personality transfer…50%...80%...100%. Open the memory pod.”

Nora lifted the pod door on F7…Nick…and reached out a hand. He reached up and gripped her hand as he pulled himself upright. His hand was warm. Dry. But soft. Human.

He stood up and Dr. Amari said, “I have some diagnostic questions. What is your name?”

Nick smiled, “My name is Gorgo the Destroyer.”

At Amari’s look, he said, “Nick Valentine.”

“What is 3+5?” Amari asked.

Nick rolled his eyes, and said, “Eight.”

Amari nodded. “What would you do if I threw a baseball at your head?”

“I’d ask you why you’d do such a stupid thing,” said Nick.

“Anything else?”

“Not unless you threw another one,” Nick said, pretty clearly getting exasperated.

“You wouldn’t move?”

“That goes without saying, Amari.”

“Interesting,” said Dr. Amari, “Your cognitive functions are very clearly totally transferred from
your original body. Think of a strong memory…”

“Not that question…” said Nora just before Nick replied.

“I was working a Saturday at BADTFL when I got the call to go and identify my fiancé’s body. She’d been shot, execution style, in the back of the head.”

Nora looked at Amari, “Please tell me you don’t need any more than that.”

Amari was watching Nick carefully. “No. This seems to be a perfect transfer.”

Nora turned to Nick, “Would you like me to get your clothes or…”

“No I got it. I’ll meet you up top,” and he shooed them from the room.

Ten minutes later, he came up the stairs. He had on his trenchcoat and beat up fedora and had left his gown behind entirely. And he was the spitting image of Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade.

“Well let’s get back to Diamond City. Piper and I have a date tonight,” said Nora.

“Power noodles first though, right?” Nick said.

Nora laughed, “Sure, but don’t think for one second I’m not planning on cooking for you. Soon.”

As they walked back, Nora turned to Nick. “So, which are you, Nick, version THREE, or NICK, version three?”

He thought for a second. “Neither.”

“Oh for…what now?” Nora said.

“I can clearly remember the moment of transfer to this body. There was no loss of continuity. This really is just an upgrade. Nick, version 2.5. I have never been able to get you to understand that my ‘transfer’ from the original Nick to that chassis back there? It was never that clear cut. I remember as if in a dream, flashes of time between the scan at CIT and when I ‘woke up’ in the garbage heap.”

Nora listened as Nick unloaded. “That line was never bright. It wasn’t ‘One minute Nick before the war, next minute, Nick in the Commonwealth Wasteland.’ Not to mention how downright weird everything was. I’m not sure what was me and what was original Nick. Or to be fair to you Nora, if there was a difference. I know that I just don’t remember how I got there, on that trash pile, and it will always bother me. And by always bothering me, it will always make me doubt who I really am.”

Nora stood still for a second. Then she said, “You and Piper have the bad habit of reminding me that I don’t have all the answers and that I’m not always right.”

“Nora, I’ll be honest. I’m not sure you’re wrong…”

Nora finished for him, “But now we’re neither of sure we’re right either.”

Nick nodded.

Nora smiled, “Then let’s just table it for now. How about I look at it as ‘I’m headed home with my wife and my best friend and we’re gonna grab some noodles.’ Hey! Want to invite Ellie?”
“Sure. She’ll want to meet the new boss anyways,” said Nick.

_You have no idea, gumshoe._

It was about 5 when they got back to town. The three headed straight for the Agency to find Ellie and invite her to dinner.

Nick walked in without a thought, Nora and Piper on his heels. Ellie was across the office, filing, with her back to the door, and Nick said, “Hi Ellie. I’m back. Want to join us for some noodles?”

Ellie turned, a confused expression on her face, then she saw Nick. Her eyes widened. “Nick?”

“In the flesh.”

Ellie’s eyes rolled up as she fainted.

Chapter End Notes

If you look at Nick in game, and listen to how his voice actor plays him, it's impossible not to come to the conclusion that he is directly inspired by Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade in the Maltese Falcon. Right down to his secretary, Effie Perrine, or Ellie Perkins.

I just really ran with it. To a ridiculously amusing (to me anyway) extent.

Oh, yeah. Bogart NEVER said "Play it again, Sam." The closest he got was "If she can stand it, I can! Play it!" Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa gets closest to the misquote a bit earlier in the film with the line, "Play it, Sam. Play 'As Time Goes By.'"
When Nora got to her, Ellie’s eyes were already fluttering open. “What…what happened?”

Nora had the good sense to look rueful. “I maybe could have done a better job of getting you ready for that. I did say, when you asked what I was borrowing pictures of Nick for, you wouldn’t be able to miss it when it happened.”

“And you…”

“Abused my position as Director-To-Be by having them make a body for Nick. I wanted him to see he’s really just ‘Nick’. He’s still fighting me on that, but what seems to have really talked him into doing this was the possibility of eating and drinking again,” said Nora.

“Speaking of which,” put in Piper.

Nick finished, “I’ve spent years smelling those noodles. I want some. Want to join us after all?”

Ellie laughed weakly, “Ok, let me get up and we’ll head out.” She climbed to her feet and the four went out to the center of the market.

“Na ni shimasko ha?” said Takahashi.

“Yes,” said Nora holding up four fingers.

As Takahashi prepared four bowls, one of the guards overheard Piper call Nick, “Nick”.

“Wait a damn minute. Are you tellin’ me that this is Nick Valentine?”

Ellie nodded, “That’s him, Terence.”

“How’d you manage that?” he said.

Nora looked him up and down, “I wished upon a star, and the Blue Fairy made him into a real boy.”

“Oh, Ok, I get it, you’re not saying. Sheesh!” the guard said.

Nick shrugged, “At least I don’t have to take out an ad.”

“Will it cause problems for your business?” Nora asked.

“Do you mean, will the people who already sneak into my office be extra careful sneaking? Maybe, but I have more work than I can handle. Maybe I can stop feeling like I’m letting people down, now,” he said.

Nora laughed. They got their noodles. They were noodles. Except to Nick. He hadn’t tasted anything for over a hundred years. Takahashi’s noodles weren’t bad, but Nora tried to imagine what taking your first bite of food in over a century felt like.

Nick had a blissful expression on his face. Nora watched as he took a bite, slurped and chewed.
And again. They were all watching him. He stopped, “Am I doing something wrong?”

Nora shook her head, “No. It’s just watching you eat after so long is way more rewarding than actually eating.”

Nick laughed, “Well, eat anyways. It’s rude to watch someone eat like you three are doing.”

Within a few minutes, all four were eating and chatting and laughing. At one point Nora said, “Don’t forget now that you can eat and drink, there’s other things you have to do. As a result of eating and drinking.”

Nick got a shocked look on his face, “What if I’ve forgotten how?”

Nora laughed, “Don’t ask me. I’m not equipped to give you any pointers.”

When they finished the noodles, they went over to the Dugout Inn, to complete the exercise of making sure every loudmouth in Diamond City knew what happened in order to ensure the news got out as efficiently as possible.

Nora bought Nick his first beer in a century, followed by Piper buying him his first shot in a century. Ellie, willfully and carefully unknown to him, continued to provide him with utter adoration. Those two were absolutely the masters of not picking up clues, and now that Nick had a body, and one practically built to the spec of “How Ellie sees him” at that, the two of them were taking “not admitting it to themselves or each other,” to positively Olympian levels.

But they did achieve one thing. They got both Ellie and Nick hammered before they took the two home.

As they walked away, Piper said, “How do you think they’ll handle the hangover?”

“I expect Nick to want to kill me. More importantly, now that both of them have human bodies, how do you think they’ll handle living in the same space?” Nora observed.

“Based on how I reacted that first night we spent together Blue, at least one, if not both of them, are going to start doing without sleep,” Piper said.

“You couldn’t sleep that night?”

“Blue, all I could do was think about you.”

“Really?”

Piper nodded. Nora said, “What were you thinking about that night?”

Piper blushed and whispered in Nora’s ear.

Nora smiled at her wife. “That sounds like a plan, Thing. Let’s go home right now.”

The next morning Nora woke up, exceptionally happy. She was lying along Piper’s side, head on Piper’s chest.

*My god, I love this woman.*

She got up and had Codsworth make coffee. She was taking her time, because for a change things were not on some kind of clock, spiraling out of control, or coming apart at the seams. When Piper finally got up, she came down the stairs, yawning and the kissed Nora ‘Good Morning’ and then
sipped her coffee.

Nat came down a bit later as it was Saturday and there was no school. Nora gave Nat a hug and asked what she was going to get up to. “Spyin’ on Nick Valentine,” was the answer.

Nora looked shocked and Nat said, “The news was all over Diamond City.”

*That was what we were after. Should I be surprised that we succeeded? With my daughter the newspaper girl? Duh.*

There was a knock at the door. When Nora opened it, it turned out Marie and Preston had taken her up on her invitation. Nora smiled and invited them in.

“Where is Nick?” Marie asked.

“If he’s even conscious, he’s probably trying to put together a voodoo doll of me. In revenge.”

“Why would he want to take revenge on you, Nora?” asked Marie.

“Piper and I got him drunk as a skunk last night. Along with his secretary. I can’t imagine hangovers were on his ‘as soon as possible’ list.”

Preston laughed, “I’d give anything to see that.”

Marie said, “You and Piper are very wicked, Nora. I do have a hangover cure I can make easily, however.”

Nora smiled, “It couldn’t hurt,” and the group made a little procession to Nick’s office, as soon as Marie was done in the small lab at Chem-I-Care.

Nick’s door was locked, but after knocking, the door opened and Ellie was standing there. She looked awful. Marie took one look at her and said, “Give me your arm.”

Ellie stuck her arm out and Marie injected her and said, “You will want to shower and get into new clothes.”

Ellie just nodded.

It occurred to Nora that Ellie had not actually spoken. She said, “Are you Ok, Ellie?”

Ellie looked at her, “I hate you.”

Nora must have looked hurt, because Ellie said, “Ok, hate is a strong word. We’ll see if this works. I may not hate you. But Nick does.”

Nora smiled and nodded and they went up to where Nick was lying. He saw Nora and said, “You. You did this to me. There are no words for how nefarious you are.”

“Well, nefarious is one.”

“Oh shut up. Where’s my shot?”

Marie produced her hypo and gave Nick another first in over a century. Nick still looked like death warmed over.

He looked at Nora, “You two seem fine.”
“That’s because it hasn’t been that long since I drank…I know my limits,” Nora said.

Nick looked a bit cross. “And poor Ellie?”

“Nobody forced her,” said Nora. “And Marie got to her first. Do you guys want brunch? I know what you need.”

Nick said, “Don’t you dare say Gr-“

“Great Aunt Kathleen’s Irish Breakfast.”

“I hate you.”

Nora laughed and levered Nick out of bed. Marie was watching with amusement.

“I had a similar experience Detective Valentine,” she said.

He started to shake his head and winced, “I should have known better. I used to know how to drink.”

Hmm. In hangover, veritas.

Nora turned Nick over to Preston, but by that time it was mostly a case of staying beside the walking wounded, just in case. When they got back, Nora sent Codsworth out to get some stuff, while she brewed even more coffee.

Codsworth soon returned, with what she had requested. Eggs. Some bread. Mushrooms. Tatoes. Molerat sausages. Polly really was an artist at converting the Commonwealth ‘pig’ into tasty smoked and spiced meat.

Nora cut the tomato outer layer off the tatoes, set that aside, then began sautéing the potato portion of the tatoes. When they started to soften, she tossed in the tomato portion and the mushrooms with some salt on them. Then she started frying the sausages. When they were done and firm a few minutes later, Nora plopped butter down and then cracked the eggs, two per person onto the pan about 2 to 3 minutes.

While Nora was doing all that she had Codsworth toasting and buttering the bread.

When the eggs were done, she carefully placed two on a slice of toast in the middle of each plate, placed the sausage along one side and the sautéed tato and mushrooms along the other and sat it all out in front of her guests.

She looked at Nick and Ellie in particular and said, “The butter and grease will settle your stomachs even more, I promise you. Even without Marie’s shots, Great Aunt Kathleen got me through a lot of hangovers.”

They began eating gingerly, while everyone else tucked in. Whether it was Marie’s shots or the food, or both, by the end of the meal, Ellie and Nick looked human.

Nick looked over at Nora, “I don’t hate you anymore. Much.” But he smiled.

Nora smiled. “Sometimes simple is best for food. Especially on a morning when your stomach isn’t fond of you.”

“So Nick, how do like your new body?” asked Marie.
“I liked it just fine until this morning. I need to remember that biology has limits,” he said.

“I have found that there are limits, but oh so many compensations,” and she smiled.

“Right now, the limitations are only slowly receding. And as long as Nora keeps cooking for me, I may…eventually…forgive her,” Nick said.

Nora smiled and leaned over and kissed Nick on the cheek.

Another first for him.

Chapter End Notes

One of the challenges I set for myself with this series was, "Can you begin a relationship in a story, and have it turn into a healthy, happy, long term relationship without boring the audience?"

Hollywood, television in particular, seems to think not. Either a couple is married at the start in which case they (may) be married at the end, or they're single when they start and will be single at the end. Based on the number of fatal to the relationship misunderstandings that get introduced in season finales. So I'll say this...Piper and Nora are never going to break up temporarily for dramatic effect. They both said forever and they both meant it, and they are both thoroughly in love with each other. And that relationship is the stable platform that each of them go back to for support.

We'll see if it gets boring.
After a lengthy chat, and observation of Ellie and Nick, Nora concluded that Step Four of ‘Operation Get Nick Together With Ellie Somehow’; Get Them to Admit Feelings, was going to be siege warfare and make no mistake. This used to be Step 3, but when Nora made it into the Institute and especially since she became Director-To-Be, Step Three became Get Nick a Real Body and Get Him Into It (aka The Pinocchio Gambit).

So far so good. And this last piece was always going to be hard. Getting Ellie to slip was child’s play compared to this. And I had to get married to do that. That’s not an option for a second try.

Nora kissed Piper, and got set up for her trip to the Institute. Ever since her epic wounding, she’d kept a couple sets of Institute Clothes at home, and a couple sets of fatigue pants and T-shirts at the apartment, so she dressed in her overalls and then waved bye to everyone.

It was strange. One minute she was saying goodbye to some of her best friends in the new world, and then the middle of the Institute. Whiplash wasn’t an adequate description.

At least I have the walk from the Relay Room to the elevator and the elevator ride to get my game face on.

By the time she got to the bottom, she was met by a synth that said, “Greetings, ma’am. I have been waiting for you. Father would like to see you.”

Nora nodded and headed for Shaun’s office. He smiled as he arrived, “I have wonderful news,” he started, “The reactor is ready to be activated. How do you feel about joining me at a ceremony this afternoon at the reactor? A ‘christening’ of sorts.’

Nora said, “Sounds wonderful, I’d love to be there.”

And now unlimited relays. All I have to do is get Allie on board, spring Madison on them, and we’re there.

She gave Shaun a look and said, “Now that the reactor is giving you a greater sense of security, have you thought about my proposal?”

“I agreed to a commission. I don’t know what more you want, Mother.”

Nora smiled to take the sting away, “I guess I was hoping to avoid the commission entirely. With the reactor running, we now control our own destiny. If we had to we could withdraw from the surface entirely, so in a weird way that argues that we should actually expand.’

“How so?” Shaun asked.

Nora said, “Because we don’t have to rely on the surface any longer, we can afford to release some control. Helping the Commonwealth and then discovering a problem is no longer an existential threat. Because we’re stronger, we can afford to be more magnanimous.”

Like how I worked those ‘we’s in Shaun? C’mon. It’s a good argument. Because it’s true. If there’s anything I learned both as a law student and a spy it’s that the truth is the best cover.
Shaun shook his head, stubbornly. “If you can get the votes, I’m sure that is an argument that the commission will study. I will not let myself be pressured into a decision before I can look at all the facts.”

*Fuck. Well, what the hell. Worth a shot.*

Nora smiled at Shaun, “Worth a shot, anyway.”

He smiled back, “I’m glad we can have these conversations, mother. Do you know how long it has been since anyone here challenged me the way you have?”

*Quite a long time, judging by what a pill you’re being.*

“I would imagine it’s been some time…you’ve been director for thirty years after all,” she replied.

He nodded, “Quite so. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some work to do for the event.”

Nora left and went to find Allie Filmore. Allie was nowhere to be found, until Nora got ahold of one of her subordinates, who told her that Allie was at the reactor, seeing to final details. Since she’d get to see Allie later, Nora went looking for Clayton Holdren.

While he was less urgent for getting the Commission at all, he was still pretty important to getting the commissioner Nora wanted. She was pretty sure anybody she suggested would be opposed by Justin Ayo. She expected him to nominate Alana Secord, under the heading of ‘most likely to obey Justin’. While Nora could sidetrack that using Madison, getting Rosalind was fairly critical.

So she went into Bioscience and for a change could simply enjoy the smell of growing plants. She went walking about looking for Clayton. As she was passing around the rear, she saw, hidden from the main area, a small alcove with a door. But the door was protected by a very lethal looking laser grid.

Ultimately she found Clayton observing two gorillas.

Nora came up and leaned in, “How did you find gorillas, Clayton?”

He looked enthusiastic, as he said, “I didn’t ‘find’ them, we made them. They’re synth gorillas. It opens up a whole new realm of potential research.”

Nora smiled and said, “Really? Did you have other animals in mind?”

“Well, Alan Binet suggested dogs for some reason, I have no idea why. I wanted to try dolphins. Or sharks. But the tanks would be expensive.”

“Interesting. Where would you put the tanks? This place is pretty crowded.” Nora said.

Clayton looked crestfallen, “That’s the problem. There’s no spare room. Most of the back office space is essential.”

“That is a problem…say! I saw a door back there,” and Nora pointed to the well protected door, “Can’t you use some of that space?”

Clayton looked thoughtful, “We’d have to take out some F-, anyway, that program may not have run its course.”

*Gotcha! That’s where I have to get to for Virgil.*
“That’s too bad. What about remote, on the surface test facilities?” Nora asked.

“Oh we don’t do those,” Clayton said.

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s policy,” he said.

“What if the policy changed?”

“What do you mean?”

Nora said, “If for some reason it wasn’t policy that no one go to the surface except synths, would you put test areas up there? I understand that once the reactor is online, it would be able to handle the demand spikes created by the relay indefinitely. There’d be no reason to ration trips to scavenging parties and Coursers with high return values.”

“I hadn’t thought of it. But everywhere is irradiated. It’s far too dangerous.”

“For that there’s Containment Suits, and frankly there isn’t that much radiation—“

Just the ever present Radstorms, Nora. Oh shush, me.

“—and the synths can mark off any dangerous zones,” Nora said.

“Maybe. Maybe so. Oh, look, time for the reactor activation. Shall we?”

Nora and Clayton walked over to Advanced Systems. At least Clayton knew where to go. It had slipped Shaun’s mind to tell Nora where the reactor entrance was, or maybe he figured she’d already found it, but as fate would have it, she simply had not gotten that far, her time having been spent in commuting and living a double or triple life.

After going through Advanced Systems, they took an elevator up quite a ways. Nora turned to Clayton, “It seems weird to be going so far up to get to the reactor.”

Clayton smiled, “Well this reactor was an experimental ultra-high yield reactor built by CIT for research. From the viewpoint of the people before the war, we’re quite far underground, but in the last two hundred years, we’ve dug quite deep indeed, so in order to get to the underground reactor, we have to go up,” and he chuckled.

Nora smiled at his little irony.

A duel of who can butter up whom faster and better.

When they got to the top, they found themselves in a disused storage room with a long access hallway. There were a number of turrets that ran along that sloping access corridor. At the top was an observation room and from there Nora, Clayton, and several other Institute members went down a set of stairs and thence into the reactor room proper.

Shaun was on walkway next to the quiescent reactor above them. He waved for Nora to come up next to him. She climbed onto a set of scaffolding and across an access bridge.

Shaun was standing in front of an access window. Next to Nora was a command terminal.

You can tell that this was experiment. No reactor I know about has a viewing port, not to mention a command unit this close.
For all that, it looked like a formidable piece of equipment. Looking into the reaction chamber the containment bottle was going to be made by a series of highly polished magnets surrounding the chamber. At the center was the beryllium agitator for providing proper fusion ignition and reaction control by directed neutron bombardment of the fusing hydrogen isotopes in the magnetic bottle.

*I can’t believe it, but in order to save the Commonwealth from the Institute I have to give the Institute exactly what it wants, so that it can feel safe enough to be part of the Commonwealth.*

Shaun began speaking, “This, my friends, is the moment we’ve been working towards. After all your effort, the time has finally come to activate the reactor.”

He gestured around all of them, “No longer will we be forced to compromise to survive. No more will we need to worry about outpacing our resources.” It was hard to tell whether the worry or the need to compromise bothered him more.

He finished by looking over at Nora, “My mother and I could not be more proud of what you have helped us accomplish. And we look forward to achieving even greater things in the future. The Institute is truly mankind’s only hope. Thank you. All of you.”

As the crowd clapped, and not just politely, he looked over at Nora and gestured her closer.

*It’s ironic that so long ago, I put my finger on the real problem. When you’ve lived a totally risk-free life, even a minuscule increase can seem huge. Maybe with the reactor active they can calm down, and given that the reactor can literally sustain them at will, reach out without the overwhelming terror that they’ve shown thus far.*

Shaun hugged Nora, and said quietly into her ear, “Look what you’ve made possible.”

Nora hugged her son back, and asked, “Now that the reactor works, what’s next?”

Shaun smiled at her and said, “We’ll get to that together. But there’s more work to be done before the Institute’s future is guaranteed. The Directorate has called a meeting Monday at 10AM about how to proceed. I’m not going to be there. You should be there as Director.”

Nora looked at Shaun in shock, “What?”

Shaun took her hand, “Don’t worry mother. I’ll still be the Director. I’ll be here to help guide you. But they should get used to taking guidance from you and not me. So that when…”

Nora nodded, “I understand. An orderly transition above all else. Our agreement still stands, yes?”

He smiled indulgently, “Of course mother.”

Nora nodded, then seeing Allie below, excused herself so she could catch Allie and gauge the weather, so to speak.

She caught up with Allie about half way up the first flight of stairs back up to the control room.

“So, Allie, what do you think?” Nora asked.

“You have to ask? About eight out of every twenty four hours I’ve spent worrying about power budgets every day for my entire career,” Allie smiled. “Every proposal carefully, painstakingly, vetted to assess impact not on scientists’ time, or the value of the science, but on whether it was better use of every precious amp.”
“And now, I can’t even explain what this means…” she trailed off.

“It’s like suddenly finding out Ft. Knox is your personal piggy bank,” said Nora.


Nora smiled, “Guess you guys never studied much history or other liberal arts. Ft. Knox was an army base in the East Central Commonwealth, in what was Kentucky. It held the US strategic gold reserve. Like inheriting the king of all piggy banks.”

“I see your point. Yes. An embarrassment of riches.”

“So how are you feeling about my proposal now?” Nora asked.

“How so?”

“Allie, with the reactor online, we don’t need the Commonwealth. Which is a weird way, means we can help them. There’s less risk. Something bad happens, just back off. Try again in a few years, safe and sound.”

Allie looked thoughtful, “Hmmm. OK. At the very least, we should have that commission study the proposal. You’ll have to lay out the entire plan. And let me tell you, Justin Ayo will not like your plan. Right now he monopolizes access to the surface. You’re going to have to watch yourself from the second you propose this.

Crap. She’s right.

“Thanks Allie. I hadn’t thought of that part. Appreciate the heads up.”

“No problem. We’ve been living with it for a long time. We all know that Justin Ayo is a dick.”

Chapter End Notes

I just finished a MONSTER chapter. So, in celebration, I'm publishing an extra chapter today.

This was the best I could come up with to explain the need for a "beryllium agitator", which might as well be called a "McGuffinite Handwavium Generator".
Nora went back to her room to check on her digital “dead drops’. Both Z1 and PATRIOT had left proof of life tokens regularly. She sent a message to Z1, [I may have big news shortly, but in the meantime, remain ready to execute the original plan.]

To PATRIOT she sent, [There are things going on in the background. Remain ready to execute plan, but stand by for potential changes in Institute Policy.]

Then she thought long and hard about Justin Ayo, and his likely reactions to her moves. She hadn’t thought of it but Allie was right. The second she actually implemented the commission, there’d be no way to get the cure for Virgil. Until Shaun was…until she was actually the Director. De jure as well as de facto.

So what? So he stays a mutant.

That’s a shitty thing to think. What if, between the time you implement the commission and when you can walk into that section legitimately he loses his humanity? That’d be on me.


So I wait until about 1AM, zip in, grab the cure, and zip out.

Nora set her alarm for 12:45 and got some sleep. At the time, the alarm went off and she strapped on her pistol, put two stealth boys and a plasma grenade in her pockets, and then pocketed three stimpacks and a Med-X Styrette. Because she’d learned.

She made her way quietly up and through the connector tubes. She’d observed they had little traffic at night so they made a better method to get around the perimeter to Bioscience than going down to the atrium and running into people. She went around two to the north tower, and then came down, because she had a chance to check on Justin Ayo’s apartment.

She paused outside the door, but heard nothing.

If only he were a known snorer or something.

Continuing down, so made her way to the ground floor and then to Bioscience. On entering the complex, she saw several synth caretakers in the hydroponics area, so she made her way quietly through the back halls to the office where she’d confronted Higgs and Loken.

She peered out, and saw that the coast was clear, so she quickly moved out and to her right into the secluded room with the lab entry laser grid. The terminal was a pain to hack, as she once again had to remain quiet instead of her usual profane commentary. But it did yield eventually.

The grid deactivated and she stepped inside. To a horrorshow. There were four tanks in a central lab, two of which were broken and two of which contained Super-Mutant corpses.

There was a terminal and several holotape logs on a desk. The terminal listed a series of subjects, that either died, were terminated, or “discarded”…fairly obviously, released. It also showed a program that was continued despite its program lead, Dr. Virgil’s strenuous objections. So strenuous that he turned himself into a Super-Mutant, apparently killed two other subjects inadvertently and then fled the Institute for the Glowing Sea.
The terminal also included a summary of Virgil’s cure serum experiments. The stress of transformation must have been too much for him, because he’d left it behind when he escaped.

Nora slotted and listened to the holotape log, “Personal record, Dr. Brian Virgil. This will likely be my last recording. My requests to shut down the FEV program have repeatedly been denied. We’ve learned nothing useful in the last 10 years; why does Father insist on continuing it? If he won’t see reason, then I have to take matters into my own hands. What we’re doing... it’s not right. It needs to stop. If anyone should find this after... after I’m gone... know that I never wanted to hurt anyone. Anyone! Do you understand me? I’m going to make sure the whole program is shut down. If not for good, then at least for years to come. After that...”

After a long pause, the record continued, “...I know what I’m about to do will be seen as a betrayal. Treason, he’ll probably call it. So... I’m leaving. I have a plan... and if it works, I’ll be somewhere safe. Somewhere not even the Coursers can find me. Everything that we’ve done, the lives we’ve taken... if there is a god, may he have mercy on us all.”

Nora looked about and quickly located Virgil’s cure. She took it and shoved it, and Virgil’s recording into an arm pocket.

This is unconscionable. All this time, I’ve been getting lectured on how bad it up there, that the Commonwealth is dying, and it turns out to be because the Institute and Shaun...Father...is deliberately pushing its head under.

What else has he implied was done, “Before he was here,” or “Against his better judgement,” that he actually approves of?

Fuck! I believed him. I didn’t catch it. What else did I miss because I wanted to believe?

God dammit, Nora, you’re better than this.

So now we can guess where super-mutants come from, and what they do with all those people they kidnap. Isn’t that special. I will wring Father’s neck...AFTER I get my commission.

She walked out of the Lab and turned the laser grid back on, then slipped out of the alcove.

And froze as she ran into Justin Ayo, two Coursers, and four Gen 2s.

Oh shit.

Justin had a horrible, malicious smile on his face as his Coursers pointed lasers at her. “Greetings, Nora. I knew you’d slip up sometime. I just had to be patient. When the alarm activated, I knew who it had to be.”

“How dare you? I’m the Director-to-be. I have every right to be here,” JADE SUN said.

If I can distract, deflect, make him doubt himself...

Justin shook his head. “Not in there you don’t. That was sealed at Father’s order, and no one was to go in there without his specific, personal permission.”

JADE SUN said, “And how do you know I don’t have it?”

“Because you’re here at 2AM,” he replied.

“So?”
“Innocent people don’t slip into a lab in the middle of the night.”

“Are you so certain that you’re willing to risk Father’s anger, and my anger, when you turn out to be wrong? You’re the ACTING head of the SRB. It wouldn’t take much to replace you entirely. And I doubt any of your subordinates would shed a tear. I know none of your peers would.”

“By all means, let’s involve Father,” he said. “I’ll show him some of the surveillance tape. You’ve been damnably difficult to catch, but the Blackbirds have occasionally caught you in potentially compromising situations.”

“Blackbirds?” JADE SUN asked.

“Yes. Our Watchers. Synthetic birds. They’ve spotted you in some questionable situations. Talking with Madison Li at both the Prydwen…”

“Father already knows I had to use the Brotherhood to get to the Institute…”

“And at the suburb you came from, Sanctuary,” he finished.

“I was actually trying got get her to come back,” she replied. “You don’t actually have anything incriminating on me or you’d have brought it up by now.”

“I consider your loyalties suspect,” Justin said.

“And I consider your sanity suspect,” JADE SUN retorted.

*Keep talking, I’ve almost got my hand where I want it.*

“If you have some fucking real proof, Justin, let’s hear it. But since there isn’t any, this conversation is over,” JADE SUN said.

“This conversation is over when I say it is, traitor. There’s one more thing. Soon, I’ll have proof that you’re working with the Railroad. We’ve suspected it’s located on the North End for a little while now, and imagine my surprise when we checked your relay records,” he said.

*Fuck! Shit piss fuckwad!*

“And we found, just before Bunker Hill, you relayed not to Charlestown, where the Courser was waiting for you, but the North End. The Old North Church in fact,” he said.

“Justin, are you crazy, there’s no way-“ JADE SUN said, as she activated the first of her two Stealth Boys.

JADE SUN…no, Nora…dropped instantly, moving as fast as she’d ever managed, and as she log rolled left, she pulled her pistol. The two Coursers began firing at where she’d been. Nora sighted up as she continued rolling and put four bullets into Justin Ayo.

The first bullet took him just above his pubic bone and tore through his bladder and several loops of his small bowels. He was going to suffer peritonitis and associated infections.

The next bullet entered his abdomen a bit further to the right than Nora had been shot and the bullet punctured his liver and stomach, then passed through his diaphragm and the upwards trajectory caused it to pass through the lower lobe of his right lung. Thanks to the diaphragm, however, he was unlikely to suffer a sucking chest wound, or a collapsed lung.

The third bullet passed relatively harmlessly through his left shoulder, passing through the
platysma muscle in his neck, but it did shatter his left clavicle. Of all his wounds, this one was merely going to cause discomfort during his recovery period.

The fourth bullet entered Justin Ayo at the Mental Protuberance of his Lower Mandible…just above his chin, but below the line of his teeth. It traveled through his mouth, passing through the remarkably thick and dense muscle of his tongue. Then the bullet penetrated the roof of his mouth passing through the lower part of his ethmoidal sinus and the upper part of his sphenoidal sinus. It entered his brain at the temporal lobe, where it began doing real damage. The bullet and the associated shockwaves began to severely damage the frontal and left parietal lobes of his brain, and destroyed his motor function areas.

The bullet finally lodged in the dura of Justin’s brain, just beneath the left parietal bone of his skull.

Justin Ayo, who was mortally wounded without immediate attention, and, in the unlikely event he survived, severely cognitively impaired no matter what, collapsed instantly. One of the two Coursers caught him as he fell, and said, “I will take the director for medical assistance.”

While that was happening, Nora plucked her plasma grenade and tossed it at the feet of the second Courser, rolled to her feet and ran like hell. Within seconds she was out of the complex and running like the wind. She leapt down the stairs onto the grass outside, then down the ramp and into the center elevator. It was just beginning to dawn on the synths and the few people who were awake that something was amiss.

Nora literally slid in front of the elevator as though she were sliding into second base. She pressed the button to call it just as her first Stealth Boy expired. She immediately activated the next.

*Has it ever taken thirty seconds to arrive? Fuck,fuck fuck, FUCK! Get down, stay down. C’mon you useless fucking elevator, get your god damned ass a move on.*

Shortly, the second Courser, looking highly singed around the edges, and bleeding profusely from gaping wounds in his legs and arms, as well as his chest, begin shooting at the opening for the elevator. Nora took cover behind the tube and looked up at the descending elevator.

*I guess I got all the Gen 2s. And at least one of the Coursers was obliged to take care of Justin. The fucking prick.*

*Will that fucking thing never get here?!?*

The elevator door finally slid open, and the Courser pumped bolts into the area in front of the elevator rapidly. When his fusion cell ran dry, he popped it out with an audible click. Still moving at peak performance, Nora Wright; wife, mother, Minuteman…agent, heard the click and immediately leapt into the elevator, and pressed the up button. The Courser growled and tried to catch the elevator before the door closed, but his leg slowed him and he was several seconds late.

His one good eye glazed up at the elevator as it ascended, then at Nora with actual hate when her second Stealth Boy expired about halfway up. When the elevator reached the top, she already had her pistol up as she ran into the relay control room.

*Please god let this work.*

Her fist slammed down on the Emergency Evacuation Relay button. Immediately lights began flashing and Nora stepped into the relay room, keeping her pistol aimed back down the hall.

“Emergency relay activated. Relay powering up, in twenty…nineteen…”
Then Father spoke over the intercom, “Did you think we would not see what you have done? Did you think I wouldn’t know you had betrayed me? After all I’ve done…The lengths I’ve gone to give you a new home, a new life…for us to be a family.”

*Liar! How could I have been so blind? How?!?*

He continued, “But you have made your choice. From this point on you are an enemy of the Institute. Should you cross us, we will kill you. Go now and live whatever meaningless life you can.”

The relay activated, and Nora found herself in the courtyard beneath the Great Dome of CIT. There was a thin trail of smoke coming from her Pip-Boy, where the Courser Chip that Madison had attached self-destructed. Nora gasped and sucked her fingers after she yanked the crisped attachment.

*Safety measures. Just like any synth that escapes the Institute instantly forgets where it is or how to get in. But…*

“Soon, I’ll have proof that you’re working with the Railroad. We’ve suspected it’s located on the North End for a little while now, and imagine my surprise when we checked your relay records. And we found, just before Bunker Hill, you relayed not to Charlestown, where the Courser was waiting for you, but the North End. *The Old North Church in fact.*”

*It’s not over. It’s FAR from over.*

Nora began running, across the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge, then east along Storrow Drive. To the North End. And the Old North Church.
She kept up a pace she knew she could manage and still arrive able to shoot, run if she had to, and speak coherently. At six minutes a mile she was not gasping for breath, but she could feel her pulse rate was elevated as she took in deep breaths.

A bit more than 18 minutes later, she leapt up into the back entrance building. Based on the fact that she wasn’t getting shot at, and she had not been subtle about her arrival, she tagged the back entrance as safe.

She cycled the door.

_C’mon, c’mon, c’mon. Open, and down the stairs. Huh, bounced off the wall…door open. Leap and kick off the wall and through the arch, and kick again, and around the corner. Through the water, sprint, and take the stairs three at a time…_

_Slam into door, breathe, yank open, staring faces, shock, bewilderment, and leap left to kick and head into the passage right, and now you can be heard…_

_“DEZ!! CARRINGTON! GLORY! DEACON! EVAC NOW. COURSERS COMING! WE’RE BLOWN!! WE’RE FUCKING BLOWN. GET OUT! NOW! NOW! NOW!!”_

Dez goggled at her for one second and the began snapping orders. PAM had already started moving. Dez must have put Nora on the “Obey Immediately” list. Nora took a deep centering breath.

She turned to Dez, “Front entrance only blown. Use the back way. SRB is coming in force, save whatever you can but be out of here yesterday. I’ll cover the retreat. RV at the Charlestown Bridge.”

Dez nodded, and said, “Take Deacon and Glory. We won’t need long.”

Nora nodded, “Deacon, Glory, on me.”

Deacon turned from a fuse box on the far wall, with an evil grin. “Thought I might arrange some surprises for our friends.”

In the distance there was a powerful explosion. Deacon looked at Nora and said, “What? You think that long walk down the narrow hallways to get here was just random?”

Glory was laying out grenades, and Tinker Tom was piling them up in front of her.

Tom looked at Nora and said, “It’s not like I’m taking it with me. I have this,” and he held up a pouch that rattled. Not caps. Holochips. Between that and PAM…

Nora tapped Glory on the shoulder. Glory had a wide grin. Nora nodded.

“You’re going to kill lots Glory. Lots. Lay out ammo. I’ll throw grenades. I only have my pistol,” Nora said.

Nora turned to Deacon. “Head shots on the Coursers. Eyes, neck. Their brains still fucking run everything. Everything else takes forever. The head will too. Just slightly less forever.”

There was another explosion, closer. Dust rained down. People were sweeping everything at their
desks into satchels. Pouring oil on anything they couldn’t carry away. Dez was directing traffic.
PAM and Tinker Tom were long gone.

Nora shouted, “Dez, get out now. Make sure the Railroad lives. Z1 is still ready. He’s just waiting for a sign.”

Dez shook her head. “Stanley is already out. I’m the last out. Always.”

“God dammit Dez. Get out now,” yelled Nora. “Now!”

Deacon called over his shoulder, “We got it boss. Bug out. It’s Ok. I know where the goodies are.”

Dez turned, reluctantly. There was an enormous explosion.

“That was the last one, Dez. Get out,” called Deacon.

Nora said to Deacon, “What do you mean, goodies?”

Deacon gave her a tight grin. “Where the triggers are to set off the charges that drop the emergency tunnel roof.”

Nora smiled. The door blew open. Glory’s minigun began ripping and Deacon joined shortly after that. There were two COURSERS in the door.

Nora began pulling pins. Tom had left every grenade he’d had. The first was a plasma, which Nora threw right into the door way, before it went off she’d already grabbed and pulled the pin on a cryo grenade.

CRUMP-Sizzle! and the ripping sound of Glory minigun filling the doorway were punctuated with the muted cracks of Deacon’s rifle. Nora watched as the lead COURSER’s, who was backlit by the plasma grenade, left eye gouted blood and vitreous matter and brains.

Everything seemed to be moving so slowly. Jet, of course, had the same effect but with enough training and adrenaline, an unmedicated human could achieve a similar state for quite a shockingly long time. That state was where Nora was operating.

WHOOSH, and the cryo grenade went off, and the slow adversaries got even slower. Nora grabbed in quick succession two frag grenades and sent them on their way into the doorway as Deacon and Glory continued to pour bullets into the small area.

The landing and the small area just past the door were rapidly turning into a charnel house.

The first COURSERS had died, one by Deacon’s hand and one a combination of Nora’s grenades and Glory’s minigun.

Jeez, we might stand a chance. They have only one way to get at us. And we can just keep pounding them.

Nora was right. The situation they found themselves in was almost perfect for defense. She picked though the pile and pulled another cryo grenade. There was a brief pause while the Institute regrouped. It had been almost 30 seconds since the last Railroad agent went through the back door.

The next wave tried to get cute, throwing relay grenades first, then coming through.

Nora tossed the cryo grenade to slow the attackers then very consciously trusted Deacon to take the ones at the foot of the stair and along the entry corridor, while Glory continued to deny the
Institute easy access to the door.

Deacon made short work of the three synths that had relayed in, and Nora’s cryo grenade and her two plasma grenades, those having been by luck the ones she grabbed, had done a fine job of incapacitating the two Coursers in the doorway. Deacon and Glory finished them off.

There was a pause. The position the three of them found themselves in was almost perfect for defense. But the Institute was willing to spend literally any amount of lives to take that hallway and finally move into Headquarters.

The next wave started with a Stealth Boy’ed Courser. The only thing that saved them was the squelch of his bloody boots on the stairwell. Glory screamed and cut loose as Nora threw another cryo grenade. then pulled the pin and threw a frag.

At that point, Glory and Nora found out that Deacon had equipped…planted if you wanted to be accurate…Stealth Boys on each of them. Because he activated them, and his own, and then shouted, “Time’s up. We’re leaving.” and turned to leave. Glory was still firing.

*Fuck. Not today, Glory.*

Nora grabbed and yanked Glory back having located her by minigun muzzle flash. Miraculously Deacon saw the flicker, and found and grabbed Glory’s other arm. They pulled at her, and screamed at her. It seemed like forever to Nora, but Glory straightened up and began moving rapidly back to the back entrance.

Nora tossed plasma grenades to either side in headquarters to set off the oil soaked furniture. A little fire in this situation was their friend.

Then as Glory backed into the back corridor in front of Nora, Nora tossed her last plasma into the pile of explosives she’d left behind, and as she shouted, “Fire in the hole!” Deacon was shouting, “Let’s go! Now!” to Glory and they all turned and ran.

They were barely through the back door when the plasma cooked off the entire pile of grenades, in a massive explosion. But the three were already running, and as they reached the far end of the sewer section and then into the control room, Deacon turned and opened a concealed panel. By then the Stealth Boys had expired.

He winked at Glory and Nora, and threw the switch. The loudest explosion of them all went off, knocking all three of them to the floor covering them in dust.

Nora said, “Wow,” but only really heard it due to bone conduction.

Deacon and Glory’s mouths were also moving, and Nora kind of heard it. She could tell they were making noise, but couldn’t make anything out. She pointed up and the other two nodded. They went through the door quickly, and then up the stairs.

They looked outside the exit building, but it was mercifully free of Institute troops. They jumped to the ground, and maintaining a weather eye, moved cautiously away from the battlefield.

Before long they’d reached the Charlestown Bridge. There were only a few Railroad members in evidence, but as soon as the three were in sight, and not followed by every Courser in the Commonwealth, the rest emerged from the places of concealment they’d found. Dez walked up and said something. Nora’s ears were still ringing, so she tugged her ear, then made an explosion gesture with her hands. Dez nodded, and wrote on a pad and showed it to Nora.
“Now what?” it said.

Nora took the pad. She knew, deaf as she was, she was likely to be loud. She wrote, “Fllw me. Dmnd Cty, then Cstle.”

Dez looked dubious. She wrote, “Safehouses.”

Nora shook her head hard. “Birds Inst spies. Assume any plc freq vstd marked. Cstle.” That last word was underlined three times.

Shortly after they got moving Nora’s hearing began coming back. She looked at Dez. “Tell everyone to start killing ravens. Check them for synth componentry.”

Dez nodded and turned to five agents, “You heard her. Get to the dead drops, alert the safehouses. And tell them to start killing big, black birds.”

Nora said, “Let’s get moving. We can pick up a caravan at Diamond City, or even better, a detachment of Regulars at Hangman’s Alley. Yeah, we’ll do that. Plus I have messages to send.”

Dez shrugged, defeated, “There’s no way we can do anything without your Institute access. The synths are in the Minutemen’s hands now.”

Nora looked at Dez. The Railroad leader was beaten. Her face was haggard. Having to drop everything and run for your life twice in six months was likely to have that kind of effect.

In fact, as Nora looked around at the ragged little group, she saw tears, shock, numbness. She didn’t see hope. Not even in Glory or Deacon. The adrenaline had worn off and everyone was slumped. Defeated. Except for PAM, who looked exactly like she always did.

Nora looked at them all, “The synths are still in YOUR hands. Because you aren’t the Railroad anymore.”

At the shocked looks, she continued, “Or not just the Railroad. You are now the Commonwealth Provisional Government Special Intelligence Service. The CSIS,” she smiled, “Which I just created.”

She looked at all of them. “Congratulations, all of you. You are now full-fledged National Intelligence Officers. Welcome to the big leagues, my fellow spooks.”

“So, let’s get moving to Diamond City, and then the Castle. We have work to do.”
The group walked along Storrow. Nobody was stupid enough to take a run at so large a group of armed, and rather pissed off looking people. No raven or crow stood a chance. The mob was rolling mechanism of avian slaughter.

Most of the birds, the vast majority, were just birds. But the general attitude of “Crazy Whisper” came to an abrupt halt the first time someone shot a mechanical bird. From that moment forward, the people of the Railroad….the CSIS… were thorough and humorless about shooting birds.

They made their way down Storrow and although there were Raiders from across Longfellow Bridge, on the Cambridge side, in a detachment at the south end of the bridge, they saw the size of the group and didn’t even emerge from their shacks.

There were no more Raiders that so much as poked their heads above window sills. The periodic gunfire from Nora’s group probably ensured that Raiders knew they were coming while simultaneously announcing that they’d be better off looking elsewhere.

The little group crossed Mass Ave and immediately walked into Hangman’s Alley, where the detachment commander was a little pissed about how the group came in and immediately shot four birds. He changed his tune when he saw that the General was with them, and that two of the four were Institute synths. Which meant Justin had been paying close attention here.

Nora called the captain over. He jogged up from overlooking the examination of one of the Watchers, and saluted. Nora looked at him uncomprehendingly at first, then returned his salute and said, “Captain, I need your radio right now.”

He took her to the shack, and Nora called first, Sanctuary, where she told Preston and Marie to head for the Castle so the former could oversee defenses and the latter because the likelihood of casualties was high. Then she contacted Greentop Nursery. She gave the Minutemen there very explicit instructions to head over to Listening Post Bravo a half mile away, and go in and tell Danse and Haylen to get down to the Castle, and to give them guides if needed. She also told them, if Danse doubted the messenger, to tell him that “Nora says ‘Love is love.’”

They sounded dubious, but agreed. Then Nora called the Castle and told them to go to high alert, and there existed a real possibility they’d have to deal with either an Institute or a Brotherhood attack soon.

Finally she called Cait at Red Rocket and told her if she didn’t want to miss a first rate fight to get down to the Castle, and to bring as many Regulars from Red Rocket and Taffington as she thought was safe to take away from their areas.

Then she looked up at Hangman’s Alley, and really took a look at the garrison. It was closely surrounded by four and five story buildings, on which the troops had stationed spotters. Nora saw that there was artillery here as well as an infantry outpost and called the Captain over.

“How in hell do you fire artillery out of here?” she asked.

He smiled, “Very carefully, and the buildings limit our range a bit, but we manage.”
Nora nodded at that, then said, “You heard me about the Castle?”

He nodded. “I’ll get troops leaving immediately.”

Nora shook her head, “No. Self-serving as it may be, I want you to maintain this base, and beef up patrols around Diamond City. Protect it.”

He nodded. Nora turned to Dez. “I’d hoped to leave most of you guys here while I went in Diamond City briefly, but those birds mean I need to bring you with me.”

Dez looked shocked, “That’s going to be conspicuous.”

Nora nodded. “But they already know I’m working with you, and at this point it’s less a matter of them not knowing where you are as it is a case of staying in places the Institute doesn’t dare attack you. That’s Diamond City, because they’re paranoid about their secrecy, and any attack there would be unacceptably high profile.”

Dez looked at Nora, “That’s why you’re bringing us to the Castle. They may know we’re there, or really strongly suspect, but they’d run into an actual military force.”

Nora nodded, “One that’s ready for them.”

Dez said, “This might be fun to watch. Shall we head out?”

Nora said, “Let’s”

As they led the group up Mass Ave and to Yawkey Way it dawned on the rest of the group where they were headed. A quiet babble started with speculation running rampant about why they were headed for Diamond City, of all places. One that got a bit louder and then died out entirely when they realized that they were going inside. There was no gate guard for some reason, and Nora got extremely worried.

She contacted the Hangman’s Alley Garrison on her artillery radio and ordered up a squad to guard the Diamond City Gates.

She jogged inside and at the bottom of the entry stairs lay Danny Sullivan, bleeding. Around him were Pastor Clements, Nick Valentine, Nat, and Polly. Nora ran up. Nick and Nat looked up and said together, “It was McDonough.”

Nick waved Nat on, and she said, “He tried to attack Piper, and Danny got in the way, and McDonough shot him and ran up there,” and she pointed at his office. “Piper just now chased him up there.”

Nora nodded at her daughter, “Ok. Run get Dr. Sun for Danny, and Nick, please get some guards out front, there’s no one there.”

Those two nodded and ran off and Nora kneeled by Danny, who wheezed, “I shoulda seen it coming. I’m a goner, Nora.”

Nora ignored him and injected two stimpacks directly next to his wounds. “Nonsense, Dr. Sun will be here soon,” then she drew her pistol and headed for the elevator to the Mayor’s office.

Danny called after her, “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m gonna rest here…a while.”

Nora ran up the ramp and then leapt onto the elevator, and pressed the up button. Painfully slowly,
the assembly rose to the press box/mayor’s office. When she got there, she was treated to the sight of her wife flinging herself at the locked door to the mayor’s office in a blind rage. Geneva’s chair had been kicked over. There was a guard, looking at the window as if contemplating going around on the outside.

Piper was shouting, “I knew it! I knew you were a synth, McDonough!”

From inside Nora heard McDonough, “Yes, Piper! Congratulations! You've won. I hope you break your foot trying to kick that door down!”

Piper kicked the door a final time. “Dammit! It won't budge.”

Nora said, “Hi honey. How was your day?”

Piper jumped, “Blue! He’s got Geneva in there and he’s making demands.”

The guard said, “Geneva used to have some way of opening the door. Maybe check her desk?”

Nora looked under the desk, and saw a button. She waved the other two to the sides, then pressed it. The door clicked. She turned and trained her gun on the door, and pushed it open with the barrel.

McDonough was crouched behind Geneva, who was on her knees, hands behind her head. He was comically too large to really use her as a shield. He had a gun pressed to her head, and he called, as Nora entered, pistol pointed at him, “That's far enough!”

Nora froze, and Geneva said, “Help me! He's crazy!”

“I'm not just going to be discarded and tossed to the wolves. I'm the mayor, goddammit!”

Nora said, in a calm voice, “Mayor McDonough, I can help you, but not when you're holding a hostage. Let her go.”

McDonough shook his head, “Oh no. I'm not losing my bargaining chip.”

Worth a shot.

He continued, “Now I'll tell you what's going to happen next. I'm walking out of this city. Unharmed. With my dignity intact.”

It's several years late for that.

Piper said, “You're not getting off the hook that easy, McDonough! You have to answer for what you've done.”

McDonough glared at Piper with profound hatred, “I'm either walking out of this city a free man, or I'm killing as many of you...disgusting, filthy savages as I can!”

Nora said firmly, “You're going to stand trial, and these people are going to have justice.”

Piper added, “Lord knows, you've got plenty to answer for.”

McDonough shook his head, “Trial? Please. You know how these people feel about synths. I won't be stuck in a prison while they gloat! This is my city! Mine!”

He was winding himself up. When he raised his weapon, clearly intending to use Geneva as a human shield, Nora shot him in his right shoulder. As he shuddered under the impact, he stepped
back and Geneva dove clear. Nora shot him again, in his knee, and as he collapsed to one leg, she darted forward, reversing her pistol and clubbing him down.

When he dropped his pipe gun, Nora kicked it away, then stepped back and once again covered him with her pistol. She spoke over her shoulder, “Arrest him, officer.”

As the guard bent over to cuff him, covered by Nora, Piper said, with the clear return of her sense of humor, “Make sure you put him in the Piper Suite, Bart.”

Bart smiled at Piper, “You got it, Ms. Piper.”

Nora shook her head, “Do none of them know our last name?”

Bart and Piper laughed, then Piper turned serious, “Without a Mayor, the city council will be next in line to pick up the pieces. Let’s hope they do a better job. I don’t know when people are going to be ready for another mayoral election. But at least now, Diamond City will finally have the truth.”

Piper walked over to her wife and give her a fond kiss, “What are you doing here anyway?”

Wordlessly, Nora brought Piper over to the window overlooking the area behind home plate, and the crowd of Railroad refugees there and pointed.

“Oh my god, Blue. Why are they all here? Wait…”

Nora nodded, “The Institute. I was careless, and I got blown. Justin tried to capture me. I fucked him up, probably fatally. I had to run for it, but not before Justin let me know he was attacking the Railroad.”

“And Shaun?”

Nora shook her head, “FATHER is a lost cause. He always was, Piper. I just didn’t see it. I didn’t want to.”

Nora looked over at Piper, “But if I’m honest, there were plenty of clues. I just chose to ignore them.”

Piper said, “Don’t blame yourself. Please?”

“Too late. It’s my fuckup, Piper. I didn’t want to see what was in front of me.”

“He’s your son, Nora. Cut yourself some slack.”

“There are people who counted on me. It’s a miracle no one’s died yet. That isn’t going to last. I let them down. Now we have to clean it up. I’m angry at myself, Piper, but I’m also angry at Father. He manipulated me, and I let myself get manipulated.”

“Well, that’s a start at least. Let’s go, Blue.”

They rode the elevator down, and walked over to Danny Sullivan. Both Carrington and Sun were fussing over him. Deacon came over, “You know we had Carrington with us, right?”

Nora nodded, “But getting Carrington wouldn’t have taken Nat away for long enough.”

Deacon gave her a look of understanding and nodded. Dez walked over, “Whisper, Crier?”

Nora gave a little laugh and said, “I think, at least as far as Piper and I are concerned, at this point
the code names are not gonna work.”

Dez gave a small laugh herself, “I guess I’ve just always thought of you as Whisper and Crier. I hope you don’t mind.”

Nora shook her head. “So what’s up?”

“As interesting as this all is, every one of us is a little freaked out by being out in the open together. Can we get a move on?” Dez said.

Nora chuckled, “Yeah, let’s get you guys settled. I have just the spot in mind.”

Nick walked up. “So, I just saw McDonough, a shot up McDonough, put in the hoosegow. Your work?”

Nota nodded, “Me and Piper. But mostly Piper. She’s been on the beat over a year. And bled for it.”

Nick gestured, “So what’s the story here?”

Nora watched Dez get more visibly agitated. She turned to Nick, “If you want to know, come with me. And please, can Ellie watch after Nat?”

As she said that, one of the guards, Bart as it turned out, walked over and said, “Mrs. Wright,” and he smiled at that, “Every guard in the City is gonna make it his or her job to look after your daughter. But having Ellie Perkins stay with her might make sure Diamond City doesn’t need protecting from her.”

“Fair enough Bart.”

As the group left, Nora realized that the gate was being staffed by a couple Minutemen over from Hangman’s Alley, plus a couple Diamond City guards. And Glory, looking amused.

Nora tuned to Piper, “This right here. This is what I’m after.”

Piper nodded. “Pity it takes mortal danger to get it.”

“Real change usually requires exactly that, Thing.”

Chapter End Notes

"The Anabasis" is a series of seven...works?...novels?...tales?...by a Greek named Xenophon covering the campaign Cyrus the Younger attempted against his brother Artaxerxes II. He marched with an army, including circa 10,000 Greek mercenaries, to a battle smack in the middle of the Persian Empire, where as fate would have it Cyrus zigged when anyone could see zagging was called for, and ate a javelin (and for the fate of the poor fucker who kill stole what Artaxerxes felt were HIS XP, follow this link https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scaphism). This left a group of 10,000 Heavily Armed Greeks(TM) in the middle of Persia.

They declined to surrender to Artaxerxes, (see above re: what he did to people on HIS side), and looked around for someone, ANYone, to support against Artaxerxes (I just
LOVE imagining folks out there trying to pronounce that). Their senior officers attempted to get into service with a Persian Satrap named Tissaphernes (he he he) which was not very successful insofar as Tissaphernes betrayed them during a feast, and turned them over to Artaxerxes (this is the last time I do this to you) who at least was merciful and beheaded them (they never took any XP from him).

After which, the rest of the mercenaries basically said, "Fuck THIS shit!" and marched out of Persia five or six hundred miles, taking on all comers. Xenophon was one of them, and wrote a remarkably matter of fact account of their travails, making him the Hemingway of Antiquity (or Hemingway the Xenophon of the Modern Era, opinions vary). I hope the idea of entitling a chapter where the Railroad marches off, risking all to reach a safe place where they can survive The Anabasis makes sense.

There is also a lot of real life, your humble author knowledge as a former artillery officer, buried in the line "...the buildings limit our range a bit..." and informs a plot point in later chapters. Basically, artillery has two modes, "regular" and "high angle". As you elevate a barrel to 45 degrees the range you throw a projectile increases. This is "regular" artillery. After 45 degrees (or for artillery 800 mils, by the way...6400 mils to a circle allows for more precision) an increase in elevation DECREASES range. This is high angle artillery. Try it with a hose. (Do it OUTside, for gods sake, dummy.)

The Minutemen's artillery are heavy mortars. Mortars only have High Angle Fire (they transfer recoil into the ground using their baseplates rather than into recuperators using hydraulic fluid) So at Hangman's Alley the artillery can only depress their barrels so far (as slamming a live round into your surroundings irritates bystanders), therefore reducing the range of their artillery there as the Captain "explains". (Nora has no idea what he means, as she's a lawyer and a spy, but frankly, she trusts that he knows what he's doing).

The other bit about High Angle Fire? It takes fucking forEVER to impact. Shooting 203mm howitzers high angle over 15 klicks took 3 and a half minutes from "shot" to "splash" (a typical regular mode engagement has circa 25 to 45 second time of flight with the charge/elevation selection defaults from the Battery Computer Systems, and to avoid this turning in Field Artillery Cannon Basic Officer's Course-lite...FACBOC...just take my word for it, Ok?). This will be important later.
As they began making their way southeast past Trinity Tower, Nora looked up, and turned to Nick and Piper, “When the Sox would win a big game, they’d light the top red. It’s the little things I miss.”

Nick patted her shoulder, “So what happened? Piper said Justin Ayo caught you.”

“Yes, but there’s more. I suppose I should gather the brain trust,” and she called over Dez, Carrington, Deacon, and Glory as well.

“So this is going be way harder for me to say than it is for you to hear,” Nora started, “But The Institute is yet more dangerous than even we’d thought. The synths weren’t an end in themselves. Ever. They were a means of controlling the Commonwealth. And the planted synths? Were there for a reason.”

The others were giving her their undivided attention, so it was probably good that some other agents were minding the march.

Nora continued. “The Institute wants to supplant the population of the Commonwealth. They call it ‘Mankind-Redefined’. What they mean is the end of civilization on the surface, and total control and power for the people underground. They strategically place synths for the express purpose of making things as bad as possible for people on the surface.”

Nora went on, “The people they replace with synths, they bring to the Institute, then infect them with FEV, test them, and then release many if not most to the surface. It was what caused Virgil to flee. He was trying to stop the testing. And Father turned him down. Hard. Because turning Super-Mutants loose to create more chaos suits his purposes.”

Nora hooked a thumb over her shoulder, “That fat bastard we just took down? He had two missions. Make every non-pure human miserable and pack Goodneighbor with disgruntled people, especially Ghouls. I don’t think Father reckoned Hancock would be as good at the balancing act as he turned out to be.”

“Second, he was to make Diamond City a dominant and destabilizing force. By making Diamond City the trading hub, and then treating other traders the way they do, they keep anyone from gaining any stability themselves. He pushed everyone else down.”

Nora said, “Father has been pursuing a policy of making the Commonwealth as miserable as possible, because that’s what the Institute has been doing for a century or more. As near as I can tell, because all the way back, right after the war, the original scientists felt fearful in a world where knowledge was less valuable than brute force and they reacted accordingly. And now it’s practically a religion; ‘the surface is dangerous and full of contaminated degenerates’. Then the Directorate takes steps to make sure it stays that way.”

Piper looked at Nora stricken, “So why did Shaun…”

“Why did Father thaw me out? Because he was dying, and he wanted to know what kind of people he came from. So he let me out, not to rescue me or be reunited, but to observe through one of those god damned birds,” and she shot one, which turned out to be a normal one, ruining the effect
somewhat, “What I would do. He dragged Kellogg in front of me to see if ‘mommy’ would come for him. When I did, I’m pretty sure I was never supposed to walk back out of Ft. Hagen alive.”

Piper looked devastated, “Oh my god Blue. I can’t imagine…”

Nora shook her head, “Yes you can, Thing. Your mom was a Raider. You know exactly what it’s like to be absolutely mortally ashamed of a close relative.”

Nora looked up at her group of friends, Deacon looked like he had the time they’d spoken about University Point. There was a pure unfiltered emotion, unleavened by his habitual cynicism, evident on his face. Pity. Compassion.

And she could see it on Dez’s face, and Carrington’s, and Glory’s. And she was on the verge of shouting at them in anger, about not wanting their pity, when she looked over at Nick.

His eyes, his human eyes, were full of tears. For her, for her suffering. And she fell into his opened arms. He just held her. After a few minutes she stood back. “Thank you Nick, I needed that.”

He nodded, “Anytime, Nora. What are best friends for?”

She smiled at him and hugged him again.

She gathered herself and heaved a sigh, “So with the activation of the reactor, I’m afraid I’ve made a bad situation worse. In large part because I was fundamentally wrong about what the point was. Not that Maxson could’ve been allowed to have it either. But perhaps it would have been best if the damned Agitator had been ‘destroyed’ while we were recovering it.”

“Right about now, I’m afraid they’re using all that power to turn the dial on synth production all the way up. About the only thing we’ve got going for us at this point is that Father is weakened and dying, I killed or incapacitated Justin Ayo, and sowed a lot of doubt in Allie Filmore. Alana Secord was utterly cowed by Ayo, and she’ll be slow to act as the new acting head of SRB.”

Nora looked around, “We have a breathing period to get away in large part because she’s still figuring out how to do her job. We can’t afford to waste the break we’ve been given.”

“A break we need, because I was an idiot.”

Dez shook her head, “Whisper. You tried to save your son. And you may think I couldn’t stop you from what you did, but truly? I wanted you to succeed. I wanted you to be able to bring your son back.”

Nora looked dubious but nodded.

By this time they were approaching South Boston and needed their wits about them. So they put out security flankers and moved cautiously through the alleys, to the Castle. When they got there, Nora barely recognized the place. It didn’t look anything like the ruin where Theresa O’Brien had died. It barely resembled the fort that she’d met Ronnie Shaw in.

It was a genuine “Castle”. She could see, atop the bastions, tubes of artillery sticking up. The entire approach from South Boston was covered by multiple and redundant machine gun turrets, and the gap in the wall had been covered with wooden walls, but thick ones, made of tree trunks, not junk. The main gates were protected by a screening wall of foot thick tree trunks covered with boxy metal contraptions.

After walking through the gate, and heaving a sigh of relief, Nora was pleased to see Ronnie Shaw
striding up. “So, General. Have you brought me a group of recruits? What a batch of raggedy ass ratrunners…”

Nora shook her head, “Don’t bother trying the usual Sergeant Major tactics Ronnie. These are our…”


“And women,” said Glory.


Nora laughed. He’d been busy getting his hands on slang terms.

PAM walked up, “Agent Whisper, this unit predicts a 94.67% probability that there are subterranean facilities appropriate to the security measures needed to ensure proper levels of confidentiality and safety.”

Ronnie was goggling as Nora turned and said, “Yes, PAM, there is an extensive underground complex under the West Bastion. I was planning on putting you guys there.”

She turned to Ronnie, “They prefer to be literally underground.”

Nora waved Dez over, “Let’s get you guys settled. Ronnie, are the barracks under the Armory still unoccupied?”

Ronnie, eyes like saucers, just nodded. Nora smiled, “Sergeant Major, may I present the Head of the Commonwealth Provisional Government Special Intelligence Service? The CSIS.” Ronnie visibly gathered herself.

“Then let’s take this group of useful thugs and ruffians and get ‘em settled General. I’ll make sure the mess hall is ready for ‘em. Wouldn’t do for all your nice new snooper and pooper to get hungry. And I’ll get linens and such on the way too.”

Nora smiled, “That would be excellent, Sergeant Major. Thank you.”

Tinker Tom looked over Nora’s shoulder. “You don’t suppose she eats food from out here?”

Nora turned, “Tom, I will not allow you to poi—–you know what? Go ahead and try it if you really want to get familiar with the infirmary.”

Nora then took Dez down the stairs to the section under the West Bastion. Dez’s eyes lit up at the large complex of rooms available. And the real beds in the barracks section. Nora said, “Dez. Work with Ronnie and get yourself set up. I need Tom and PAM working at 110% and I need them doing it yesterday. I need hard actionable intel on whether the Institute is doing what I think, which is getting ready to smack us again, right here, or if they’re going to attack elsewhere.”

Dez looked up shocked, and Nora continued. “This is it Dez. It’s them or us. Right here, in and around this Fort? This is where I think the Battle for the Commonwealth is going to occur. I need to know when it’s going to start. I need you to tell me.”

She added, “And find out what that crazy SOB Maxson is getting up to. I see the Vertibirds, but I’m not hearing much.”
Dez nodded, and they returned to the surface, where Dez immediately began moving her people down, and sending runners to Ronnie to coordinate needed supplies.

Glory walked over to Nora, “Whisper. You have nice setup here. Even machine guns covering the courtyard. Smart, girl. Real smart. Let’s check up top.”

They went up some of the stairs in the Courtyard. Nora could see the rest of the repairs. The two sections of destroyed walls had thick timber substitutes, the kind of thing that would stop not just bullets but missiles.

Each of the bastions had couple tubes of artillery. At the very apex of each bastion was a missile turret sweeping across a potential 320 degree field of fire and at the “waist” of each bastion on both sides were machine gun turrets. Even along the sea facing walls, you couldn’t get to the wall without finding yourself under fire from at least one machine gun turret at every possible moment, and usually two or three, except along the west and the south avenues of approach, where you were lucky if only two or three were shooting at you.

Glory pointed that all out in an approving tone. “Good. This place is well set up. Someone here has a damn good eye for the booms.”

From behind them, Ronnie Shaw said, “You bet your biscuit eating butt they’re well set up. I set ‘em up that grease trapping way.”

Glory turned around with wide smile, and held out her hand, “They call me Glory. The ass kicking poster child of liberated synths.”

Nora winced and waited for some kind of reaction about synths. Ronnie looked at Glory for one second and grabbed Glory’s hand. “They call me Ronnie Shaw, the ass kicking poster child of old women.”

There was a pregnant pause and then first Glory, then Ronnie broke down laughing. Glory slapped Ronnie on her back, “I like you lady. You’re way more fun than these sneaky bastards here.”

Ronnie looked confused. “I thought you were all sneaky.”

Glory shook her head, “I’ve always had to be. But I don’t want to be. I want to get out there and put the hurt on the Institute.”

Ronnie smiled, “Then, Sergeant Glory, walk with me and I’ll lay out our defenses.”

“Not a Captain?” Glory asked.

Ronnie laughed hugely again. “Glory. Officers worry and sweat. Sergeants get to do the fun stuff. Like killing every mother humping biscuit eater crosses our gun sights.”

“Well slap my synthetic ass and call me ‘sergeant’ then. I can’t think of a better deal,” Glory said.

Nora shook her head and laughed to herself.

Well there’s two ladies I don’t think I have to worry about getting along. And the whole place looks pretty good to go. Time to check in and see how the former Railroad is settling in.

Nora went down a different set of stairs to the courtyard and was met by Piper and Nick.

“Ok, Blue. Did you know that all this had happened?” asked Piper.
“Well I guessed most of it from Preston’s briefing after my little screw up, but I didn’t expect it to be this supernaturally well set up. Ronnie was better than even I gave her credit for.”

“Speaking of which, where is she,” Piper said.

Nora laughed, “Stealing Glory from Dez, last I checked.”

“What?” said Nick.

“Relax tin man, she’s not starting a fight. I just think Glory likes stand up fights more, and Ronnie is filling her mind with how much fun being a sergeant in the Minutemen is. Not that she’s wrong from where Glory’s standing.”

“I’m not a tin man anymore, Nora, you saw to that.”

“And I’d do it again in a Boston minute if I had it to do over,” Nora said.

“That’s ‘New York minute’,” Nick corrected.

“Not around here it’s not, Yankees fan,” said Nora.

“Oh, will you two idiots knock it off? I’m not falling for that twice,” interrupted Piper.

“You are No Fun, Ms. Wright,” said Nora.

“My wife makes me that way,” Piper started.

“Hey!” interrupted Nora. “Damn, Ronnie’s fast.”

The stairs down to where Dez was setting up already had a neatly painted sign that read:

G-2 Section, Intelligence Headquarters, CSIS.

Nora smiled, and went down into her Intelligence Service HQ.

When she found Dez, she said, “Don’t look now Dez, but I think you belong somewhere now.”

Dez raised her eyebrows. Nora pointed up the stairs. When Dez saw the sign she looked like she wanted to pull it down. Nora stopped her. “Dez. It’s time for us to come out of the cold. Both of us. Guess what? You’re surrounded. By people who are going to protect you and yours just as well as they know how.”

“It’s a different world. Time to start thinking that way.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a reason forts started changing shapes in the 16th Century. They went from round to pointy. Because guns and cannon had dead spots if you made the bastions round. In fact many Renaissance artists may be known today for their painting or sculptures, but the first thing Leonardo DaVinci and Michelangelo put on the resumes they sent out to noble patrons? “Can design fortifications”.

Hence the triangular shape of Ft. Independence's bastions, and the best place to put those long range missile launchers is where they can shoot over the greatest arc... And there's no such thing as too much redundancy in defenses. Which Sergeant Major Shaw is well aware of.
While Ronnie continued to subvert Glory, Dez brought Nora to PAM.

“Greetings, Agent Whisper. Probabilities indicate a 76.5% chance that this location will be struck within one week, 54.3% chance that it will be struck in 4 days, 22.4% chance it will be struck in 3 days, 11.2% chance that it will be struck in 2 days, and 1.9% chance it will be struck in 1 day.”

Nora raised her eyebrows at Dez. Dez looked back and said, “You wanted to know if they were going to hit us.”

“True. PAM, what is the chance that the Institute will strike somewhere else in the Commonwealth first?”

“0.25% chance that the combination of Organization Railroad and Organization Minutemen are not the primary target of the Institute,” replied PAM, “Agent Whisper has ensured that Organization Institute will place Location Fort Independence as the primary target by placing so many high value targets here.”

Nora looked a little sheepish as she looked over at Dez, “Guilty. I wanted to make sure that they really wanted to hit us here where we’re strong.”

She looked back at PAM, “And the Brotherhood? What are the odds that Maxson will finally strike?”

PAM said, “There is a 21% chance that Organization Brotherhood will strike Location Fort Independence before Location CIT.”

“Good.”

“Warning. Organization Brotherhood predictions inherently more variable than Organization Institute predictions, as baseline is not as long, and command structure of Organization Brotherhood introduces greater variability.”

Piper said, “What does that mean?”

Nora looked over, “She means she hasn’t been studying the Brotherhood for as much time, and since the Brotherhood is, for all intents, the same as Arthur Maxson she’s trying to predict what one person will do with too little data.”

Carrington added. “Basically, what that was, was PAM saying, ‘I don’t know.’”

“Fair enough,” said Nora. “She’s not magic.”

PAM spoke up, “Odds against Institute success will increase 28% if Outpost University Point is taken.”

Deacon, who’d been listening, said, “What!?”

“Organization Institute seized Location University Point approximately 2 years ago. They maintain a continual Gen 2 occupation at this time. Location University Point has direct line of sight to
Location Fort Independence and, since Organization Railroad has begun campaign of extermination of Watchers, that is the only source of intelligence about this location at this time.”

Nora looked over at Dez. “They’ve got to be wiped out, now.”

Dez nodded. “Deacon, go with Whisper.”

Nora nodded, and then said, “But first, Drummer Boy!”

“Whatcha got, Whisper?”

“Find Ronnie Shaw and Glory and tell them to get down here.”

The little group waited, until Ronnie and Glory came down. Ronnie walked over and shook Dez’s hand, “Two things. One, your Sergeant Glory here is a heck of a potential NCO. Can she join the Minutemen as my First Sergeant?”

Dez looked at Glory, “Your life always, Glory. Is that what you want?”

Glory nodded, “Hell yeah.”

Nora touched Dez’s arm. “Dez. The more the Minutemen, and thus the Commonwealth, see synths like Glory as help and not a threat? The easier our job gets. You know that.”

Dez said, “I know, but I hate to lose her, and besides, it’s not going to fix everything.”

“I agree. About both your points. But it’s going to help. And I keep seeing hope. Not just for synths or humans, but for the Commonwealth. This is another of those steps.”

Dez nodded, “Not that you really need my permission, Glory, but you have my blessing. Go be the best soldier you can be.”

Ronnie smiled at Dez, “I promise I’ll take care of her like she was my own fishmongering daughter.”

Then she continued, “Second. You got set up goddurned fast, Desdemona. I’m impressed. In fact,” and she turned to include Nora in this, “I’ve never been part of something like this. Not this big. This isn’t just the Minutemen anymore. We’re not maintaining, we’re building. And I’m proud to work with you General, and with you, D.”

“OK, I’m drawing the line right here, right now. I get enough shit for ‘Jane Bond’,” Nora said, sharply, “The director of the spy service is not going to be god damned one letter name. She’s Dez. Or…Head. Head of Intelligence. Anything but ‘D’.”

Piper smiled, “‘D’ works for me, work for you Nick?”

Nick nodded.

Deacon said, “‘D’ has a nice ring, and that puts me next in line for the head spot,” he looked suddenly worried, “That comes with a pay raise right?”

Nora just held her temples. “This is gonna stick, isn’t it?”

Piper looked over, “I’m afraid so, Blue.”

“And my own wife is going to make sure of it. Just to fuck with me,” Nora continued.
Piper smiled, “You remember how long you lied to me about who you really were? This is the payback, Jane Bond.”

Nora looked up, “But now I’m done right? No more?”

“Maybe…” At Nora’s look, Piper smiled and said, “Yeah, Blue, this is it.”

“OK, D it is,” Nora said.

“Don’t I get a vote?” D asked.

“With these guys? Not really. I recognize the signs. Go out to the shore and yell at the tide. You’d get a better reaction. Best of luck, D,” said Nora.

D shook her head. “Fine. You were saying, Ronnie?”

“Just that. I’ve got a goldurned good feeling about this. I’ve never seen the Castle like this, ever.”

Nora said to Ronnie, “I, Piper, Nick, and Deacon are going to University Point. Now that we’re shooting Watchers out of the sky, it’s the only place Father has to get info on us from. We’re going to take it away from them tonight and then put a small garrison in. Ronnie and Glory, you handle that part. Send a detachment out in a few hours. Make sure it can hold University Point.”

Nora smiled, and said, “As you were, Sergeant Major. First Sergeant.”

Those two went out. Glory looked like she was having the time of her life.

Nora had a thought. “Tom!”

When he came over she asked him, “How much ballistic polymer weave can you make?”

“Quite a bit, more if I get supplies,” he answered.

“OK, get cracking, Tom. Armor up as many Minutemen as you can as fast as you can, please.”

Then Nora went up to the radio shed. She stuck her head in and said, “Get on the horn and tell every settlement and person in listening distance that the Institute uses big black ravens as synthetic watchers. Suggest that the Commonwealth start killing.”

He looked over, “You got it, General.”

If that doesn’t profoundly grind Father’s gears, I’ll eat my shirt. Eventually they’ll work out something else, but it’ll take a while.

Suddenly the lookout called, “Power Armor troops inbound.”

Jesus, already?!?

Nora ran up to the lookout post, the one overlooking the west approach, and then smiled and called, “Stand down! Friendlies.”

She jogged out to meet Danse and Haylen, who were walking up.

Danse looked over her fortifications, “Nice. Someone put up caging to defeat missiles,” and he pointed at the boxes bolted to the protective walls.
“Is that what that is?” said Nora.

Haylen nodded, “Yep, it’s there to pre-detonate the missile warhead so the force dissipates before it gets to the actual surface. Someone here knows what they’re doing.”

“That’s undoubtedly my Sergeant Major, Ronnie Shaw,” said Nora.

“Outstanding, let’s head in,” said Danse.

Nora leaned over, “How’s it been going Meredith?”

She smiled, widely, and Nora said, “That well?”

“Oh yes. But we were actually starting to get a bit of cabin fever. Your call came at just the right time. What’s the situation?”

Nora waved Haylen through the gate complex, and then joined Danse inside. She caught Ronnie’s eye and waved her and Glory over, yet again.

“Sergeant Major, First Sergeant, meet Paladin Danse and Scribe Haylen.”

Ronnie looked over at Nora and said, “I thought we weren’t working with the goosesteppers anymore.”

“Ummm,” said Haylen.

“They’re refugees, defectors I guess,” Nora said.

“Well why didn’t you say so, General? Welcome you two. What do I call you?

Haylen looked thoughtful, “You’re using pre-war American ranks? General? Sergeant Major?”

Nora said, “Yep. Though I didn’t start calling myself that, that was Preston Garvey, Colonel Garvey now.”

Haylen said, “Then probably the best analogs would be ‘Captain’ for Danse, and “Chief Warrant Officer’ for me.”

Ronnie stuck out her hand, “Pleased to meetcha, Captain. Chief.”

Nora smiled, “We’re a little less formal and lot more accountable to the people here, Danse, Haylen.”

Meredith smiled widely, “That’s exactly what I’ve been hoping to find, somewhere. How can we help out?”

“Walk with me, all four of you,” Nora said.

They went back up on the walls, where Nora pointed. “The Prydwen. Your former home. Here’s what I need you two to help with…tell us what we can expect from the Brotherhood. Help us wave them off if you can, get them to head back to DC. But if it comes to it? Help us fight them effectively.”

They both thought for a minute. Then Danse said, “They were my brothers. And I will do everything I can to help them, but…this is my home now.” He glanced over at Meredith, “I’m building a life here and…I have to defend that. Above anything else.”
Ronnie gave him a penetrating look, “Sounds to me like you’ve picked your side, Captain. Welcome. One more thing…my First Sergeant here’s a synth. Won’t lie to you, there’s some in the Commonwealth as bad or worse than the goosesteppers about synths. Still, I need to know where you stand.”

Meredith began laughing and pointed at Danse, “He’s a synth. And my boyfriend. I think we’re good here.”

Nora looked her team over, “Ok here’s the deal. D will work on getting us better details on what the Institute is up to. Ronnie, you and Glory, and Preston and Cait when they get here, you guys get the troops set up. I want this place arranged so that it really hurts to get at, and do not forget that they can relay right into the middle of the Fort. Plan accordingly. Danse and Haylen, work with Ronnie, Preston and Cait, but also D, about the Brotherhood.”

She and Piper and Nick went down to get Deacon, and then headed out to go along the spit isolating the lagoon from the Bay.

As they walked to the gate, Nora looked over at Deacon. “Are you going to be OK?”

Deacon said, “Somehow I always knew I’d have to come home one day. But if there’s Gen 2s there…This isn’t going to be fun.”

Chapter End Notes

Caging (or slat armor, or standoff armor) is designed to pre-detonate a shaped charge warhead, causing it to expend the focused bit of the explosion fruitlessly in thin air. All missiles and some anti-tank cannon rounds use shaped charges. (The others use a dart maybe 2 to 3 cm in diameter shot from a 12 cm smoothbore cannon, so as to maximize muzzle velocity, using fins instead of spin to stabilize the projectile...the more things change...)

At any rate, using caging to protect fortifications is as valid as strapping it to tanks.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slat_armor
As they slipped out the Castle’s south gate in the gathering dark, Nora checked the walls. They were virtually bristling with firepower. If she hadn’t had to worry about relays, she’d feel a lot more confident.

Even so, this is the best shot we have. Take the hit here, and figure out a way in and drive them all out of that hole in the ground. With the nuclear demo charge.

As they walked, Nora outlined the plan of attack to the others. Nora and Deacon would cut them a path into University Point and kill all the synths that they could from long range with Piper and Nick working as their spotters respectively. Then each building would be carefully cleared. The Minutemen garrison was due to arrive an hour after them, which should give the team a chance to clear the exterior at least.

As they approached, they could see the gate with its proclamation “Traders Welcome!” belied by the obvious skeletons in the open.

Deacon shook his head, “The people here were simple farmers and you only took the Castle a couple months ago. Why did the Institute attack them two years ago?”

Nora shook her head, “I have no idea.”

“God all these people,” breathed Piper.

At the entrance, Nora and Piper went right and Deacon and Nick went left. Shortly after splitting up, Nora heard Deacon’s rifle cough. As she scanned, Piper whispered in her ear, “Synth, 10 o’clock on top of the shack, maybe 150 yards.”

Nora saw it and it was child’s play to drop it with one shot. As they moved cautiously around the perimeter, Piper stopped abruptly. Nora froze and watched as her wife deactivated a cryo mine. Then she watched in horror as a synth rose up behind Piper, but she shot from the hip with her rifle at point blank range and the synth slumped back down.

Then Nick’s .44 boomed out inside a building across the way, and Nora saw movement in reaction at the far end of the courtyard, about 200 yards away, on the balcony of the main building. It was another synth. Nora sighted on it. That distance was the zero range and there was no wind. One shot and that third synth went down. Nora and Piper continued around the edge, checking the cafeteria and not finding anything, and then they turned to the one intact building on their side, the Credit Union.

Getting in was matter of hacking a fairly simple terminal, and the door popped open. Inside was a room that looked like it had been a teller’s area, but was now a meeting room. There was a terminal in the corner. Nora hacked that as well. There was a meeting tape on the terminal that they listened to.

It started with a male voice, “As head of the town council I call this meeting to order. In attendance this evening we have Perry Owens, Gerald Spencer, Sylvia Cooper, and myself, Bert Strickland, as acting council head.”
A woman, presumably Sylvia as the only woman, said, “Bert what is all this about? I've got wheat that needs bringing in.”

Bert said, “Yesterday I received a very disturbing visitor. I managed to record part of the conversation, it's probably best if you all hear it.” Then there was the sound of a recorder turning on and the recorded Bert said, “I don't see anything about that in my records, what was it you said you wanted again?”

The man he was speaking with said, “Don't toy with me. We know a girl here found some pre-war data related to energy research and you're going to give it to us.”

*Kellogg*!!

Bert said, “I really have no idea what data you think we have, we're just farmers and fishers. I'd be happy to ask around for you. Please, just lower the gun.”

Kellogg replied, “Look, I'm a reasonable man, but the Institute wants that data. You've got two days to get it for me and then we do this the hard way.”

*It was never going to be anything but the hard way.*

The recording within the recording ran out, and a man’s voice said, “Oh god, Jacqueline.”

Sylvia said, “What has your daughter done Gerald?”

Gerald said, “She's been saying that she was close to finding something in those old terminals she fixes up, but I don't think she's actually found anything.”

A third man’s voice, Perry by process of elimination, said, “Bullshit, I overheard her talking to that trader last week. Something about getting ten times the price for something if she sold it in Diamond City.”

Gerald replied, pleading, “Look, just let me talk to her, see if she actually has this data or not.”

Bert said, “Perry, sit down. We all need to remain calm about this. I need you all to keep this to yourselves for now, the last thing we need is to start a panic.”

And the recording ran out.

Nora shook her head, pocketed the recording, and looked at Piper. “If it was Kellogg working for Father about energy generation, there never was going to be an ‘easy way’. Kellogg was going to come in here and slaughter everyone no matter what.”

“C’mon Blue, let’s find Deacon and Nick and finish the sweep,” Piper said.

They left and found that the other two had worked their own way down the other side. All of them looked up at the main building, Sedgwick Hall. Nora slung her rifle and pulled her pistol and they quietly slipped into the building.

Clearing the first floor was child’s play, but the building was creaking from movement. Even though there was no talking and no breathing. Deacon mouthed, “Gen 2s” at the group.

Although first floor had been a series of broken down offices and chained doors, the second was clearly a living area, and there was a bedroom off the top of the stairs, with a Gen 2 sitting in it. Nora and Piper’s pistols spit almost simultaneously, twice, and the synth flopped back,
deactivated. From there the four could see one last synth on the third floor balcony.

Deacon dropped that one with a rifle shot. Across the way, still on the second floor, was a terminal. Activating it brought up a skull and crossbones logo and the legend: [Property of Jacq Spencer. ALL OTHERS KEEP OUT! ]

Nora smiled as she remembered her own pre-teen and early teen years.

The first diary entry was [Mom’s Birthday: Mom's birthday was yesterday. Dad and I left flowers on her grave. He was telling stories about her and I kind of mentioned that I don't really remember what she looked like any more. He said it was okay, but I can hear him sobbing in his room. Ugh, I can't take this right now. I'm gonna go scavenging in the flooded area. Still haven't replaced my secondary hard disk after it blew out last week, maybe I can find a new one. Sylvia also said that her network port has been acting up.]

Then [Good Find: Looks like Dad has stopped crying. Hope he didn't realize I snuck back there by myself. I've gotten so good that the Lurks don't even know I'm there. I didn't manage to find a replacement port for Sylvia, but I DID manage to pull a hard disk out of a large console in one of the lecture halls. Some of the data on it even seems to be intact. I'm going to poke around before I reformat. Who knows, maybe there is something interesting on it.]

Next: [Score!: Oh man this is big. I managed to get part of the data off of that hard disk and it seems to be some research about reactor efficiency. Part of it was corrupt, but I might be able to find the rest somewhere else. There was a caravan passing through so I figured I'd see what I might get if I could find the rest of it. He said to the right person, that kind of thing might be worth several hundred caps! We agreed to a 25/75 cut if he can find a buyer. Now I just need to figure out how to get the rest of the data!]

Reactor efficiency. And of course neither Kellogg nor Father was interested in just PAYING for it. Because then it would be known the kind of thing they were looking for. And they couldn’t have that. Oh sweetie, please tell me you guys got away at least.

The next entry read: [Today is terrible!!!!: UGH. I haven't been able to make any progress with finding the data, and the Lurks have started laying eggs again. And to make matters worse, Dad just got back from some council meeting and somehow found out I had been searching the flooded area. He locked everything up and said I'm not allowed to do any scavenging. I tried to explain about the data, and he listened, but then started acting weird and told me to go to my room and not to come down until he sorts things out. What is going on??]

The last diary entry read: [What have I done: Oh god, what did I do?! I've been getting mail from everyone in town saying that the Institute is coming and asking if it's my fault! Someone even accused me of being a synth! Somehow they must have found out about the reactor research. but it's not even complete. Dad said that it was probably just some scammer or a raider trying to trick us, but I don't know... What if it really IS the Institute? I need to get back in there and find that data somehow.]

There was a recording on the terminal, and Nora pulled it and slotted it into her Pip-Boy and listened as she opened the elevator door on the terminal and dropped down a floor.

As they listened, the young woman, girl really, poured her heart out to her father, “Okay. First I just, I want to say I'm sorry Dad. I knew I was on to something big, and thought I'd see what a trader would pay if I found it. I had no idea that the Institute would be after any of this, and now the whole town is in trouble. I know you told me not to worry, but I just know that the town is gonna vote to throw us out or worse. I wasn't lying when I said that I didn't have the data, despite
what Mr. Owens and his cronies think. That's why I have to go back in. I know the key is in there, I just need to put the pieces together. It's something with that professor. If I can find it, maybe I can give the Institute what they want, and they will just leave us alone.”

*Oh sweetie, if only that had been one of the options.*

The moved through the halls carefully, killing several ‘lurks. Only Deacon, Piper, and Nora fired, to preserve surprise.

As they made their way through lecture halls, Nora couldn’t help feeling an urgency. Which was silly, because whatever had happened had happened 2 years earlier. And yet…

Finally, they’d cleared all of the first floor and moved up to the second. A synth popped up from behind the librarian’s desk and all four guns spoke. At that point, they could hear the footfalls of the synths on the floor above rushing to their point. Each of them jumped down to the second floor, where Nora and company were waiting to drop them all the way to the floor itself.

After three synths went down in this fashion, they stopped coming, and there were no further sounds of movement in the building. The four of them finished the sweep by checking the third floor. While they were checking rooms, Nora heard Piper call, “Blue! C’mere. You should see this. You’re not gonna want to, but…”

So Nora was ready for what they found. The skeleton of someone almost 5 feet tall, in a dress. Nora knelt next to Jacqueline Spencer, and gently stroked her shoulder, feeling the bones underneath the fabric.

Nick looked around, and picked up and read a note lying next to Jacq, then handed it to Nora. It said, “Oh God, the Institute is here. I can hear them fighting outside. Dad, I figured out where the data is, but I think I'm too late. I'm sorry - Jacq”

Nora closed her eyes. Then she opened them, “Help me gather up her bones, carefully.”

The four of them carried Jacq out of the back area in a blanket they found. Nora checked the rest of Jacq and Gerald’s living area and found another skeleton, a full grown man. You didn’t need to be a detective to figure it out, but it was Nick who said, “Gerald Spencer.”

Nora went into his bedroom where she found another blanket. Going back to Gerald’s...shop?...perhaps, she checked his terminal. She read the first line of the first entry, “Josephine, I don't know what to do. Our daughter found something in the ruins, some sort of data…” and she closed it immediately.

They gathered up Gerald’s bones as well and carefully carried the Spencers outside. The Minuteman detachment had just arrived and Nora called them over. She looked at the leader and said, “Fan out. I want you to find the grave of Josephine Spencer. When you do come get me immediately.”

Piper was already finding something to make headstones out of. She managed to get some concrete and began carving out “Gerald Spencer, Beloved Husband” on it.

Nora crouched down and took another piece, and sharp piece of metal, and carved “Jacqueline Spencer, Cherished Daughter” on it. After a while, Deacon and Nick took over, carefully deepening the letters. Making sure they’d last.

Eventually the Detachment leader found them, “We found the grave, General.”
Nora nodded. “Take us there, and have some men carry these headstones. Bring shovels.”

They walked out and when they got to Josephine’s grave, Piper looked at Nora. “Put her between..?”

“That’s what I’d want,” said Nora.

“Me too,” said Piper.

The four began digging the graves. The Minutemen, who’d been watching, took over after a while. When the graves were deep enough, they carefully laid Jacq in between her mother and her father, and carefully covered them. Then they set the headstones up and the four stepped back.

Nora said, “I’m sorry this happened to you. I am going to stop it from happening to any more families. You have my word.”

Piper took Nora’s hand as they walked away.

Nora had kept Jacq’s note, and the tape.

Chapter End Notes

There's a TON of in-game content in this chapter, and this is 100% necessary, and NOT through laziness on my part.

A lot of people have said, "Oh poor Nora. She'll be so disappointed at the FEV labs."

And as I've shown, she was. But I'll point out, she was willing to bite her damn tongue even after the FEV lab incident. Justin Ayo cut off that option. She herself did not walk away at that moment. This chapter, for exactly the reason you see here? This is where Nora's patience with Father evaporates. Entirely. The fate of Jacqueline Spencer is, in my opinion, that point at which Shaun/Father TRULY crosses the moral event horizon. Almost anything else he has the (teeny weeny, utterly inadequate but nevertheless still there) fig leaf of "Not my idea."

Killing everyone in that town including Jacq is 100% all Father from planning to execution. In both senses of the word. This is the smoking gun, the mortal sin, the capital crime of Father. So you get all the poignancy and guilt of Jacq's predicament, and pain, and death.

For all that maybe 35% plus of this is copied dialog/transcribed entries? This was one of the hardest chapters to write. Only a few beat it in my opinion. It rare that a situation I write makes me cry. This one did. It was hard to copyedit this. I kept having trouble seeing the screen.
After getting the Minutemen garrison set up, they walked back to the Castle quietly. Nora had instructed the garrison that if the Institute attacked in force to retreat and report. They could retake University Point over and over if necessary, but troops were too valuable to risk in ‘resist at any cost’ last stands.

The four of them were very quiet for most of the trip back to the Castle. Eventually, Nick very quietly said, “Every time I think that I’ve seen the most evil thing, the world finds a way to top it.”

Nora looked up, “‘Evil’, Nick? Isn’t that a touch strong?”

Nick shook his head, “I was a homicide detective. I saw plenty of merely bad, but exterminating an entire village, just because they had something you wanted? That’s evil.”

Deacon finally spoke. “I knew Bert. And Gerald.”

Piper touched his shoulder, “They weren’t…?”

“Deathclaws? No. They were both good kids. Bert was kind of bossy, so it’s no surprise he ended up Mayor. But Gerry was just a nice guy, good with his hands. His daughter sounded like she would’ve been…” he ran down.

Nora spoke up firmly, “Jacq would’ve been a fine, talented, clever young lady. And her father gets a lot of credit for that.”

Deacon nodded. He was quiet for a while as he walked. Then he said, “Can you bury me with Barbara?”

Nora looked over, shocked. He shook his head, “I’m not having a premonition or anything. But I’m glad Gerry got to be buried with his wife and daughter. I’d like the same thing. I can trust you to be sure. I’ll mark where we lived and she’s buried. Not that I’m in any hurry to join her.”

He looked up with a little of his old swagger, “So, you know, I get to run you around one last time?”

Nora looked at him, “Yes, Deacon. Assuming I don’t beat you there, I will bury you with your wife. I promise.”

He nodded once, satisfied. “Thanks, boss.”

Nick spoke up, “And for every evil, there’s a good. Nora, I have never been prouder to call anyone my friend.”

“Anybody would do that,” Nora protested.

Piper said, “Will you finally stop it, Blue? ‘Anybody’ wouldn’t. You know it, Nick knows it, I know it, and Deacon knows it. It’s why he asked YOU. Just accept it. By now, you have to accept that you’re a good person, right?”

Nora sighed, “Ok. But what happens when I have to call in a strike on the Prydwen? With all those
kids?”

Piper shook her head, “I’ve watched you. You’ll only do that if you absolutely have to. I also know, if you have to, you’ll do it. We both know that. But I’m glad it’s you and not me making that decision.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t, Nora. As much as I know it may reach that point, I can’t make that call. But if that call has to be made, it will absolutely have to be made. You can do that. You can take that responsibility. Mine is to keep you in one piece afterwards if you have to make it.”

She looked at Nora, “Blue. It’s what we’re all counting on. That if a hard decision has to get made, you’ll make it. Why do you think half the Commonwealth is headed for the Castle right now?”

Piper held her wife’s hands, “Because you called them. And they know you wouldn’t have if they weren’t needed. So they’re coming. All of them.”

Nora shook her head, “What if I’ve brought you all to your deaths?”

Piper said, “What if? Now we know what kind of threat the Institute is. It’s always been them or us. It’s just that we know it now. So before matters up here get any worse, before the Minutemen and the CPG fall apart under an insidious attack again, we fight them.”

Piper went on, “I won’t lie, I’d prefer to win and live but this is a fight that needs fighting.”

“All my friends, and my life’s work,” Deacon said, “It…we’re in your hands, my friend. But we joined you with our eyes open. I think you’ve done everything you can. Eventually you have to roll the dice and see what really happens.”

Nick added “Besides, no one knows better than you how much I hate cold cases. I have to close yours out.”

Nora looked over at Nick, “For god’s sake Nick. I found the asshole. Close the case. Go back to Diamond City. This isn’t your fight.”

“Don’t you even think that. This is my Commonwealth too. I’ve made a home here, and I will not let it be torn down. Neither will anyone else, Nora. But…Piper’s wrong,” Nick said.

“I am?” Piper asked.

Nick nodded, “All those people aren’t coming because you called them. Or not just because of you. They’re coming because it’s the right thing to do. Because Father is wrong. The Commonwealth isn’t dying. It may be getting murdered, but it’s not dying. It wants to live. And this,” he gestured at the Castle, looming in the distance, “Is the Commonwealth fighting back. Literally. And finally.”

Nora was very quiet for the rest of the trip back.

By the time they arrived, dawn was breaking, and the Castle strongly resembled an anthill that had been kicked. Cait had arrived with almost the entire detachment of Regulars from Red Rocket and Taffington, nearly 100 troops, tripling the strength of the garrison at The Castle. She was working with Ronnie, getting her people settled, and more importantly, dug in.

Preston and Marie had also arrived, and brought Sturges with them. He was already knee deep in modifying the turrets for target recognition speed. And Preston had taken one look at the defenses
and suggested digging huge ditches, mining them, and using the dirt to add berms to the top of the walls for the Minutemen to take cover behind.

Ronnie had listened, gotten an evil grin, and told him how far from the Castle to site the ditches. The she carefully had the artillery target those ditches.

Nora got all this information in a morning briefing. After the first couple reports, she counted noses, and she’d stopped the group and sent a runner to bring D and PAM. Those two arrived a few minutes later, D with one eyebrow up.

Nora took one look, and said, “Oh, don’t give me that D. You should know, you’re not hiding the Railroad anymore, right?”

D shook her head, “Old habits, Whisper. I heard there was a morning briefing for principals, and it didn’t even occur to me that I was one.”

“Well you are. Congrats and/or condolences,” said Nora. “Mainly, I wanted to get PAM’s refined predictions as I assume she’s hooked into the Minuteman radio net, and has their reports as well as Railroad records and surveillance.”

PAM spoke, “This unit has raised the probability that Organization Institute will strike Organization CPG at Location Fort Independence to 99.99999%. The likelihood that Organization Institute will strike anywhere else has fallen to 0.00001%. The likelihood that Organization Institute will attack today is 38.9%. The likelihood that Organization Institute will attack tomorrow is 59.9%. The likelihood that Organization Institute will strike 2 days from now is 87.8%, 3 days from now 98.7%, 4 days from now 99.99%, 5 days from now or later 99.99999%.”

The table went silent. Nora nodded, “So probably not today, but tomorrow or the day after more likely than not. Day after that almost certain. Well, Samuel Johnson said when a man knows he is to be hanged, it concentrates his mind wonderfully. What else have we got?”

D said, “Tom is armoring up as many Minutemen as he can as fast as he can. And my people have been working the dead drops for any clue. Once piece of data…Institute activity has fallen across the board. They’re getting ready. PAMs already told us what for.”

Nora nodded. Cait spoke up next. “We’re set. I’ve put half the Regulars on th’ walls, an’ kept half back to keep an eye on the feckin’ courtyard. I’ll stay down here, an’ Preston can boss me lads and lasses on th’ walls.”

Nora turned and said to D, “Get as many Agents into the courtyard and walls as we can when the shit hits the fan. The Minutemen are going to need the help. Speaking of which, can we get the Hangman’s Alley garrison moving too? As long as the odds that the Institute will hit us here are that high.”

PAM added, “Alert, movement of Minutemen at Location Hangman’s Alley to Location Fort Independence will increase odds that Organization Institute will strike elsewhere.”

“By how much PAM?” asked Nora.

“Probability that Organization Institution will strike elsewhere increases to 0.00003%,” PAM answered.

Nora smiled, “I think we can risk it. Preston, get ‘em moving.”

Cait finished, “I’ve got th’ whole sorry lot on one on, one off. And I’ve given orders that if ye’re
off, you’d best be gettin’ yer head down fer some sleep. If we all of us die because some fecker’s yawnin’ when she’d best be shootin’, I promised to spend me afterlife as a feckin’ beann sidhe makin’ ‘em miserable.”

Marie finished, “I have set up three operating bays and a casualty clearing station for triage.”

Nora shook her head sadly. “Triage” was a French term, from the verb trier, to slice or separate. That wounded people ended up in three groups was coincidence. The first group were those likely to survive, regardless of how soon they received care. The second were those who would likely live but only if they received immediate care. The last group were those who would most likely die, regardless of the speed or level of care.

Which brought Nora up against the reality that some, perhaps many, of the people here would die sometime in the next few days. Because they were here. For her. And as much as she told herself that they had to fight the Institute, and even as much as she was absolutely right, the fact remained that for any single discrete individual who died, they’d most likely have lived out their lives in blissful ignorance of the ultimate fate the Institute had in mind for them but for Nora’s need to find her son and everything that happened because of that.

“Nora? Nora?” Marie was interrupting her reverie.

Nora shook her head. “We probably won’t get hit any earlier than tomorrow. Use the time. Make this place and everywhere in laser range of this place a deathtrap. But don’t forget that 38% is not 0%. Always be ready for a fight.”

Ronnie clapped her hands. “You all heard the goldurned General. She’s fish mongering right. Get a move on,” she turned to the orderly, “Sound NCOs call. I want to brief the ratrunning sergeants. Yesterday!”

And with that, Ronnie was out of the room. Cait, who lingered, looked over at Nora. “That lady needs ta watch her fecking language. You don’t s’pose she kisses her mam wi’ that mouth?”

Nora looked over at Cait, and began a belly laugh that threatened to bring down the walls.

“Cait, I’ve missed you.”

Cait smiled, “Well I was not perishin’ fer yer company, you great cow. You have any notion how many bloody ’lurks were in that ’fish mongering’ treatment plant? I still fecking REEK o’ fish.”

“I’m still glad you’re here Cait. I thought long and hard about sending you to watch Nat.”

“Nora, don’t ye bloody dare! Me fecking people are here. Th’ fecking fight’s here. Don’t you be doin’ sommat like that,” Cait said, urgently.

“Relax, Cait. The only way I’d even think of doing that is if there were a large enough chance Father would hit Diamond City. But he probably doesn’t even know we iced McDonough yet. Given that we keep shooting his Watchers out of the sky.”

“Sure and we thought you’d gone stone mad. Until they shot th’ first mechanical bird. Then twas lovely. A right slaughter. Yer worthless son must be goin’ fecking nuts about now, all blind an’ all. Warms the cockles of me fecking heart thinking on’t,” Cait said smiling, “And if I thought fer one second that Nat needed me…”

Nora finished, “You’d leave a Cait shaped hole in the wall on the most direct line to Nat. I’ve already caught the act, remember?”
Cait laughed. “Can the high n’ mighty General stand to down a feckin’ pint with the Captain o’ her best troops?”

“It’s well before noon Cait!”

“Yer right, better make it two pints,” and she smiled at Nora.

“Fine, you blackguard. But I need to address the troops at dusk, Ok? I can’t be half in the bag when that happens.”

That evening at 5, with the sun about to set, they still hadn’t been attacked. Most of the troops were gathered. Nora stood in front of them halfway up a set of stairs. There were lot of Minutemen and Railroad people.

There’ll be less soon.

She opened her mouth and promptly forgot her speech.

“I was going to stand up here and try and give you guys a ‘We happy few, Band of Brothers’ pep talk. But I seem to have forgotten that speech,” she started, and there were chuckles.

“I really mean it. Jesus, there’s a lot of you. It was supposed to cheer you up and make you fight harder. Apparently, I don’t know how to give that speech. So I’ll give you my closing argument instead. Most of us know that the Institute is dangerous. Most of us know the fear that comes from wondering if a loved one will be kidnapped. Some of us know the fear of wondering if it’s already happened.”

She looked over the crowd, “Sometime in the next few days I expect that we’ll get attacked. When we do, we’ll know that the Institute has done its worst. Then it will be our turn. But we have to win first. It’s not often you can truly say you’re fighting for survival, but this is one of those times.”

“The Institute wants us all dead. Gone. Out of their way. They try and turn us against each other, and they create Super-Mutants from our kidnapped loved ones,” and there was an angry murmur in the crowd, “and in the end, it’s because they are frightened of us. We terrify them. And we never terrify them more than when we band together. Look around. Some of you are ghouls. Some of you are escaped synths. Some of you are humans. But we are all citizens of the Commonwealth. Mothers, Fathers, Wives, Husbands, Daughters, and Sons. Minutemen.”

“Tomorrow and every morning until the battle is over, we’ll all be up before dawn and ready to go. Because we can’t let our families down. My daughter is counting on you to do your jobs, just as your sons or daughters are counting on me to do mine.”

“What happens in the next few days is more important than anything you’ve ever done. It may be more important than anything you ever will do. That’s all I had. Good luck to all of us.”

We’re gonna need it…

When the cheering, totally undeserved in Nora’s opinion, was over, she found herself looking at Danse, almost eye to eye despite her being on the third step.

“That was a good speech. Where do you want me and Haylen in the fight?”

Nora said, “Two things. First, she’s your girlfriend. Don’t you call her Meredith? And second, maybe you should paint that armor. Don’t want a potential target identification error.”
He smiled, “I call her Meredith in private, and good idea. I’ll get it painted right after this.”

Nora thought for a second. “I trust you two to be where you’re needed. Monitor the commanders’ radio net, though. If I need you, I don’t need to be running all over looking for you.”

“Roger that.”

Chuckling to herself, Nora walked off, and met Piper at the Radio Freedom shed. Piper perked up when she saw her wife, “Hey want to try some mess hall food? Rumor has it it’s worse than my cooking.”

“I find that hard to believe, as we don’t have a mutiny on our hands,” Nora said, but she and Piper went and had dinner. Nora was in the strange position of ‘celebrity’ as she ate, the subject of awed gazes and murmured well-wishes. Which, given her secretive past, she found extraordinarily uncomfortable, to Piper’s great, and obvious, amusement.

When they’d eaten, they went up on the walls. Piper slipped under Nora’s arm. “I’m glad I met you outside the gate that day, Nora. I wish it were under better circumstances, but I still can’t imagine you not in my life.”

Nora laid her head against Piper’s. “I know what you mean Piper. I can hardly remember a time when I wasn’t in love with you anymore.”

She kissed Piper and said, “This where I belong. This place, this time, you. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Oh good. I think Nat looks up to you, I’d hate for you to get cold feet,” Piper said, smiling impishly.

“Nope. Now all we have to do is kick my son’s ass.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the great, macho, "Convince the troops to not think about how they're all gonna die now" speeches is the St Crispin's Speech, Act IV, Scene iii, from Henry V.

The full text is here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Crispin's_Day_Speech

A (lightly) abridged version with a great soaring score by Simon Rattle and performances by Kenneth Branagh and a (surprisingly understated for at least one line) Brian Blessed is here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-yZNMWFqvM

So no points for guessing the next Chapter.

BTW, I was genuinely surprised that Triage in NO WAY was related to "tri-" for three. So I threw it in. The things you learn.
Nora’s Pip-Boy went off at 4AM. For once neither she, nor Piper, complained. They simply got up, equipped themselves and went out into the night, with just a hint of blue on the eastern horizon, out over the Atlantic.

Nick, Danse, Ronnie, Cait, and Preston were standing in a little clump. Nora and Piper headed over and caught the tail end of a briefing from Ronnie, “…so if nothing happens by 7AM, we’ll get folks in to grab some hot coffee, and get ‘em going on improving the breastworks.”

Then she said, “General. Eaten anything yet?”

Nora shook her head. Ronnie looked amused, “Officers. Private, get the General and Ms. Wright some canned Cram.” When the food had arrived and Nora and Piper tucked in, it was about 4:50. Suddenly, the machine gun turrets spun up and began firing into the air.

Ronnie said, loudly, “Goldurnit, Sturges, what did you do?!!?”

Sturges came running over. He looked worried. “Ronnie, I set them up to identify those black birds as hostile. I don’t think they’re firing at nothing.”

Nick pointed. One had gotten close, “Sturges is right. They’re shooting up black birds.”

Nora dropped her can. “Shit. Get the troops set up. I’m gonna go check with D.” And with that, she took off at a run, Piper right on her heels.

As she burst into the new underground HQ, D came up, pale and shaking. “PAM says the birds are the first step.”

PAM agreed, “Organization Institute is trying to get enough information to relay…”

“Relay into the courtyard!” shouted Nora and turned around and ran right back out, followed by a dozen Railroad agents carrying huge Gauss Rifles. Sure enough, even as she got to the top of the stairs, she saw the flash of a relay. Three synths materialized. And were almost immediately eradicated by the turrets facing inwards.

“Cait! Get the courtyard people set up!” Nora shouted.

“Already on it, darlin’,” Cait replied as she deployed her troops in back to back twosomes. D had followed Nora and said, “They can only relay three at a time at most. They’re bottlenecked.”

Nora turned and asked, “But what if they relay three Cour…” as three Coursers materialized. Nora shouted and began firing her rifle into them, joined by D, Piper, every Railroad agent and half the troops in the courtyard. Plus all the turrets on the walls facing in.

It took longer, and three minutemen were shot, but the Coursers went down. The outer turrets continued to fire at barely visible Watchers. Within a few minutes, even they fell silent. PAM came up, just as Nora said, “They’ve given up on directly relaying in.”

PAM said, “Affirmative. Organization Institute has not given up, though. There is a 99.6% probability that they are relaying out of range of local defenses, in order to build up enough force.”

“Let’s hope they attack too early, then,” said Nora. Ronnie and Preston and Cait had come running
up. Nora said, “Get ready for a standard attack. They can only relay three at a time. They’re not going to try for the courtyard until they have a good push going from outside. Some confusion to take advantage of. Cait, do not let your guard down.”

Cait nodded and ran off to brief her people. Nora shook her head. “I’m missing something. They’re not this stupid are they?”

PAM stated, “Organization Institute is not a military force. They are not used to being actively resisted in force.”

“So what you are saying, PAM, is that maybe they really ARE that stupid.”

They were now well into morning twilight. The sun was about to peek over the Atlantic. PAM replied, “Affirmative.”

Danse, who’d come over said, “A good rule of thumb in attacks is you need three to one in the open. With these fortifications, they really should wait for six to one.”

D said, “We have reason to believe that they can’t relay more frequently than once every twenty seconds based on how long the emergency relay took. That’s 9 synths per minute.”

PAM added, “If Organization Institute wishes to attack at a three to one ratio, they will need to wait 66 minutes. For a six to one ratio they need to wait 133 minutes.”

Nora said, “So if they attack in less than an hour, they’re definitely making mistakes. Between an hour and two hours, maybe they’re making mistakes, and if it’s over two hours, they aren’t.”

Danse said, “Pretty much,” just as PAM said, “The calculations have more variables than that…”

“I think we have the gist,” said Nora.

It was 5:15 AM. The sky was lightening considerably. Preston had passed D and PAM’s timetable to the senior Minutemen.

D had sent her agents up to the tops of the walls. Their Gauss Rifles were extremely effective at extreme range. Which they immediately began proving as they sniped at Synth observers in buildings in South Boston to the west.

At about 6AM, Synths began emerging at a run from behind buildings in South Boston, firing as they went. First missile turrets and Gauss Rifle equipped agents were firing. Then the machine gun turrets, and laser musket equipped troops, and finally, the troops with Combat Rifles and a few Pipe Guns.

The artillery began to get involved. Shells were dropping, blowing huge holes in the synth skirmish lines. The Institute troops were coming in waves.

Nora had run up to the wall when the firing started and looked down. “They came too early,” Danse said, next to her.

She nodded. “But they just keep coming. They don’t break, do they?”

“Not in the morale sense, but in the mechanical sense,” Danse said as an artillery round impacting nearby took a synth down in a spray of parts, “Yes, they do.”

A third wave of synths from South Boston made it all the way to the ditch, where mines began
going off. But that seemed to have been a signal, because another group appeared at the far end of
the spit. Apparently the Institute had been relaying troops in all during the night.

“Fuck! THAT’S what I missed!” yelled Nora.

Ronnie shifted half the artillery to rain down on the second attack. Wave after wave of synths were
sprinting along the spit, and missiles were raining on them as well, and the machine guns, and the
troops were firing continuously.

At least Nora hadn’t had to commit her reserves, and the troops and turrets firing down the spit did
not detract from the ones firing on the South Boston Approaches. Runners were bringing
ammunition. Nora could see that her mistake may not have been fatal. It was going to be close.

Then over the thunder of the artillery and the whoosh of the missiles and the clattering of the
machine guns, she finally heard the rotors.

The Vertibirds and their machine guns began chewing into the lines along the walls and the
courtyard. Other Vertibirds were engaging the two prongs of the synth attacks. The whole thing
had turned into another three way clusterfuck, just like Bunker Hill.

The northern missile launchers began targeting ‘birds, as their fields of fire didn’t cover either
synth avenue of approach. But there were Knights dropping into her courtyard as well as among
the synths, who were also now fighting a two front war. It was no longer a mad dash to the gates
for them, as they began to take cover and use fire and maneuver as infantry had for 350 odd years.

Cait’s troops began cutting down Knights and Danse was screaming at the Brotherhood to stand
down. They weren’t listening. Two Vertibirds blew simultaneously, one disintegrating over the
lagoon, and fortuitously crashing into a clump of Institute Synths and a Courser.

The other crashed into the courtyard near the south wall gap. Mercifully it didn’t burst into flames,
but the two Knights inside came out, highly pissed off. Nora kneeled and, as one turned towards
her, she shot the Knight through their eye piece. The other was taken down by a number of Cait’s
Regulars.

She shouted at Danse and Haylen over the din, “Come with me!”, and the four of them, Piper
having refused all entreaties to get inside, descended one of the interior staircases from a gun pit to
the Castle interior. The din was less there.

Nora looked at Danse, grimly. “The only reason we haven’t already lost is he’s attacking the
synths too. We have to call him off of us, at least.”

Danse nodded. “I’m not sure he’ll listen, but you’re right. We have to try.”

The little group made its way to the radio shed, just inside the walls. The operator took one look
and turned the set over to them. Danse consulted something in his head up display, and switched
frequencies.

“Prydwen this Danse and Haylen. Prydwen, we request parley.”

‘Parley’. I hope they kept the medieval honor to go with the arrogance and entitlement.

Oh who am I kidding? There wasn’t much honor in the actual middle ages. Why start now?

“This is the Prydwen, why should we speak with you, traitor?”
Nora called over, “Because even in the middle of this fight, I can still kill you all. Now put Arthur Maxson on, damn you.”

There was a long pause, during which Nora listened to the sounds of battle with barely contained impatience. The next voice she heard over the radio was Maxson.

“Why should I listen to you traitors?” he asked.

“Because the last thing you need is for the entire Commonwealth to rise up against you, Arthur,” Danse said.

“And why should I listen to a…thing?”

“You seem perfectly happy to do the Institutes job for it, by attacking the Castle,” Danse replied.

“I am doing my job, which is protecting humanity. You are the one who is perverting…” As Maxson spoke, Nora heard a cry sweeping across her troops. “Robot. Giant Robot!”

Nora made a ‘stretch it out’ gesture to Danse and ran up the stairs, where a laser beam from Liberty Prime swept by overhead, taking out an artillery piece. He was stationed across the small inlet to the north, near the General Atomics industrial complex ruins.

The lines between the Institute and the Minutemen had stabilized as both sides turned to confront the new attack. But Nora watched in horror as Liberty Prime called out, “Target, Red Chinese Fortress. Taste freedom loving nuclear annihilation!”

He reached behind him and pulled a Mk 28 bomb.

Oh, god. They found Madison’s hacks. He’s going to…

There was an earth shattering explosion as Liberty Prime and most of his primary ammunition load exploded. The destruction of the robot sufficiently disrupted the detonation sequences of the Mk 28s that the only consequence, other than the destruction of the sizable detachment of Knights escorting Liberty Prime, was a lethally radioactive crater in that spot from all of the exposed plutonium.

I will kiss Madison Li if we get out of this.

Nora ran back down the stairs to the radio shed.

Maxson had just stopped transmitting as an aide had interrupted him. Nora could guess why. “Elder Maxson, this is General Nora Wright of the Commonwealth Minutemen. Your war robot has just been destroyed. If you do not want to receive the same treatment, stand down immediately and depart the Commonwealth.”

There was a long pause. Then Maxson came back on the radio.

“I will never kneel to rock bangers like you. You and all of the others who stand in my way. I will destroy the Institute, and then I will return to California and bring the rest of my Brothers here, Washington and Boston, and we will create a new country!” he shouted.

The radio crackled one more time, “I. Will. Destroy. You!”

Nora shook her head. ‘That’s the craziest thing I ever heard.” Then she looked over at Danse. He shook his head helplessly.
“I don’t think he’ll see reason Nora. And we’re doomed unless the Brotherhood backs off,” he said.

Nora turned to the radio operator. “I want every available artillery battery in range of Boston International to fire a time on target on the Prydwen in seven minutes from my mark,” and she waited until the radio operator nodded, and she said, “Mark.”

He immediately turned and began calling batteries, “This is the Castle. We have authorization for DELIBERATE PHOENIX, Code Blue. Repeat DELIBERATE PHOENIX, Code Blue, Time on Target 6 minutes from my mark,” and then he began counting down, “Forty five seconds…thirty…twenty…fifteen…ten…five…four…three…two…one…mark!”

*They already had a code name for it. I’m not the only one who can imagine the unimaginable.*

Then he called, “All batteries report status.”

Nora told the operator, “As soon as each battery fires for the time on target, have them resume firing at the ditches and do not let up until I say so.” He nodded.

Nora stepped out and went back up to the wall, but her artillery radio was still tuned. The synths at each ditch were beginning to overcome Brotherhood resistance and she could see Vertibirds in the distance that were departing the airport presumably headed for the Castle.

*They’re ALL coming for me now.*

Without the artillery the synths were beginning to break out for the walls from the ditches... They occasionally incapacitated a turret, but usually Sturges got it working again. She’d only permanently lost six outward facing machine gun turrets, and the missile turret on the West bastion. The inward facing turrets were another story. The Brotherhood Knights had been entirely too effective.

The Minutemen were firing frantically, but they’d taken casualties. Of the hundred or so that had started on the walls, maybe fifty remained. The Vertibirds and Knights had taken their toll. Cait’s courtyard troops had done better, but they were down to about seventy. And Cait had committed over half of them to the walls. And was sending more whenever Preston called for them.

*We’re getting beat.*


The synths were closing in and the turrets were chattering continually. The synths were close enough that Minutemen were now throwing grenades at the approaching attackers. Nora joined in, specifically picking one of the two Coursers in the attack and pumping his head full of bullets. A full magazine and he finally keeled over, although he did feebly continue pulling himself forward.

Overhead, the fundamentals of ballistics had imposed their own cruel delay, but as she turned away from the crisis at the Western Gate, the Prydwen finally lit up with explosions.

*More sins. All those people. And once again, I’m a mass murderer.*

*You tried.*
Not hard enough.

Yes, hard enough. The one thing I couldn’t do was tell him exactly what I’d planned. But Madison was right. He wasn’t smart enough to take the offer. Or take the threat seriously.

The Prydwen burst into flames and slowly collapsed, and as it impacted the ground several more fireballs ignited. Ammunition and equipment exploding. Which in no way meant that matters were done, but the last three Vertibirds in the air banked and headed away. One for Cambridge and two directly north.

The fight wasn’t over, but at that moment, artillery fire began raining back on the ditches, first the southern spits, and then fifteen seconds later on the Eastern ditches. In both cases a lot of synths had been caught in the open.

The last fifty synths began climbing ladders up the walls, firing lasers as they climbed, and met determined Minutemen who kicked the ladders off or fired, along with the remaining machine gun turrets, down into them.

Then Nora saw a flash in the courtyard as already Stealth Boy’ed Coursers relayed in. They began firing all around them. There were only two turrets left facing in. And twenty Minutemen. Anyone who could, began firing at the laser flashes. A second group of three relayed in already Stealthed on the opposite side of the courtyard from the first group. And began firing.

Nora’s heart thumped deep in her chest in panic. Danse and Haylen and Nick were all converging on the new group as the last synth from the first group went down. The Minutemen on the side of the courtyard where there were still Coursers, went flat as the entire Castle fired on the group, dropping two of them. But one was wrestling with a figure obscured by his Stealth field. It was the last one.

There were three sizzles of laser fire, and then the top of the last Courser’s head fountained outwards. The Courser’s Stealth Boy expired moments later, and Nora, finally able to make out who was under the Courser, leapt down the ten feet to the courtyard and rolled to soften the landing. Then she was up and running.

She reached the Courser and tossed its body to one side. His victim looked up at her, blinked once, smiled a little smile, and then died.

Nora’s legs collapsed. She fell to seated position, and reached out and gently took the woman’s hand.

Nora was making small, piteous noises.

She looked up, barely comprehending what she was seeing, when Piper fell to her knees beside them both and took Cait’s other, lifeless hand.
Nora and Piper sat next to Cait for a long while. Danse had taken it upon himself to keep the others away as the two women sat and mourned the loss of their friend. Eventually Nick came up and gave Danse an eloquent look.

Danse nodded, and they both approached the women.

Nick kneeled next to them and said, “You have to let Danse carry Cait in now, Nora.”

Nora looked up. She thought for a second and then nodded. She took Piper’s hand and they both stood back as Danse, with a gentleness you wouldn’t expect from someone in power armor, knelt and scooped up Cait’s body, and solemnly brought it into Dr. Curie’s aid station.

Marie looked stricken, but not surprised, and she’d prepared a spot for Cait to lay until she could be buried. Danse placed her in the spot, then stood back, came to attention and saluted, in Minuteman rather than Brotherhood fashion. He stepped back and prepared to move away, when Nora laid her hand on his arm.

She looked up at him, “Thank you, Roger.”

He looked down at her and simply said, “You are welcome, Nora.”

She turned to Piper and the pair of them went out into the Courtyard. The Minutemen had already begun removing wounded and bodies. She looked out at the remaining wreckage with red rimmed, exhausted eyes. Ronnie came over.

“They gave a good account of themselves General. There’s still over a hundred Regulars combat ready,” she said.

Nora shook her head. “How many dead?”

Ronnie looked down, “50. And 35 wounded bad enough to be hospitalized.

“Badly,” said Piper, though her correction was practically on autopilot.

Nora looked up at Ronnie, “How many can be ready to fight again? And how soon?”

Ronnie thought. “You can have all of the non-hospitalized within two days, General.”

“Then I’m thinking day after tomorrow,” Nora’s voice was hard, uncompromising. “How many would we have if we also emptied the Garrisons and backfilled the Garrison locations with local volunteers?”

“Another 60 probably, the last 20 from all three,” replied Ronnie.

“Get them on the road first thing tomorrow,” Nora said. “And as many volunteers as can be spared from either the Garrisons or local responsibilities. Father gave us his best shot. I want to give him mine. If PAM can help me find a way in.”

Ronnie nodded and turned back to getting the Castle reorganized.

Nora went to the CSIS HQ, under the West Bastion.
She found Glory there, gesturing enthusiastically, but the room fell silent when she stepped in. Glory turned, “General. I’m sorry to hear about Captain Cait.”

Nora nodded. She turned to D, “D, PAM, come with me.”

And she left the room. Glory looked hurt.

D and PAM came up the stairs into the open and followed Nora as she led them to the command center. When she got there, she sent runners to get Preston, Sturges, and Ronnie. She herself went to collect Nick, Piper and Danse from the infirmary.

When they’d all gathered in the former ‘General’s Quarters’, Nora closed the doors. Then she turned to the room.

“First, Sturges, how are we on turret repair? I need defenses, just in case.”

“They’re all back up, boss. I’m sorry I let you down…” he started.

“No one let me or anybody else down, Sturges. If anyone let anyone down it was me letting all of you down. I never imagined in my wildest dreams we get attacked by two factions at once. And I…we…paid for that,” Nora said.

Nick, Piper, and Danse immediately tried to contradict her, but Nora just barked, “Enough! I’ve seen enough battles from a command post to know what the limits of my control were, and where my responsibility starts and stops. I should have had the attack on the Brotherhood preset the way someone had planned it. That is my fuckup. I own it.”

Danse interrupted. “No, Nora. This was the inevitable result of what happens when you fight a battle. At most you lost two minutes making sure you had a time hack. And probably not even that, since the artillery had to reload before they fired the Time on Target. That was not enough to make any difference in how many people died, including Cait. She died because in war these things happen. This is different from when you were a spy.”

When Nora looked at him in shock, he nodded, “I asked around. Learned your story. When it was just you, it was on you. But a battle is a different thing. It has a life of its own. And with all the people involved, there’s dozens of ways for random chance to affect the outcome, good or bad.”

He looked at her earnestly, “Did you do everything you could reasonably expect to have? Yes. Did your friend die? Yes. Not to be callous, but it happens.”

Nora shook her head hard, “That’s awfully fatalistic, Danse.”

He interrupted, “It’s the truth, General. And yes, I think you earned that title. You took on both of the most technically advanced groups in the Commonwealth, at the same time, and you neutralized one, and drove the other back into its hole. If you hadn’t been ‘doing your job’ and doing it as well anyone could possibly have a right to expect, we’d all be dead. That’s not me comforting you, that is my professional opinion.”

Preston, spoke up, “I agree General. I was the one who came up the artillery strike plan, but I didn’t suspect for one second that they’d hit us at the same time. You’d think if I could think up DELIBERATE PHOENIX, I could have come up with that thought.”

Haylen had come in, and said, “And I should have been able to predict that Elder Maxson might see what was going on here and pick that moment to strike. I’ll give Pal-…Captain Danse a pass. Elder Maxson was his friend. No one wants to think his friend is that big an asshole. But I should
have thought about it, and warned you. I didn’t.”

Ronnie spoke up, “And I should have kept a better fishmongering watch on the air, and known what was happening before a bunch of goosesteppers landed in my perimeter. We all could have done more. One or two things done better, maybe Captain Cait would still be here. But that doesn’t matter now.”

Piper took Nora’s hand. “I love you Blue, but they’re right. It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not, Piper, but it is my responsibility and my mess to deal with.”

Danse nodded, “You’re right about that General.”

Nora looked at him in shock, he continued, “You can take responsibility without taking blame, General. Responsibility IS your job.”

Soldier Boy has a point. God damn but I’m an idiot about seeing other people for what they really are some times. Always the worst, and never the best of them.

Nora looked over at Preston and Ronnie. “Colonel? Sergeant Major? We need a new commander for the Regulars, don’t we?”

They both looked over in surprise, but almost immediately looked thoughtful. It was Preston who gave her the first nod, followed closely by Ronnie.

“Ok, Captain. You have a point. And now I’m going to delegate some of my responsibility. Congratulations, I’m appointing you the new commander of the Regulars. You and Cait may differ a lot in command style, but the one thing I’m certain you have in common is caring about your troops.”

“He’ll need a First Sergeant,” said Glory from the doorway.

Nora looked over, “Dammit Glory! You weren’t invited.”

“You hurt my feelings, General, so I followed and listened. I kept that much Railroad in me. Now I get why you snubbed me. You were mad, but you were mad at yourself,” she said.

Nora tried to look pissed off, but then she barked out a laugh. “I’m not sure who this punishes more, him or you, but I think between the two of you, you might be able to give the Regulars a sizable fraction of what Cait gave them.”

Captain Danse looked solemn. “I know we have big shoes to fill General. I’ll…we’ll do our best.”

“Well, that’s taken care of. Getting back to it, Sturges, you were saying about the turrets?” Nora said.

“Right boss. They’re all back up. I put in several more around the Courtyard, and no one is giving me the stinkeye for it this time. Finally, I have some folks putting more mines in the ditches, and building a ramp across. “

“Thanks, Sturges,” Nor said then turned to Ronnie, “Morale?”

Ronnie looked pleased, and said, “These kids are real Minutemen, General. They’re ready to go. I couldn’t be prouder.”

Nora nodded and turned to Preston, “Preston. I need you and Captain Danse to work up a plan to
attack the Institute. I’ll give you the layout for your plans, and I have the nuclear demo pack we’re going to use, along with their own precious reactor, to destroy them. But there are some limitations. We’ll get to those in a minute. First, D and PAM…”

D nodded, and Nora said, “I need a way in. A physical way in. There has to be something. A pilot tunnel. A thin spot. Something. Find it.”

PAM said, “This unit will go over the records Agent Whisper brought back. However, this unit’s analytical models are social and strategic, not structural.”

Sturges looked up, “I can help. I’ll work with her to figure something out Boss.”

Nora nodded. “As soon as we’re done.”

She looked at the table, but especially Danse and Preston. “I have some requirements. First, anyone who wants to peacefully leave the Institute gets to. You have to build the attack around beating Coursers while simultaneously getting as many people as you can out of the Institute.”

She continued, “You don’t have to force people to leave, except for children. Even if their parents are insisting on staying, they don’t get to make that choice for a child. They can all hate me later. And Allison and Nathan Fillmore. They get taken whether they want to go or not. I think they won’t fight you, but I owe Allie, so they go no matter what.”

“Yes ma’am. I’ll work with Chief Haylen on an evac plan,” said Captain Danse. “The concept of the operation as I see it is to penetrate the Institute, set up a perimeter, and get everyone out who wants out…maybe a few that don’t,” as Nora gave him a look, “Then plant the charge and get out. And set the charge off. Killing everyone who didn’t leave.”

He looked at Nora carefully. She gave him a hard look, “First, incorporate the concept that indigenous synths will be operating with us. You need an IFF scheme. Second, I know that Father is going to die. I have to be OK with that. Because I have no choice.”

She looked off into the distance.

“I never had any choice at all from the moment I was thawed out. I can see that now.”
Night had fallen during the briefing. Nora stepped out of the Castle, and went up on her ramparts.

O'er the ramparts we watched. I've never really felt that before. I was a cynical spy. But I guess now I'm more. Because right now? Right now, I want the CPG flag up. Not just this Minuteman one. I want my wife and daughter…I want them to have a real country. I want them to have what I had. But better.

And that means I have to…I have to kill my son. Can I?

Yes. I have to. For the last few weeks, he's been showing me what he really is. I cannot let him rule over the place my wife and daughter live. I can't.

Looking north, she could see that the fire at the airport had still not died down.

I killed them. All of them, children and all. But I had to. Maxson gave me no choice.

But I will NEVER say, 'You made me do this.' That's a fucking cop out. I am responsible. It's not my fault. But it will ALWAYS be my responsibility.

Piper will help. It's what she does. I do some god awful thing because it has to be done, and she comes along and puts the pieces back together again. What would I do without her? All the good I've done should be credited to her.

Nora shook her head. Roughly wiping her tear away with the heel of her hand, she went down into the Castle.

She went down to the infirmary, where she found Marie. “Marie, please get Cait ready to travel.”

“Oui, I already have, Nora. Although I do not normally do so, I have embalmed her, and cleaned her wounds and made her look, well, better.”

Nora nodded and they walked in to look at Cait’s body. She didn’t look like she was sleeping. She looked dead. But she didn’t look like she’d died violently. Nora sighed.

“Day after tomorrow we’re going to strike, as soon as the Minutemen are ready, and Sturges and PAM find me a way in. Preston is going to be part of that attack.” At Marie’s concerned look, Nora said, “I’ll do my best Marie, but I need him to lead the Minutemen during the attack. I’m going to be…busy.”

“I want you to take Cait to Sanctuary. Help build a memorial grave for her in the Cemetery. But we have to go through Diamond City,” Nora said, eyes welling up, “I have to tell Nat. I hope she doesn’t hate me.”

Marie laid a hand on Nora’s arm. “She will be upset Nora. She may even say that. But she doesn’t hate you. She loves you and you know it. But you are right. You and Piper are her family. She needs to hear it from you.”

“In the morning, Marie. We leave at first light. I want you guys to get to Sanctuary by nightfall.
And I need you to bring Nat. If I live, we’ll be having a ceremony for Cait. After I keep my promises.”

Nora left and headed for her temporary quarters. When she got there, Piper was holding a towel out to her. She was already damp from her own shower.

“I don’t feel like it Piper. I just want to collapse,” Nora said, at Piper’s implied statement.

Piper shook her head, “You not want a shower? No. Strip, and get in. I’ll get you clean clothes.”

Nora gave in, and undressed. Turned on the shower, and climbed in. As she soaped up and then shampooed her hair, luckily kept short, she relived that horrible moment.

She could see, in slow motion, as the blurred form of the Courser struck someone down. She could only see boots underneath. The rest was obscured by the Stealth Field. And she heard, over and over again, three shots from an Institute laser. She never heard the shotgun cough, but she remembered the sight of blood, brains, and bone leaving the field, and suddenly coming into view as though some obscene flower were blooming from nothing.

And then the field expired. And she could see Cait’s leather pants, and the jacket she’d bought from Becky Fallon that one time. She didn’t remember how she got down from the wall, but she’d been told she jumped, did a some kind of rolling fall, and then rolled to her feet. She maybe recalled some blur resembling that. She did recall the mad careless sprint across the Courtyard, not caring if a third group was about to relay in. She remembered grabbing the Courser by the back of his coat and throwing him to the side.

And she remembered the look on Cait’s face. Her eyes recognizing Nora, and the little smile that said, “I’m glad ye made it t’ me, here at th’ end.” And then watching the light go out from behind her eyes.

Nora found herself sobbing against the shower wall. She felt Piper’s hand on her. She turned and Piper wrapped Nora in her arms. She’d undressed to get back in the shower, but there was nothing sexual about it. Just Nora wrapped in her wife’s arms, feeling the heat and love, flowing from Piper to her, comforting her and enveloping her.

Wordlessly, Piper took Nora from the shower, and dried her off, and handed her panties and a t-shirt. Then Piper dried herself off, again, and dressed the same. She took Nora’s hand and led her to bed. Nora laid down and Piper turned out the light and climbed in, and then held Nora again.

Nora could feel the heat of Piper against her back, and the weight and strength of Piper’s arms around her. After a while she said, over her shoulder, “We have to tell Nat.”

She felt Piper’s nod, “I know, sweetheart. And she should go with Cait to Sanctuary. While we go to the Institute.”

“Piper…,” Nora started.

“No. Not this time Nora. This time I go with you. I will never ever be separated from you again. I will not make that walk to Sanctuary again. Whither thou goest, wife, there also go I.”

“I…you’re right,” Nora kissed one of Piper’s hands. “Together forever.”

Piper kissed the back of Nora’s neck. “Now go to sleep, darling. We have some busy days ahead of us.”
The next morning, Ronnie Shaw woke the pair. “There’s some chow, but you two have work to do today. The Doc is about ready and Colonel Garvey is impatient to get started.”

Nora nodded, and said, “Thanks, Ronnie.”

Ronnie looked them over and said, “You’re lucky to have a wife as good as her, General. Believe it.”

Nora smiled as the two of them got up, “I could never ever forget that, Sergeant Major, but thank you.”

Ronnie nodded once, and then smiled, did an about face and marched out, whistling.

Piper said, “That woman is obscenely cheery in the mornings.”

“Yeah, but she’s right about you, Thing.”

“I know. She kinda grows on you. Let’s eat,” Piper instructed.

They went to the chow hall, where the food was quite good. In fact…

Nora dropped her fork, “Great Aunt Kathleen’s…”

“Irish Breakfast,” Piper finished. “Yes. While you were making other arrangements, I described it to the cook. He’s not bad, with a recipe at least. I thought that everyone who was here deserved a good and filling breakfast after yesterday.”

Nora nodded, and her voice thick, she said, “And an Irish Breakfast is appropriate because…”

Piper reached out and took Nora’s hand, “I know, Blue. It hurts. But it will get better.”

Nora nodded. Then she looked pained, “But first…”

Piper said, “I know that too. And it won’t be easy. She may say things. She’s said them to me at times. But you know she loves you right?”

Nora nodded, “Yes. But I hate hate hate having to hurt her.”

Piper shook her head, “The Institute hurt her. The Brotherhood hurt her. You’re just the messenger.”

“They shoot messengers.”

“Maybe. But not forever, and I know my sister. Not for long.”

“Any time is too long.”

Piper smiled fondly at Nora. “I love how much in love you are with Nat, you know that? I ‘mom’ed her, but she never had a MOM mom. I was her big sister that took care of her sure, but not her mom.”

Nora finished her last bites, and waved for Piper to finish. “This isn’t going to get any easier no matter how much I put it off.”

Piper nodded and scooped up the last bites.
They walked out. Nora was shocked at the twenty person detachment Preston had arranged. She went over and asked, “Isn’t that a little much as a honor guard?”

Preston shook his head. “I’m only sending eight to Sanctuary. This is to guard you.”

He went on, “You are now one of the most important people in the Commonwealth. That makes you a high value target. I’m pretty sure if he gets a read on you, your son would send a hit squad. He has to know you’ll be coming for the Institute. And based on what you’ve said, he isn’t going to let sentimentality stand between him and ‘humanity’s only hope’.”

Nora shrugged and said, “I just feel like it’s really ‘high profile’.”

Preston smiled, “General? When we take out the Institute you can go back to sneaking everywhere you go. Until then? You go with at least a squad. Everywhere.”

“Looks like you have your Praetorian Guard, Nora,” called Nick, as he strolled up.

“You’re coming too, tin man?”

He shook his head, “Waiting here. I want to be ready when we head out to get into the institute.”

“The Three Musketeers, huh?” said Nora.

“Yep. Plus, I told you, I hate cold cases. I am going to close this one out right.”

The group left the Castle headed out through through Southie. As a result of a patrol larger than many entire Raider groups, the walk through South Boston was uneventful and they were at Diamond City by 10AM.

The walls had never looked as naturally ominous as they did at that moment. Nora looked over at Piper, took a deep breath and walked in. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, they saw Nat and Dogmeat at their usual spot.

Nora closed her eyes briefly then walked over and said, “Nat, could you come with me?”

“Why, did I do something wrong?” Nat asked.

Nora shook her head, “No sweetie, but I have some news for you and I’d rather tell you at home.”

At that, Nat looked up and seeing Piper, looked confused. Piper came and took her hand, “C’mon Nat,” she said, “Let’s go home for a sec.”

Looking suspicious, Nat came with them the short distance home. Dogmeat followed, and when they got into the house, Nora sat down and looked at Nat. “Nat,” she said, “There’s no good way to tell you this, but I’m afraid your Aunt Cait is dead.”

Nat stared at Nora, then looked over to Piper for confirmation. As if to check and see if this wasn’t all a horrible joke. Piper, her eyes swimming, just nodded and came over and hugged Nat.

Nat, almost in shock, asked, “How?”

Nora said, “How did it happen? We had a big battle with the Institute and I called everybody to the Castle. There were Coursers relaying in…and one of them, the last one, he relayed right next to Aunt Cait. I’m sorry. There was nothing I could do.”

“Did you even try?” Nat asked, sharply.
“Oh honey, I got over there as fast as I could. I really did,” Nora said.

“You could have not called her. Sent her away. Why didn’t you? Why?” Nat said, voice rising.

“Sweetie, I thought about it, but Cait would’ve hated being sent away.”

“But she’d be alive then. She’d be alive. Not..d-d-dead. You should’ve sent her away!”

And with that, Nat ran to her room. Nora got up to follow, but Piper laid a hand on her wife’s arm and shook her head. “Give her a little time, Blue. I know her.”

Dogmeat ignored Piper and went into Nat’s room. Seconds later, Piper and Nora heard great wracking sobs from inside. This time Piper didn’t stop Nora, and they both climbed the stairs and looked into Nat’s room.

Nat was on her bed, arms thrown around Dogmeat, who was sitting up on her bed and leaning into the girl, his head laid over hers. Nat was sobbing uncontrollably. She was making muffled noises.

Dogmeat looked at the two women, his eyes soulful. You’d almost swear he knew exactly what was happening. It was certain he knew his person was hurting and he was doing what any good packmate would do. Piper and Nora waited for the sobbing to subside, then Piper sat down next to Nat on the bed.

She rubbed Nat’s back, and said, “You know it’s not very fair to blame Nora, right?”

Nat stiffened for just a second, and then, as though a balloon deflating, relaxed, and nodded, her face still buried in Dogmeat’s fur. They heard a muffled, “I know it’s not mom’s fault. But I don’t want her to be dead. I don’t.”

Nora sat down next to Nat then, and said, “Oh sweetie. I feel the same way. We all loved Cait. Especially for how much she loved you, and was your friend. I’d give anything to have her back, but we can’t do that. She’s gone. But we can remember her.”

“How?” Nat asked, coming up for air. Her face was blotchy and puffy, and Nora had never wanted to hold a child as badly as she did in that moment. But Dogmeat was still comforting Nat, and Nora had to accept how important that was to Nat.

“Well, eventually, by keeping her in our thoughts, and telling stories about her. But right now, Dr. Curie and some Minutemen are taking her to Sanctuary. We’re going to have big ceremony after…”

“After? After what?”

Nora said, “After we make the Institute pay for what they did to Cait and for hurting Danny Sullivan, and everything they did to everyone else. Piper and I are going to figure out a way to get in. And that’s going to be that.”

Nora went on, “And then we’re going to have Cait’s funeral. We’d like you to go with Dr. Curie and stay up in Sanctuary.”

“Not Preston?” Nat asked.

Nora shook her head, “Preston is helping lead the attack.”

“Attack? Mom?”
Nora nodded. “It’s not ‘spy stuff’ this time, sweetie. They attacked us. So did the Brotherhood. We’re fighting back now.”

“Is that why their blimp blew up?”

Nora nodded. “Yes. The Minutemen…I…attacked it with artillery. I promise, Nat. I’ll tell you everything someday. I won’t hold anything back. When you’re old enough.”

Piper looked at Nora, surprised, “Really Blue?”

Nora said, “Only when she’s old enough. But I won’t ever hide anything from you two. I hid things from you when we met, Piper. Never again.”

“Can I bring Dogmeat? With me I mean,” Nat asked.

Nora chuckled softly, “Not only can you, I think I’d prefer it. If he can tell when you’re upset and come running, I trust him to protect you no matter what. Make me a deal?” Nat nodded, and Nora went on, “If he starts acting upset or nervous, you pay attention. OK?”

Nat looked serious, then nodded. Nora opened her arms, and Nat hugged her. Nora murmured, “I miss her so much too, Nat. But she’d want us to remember her with happy thoughts. I love you.”

Nat took a deep, cleansing breath and then said, “I love you too, mom. I’m sorry about what I said.”

“I know honey. You were upset. You wanted someone to blame. So do I,” Nora said. “And I’m going to go give the person responsible a piece of my mind.”

Chapter End Notes

This was one of the three hardest chapters in the book to write. Because I wanted to get Nat's reaction right. And I still don't think I nailed it, but I've gotten it as polished as *I* can make it, absent two things.

1) Being much closer in life experience to a 14 year old girl dealing with a family member dying unexpectedly and violently. I suspect there’s a whole range of reactions, including the one here (drama followed by acceptance), but I also suspect that Nora got let off a little easily here. Mainly because;

2) Making the next half a book about angry teenagers and blame shifting and family drama would be a valid storyline, but it's not the story I'm telling here. 50,000 words of Nat or Nora or both holding the idiot ball (or taking turns) is not a story I'm capable or desirous of telling.
Nat began packing and Nora left the room, and went to the safe Codsworth had built in Piper and Nora’s bedroom. It was unlikely that anyone would mess with their possessions now, but when she’d first moved in, burglary had been a possibility.

Nora reached in and retrieved a package she’d kept for over four months, since Oct 23, 2287. A gold wedding band knotted into a scrap of a baby blanket. It went into the same pocket where she was keeping Jacq’s tape and note, and Virgil’s recording, and the University Point Council tape. Piper tapped her shoulder. “What’s that for, Nora?”

“I’m collecting my exhibits Piper. The supporting evidence.”

“But that’s what you use for a trial, Blue.”

“Piper, I’m not just a spy. Or a General. I’m also a lawyer. These are my exhibits.”

Piper looked serious, “I spend so much time thinking of you as my holotape hero…I’m not sure I realized how much of this…the CPG, the building of alliances, the political maneuvering you were trying…was because you actually want to bring back laws.”

Nora smiled sadly, “Justice, actually. Laws aren’t necessarily justice, Thing, but until you have laws justice is a result of random chance. I’m not having that. You remember back at the Abernathy’s? That’s what I want. And for that I need justice, and for that, I need laws. And the first step to having laws is subjecting yourself to them.”

“So what, we’re going to stop a battle and conduct a trial?” Piper asked.

Nora shook her head, “Nothing so formal. But he’ll know why I’m there. There won’t be any ambiguity about that. It’s going to be clear that I’m not just there because I can be. And that it doesn’t have to be the end of the Institute, just that version.”

Piper took a deep breath, and said, “Ok, Blue. Let do this. I’ve never been a trial reporter.”

And to Nora’s surprise Piper went and rummaged in her desk, emerging triumphantly with her recorder and a pouch of recycled ‘tapes. She hung her recorder over her shoulder and shoved one tape in. The rest she stuffed in the pocket that didn’t hold her pistol.

Nora smiled and they gathered Nat, who still looked ready to burst into tears, and Dogmeat, who was still standing so that he was touching Nat. They walked out to the caravan, where Marie opened her arms and hugged Nat, “Oh, ma chatounette, I am so very sorry.” Nat’s arms went round Marie slowly.

Preston knelt down, and said, “I’m trusting you to look after my eight Minutemen, OK, sweetheart? And Marie. She needs looking after.”

“Why eight Mr. Garvey?”

Preston looked very serious, “That’s how many I need for Captain Cait’s funeral. They’ll practice when they get there. For the funeral, seven of them fire a salute three times. Can you help them
sometimes by making sure they count right?"

Nat nodded. Then she looked at Nora, “Can I see her?”

Nora nodded gently, and she and Marie took Nat to the wagon carrying Cait, and Marie pulled the blanket back. Nat stood very still and then looked up at Nora, “She’s really gone isn’t she? I was hoping it was all just a horrible bad dream.”

Nora caressed the side of her daughter’s head. “Yes, sweetheart. She’s really gone. But I want you to help Marie and the Minutemen plan her funeral. I don’t think she’d love anything more than to know you’d put your touch on it.”

Nat looked very serious, and then nodded, “You’re right. I’ll do that for her.” She looked up at Nora, “It just really hurts, mom.”

Nora kneeled and held Nat, “I know. But it really does get better. I promise. The funeral will really help I think.”

Nora stood up, and Piper held her sister. “Be good. Be strong. Take lots of notes. Because when the time comes, you’re writing her obituary, Nat.”

Nat looked up, shocked. Piper nodded. “It’ll be your first byline. Probably not your last, if I know Wright women.”

“OK, Piper. I’ll do good, I promise.”

“Well,” said Piper, then smiled at Nat.

Nat smiled back too. Sort of.

Then Cait and her procession, plus a little reporter and her dog, went north towards Sanctuary. Nora, Piper, Preston, and the General’s Guard turned back towards the Castle. Soon they lost sight of each other.

By noon Nora’s group had reached the fortifications. Ronnie had been busy. Every single turret was back up and functioning. The crashed Vertibird had been removed from the courtyard, and all the mines re-laid in the defensive ditches. They’d rigged removable bridges over both sets of ditches, and all the bodies had been taken away.

They’d managed to salvage 6 sets of Power Armor and the Minutemen had built racks for refurbishment. Sturges hadn’t gotten to them, but Chief Haylen was bossing her assistants in repair and using the whole exercise as a training opportunity.

The center of the courtyard had been turned into a training area by Captain Danse, who was running half the Regulars through an obstacle course of planters and platforms and stairs and ramps, and the other half doing target practice. Each valid target was surrounded by little silhouettes with ‘NO’ painted on them.

Nora and Preston strolled over. Nora said, “Kind of unusual obstacles and target practice, Danse.”

Danse turned and popped a salute, and said, “General, ma’am. Colonel, sir. Yes, ma’am. I studied your accounts of the Institute and I and some of the volunteers built the course. I want them used to maneuvering in that kind of environment. And the target practice is because I believe that the civilians that we need to escort to the relay are liable to be mixed in with synths. So we practice shooting in tight quarters.”
Preston raised his eyebrows. “That’s ingenious Captain. I’m sure the Regulars will be ready when we are.”

“Cait’s Own, sir.”

“Excuse me?” said Preston.

“Yessir. I suggested we needed a new name for the unit. After some wrangling we voted. I’m proud to say they took my suggestion for the name,” said Danse.

“You suggested ‘Cait’s Own’ Danse?” Nora asked.

He nodded. “Ma’am. Nora. In the single day I saw her with those troops? Getting ready? The way they looked to her? I have never ever served with a more natural leader. As short a time as we spent in the same army, I have never been prouder to be in a unit than I was to be in the Minutemen with Cait.”

“Captain Danse…Roger…I was wrong about you,” Nora said. “I thought you were arrogant, when I should have seen your justifiable pride in service.”

She continued, “I’m glad to have you and Meredith with us, and I would be honored if, at the end of all this, you commanded Cait’s honor guard at her funeral.”

Danse said, “It would be my very great pleasure, ma’am.”

“Just don’t be surprised if a 14 year old girl maybe has you doing some strange things.”

“Ma’am?”

“My daughter, Nat. She might take a hand in planning Cait’s funeral. Cait was like family to her.”

“Absolutely, ma’am. ‘Operation Fluffy Bunny’ in effect ma’am,” he smiled.

“I was wrong about your sense of humor as well. Not that wrong, but wrong,” Nora said.

Danse saluted, and went back to training.

Glory broke off target practice long enough to say, “He’s not as single-minded as you thought he was, Whisper. I hear from the troops he’s a tad more spit n’ polish than Cait was, but they like him just fine too. He keeps ‘em thinking they’re special, like Captain Cait did.”

“And you, Glory?” Nora asked.

“Of course they’re special, I’m their First Sergeant. They’ll be special or they’ll be sorry little kiddies,” she smiled.

“Does it occur to you, Glory, that my best unit is led by two synths?”

“Yeah. And won’t that be a kick in the balls to the Institute when we come calling? ‘Hi, folks! We’re baa-ack!’” Glory smiled nastily.

Nora grinned and sent Glory back to training. She and Piper headed for the CSIS HQ under the West Bastion. As they went down the stairs, they heard Nick’s distinctive voice, “Are you sure about this? Absolutely positive?”

As they came around the corner, Sturges was saying, “You bet. This is it,” at the same time as
PAM said, “Nothing is 100% certain Detective Valentine, but there is a 99.99% likelihood that this route, while problematic in other ways, will lead into the Institute.”

Nora’s ears perked up. She called, “You two have something?”

Sturges turned, “That’s right. We were hoping to find something worthwhile after all the time PAM spent cracking the encryption. And we did.

He showed Nora a schematic on a terminal, “One of the things in the data you stole was a plan of the whole Institute complex…including the older sections that used to be part of the old CIT.” He gave Nora a significant look. “Turns out they’re still using an old water pipe that runs out into the Charles. Brings in cooling water for their reactor. The entrance is underwater, and blocked by a security grate. Also, the whole pipe is labeled a high radiation danger.”

He looked apologetic. “But there isn’t any other way in so it’s this or nothing.”

Nora patted his arm, “That’s OK, Sturges. Swimming in a Hazmat Suit sucks, but it’s not impossible.”

He perked up a little. “Thanks boss. I wish there was a better way, but if there is, it’s not in this data.”

He pointed at a section just inside the entrance. “I did manage to pull the code that unseals this grate. So all you have to do is survive the trip. Especially this vertical drop here. It’s about 15 feet. Hopefully there’s a pool. Soon as you get in there, you need to access the main relay control and use this holotape PAM set up to teleport everybody into the institute.”

“OK. Drummer Boy!”

“Yeah, boss?” he came over.

“Round up Colonel Garvey, Sergeant Major Shaw, Captain Danse, First Sergeant Glory, and Chief Haylen and he them meet us here. 15 minutes.”

He ran from the room. Nora called over Deacon and D. Making small talk, she asked, “How are things going?”

D said, “It’s a little strange to know that the Institute knows exactly where we are but can’t get at us.”

Deacon added, “Every now and then some Minuteman will come up to me and tell me they get it now. Danse and Glory have really done a number on the redneck factor.”

He smiled, and went on, “It doesn’t hurt that Ronnie Shaw uses some…unique…words every time she catches someone saying something racist. Not that she’s had to for any of the guys and gals in Cait’s Own.”

D then said, “So we really are safe here. Or as safe as we can be. And because we know what Watchers are, right now all the safehouses are moving. But then, they have to be moved and we know there aren’t any synths escaping. They’re all waiting on Z1’s signal. Or, PAM thinks that at least.”

“And Tom has been continuing to work on putting ballistic weave in the Minutemen’s uniforms. Pretty soon, you’ll have a whole army with equipped with the stuff.”
She finished, “Even Carrington is coming around. He’s the most natively suspicious. I think the
degree to which the Minutemen were pitching in in here during the battle helped.” At Nora’s look,
she added, “While the battle was going on, a detachment of volunteers posted themselves at the
bottom of the stairs to help guard the way in.”

“Good. At least one thing I wanted seems to be happening at least,” Nora said.

The group she’d sent for arrived and she turned to them. “Gather ‘round. We’re going to have a
final briefing and then Piper, Nick, and I are going to head for the Institute.”

“You found a way in, I take it,” said Haylen.

Nora nodded. “Through the reactor coolant tunnels. Sturges and PAM found it.”

“Aw shucks, boss. I just made a list of things they’d have to have in order to live and then figured
out everything from that list they couldn’t relay in in bulk. PAM helped me run the numbers,”
Sturges said blushing.

“Well no one else came up with something, so let me pat your back, Ok?” Nora said, “Danse,
dazzle me with your military brilliance.”

Danse nodded, “Step one requires that you and your friends get in, and then use PAM’s relay
hijacker but from the source this time. We’ll bring through waves of troops, three at a time again.
Think of the central elevator as a bridge. What’s the best way to take a bridge?”

“You got me,” said Nora. “Talk the guard into looking the other way?”

Danse smiled, “Close, but no. We have to take them from either end. You never fight your way
across. Which means that when we have twenty or so Minutemen, me, Haylen, and Glory, plus
your group will make our way through this section, labeled ‘Old Robotics’. It links the relay area
and Bioscience. We’ll seize the bottom of the elevator, form a perimeter and bring in the rest of the
troops down that way.”

Nora looked at the plans, “Looks good.”

Danse asked, “So the plan is timetabled, all you have to do is pick H hour. When do we go?”

“I was thinking that we should try to arrive in the Institute at 9 or 10 AM. While normally you’d
want to do this kind of thing at night, synths don’t sleep, and the people we’re trying to evacuate
do. So there’s no reason to do this in the wee small hours, and at least one good reason not to.”

D nodded, “Also, the synth uprising we were planning should start when Z1’s people realize
what’s happening. Someone should go in that first group, to liaise with them.”

Deacon groaned, “Fine. Do I at least get hazard pay?”

“You get as much hazard pay as you’ve been all the other times I ask you to something outrageous,
Deacon,” D replied.

Deacon just groaned again. D went on, “When you make contact with Z1, have his people make
purple armbands.”

Danse nodded, “And Cait’s Own already knows that purple armbands equal friendlies,” then he
said, “So with Z1’s people’s help we then spread out, while maintaining a tight hold on the bottom
of the elevator, and get the scientists and synths evacuated. If they’re not shooting at you, you let
them go up.”

Nora interrupted, “Except SRB. You disarm them. They’re prisoners. Also a guy named Dean Volkert. I personally observed crimes against humanity from him, using people as experimental subjects. We can have any necessary trials after we get out, but there’s likely to be some people surprised that synths will be allowed to testify against them.”

Danse continued, “When we’re sure we’ve evacuated everyone that wants to go, and every child, we plant this charge on the reactor,” and he held up the nuclear demo pack. “Sturges will rig it for remote detonation. We leave the way we came, and pull back, like a collapsing bag, assuming there’s still any resistance. The team at the reactor will relay out, and then we’ll blow the place.”

Sturges asked, “Where do we evac the synths and scientists to?”

Nora answered, “Send ‘em to Sanctuary. Madison’s up there and she’s a familiar if not a universally loved face. We’ll figure out where they can settle later. Anything else?”

Sturges said, “You’re gonna need me to run the relay, so I’ll come through with the first group.”

Nora nodded. “I think that’s it. Except I need three Hazmat Suits for getting through those damned coolant tunnels.”

“Two,” corrected Nick.

“Three,” Nora said firmly, “Have you forgotten you can get sick from rads now? Welcome back to the human race, Nick.”

Chapter End Notes

"Chatounette" is a French term of endearment that translates to "Kitten". Nat is kinda adorable and kinda spiky. Like a kitten.
On the Approaches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sturges had put the entrance coordinates into Nora’s Pip-Boy. They’d gotten three Hazmat suits. And looking at the location, Nora had called a group of volunteers from County Crossing. And then watched, with almost no outward show of emotion, as artillery utterly pounded the Raider Camp on the north end of Longfellow Bridge.

They were in her way. The headquarters was literally above where she needed to go. When she was convinced that the camp full of Raiders had been utterly annihilated, she and her companions went in. It was about 6AM. It was Saturday, March 10th, 2288.

Nick was still complaining about the Hazmat Suit. Nora laughed. “Are you carrying your damned Trenchcoat in a waterproof satchel or am I?” called Nora.

“Well, you’re the only one carries a satchel, Nora.”

“Y’know how you get it back, right Steve? You put your lips together, and blow.”

“Oh for god’s sake Nora. Can’t you let it go?”

Nora shook her head, “I don’t think so. I do have one question though.”

“Shoot.”

“Has Ellie seen Bogie holotapes the way Piper has apparently seen every Bond flick?”

“I’m pretty sure. Why?” Nick asked.

“Huh,” Nora said, “Interesting.”

“What are you talking about?” he said.

“Those were her sketches of you that we used. She seems to have run you and Bogie together in her mind.”

“I guess that makes sense. He played private eyes. I am one. And if I’m honest with myself, there is a resemblance in my old body,” Nick allowed.

*Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt. Yenta is just gonna let that one lie there for a while Nick. Although it’s good to know if I ever have to hide something from you, just associate it with Ellie and let the blind spot work for me."

“Ok, the culvert should be right here. So now we get wet. Weight belts on. And for fucks sake, put the bungee cords around your calves,” Nora called. Unlike a lot of what she was doing as General of the Minutemen, this exact situation had been covered in her time at the Farm. No one wanted a bunch of air to gather in the feet and legs of their drysuit. An upside down, uncontrolled ascent might be dangerous, but it was also undignified. To say the least.

They all sat and pulled on fins, then Nora waded in, followed by Piper and Nick. Fairly quickly Nora found the grate, semi-concealed under a rocky outcropping and weeds. She led the rest of them in. After about 100 yards it opened into a room. There was another grate leading to a pipe one
third full. Nora ditched her fins and motioned for the other two to do so as well.

There was a keypad on the wall. Sending a silent prayer to a deity she had long ago stopped believing in, Nora punched in the combination Sturges and PAM had provided. The grate opened. The way into the Institute was clear.

The three of them slogged into the tunnel. According to the schematic, the drop off should be…

The three fell a little less than 15 feet. Maybe 10. Nora was ready to make a proper fall, but in the event it wasn’t needed. They landed in a 10 foot deep pool. They’d found themselves in an infrastructure passage. There were a number of tubes, labeled “Coolant” and with arrows.

“Well, nice of them to let us know which way to go,” observed Piper.

“Nothing like courteous hosts,” agreed Nora.

Nick just drew his hand cannon. Ever since he’d taken Kellogg’s .44 he’d been careful about pulling his weapon. Now he looked ready to fire at the first sign of danger.

Nora and Piper pulled their pistols as well. The little group followed the tubes. There were some vermin, but nothing they couldn’t easily handle.

They moved through a junction, and had to do another drop down to a lower level. As the three made their way through the tunnels, Nora heard familiar growling.

“Ferals, Blue!” called Piper.

“Yep,” said Nora. As at Sunshine Tidings, the three got into a little circle. The booming of Nick’s pistol drew all of the ferals down on them. Which merely served to spare them the trouble of stalking and flushing the ferals individually.

They moved through several irradiated sections. Nora’s Pip-Boy was going bonkers but almost nothing got past the seals and respirators of the Hazmat Suits.

“It’s almost like the Institute has been dumping radioactive material down here deliberately,” said Nora.

“I bet that’s exactly what’s been happening,” said Piper, “So in the unlikely event someone manages to get inside, well…” and she pointed back over her shoulder towards where they’d left a pile of feral corpses.

“Or tries to get out by that route,” said Nick.

“I doubt that Nick,” said Nora, “Everyone human I met inside seemed pretty contented. The synths on the other hand…”

“Natural selection, Nora. Malcontents got bred out over 200 years,” replied Nick.

“Maybe. God knows this is the kind of defense that would tickle a bunch of people with access to radioactive waste and in possession of a strong conviction that anyone on the surface is a contaminated degenerate,” Nora allowed.

The environment inside the tunnels reached an impressive level of lethality. It had to be a deliberate, last ditch defense mechanism, because there wasn’t anything that produced this amount of radiation as a byproduct of a useful process.
Eventually the radiation levels fell to ambient and they came to a pumping substation. The Institute had put a metal walkway outside it, running along a wall that looked like it might well be original to CIT. It was from very early in Institute history for sure. The three went up a stairway.

As they crept quietly along, there was a gap in the wall, and Nora heard a pair of synths talking about a pressure loss in the system. Nora could make out the two synths examining on a piece of equipment through the gap. Their backs were turned as they worked.

Nora swapped out her pistol for her rifle and then sighted on the first synth. She had mentally rehearsed switching to the second one even before she’d squeezed the trigger the first time. In two shots she’d destroyed the head casings of both. Both fell to the ground buzzing.

A few yards down the walkway there was a door with a terminal outside. Nora took a look at the security. She looked over her shoulder, “They really don’t want anyone getting through,” she said, then smiled.

Piper turned to Nick, “Hey, you haven’t ever been around when she goes at a really secure system, have you?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re in for a treat,” Piper said.

As if on cue, the stream of profanity started. It had been a while but it really did seem as if the hacking went faster while swearing. Piper was amused to note that Nora had added ‘fishmongering’ to the list.

The door popped open. When they entered, there were several doors, including one to the substation. There were also signs saying ‘Posted: No Trespassing, Commonwealth Institute of Technology’.

That answers that question. Some of these collapsed passages must have been among the first parts of ‘The Institute’.

The group went through the door leading to the pumping station. There was a door into the tubes, with a keypad. Nora entered the access code again. The door slid smoothly open. Inside the water was maybe a foot deep, and it was flowing towards the Institute. It was easy to follow.

The three of them walked for almost a quarter mile in the tube, when they came to another panel. There was a latch release, which Nora pulled.

The door opened onto a corner of the relay room. Nora froze.

“Ok,” she said, “Inside there are cameras for sure, so I’ll head straight for the central console and load PAMs little piece of software. You guys get out of those suits and cover the elevator. Then when Danse and his people start arriving, I’ll change and send the first groups down to relieve you. If an elevator comes up, I don’t care if it looks empty. Fill it with bullets.”

Nick said, “Don’t worry Nora. We all caught their act at the Castle.”

Nora nodded. “Ok, go.”

She was through the hatch in a flash, tossing down the satchel with Nick’s coat, and then heading straight for the console. She’d been here so often, but always alone before. She began loading the tape and out of the corner of her eye saw Nick pull on his coat, then shrug into it and place her
satchel next to her on the console as he and Piper went down the half flight of stairs.

Nora tried very hard not to imagine Piper wrestling with a Courser emerging from the elevator cloaked. She finished loading the program, and twenty seconds later Danse, Haylen, and Sturges materialized.

“Well that’s a new experience,” Danse said.

Sturges came around the console and started tapping keys. After a moment, he relaxed. “I’ve cut the feed from the cameras,” he said.

At that precise moment three more Minutemen came through and Piper called, “They just cut power to the elevator. Thing’s locked up.”

“Shit,” said Nora.

Danse just said, “No plan survives contact.”

The three Minutemen and the three after that went down to cover the elevator just in case. Danse looked at Sturges, “See what you can do about getting the equipment reactivated. We’ll take the first group and see if we can’t get it started from that end.”

After six more relays, there was a group of twenty Minutemen available to push further in. The group went down to the door to ‘Old Robotics’. One of the troops slapped a charge on the door latch, and stood back as it detonated.

The door hung on the hinge, and slumped. One of Cait’s Own kicked it out of the frame. The way in was clear.

The invasion of the Institute had begun.

Chapter End Notes

Back when I was in college at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, I took a class in SCUBA diving. We got our instruction from NAUI which was known for the amount of classroom instruction (Trivia question: How deep do you need to be to die diving? A: 4 feet. Take a deep breath and hold it. Ascend. Enjoy the tearing of your alveoli and the resulting cerebral air embolism.)

But the course ended in April and for certification (optional as far as grading went) you needed 5 open water dives. We did them in Gloucester, Mass. Which in Fallout 4 would be about 2 squares north of The Nakano's Residence and about 10 squares east. Fun fact, the warm water Gulf Stream Current hangs a big honking right at Cape Cod and heads off to warm up Great Britain. The waters off Gloucester (pronounced "GLAH-ster" or "GLAH-stah" depending on where you're from) are fed by the Labrador Current. Which comes from fucking Greenland.

So we're doing the qualification dives in 38 degree water. In wet suits. I stuck my face in and was numb. Immediately. I tried to adjust my hood and discovered that I had, for thirty seconds, been trying to pull my mouth off to the right. I had no idea, I was that cold.
Pertinence here? One of the instructors was wearing a dry suit. The name says it all. A dry suit is DRY. No water gets inside the gaskets (ideally). There is a layer of air inside the suit. But if you don't properly manage your trim and section the suit with the straps? You can have all the air migrate to your lower legs and booties. Then if you let your feet get a little high? Start breathing out immediately (see above re: tearing air sacks) and enjoy the mockery as you announce your presence to everyone on the surface, fins first. Much fun, so humiliation.

And that's not a typo, 'Steve' is the name of Bogie's character in To Have and Have Not, his first movie paired with his soulmate, Lauren Bacall. And the exceptionally famous line: "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and ... blow ..."
The little band headed down a set of stairs and through a hatch to a balcony overlooking an assembly floor, long disused. There were turrets covering the approach, and they spun up as the little band dove for cover. Nora and her two companions had pressed forward up a small set of stairs to an office overlooking everything, and from which Nora could easily destroy the two turrets while they tried fruitlessly to lase a hole in Haylen’s cover.

When the last explosion died out, they could hear foot falls. A group of three synths were charging up some stairs further into the complex. The Minutemen stood as one and cut all three down in short order. The little band headed back the way the synths had come and found themselves over the main robotics plant. It too was clearly mothballed. The four turrets that opened up were not mothballed, however, and here they had their first casualty.

As Cait’s Own fired on the turrets, one of the turrets partially covered by a support beam, managed to burn a hole in the leg of one of the Minutemen. She cursed and fell to one knee just before Nick yanked her out the way and fired back at the turret, detonating it instantly. They couldn’t pause however, as there were a group of synths visible coming up at them along a windowed hallway along one side of the factory floor.

Nora took one look and cursed. She darted into another control room, which connected to that hallway. She pulled the pin on a plasma grenade and tossed it down the stairwell, causing the group approaching to pause momentarily.

As soon as the grenade detonated, Danse swept past her and down the stairs, as fast as he could in Power Armor. Nora heard the snap of lasers and then Danse called, “All clear. Continue mission.”

The group moved on, around a corner and down yet another flight. At the bottom they found themselves in the main office. Through a set of double doors there was a factory floor, but it was unlike anything Nora’d ever seen in the Institute before. It was set up to produce Protectrons, Mr. Handy’s and Sentrybots. There was even a single Assaultron station.

This isn’t just ‘Old Robotics’. This is probably ‘First Robotics’. The place it all started. Where scared men and women started themselves down a route of paranoia and isolation supported by mechanical surrogates.

None of the robots were active, however there was detachment of synths headed their way. The team began firing. The Minutemen deactivated a number of synths, before the remainder took cover. Nora tossed couple grenades, and in an attempt to avoid being blown up the synths had to expose themselves, which was all Nora’s companions and troops needed.

The group swept across the factory floor, and around a corner to an access port. It opened in the floor, to a set of stairs down. They made their way down the resulting hallway to doorway. Nora opened it.

She found herself, yet again, in the office where she’d confronted Higgs and Loken.

This place is like a bad penny.

“Huh. So this is the Institute,” said Piper. “Shiny.”
Nora smiled grimly, “It is that. Also full of Coursers that want to kill us.”

Nick said, “Well, the three of us, surrounded by things that want us dead. Seems familiar.”

Haylen interrupted, “But you never had a squad of crack troops with you those times.”

“True,” said Nora, “Ok. On the far side of the hydroponics room is the passage to the atrium. We’ll need to cut our way down to the center. And then figure something out on getting the elevator to work.”

“If nothing else,” said Haylen, and she held up a set of wire cutters.

“Very well. Cait’s Own, advance. And mind your flanks,” Danse ordered.

The troop moved out, and into Hydroponics. They were under fire from synths almost immediately, but the floor had waist high planters at regular intervals. No one lacked for cover.

Nora made out a number of scientists cowering. She called, “Check your targets, and no grenades,” then she began moving right around the edge of the chamber. As she passed the entrance to the FEV lab, someone on the Institute side got the bright idea to release the gorillas.

Normally, Great Apes would run from this kind of fight, but these charged. They were indiscriminate and their first victim was a synth. Then one charged them and one the scientists. Nora shouted, “Piper, Nick!” and pointed at the one charging them. She unslung her rifle, and pumped a full magazine into the one charging the scientists, dropping it mere feet from them.

There were two laser turrets firing on her Minutemen, all in cover. She destroyed both in as many shots.

And then the firing died out. Nora approached the scientists. She recognized Isaac Karlin. “Dr. Karlin, gather up your people and get them ready to move.”

He looked up at her fearfully, “Where?”

She pointed towards the center. “The relay room. We’re evacuating the Institute.”

He shook his head, “Why would we want to do that?”

Nora held up the demo charge. “Because I’m going to blow this place to Kingdom Come. You can either stay here and die or go to Sanctuary, and get ready to make a life on the surface. Hiding down here and kidnapping people and turning them into Super-Mutants is not one of your options anymore.”

Isaac said, “We never did that…”

Nora pointed at the FEV lab, “Go through that door and get back to me about that.”

“It’s locked.”

“Fine!” Nora said, and discovered that no one had changed the password in the few days she’d been gone. She deactivated the grid. “Now it isn’t. But be ready to move your people when we call.”

He looked stricken. “What about children?”

Nora shook her head, “They don’t get to choose. They’re leaving. An entire generation can hate me
for all I care. But they WILL be alive to do so.”

This time.

Nora looked at Danse and Haylen. “Ready?”

“As I ever will be ma’am,” called Haylen.

“Born ready, General,” said Danse.

He’s still kind of arrogant. ‘Born Ready…’ Hey. He was a synth. He really was born ready. You don’t suppose that’s how he meant it…

Nora looked over at Danse. He smiled at her and gestured around them.

Son of a bitch. That is exactly how he meant it.

Chuckling to herself, she waved the team forward. The Minutemen burst out into the atrium. Two pairs stationed themselves to either side, watching for synths coming up the ramps from under the East or North Apartment towers.

But as her troops met resistance, doors and shutters fell over every exit from the atrium. Locking them in with a batch of synths and one Courser with an already active Stealth Boy. One of Cait’s own went down to it, blood gushing from his crushed, ruined head, but the rest of them found the Courser. Screaming, Nora emptied clip after clip into him, all but ignoring the other synths.

She was joined by most of Cait’s Own, Danse, Haylen, Nick and Piper. Having killed the human shield that might have made the rest of them hesitate, it went down fast. For a Courser.

That cruelty is a major flaw in their programming.

As it went down, the remaining troops, including a pair of walking wounded from supporting attacks, moved into the center. Pointing straight across the Atrium at the SRB, Nora briefed Nick, Danse and Haylen, “Keep your eyes on that one. If there’s going be more Coursers, they’ll almost certainly be from there.” Danse nodded, and turned to position his troops. Haylen began working on the elevator.

Nora could hear her talking with someone, presumably Sturges, on the radio about what they each were seeing. Nora paced impatiently. Trapped in the atrium was not how she wanted to go. Finally Haylen swore, and said, “Fine! Brute force it is, assholes.”

She literally hot-wired the elevator and began ferrying troops down. She turned to Nora, “Sturges wants you. Frequency 78.25.”

Nora flashed her a thumbs up and tuned her radio to 78.25.

“…boss, boss? Come in.”

“I read you Sturges. What’s up?”

“We’re locked out of all systems. I know it seems hopeless, but you have to find a way into the Director’s office. It’s the only place that can override the lockdown.”

“OK.”

Nora turned to Haylen. Very quietly she said, “I need you to send me and Piper in the elevator
DOWN one floor.”

Haylen looked at her surprised, “I thought this had only two positions.”

Nora shook her head. “No, there’s one more, but you have to do it from the Director’s office. I’ll bet with your hot-wire we can use that setting.”

Haylen nodded, and Nora called Piper over. “Ready to meet the step-son?”

Piper looked up, a little nervous. She nodded.

The first elevator load arrived with 8 Minutemen and Preston packed aboard. They piled out to help control the perimeter. Before she entered, Nora said to Haylen, “Get as many down here as fast as you can. When we open everything, I’m betting all hell will break loose.”

Haylen gulped and nodded. She touched the two leads together again, and slid smoothly up out of sight as the elevator went down the extra floor. Nora ran out, Piper hot on her heels, wanting to get to the other elevator before Father shut that one down too.

They were in luck. It was still live. It arrived, and the two women entered. Nora pressed the up button. The chamber slid upwards. Nora brought her pistol up. It wouldn’t do to get killed by a Courser when she was so close.

There was nothing on the lower level of Father’s Quarters. Nora moved silently into the room with the cell for S9-23. There was a laser grid locking the door out into the tower’s central stairwell, so she moved out into Father’s office space. Still nothing. She pointed up. Piper nodded, and followed Nora up the stairs to the living quarters section.

As she cleared the staircase, Nora saw Father in a hospital bed. But she was a professional, and checked the entire apartment for threats before holstering her pistol and returning. Father’s eyes followed her everywhere.

She approached him. “I didn’t expect to see you again,” he said.

“I’m here to blow up the reactor Father. The new director feels very strongly that it’s time to stop hiding underground,” Nora said.

“Well at least there’s no need for guessing games now. It’s not enough that I lay here dying…Now you plan on what, destroying everything? Tell me then. Under what righteous pretense have you justified this atrocity?” Father asked.

Nora shook her head, “Seriously? All the enemies you’ve created, you can’t imagine why I’d be standing here?”

Father shook his head. “Perhaps I didn’t think to count you among them. You had me fooled. I really believed you were on our side,” he said.

“What side would that be Father? The one that kidnaps surface dwellers, ‘dirty contaminated degenerates’, replaces them with synths whose sole mission is to make things worse and then takes the originals and twists them into Super-Mutants?”

She walked towards him, “Or would it be the side that kills a little fourteen year old girl whose only crime,” and her voice began rising, “Was to be bright and curious and find a tiny little piece of data that probably allowed you to hurry up your precious Phase Three by a whole five minutes?”
“We’ve never done anything of the sort. How could you get such a twisted notion…”

Nora interrupted. “How do you think Justin Ayo caught me? I was coming OUT of the FEV lab. Where I found this,” and she pressed play on her Pip-Boy. The speaker crackled to life, “‘Personal record, Dr. Brian Virgil. This will likely be my last recording…’,” Nora listened, staring at Father, face stony as the entire recording played out. “…If not for good, then at least for years to come. After that…”

“Let’s call that Exhibit A, Father. You and your predecessors have been planting Super-Mutants throughout the Commonwealth. For decades. They’re functionally immortal, but completely infertile. They have to come from somewhere. Here is where they come from. And there are thousands of them! How could you?”

“It was a dead end on the Gen 3 project…” he started.

“I am so glad this isn’t an actual court. Bullshit!” Nora barked. “The Gen 3 project was jumpstarted with your kidnapping 60 years ago. And Dr. Virgil only epically resigned in protest last year. For 60 damned extra years the Institute turned people into things? Why? What conceivable purpose did it serve? Only one. To put terror into the hearts of the people of the Commonwealth.”

“It wasn’t my program,” he said. “It predated me by more than a century.”

Nora let utter contempt drip from every word, “It became yours 27 years ago when you became Director. When YOU decided to continue it. For no better reason than that you’re convinced the world above is dying in a pool of its own filth, and why not encourage it.”

“It is! Can’t you see that?!?” Father shouted.

“No it isn’t. You’re trying to kill it, and guess what? You can’t. We BEAT you, Father. Even with your precious Phase Three active. The project for which you are willing to lie, cheat, kidnap, and kill. Kill children.”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about, mother,” he said.

“Really? Exhibit B,” and she slotted the council meeting at University Point, “‘As head of the town council I call this meeting to order…..’,” Nora listened until Kellogg’s voice came on and threatened them. “Your attack dog, the one I had to put down? He was never going to let them live and you know it. Your precious Phase Three had to be protected at all costs. And for that you knowingly killed a fourteen year old girl.”

“I don’t see any evidence of that mother,” he said.

“Exhibits C and D,” Nora said with an angry flourish. She pressed play on Jacq’s tape, and listened, her eyes boring into Father’s as it played, “‘Okay. First I just, I want to say I’m sorry Dad. I knew I was on to something big, and thought I’d see what a trader would pay if I found it. I had no idea that the Institute would be after any of this, and now the whole town is in trouble. I know you told me not to worry, but I just know that the town is gonna vote to throw us out or worse. I wasn't lying when I said that I didn't have the data, despite what Mr. Owens and his cronies think. That's why I have to go back in. I know the key is in there, I just need to put the pieces together. It's something with that professor. If I can find it, maybe I can give the Institute what they want, and they will just leave us alone.’”

“That trader was one of your Bunker Hill informants. As for evidence that your actions killed her?” Nora said as she pulled a letter from her pocket, and read it aloud for the benefit of Piper’s
recording, “‘Oh God, the Institute is here. I can hear them fighting outside. Dad, I figured out where the data is, but I think I'm too late. I'm sorry - Jacq’ Did you at least get something from executing that child? Did you?!?”

Father recoiled from Nora’s obvious fury. “Mr. Kellogg did many things for us. I never told him to do that.”

“You knew who he was, you knew how dangerous he was. As far as I’m concerned you accepted responsibility for anything he did when you didn’t explicitly tell him NOT to do it,” Nora said. “And while you obviously weren’t the one making the decision, the Institute had him kill an entire Vault full of people to cover up your kidnapping. Leaving one victim on ice. One no one worried about until YOU got curious…”

Nora shook her head, “And then you conducted an experiment. You released your own mother into the wilds and just…watched. And you arranged for me to chase Kellogg down, knowing exactly what would happen. Expecting it to happen. I was never supposed to walk out of Ft. Hagen, was I?”

“How could you think that, mother?” Father asked.

“Let me tell you something Father. You never really knew who it was you let out of that Vault. You thought I was only your mother. If you thought about who I was at all you thought I was a lawyer. You. Were. Wrong.”

She leaned over, “Before you were ever born, I was a deep cover intelligence agent for the US Government operating in China. Before the bombs ever fell I had killed 49 people, some of them quite intimately, their final breaths in my face as I throttled them. I have done horrible things, but more importantly I am capable of horrible things, Father. I am fast. I am skilled,” her eyes locked on his, “I am supremely lethal.”

She sat back, “And the only way I killed that old bald rat bastard was by having two more friends and a dog that didn’t give shit about his stealth field. And the dog almost died.” She raised a finger, “In my highly professional opinion as an expert witness, he would have killed me otherwise, and based on conversations you’ve had with me, that’s what you expected.”

He was staring at her speechless. Then his face twisted.

“Well, none of it matters now, I suppose. You’ll accomplish your task and ruin humanity’s best hope for the future. The only question left then, is why you’re standing here. Did you just come to gloat?” he said.

“Was that what you thought this was? Gloating? No. It was an indictment, Father. I am explaining to you, and to anyone who reads this account in the future, why we’re doing what we’re doing,” and she raised a hand and pointed at Piper, recording.

“As for ruining ‘humanity’s best hope for the future’? I plan to rescue as many scientists as possible. They just don’t get to live down here in splendid isolation, conducting unethical experiments. That’s all. If that’s ruining ‘humanity’s best hope for the future’, then mankind doesn’t deserve a future. ‘Re-defined’ or otherwise.”

She stood straight, “You could join them. I will absolutely take you to the relay. Carry you in my arms if I have to. If you want. I can see in your eyes, you don’t.”

She turned away and walked towards his terminal. He raised up, “So that’s it, Mother? You just
destroy your son’s lifework?”

She whirled, and something in her expression made him fall back. “Son? Son?!? Just so you know, my son…” her voice broke, and she took a deep breath, “MY son died in that Vault. With his father.”

And she tossed Nate’s wedding band, and Shaun’s blanket scrap, in Father’s lap.

She walked deliberately to his terminal. “Mother?” he called, “Mother?”

“Nora?”

She stopped without looking back. He said, “Director’s Access code 9003.”

She continued, again without looking back. Leaning over the terminal she entered the code, and turned on the elevator power, opened the gates, and set off the general Institute evacuation code, as well as a synths shutdown code. Then she left the apartment and went down to the atrium. Many of the Gen 2s were immobilized. But when she got to the floor, it was still an ungodly melee.

Over a hundred of Cait’s Own and a sizable band of rebel synths were slowly pushing back Institute synths. When she got to the center, Glory greeted her. “I think we have them on the run. The Captain and Chief are already covering the SRB entrance. We’ve been pulling people out of Bioscience and Robotics.

Nora nodded, “Right, Glory, we don’t leave until everyone who wants to leave has.”

At that point, Deacon and Z1 came up. “Hello ma’am. It’s a pleasure to be speaking face to face finally.”

Nora hugged Z1 to his considerable surprise. “I’m glad you were safe after I had to run, Z1. I was worried about you,” and she looked over at Deacon, “I guess I’m lucky I was BLACKLIST Deacon. Being a regular agent runner would’ve killed me.”

Z1 looked confused. Deacon just smiled and said, “I’ll explain later my friend. We need to keep the refugee train going.”

Just then Allie Filmore, Nathan Filmore, and Quentin were escorted up by a couple of rebel synths and a Minuteman. Allie looked distraught. “How could you be doing this?”

Nora sighed. “I’ll let you hear the tape, when we’re all safe Allie,” she said, “But believe me it’s necessary and even if you hate me, I care about you three too much to let you die. I’m sending you to meet Madison Li, at Sanctuary. Father appointed me his successor, and I’m just informally disbanding the Institute and relocating it to the surface.”

“But the surface is dangerous and full…”

“…of contaminated degenerates.’ I’m familiar with the catechism, Allie. We’ll have time to debate your foundational myths later, when we’re not all in mortal danger,” and a stray laser bolt from a Courser trying to get out of the SRB emphasized her point, “But for now, please believe. I never stopped being your friend. Or the person who was trying to find a peaceful resolution. Justin Ayo killed that possibility, is all.”

Allie looked dubious. But she didn’t look like she hated Nora. Probably the best that could be expected at this point. She and her family joined the stream of refugees, synth and human, moving in a steady stream up the elevator.
Several Minutemen and synths dragged up two people, Alana Secord and Dean Volkert. Nora smiled, “Ah, yes, you two don’t get a choice. You will return to the surface and stand trial for Crimes Against Humanity.”

“What kind of crimes are you talking about?” Volkert shouted.

“Illegal human experimentation. Mind wiping persons without consultation or due process.”


“That’s my point, Dean,” Nora said. Alana just hung her head in resignation. She at least recognized a paradigm shift when she saw it. And thought about how many re-programmings she’d presided over.

Glory came up, “That’s it. The kiddies have swept everything but Advanced Systems.”

Nora nodded, “Ok, we’ll clear them out on the way to the reactor. Then you guys get out of here.”

She took a crew with her and headed for the reactor. When she entered Advanced Systems, there were two synths that were still active. They shot ineffectively, and were abruptly cut down by Minutemen. Nora called out loudly, “This facility is about to be destroyed. If you wish to evacuate, please move to the central elevator. You will be relayed to a safe location.”

Then she noticed Rosalind Ormon. She walked over to where Dr. Ormon was crouching, “Rosalind? I would consider it a personal favor if you would please choose to live, and convince as many as possible to leave with you. It’s not the end, just a new beginning. Please?”

Rosalind looked shocked, and then she nodded, and stood up.

Nora and her group continued on to the reactor. They rode the elevator up that long distance. And when they arrived, they piled out into the equipment room. The turrets along the passage began warming up, but Nora, who’d barely fired her weapon during the invasion, kneeled and fired up the hall with her Type 79. Three shots led to three explosions.

At Piper’s look, she smiled, “Hey, they need to think their General still has it going on.”

Piper laughed and kissed her. But she did let her troops clear the reactor room for her. It took a few minutes. When she was sure that the coast was clear, she radioed up to Sturges. “Let me know when the last group is up from the Atrium.”

He called back, “Glory just showed up. She’s giving us the ‘Get a move on’ sign.”

Nora nodded, “Standby.”

She went up onto the gantry and walked over to the reactor. She attached the scalable yield demo pack to the reactor casing and set it to its highest setting. Her Pip-Boy was rattling at her until she stepped away, after activating the remote detonator.

She called up, “Ok, Sturges. Pull the team down here out.”

She looked around as by threes, her team was pulled out. She, and Piper, and Nick were the last people out.

When she arrived at the relay room, Sturges hustled over, “We’re almost set to go, but…well…there’s a complication. This kid showed up. Says he’s your son.”
Nora looked down at the S9-23. Piper was looking between the two of them, her eyes wide. S9-23 looked up at Nora and said, “Please mom, don’t leave me here. I want to go with you.”

Nora looked at him stunned. It wasn’t often she was caught utterly flat footed. This was one of those times, and her speech centers stalled for time, “Why did you call me Mom?”

The synth Shaun looked confused, and terrified, “What? Because you’re my mother. Why else would I call you that?”

More reprogramming. *Father doing a last head job on me? I don’t know, but god damnit. How can I live with myself if I don’t take him out? And in a sense, it’s been this little boy right here that I’ve been chasing. All along.*

Nora nodded, “Right. Of course. I’m your mother.”

Shaun let out a breath, “Good for a second I thought you forgot who I was. Now let’s hurry up and get out of here.”

Nora reached out and took one of his hands, “Ok come with me.”

Sturges said, “I’ll send him ahead to Sanctuary. You need to go with the last few groups, boss.”

Nora said, over her shoulder, “Ok,” then knelt down to Shaun, “When you get there I want you to go to Dr. Curie and Dr. Li for a checkup.”

He looked at her, “Do I haveta? Dr. Li’s tests take forever.”

Nora smiled weakly, “Yeah, kiddo. You gotta.”

He smiled suddenly, “Ok. I’m glad you were here to save me.”

And he disappeared. Nora must have looked completely shocked, because Piper said, “Are you Ok? Blue?”

“I honestly have no idea, Piper.” She turned to Sturges, “Is that really everyone?”

“Except for you, Piper, Nick, and Preston.”

“All right Sturges. Fire it up. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“I’m going to teleport you to the detonation site, you press that button extra hard when you get there,” he said.

Nora watched as her companions relayed out, and then entered the chamber herself.

When the flash had ended she found herself atop Mass Fusion one more time. Preston called, “Sturges and PAM calculated this would be far enough.”

She looked around. There was Preston, and Danse. Haylen and Glory. Nick. And of course Piper. Her wife.

A radioman called, “We just got confirmation; ‘Elvis has left the building’.”

Preston turned to Nora, “Everyone is out. Sturges was the last. He’s safely made it to Sanctuary.”

Nora turned. The detonator was a low box, with three switches and large button covered by a thick
glass cover. She reached out and flipped the switches in order…one…two…three. The day was beautiful and clear. Sunny.

The safety cover flipped away and the button began glowing.

Shaun. I wish I could have saved you. But I never was going to be able to was I? This was all so… inevitable.

I’m sorry. I failed you, son.

She pressed the button. For moments, nothing appeared to happen. Then as the fireball emerged from the ground, there was a bright flash, and Nora watched as the shockwave reached as far as Greenetech and Diamond City. A small mushroom cloud ascended almost 1000 feet. From a deep subterranean detonation.

As the dust cleared, Nora saw the Charles River rush into a new manmade estuary. A round water-filled grave for her son. Nora thought of verse from her English Lit classes at Boston University.

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world./The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/the ceremony of innocence is drowned.

“Drowned so long ago,” said Nora under her breath.

Chapter End Notes

This book was never going to have a happy ending. It was always there, in the title.

One more Chapter in Book 2 and then on to the final book of the trilogy, "To Plant Companionship Thick As Trees".

Because Nora is going to be an agent of positive change in the end.
She turned away. Piper was right there, “I can't believe it. They're gone. The Institute's gone. Do you know what this means?”

Nora looked at Piper, face flushed, and tried to muster up a little humor for her wife’s sake, "You gonna to make me guess?"

One corner of Piper’s expressive mouth quirked up, “Have you ever known me to hold back information? It means no more kidnappings. No more sleepless nights, terrified your neighbor's plotting against you. No more fear. Thanks to you, we don't have to be afraid anymore.”

Nora was slowly recovering. Piper’s evident joy was helping her forget exactly how they got there. She looked at Piper, and ticking off her fingers, she said, “You know, except of Deathclaws. And mutants. Ferals. Ambitious Mole Rats.”

Piper laughed, “Okay. Maybe a couple of things to be afraid of. But you took care of the big one.” She kissed Nora, hard. Then hugged her wife, “Welcome to day one of the new Commonwealth, Nora.”

Nora turned and looked out over the Commonwealth. She sighed deeply. She turned back to Piper, “This wasn’t the world I wanted, or the one I expected. But it’s the one I have.”

She took Piper’s hands, “I tried to find my family. To cheat time. To make things the way they were.”

Piper opened her mouth and Nora placed a finger on her lips, “But now? Now I would never go back. I don’t want to go back. I have you and Nat. And my friends. And I can build it back. Better. Because while War never changes? Neither does Hope, Piper.”

She leaned forward and kissed Piper tenderly.

“I love you with all my heart, Nora Wright,” said Piper, when they’d broken their kiss.

Nora smiled at Piper and then said, “That’s all well and good, but how are we getting down from here? I don’t have the keycard.”

Piper’s eyes widened, “Maybe Haylen can hotwire this one too?”

Preston tapped Nora on the shoulder and said, “Follow me, General.” Nora, without letting Piper’s hand go, turned and followed him around the central structure, where she saw the familiar shape…

“A Vertibird!! Where’d it come from? And it’s got Minuteman Symbols on the door, and a blue tail…”

“It’s yours General,” Preston said.

“What?”

“This is the Vertibird of the General of the Minutemen. YOUR Vertibird.”
Nora thought for a second. “Where’d you get this? And who’s the pilot?”

Danse said, “Lancer Conklin! What are you doing here?”

The pilot called out, “That’s Chief Warrant Officer Conklin to you Captain. And I could ask the same, but we’d both get the same answer. Defected from the Brotherhood. Me and Lancer Initiate Perez flew north after the Prydwen bought it. Landed at County Crossing and surrendered. Offered our service as pilots. Colonel Garvey took us up on it.”

Danse looked at him, “There were three Vertibirds after the fight.”

Chief Conklin shook his head, “Lancer-Sergeant Inkata’s bird flew to the Cambridge Outpost.”

“My question stands, Preston,” Nora said.

“We got these two, just as Chief Conklin said. We found a dozen more in an undamaged hanger at the airport. Chief Conklin and Ms. Perez are currently training more Minutemen as pilots,” he said.

“Signaling mechanism still the same?” Nora asked.

Conklin shook his head, “The transmitter detector was aboard the Prydwen. You need to call us on the radio. If you’re in range of a garrison or a settlement their larger radios can reach us. We’re building a base near the Red Rocket Garrison.”

“Ok well then, ‘Home, Jeeves!’” Nora said as she climbed aboard, and settled into the co-pilots seat. She planned to enjoy this ride.

Danse clipped into the Power Armor station, and the rest of them clambered aboard, except Glory, who manned the minigun. The Vertibird lifted off and flew northwest towards Sanctuary. Nora looked at the crater where CIT had been. It hurt, but it wasn’t overwhelming. In a sense she’d been mourning the loss of Shaun for so long, the actuality of his death was just the end of a months long process of losing him, bit by bit.

And now there’s young Shaun. Only Shaun now I guess.

For the rest of the trip, Nora simply reveled in flying again. The relay may have been faster, but it was always a bit prosaic. There was something about watching as the miles disappeared under her that was far more satisfying.

As Sanctuary hove into view, she whistled. It was practically growing across the bridge, which was beginning to resemble the Rialto, with shops lining the span. And Red Rocket was growing as well. They’d felled trees to its northeast, and begun building an airstrip for the Vertibirds. The two locations were verging on growing into each other.

It was to that airstrip that Nora’s Vertibird was headed. As they landed, Nora instructed Conklin to be ready to fly, but change into a Hazmat Suit. When Piper heard that, she interrupted, “Why are we headed for the Glowing Sea?”

Nora said, “The reason all my plans came apart like a house of cards was that I had to get the cure for Virgil. I’m just going to get him, and let Madison and Marie oversee his treatments.”

“Ah!” said Piper, “Ok, in that case, I’ll stay here. I want to see how Nat is doing, and you can fly right to the cave now. It’s just running an errand.”

Nick looked at Nora and said, “I’ll join you.”
“Ok, tin man. Time to get our armor,” Nora said.

“Hey. I just got a new human body and you’re trying to make me a robot again.”

“Very funny.”

The trip turned into an impromptu victory parade. As they walked up the main street in Sanctuary, people came out and clapped and cheered, while Nora and the rest waved, and accepted hugs and pats on the back. Notable for not cheering were the Institute Scientists, while the synths were ecstatic. Nora was pretty sure she saw Z1 in the crowd.

The whole thing reminded Nora of pictures of towns getting liberated during World War 2. Eventually the whole screaming, cheering, crying mob made its way to the town hall and General’s residence, where the Power Armor was still racked. Nora climbed into hers and then clumped out and turned her speaker up. “I have one more promise to keep, and one more person to rescue. When we get back, for god’s sake no one overreact, Ok?”

“Why?” came a call from the crowd.

“Because the man I’m bringing back has a cure for Super Mutants. But he’s currently one himself. I promised to bring him his cure, and he made today possible, so be respectful.”

The crowd parted as Nora and Nock went back to the airstrip. But they followed the two as they made their way back. At the far end, Nora turned and waved, and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Then she and Nick climbed into the Vertibird and she gave Conklin the coordinates for Virgil’s cave. The ‘bird leapt into the air, banking left and accelerating as it headed south.

In less than a half an hour, they were over the Glowing Sea, and then descending to Virgil’s cave. They hopped out and strolled to the cave, “Stay in radio range,” Nora said.

“Roger that, ma’am,” he called back.

Nick and Nora entered the cave, and almost immediately met Virgil, who’d heard the rotors. He was holding a club, and Nora called, “It’s me, Virgil. I have the cure.”

“I thought you were dead,” he said.

She relaxed, “Thank god. You’re still rational.”

He nodded, “It’s been a constant struggle ever since I left the Institute. Do you have the cure?”

She said, “Yes. And no. I didn’t bring it. I left it with Madison Li in Sanctuary. I need you to come with me.”

“Are you mad? The Institute would kill me if I ever left here,” he said.

“That’s going to be difficult. I destroyed it.”

“What? Why would you do that?” he said, shocked.

“How about because they made all the other super-mutants. And killed thousands of people for no better reason than they were in the way. We have the records,” Nick said.

“We do?” Nora asked.
“What do you think I and Preston were doing during the invasion? Twiddling our thumbs?” said Nick. He turned back to Virgil, “We have all the proof you’d ever need. And we didn’t kill the people there, we evacuated them, the ones willing to leave. But no more hiding underground.”

Virgil thought for a while. After a moment, he said, “All right, let’s go.”

When they left, Nora called Chief Conklin, and the ‘bird flared in for a landing. Virgil panicked briefly, but they pointed out the non-Brotherhood markings, and he eventually relaxed.

*He is the most nervous 7 and a half foot tall engine of destruction I’ve ever met.*

They climbed aboard and made the flight back to Red Rocket airstrip. As Piper had predicted, it was just an errand, but Brian Virgil deserved to be human again. Not to mention that if they could get the serum weaponized, maybe instead of killing Super-Mutants they could heal them.

When they landed, Nora turned her suit and Nick’s over to a Minuteman with instructions to rack them.

She looked at Nick, “I could get used to this General shit.”

“It comes with a high-price, Nora,” he replied.

She sobered, remembering why she was currently in town. “It does at that, tin man. It certainly does.”

The three walked up to Marie’s hospital, and Nick excused himself. Virgil wedged through the door, and said, “Madison?”

Madison turned and said, “Brian. Always one for the grand gesture. Well,” she smiled, “This one worked. The serum is still good, and the Institute will never infect another victim with FEV. So, very well done, you.”

It turns out Super-Mutants can smile. He held out his arm, and Madison injected him. “It should a take a week or less to work,” he said.

“We should keep a journal. Let me take your vitals…,” started Madison, as Nora left. As she did, Allie Filmore caught her at the door.

“Nora!”

Nora sighed and turned, “I suppose you want to yell at me for destroying your home. It’s only fair, even if I would do it again.”

“So would I,” said Allie.

Nora looked at her in shock. Allie went on, “Piper could tell my anger hurt you, so she invited me to come help her on her article. About the invasion. About the trial. I listened to your tape. I was willing to admit that the Institute sometimes wore the grey hat, Nora. I never realized that it was only because you can’t wear a black hat all the time.”

Nora gave Allie a small smile, “You don’t hate me?”

Allie shook her head. “No, and I plan to make sure all the Institute refugees understand what really happened. Except Rosalind. She apparently doesn’t give a shit. She suddenly has a million things she can do.”

“Allie, you can still be ‘The Institute’. You just can’t do some of the things you were doing.”
“I know. We’ll talk about that later. I understand Danse and Preston are looking for you.”

Nora sighed again, “No rest for the weary. Know where they are?”

“I think they’re at your ‘summer residence’,” Allie answered.

Nora smiled and went up the road to her house. Danse, Meredith, Preston, and Piper were waiting for her. Danse had shed his armor, for a change, and he and Meredith were wearing civvies.

But when he stood, you’d never mistake him for a civilian. “Ma’am,” he started.

“Nora,” Nora interrupted.

“Ma’am?”

“When we’re off duty, we’re off duty, Roger. You could even hold your girlfriend’s hand if you want.”

Meredith smiled broadly and grabbed his hand, as he stammered, wondering how he’d so thoroughly lost control. He finally said, “Nora. The troops of Cait’s Own want to hold a wake for her. Before we bury her tomorrow.”

*I suppose that makes sense. And clearly the girl managed put her Irish stamp on that unit.*

“Absolutely. Get the bar set up, Roger. You can use my caps.”

Piper cut in, “Our caps. And even if you have to use them all…”

Preston added, “I’ll help pay too.”

“Me too,” said Nick from the doorway. “No way I’d rather spend ‘em.”

Nora turned to Piper, “An Irish Wake involves a ton of drinking, but I still think…”

“Absolutely Nat needs to go. We’ll just tell Dogmeat not to let her drink liquor,” Piper said.

“You know, I think we actually could rely on him for that,” Nora said.

Danse left to make arrangements, but not before telling them the wake would start at 5PM and that he would have Cait laid out in the Town Hall. Which was next to the bar, as luck and convenience would have it.

The entire idea of a wake for Cait, and the purposes of a wake, gave Nora an idea. So she took Piper’s hand, for moral support, and the two of them went down to where the Institute refugees were staying.

There was an undercurrent of hostility, but no outward threats of violence. They were scientists, used to synths doing everything for them after all. Even threatening people. And the synths had their own quarters.

*Synth and human, Commonwealth and Institute, will all have to reach some kind of detente at some point. But not all at once. The emotions are too raw. Speaking of…the reason we’re here.*

Nora found Allie with her family. She looked them over and said, “Allie, may I introduce my wife, Piper?”
Allie and then Quentin and Nathan stood up and shook Piper’s hand. Allie said, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Oh Allie, please don’t be so formal. You’re starting to understand why what we did was necessary,” Nora said.

Allie nodded. “I’ve been explaining. There’s still a lot of resentment.”

Nathan added, “Some of us are willing hear this from Allie. There’s some that will need to hear the actual recordings and see the evidence.”

Nora said, “That’s fair. I’m really here to ask two questions. First, do all the children have their parents?”

Allie nodded, “As I understand it, every child has at least one parent. Most have both, but there were some people who refused to leave.”

Nora shook her head, “I wish…,” she looked into the distance, “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I’d hoped the prospect would snap at least all the parents out of their prejudices.”

Then she looked at Allie and Nathan and Quentin. “We’re having a wake for a woman everyone here respects a lot. She died when a Courser shot her, when the Institute attacked us at the Castle,” and Allie’s brow was furrowing, “And Allie, I think it would be good if you guys came. Anyone from the Institute, in fact. I think it would help us all come together, even a little bit.”

Nora smiled slightly, “It’ll be an Irish Wake and that means drinking, but my daughter will be there. No alcohol for kids of course. And discussing politics is OK. Cait’d be upset if there isn’t at least one fistfight.”

Allie looked shocked, and Nora smiled, “That’s not a Wasteland thing Allie. It’s an Irish thing. Don’t worry, there won’t be one, I’m just kidding. I think. But please come.”

Allie nodded. “We’ll think about it.”

Piper said, “Try. Please. I think Nora’s right. We need to start healing. This will help.”

They left the refugees, and went over to Marie’s. When they walked in, Shaun was there with Madison and Marie. He ran over and hugged Nora, “Mom!”

Piper was watching Nora closely as Madison said, “He checks out,” she said earnestly. “Perfectly healthy and with no,” she nodded once at Shaun, “Anomalies. Of any kind.”

Piper blew out softly. Nora kneeled down to Shaun, “How are you feeling sport?”

“Pretty good mom, but Dr. Li kept sticking me with needles,” he said.

“I’m sure she needed to, honey,” Nora said.

“Oh! I almost forgot. Father gave this to me,” and he handed her a holotape.

Nora took a deep breath and slotted it. Father’s voice came to her, one last time.

“If you are hearing this, then whatever conflicts you and I have endured are over. I have no reason to believe you’ll honor the request I’m about to make, but I feel compelled to try anyway. This synth, this…boy. He deserves more. He has been re-programmed to believe he is your son. It is my hope that you will take him with you. I would ask only that you give him a chance. A chance to be
a part of whatever future awaits the Commonwealth.”

Shaun looked up at her, eyes wide, “Mom what does that mean? What is Father saying?”

**What do I tell him? Lie or truth?**

Piper intervened, and kneeled down to look at Shaun. “It’s true sweetie. You’re a synth. You were made in Father’s image at ten. But I don’t care what Father said about ‘re-programming’. I’ve been with your mom almost since she came out of the Vault, and I can tell you that she has been looking for YOU, for exactly you, since the moment she came out.”

*You know in some sense Piper is right…*

Piper took Shaun’s hands in hers, and was watching Nora from the corner of her eyes. “Before we were married, she fought a bad man to get to you. She risked everything to sneak into a group of dangerous soldiers so she could get their equipment, so she could get to someone who could help her get to YOU. And then she walked into the most dangerous place I know of, so she could get that help to find you.”

*And isn’t it the rankest hypocrisy to point out to Nick that he’s Nick, and not accept that Shaun is Shaun? Especially since Nick isn’t exactly a direct memory transfer either?*

Now Piper was looking into Shaun’s eyes earnestly, “Then she hunted down a very VERY dangerous Courser with just me, and Cait, whose funeral we’re about to have, so she could find a way to you. And she joined a group of spies, but that wasn’t hard because she’s always been a spy, and she used all those talents to get to you. And she entered the Institute with neither of us knowing if she’d ever come back…and she did that for you.”

*And if this is based on Shaun’s pattern at ten, versus a recording at ten…does that really matter? This is Shaun at ten based on input from Shaun at what, 58, 59? I could ask Madison, but what does that matter?*

“And when she got there, she tried to help Father, even though he was lost to us a long time ago, all for the idea of YOU. Whether programmed or not, believe me, I know my wife. She IS your mom, Shaun. And we both want you to be part of our family. We already have a bedroom set up for you. At home. Your home.”

*Piper is right. As usual. This IS Shaun. Who Shaun should have been. MY son.*

Shaun looked at Piper, and asked, “Really truly?”

*Maybe my son DIDN’T die in the Vault with his father…*

Piper nodded. Shaun turned to Nora, “You’re my mom no matter what?”

*Oh, Shaun!!*

Nora burst into tears, and picked up Shaun and held him to her, murmuring in his ear, “Oh Shaun, I’ve been looking for you for so long. But it’s Ok now. I’m here. We’re here. I’ll never let you go.”

Marie and Piper had teared up, but Madison looked thoughtful. Nora put Shaun down after a while, and said, “This is Piper. We’re married so that makes her your mom too.”

“Wait. I get to have two moms? That is so cool,” he said.
Marie bent over, “And I too am a synth. Many of us are. There are lots of things you can do. Don’t let anyone tell you that you aren’t human.”

Piper said, “And you have a sister. She’s older than you though. So sometimes you have to listen to her.”

“Awww.”

Nora laughed through her tears.

She heard from behind her Nat’s voice, accusatory. “If you have your son back, does that mean you’re not my mom?”

Oh boy. Sibling rivalry. Time to nip this in the bud...

“No sweetie. Just like we talked about before I left for the Institute, it just means you have a brother. I’ll always be your mom. Just like you’ll always be his older sister.”

“Hmmpf. Ok. I guess so.”

“Nat! Black eyes mean no terminal for a week. And no byline,” said Piper.

“Ok. Ok! Look kid, would you like to come play with me and my dog?”

“Nat!” Piper said.

“Ok. Shaun, would you like to come play with me and Dogmeat? See if other kids want to do stuff?”

“All right,” he said and they walked out.

Nora was biting her lip. Piper saw her wife, and said, “They have to work it out for themselves, Blue. You should know that.”

“But…,” Nora started.

“Dogmeat won’t let anything get out of hand,” Piper said firmly.

“I hope so,” Nora said.

“Jane Bond is a nervous mom? Who knew?” Piper said.

“Not only that,” said Nick, who was lounging casually in the doorway, “I get to close a case. Twice. How many gumshoes get to say that?”

Nora laughed. “Well you know that’s what’s important. Whether Nick Valentine can brag about the case he solved. Twice.”

Nick’s lips quirked, “Took you long enough to understand why you don’t close a case until it’s really over. Maybe you’re ready to be a PI after all.”

“Oh sure. In my copious free time from being the General of the Minutemen, the second in command of the CSIS, and whatever else the world dumps in my lap,” Nora said, smiling.

“It is almost time, you three. Will you help me carry Cait to the Town Hall?” asked Marie.
Nora nodded, and she, Piper, Marie, and Nick solemnly carried Cait’s body to the Sanctuary Town Hall, where Marcy had already moved desks and furniture to allow visitors to come and see. Then Nora and Piper went and changed. Piper had found dark colored dresses at the clothing shop on the bridge.

They went back and Nora waited. Piper, Nat, and Nora were the closest thing Cait had had to family. They had to be there to receive the well-wishers.

Shortly before 5, Nat arrived. She too had changed into a dress. Shaun sat off to one side, watching.

People began filing in, and shaking Piper, Nora, and Nat’s hands, solemnly. Many of the Minutemen crossed themselves. It was Boston.

I should know how that works. How can you be Catholic without a Pope in Rome? There may be a Pope, but who’d know? Or do they just assume that everything is operating normally out of their sight? If I’d cared more I’d have paid closer attention in CCD. But I never did.

The mourners passed through and then made their way to the bar. By 6 everyone that was coming, had. Nora was grateful to note that Allie and her family had come, and she made sure to warmly greet them, and introduced them to Nat.

When the last person had come to the viewing, Nora brought her family to the bar. There was food, and beer. For a while. Then the liquor started.

But before that, Nora watched, heart warmed, when some jerk spilled beer on Nat’s precious recorder. That wasn’t what pleased her of course. It was what happened next. First, Quentin Filmore came running over immediately to help her wipe it off. It turned out he’d been watching her closely. It looked as if the eleven year old had a crush on her.

But when that didn’t work to fix it, and Nat was on the verge of tears, Shaun came over and touched his sister on the shoulder. He held out his hand, and opened up the recorder, jiggled a couple pieces and cleaned some contacts. And then the recorder was working again. Nat had given her brother a big hug.

By about 9, Danse cleared his throat, and spoke loudly. “As the commander of Cait’s Own, I have been informed, by more than a few of Cait’s Own,” he hemmed, “That at a wake, you tell stories of the deceased. And that it’s my job to start the lying off.” He smiled.

“I remember that first day I’d met Cait at the Castle. And she’d taken one look and said, ‘And what use are ye goin’ t’be, you great lumbering oaf?’ and she walked off.” He did a credible Cait, “And the next day, when we’d been fighting for a couple hours, she found me, and said, ‘Yer not a bad piece of fightin’ man, even if you are a sodding great lummox,’ and I have to say I’ve never been prouder.”

Not bad for a start but best get the kiddies out before it gets bad.

Nora stood on a chair, and said, “OK, anyone under the age of eighteen had better get out before you’re scarred for life. Shoo!” and she watched as they all filed out. But she didn’t see everything, as it turned out.

Another Minuteman was telling a Cait story when Nora turned to the bartender and got a whiskey for herself and her wife. When she got it, she handed one to Piper and said, “Drink up, you’re gonna need it.”
“Why?” asked Piper, suspicious.

Nora looked at her and said, “Because someone has to turn this into a proper wake.”

“Blue?”

Just then the Minuteman finished and Nora stood on a chair and said, “This is all well and good, but if this is gonna be the kind of proper wake Cait would’ve wanted I’m going to tell you a story about Cait I think you’ll all find…educational. I know I did.”

“So it was a few days before Piper and I were going to get married, and it was as Cait would say ‘late of an evening’,” and Piper started frantically pulling on Nora’s dress and hissing “Blue! Blue!!”

“Oh shush you. I did say you needed the whisky, darling,” and she went on as Piper gulped the first whiskey down, and ordered another her face turning beet red.

“So Piper and I are doing with you might think two people about to be married would do in bed… reading the Bible,” and a Minuteman with an Irish accent as thick as Cait’s said, “We know ye two were gettin’ it on, ye great liar!”

Nora raised her glass and took a sip, “Guilty. So we THINK we’re going at it hot and heavy, and suddenly we hear Cait go, ‘Ye two look like a pair o’ kittens fightin’ over a ball o’ yarn, y’do.’,” and now Piper was blushing as hard as she had when all this went down, “And the woman, who, mind you we had NO idea how long she’d been watching, proceeds to give us a laundry list of things she suggests we could be doing with each other.”

“And my wife-to-be is turning exactly that color,” and she pointed at Piper. There were cheers and several drinks were gulped down, and Nora went on, “But that wasn’t the point. So eventually Cait runs out of ‘suggestions’ and says, ‘Ta, the pair o’ ye. Don’t bore each other to death,’ and she leaves. And Piper,” and at this point the hissed “Blue!!”s became frantic, “Turns to me and says,” and Piper actually yelled, “Blue!!” which Nora ignored, “‘That second thing sounds interesting. How did it go again?’”

The room erupted in laughter. Piper was blushing so hard you could feel the heat coming off her.

“Blue!’ she said when Nora climbed down, “How could you?”

“Because look,” Nora said.

Piper looked around the room. People were telling stories about Cait, and the gestures and the babble was bawdy, and funny, and maudlin, occasionally combative. People were laughing, and weeping, and hugging each other.

She looked back at Nora. Nora said, “NOW it’s a proper wake. The way Cait would’ve wanted. And all it cost was little dignity on our part. We’ll live.”

Piper started crying, “And she won’t, will she? That was for her wasn’t it?” Nora nodded. Crying and laughing Piper fell into her arms, “I love you, you great cow. Why am I crying and laughing?”

Nora laughed, “Because you’re thinking Irish at the moment. We’re never so happy as when we’re miserable. It’s a Celtic thing, sweetheart. I was bound to get you in the end.”

“I keep forgetting you’re as Irish as Cait was, looking like you do.”
Nora gulped her whisky. “That I am darlin’,” she said in her best Cait accent.

This went on for a couple more hours, and then a small familiar voice called out.

Nat was standing on a table.

“I want to tell you all a story about Aunt Cait,” Nat started. Piper made to get Nat, and Nora shook her head. “Let her finish sweetheart,” she whispered.

“It started when I snuck out of Diamond City to follow mom here. She’d been gone and I missed her. And we were attacked, and a bunch of people were killed trying to protect me. They were the first people I’d ever seen killed,” tears were running down her face.

Nora looked around. Allie Filmore and Nathan were still at the wake, and listening to Nat.

“And the Raiders took me through the woods to their hideout and when I got there someone called Red took me and she told me that she was going to use me to buy a lot of power. And she even told me that she had big plans for selling me. I was terrified.”

Nat was looking around, “I didn’t know what to do, when suddenly there were shots, and running feet. And then the door burst open and there were more shots and Red had grabbed me and her gun was at my head, and then I saw Aunt Cait. She was pointing her gun at Red and I knew, knew, it was going to be Ok. Because my Aunt Cait had come. Just like I knew she would. And she rescued me. Mom and Piper were there too, but Aunt Cait saved me.”

Tears were flowing over Nat’s face now, “But now she’s gone. Because she was rescuing all of us. And she’d want us all to rescue each other from now on. And I will. Because I’ll always have Aunt Cait, right here,” and she pointed at her chest.

Nora, through her own tears saw there was barely a dry eye in the house. Including the Filmore’s.

Danse raised his glass. “To Aunt Cait,” he thundered.

“Aunt Cait!” and drinks were downed.

Nora and Piper were holding Nat tightly.

“We have a big day tomorrow. We should all get to bed,” said Nora.

“I’m not in trouble?”

“Not unless you recorded Mom’s story about me and her and Cait,” said Piper.

Nat shook her head. Nora was pretty sure that Nat was lying. But she also figured she could get in and erase it if she had to.

They all went to bed, joining Shaun in sleep. The next morning dawned bright and clear.

Once again, Nora put on a good dress and got ready. Piper, Nat, and Shaun joined her a bit later dressed in their best clothes. Piper came up, “Know what you’re going to say?”

“Kinda,” Nora replied.

“Going to quote Lincoln again?”

“Nope, it’s going to be all me,” Nora said.
The funeral procession started at 10AM. Led by a Color Guard, carrying a Commonwealth Provisional Government Flag and a Minuteman Flag, they preceded the troops carrying Cait’s coffin along Main Street and around and up to the Cemetery.

Cait was followed by Nora, Piper, Nat, and Shaun. Dogmeat was sitting this one out. Then the Honor Guard, commanded by Danse, and any of Cait’s Own who were nearby, led by Glory. Then a procession of funeral goers.

They got to the summit and Nora saw to her surprise that they’d built a mausoleum for Cait in front of the Vault lift. It was positioned so that anyone visiting the cemetery would now have to go by Cait’s monument. Sturges had even managed, somehow, to find enough marble to encase the monument.

The unofficial chaplain of the Minutemen led them in a funeral prayer. Nora barely heard the prayer. Nora had never really been devout, and her life had beaten what little might have remained out of her. But…

*Please don’t let me fuck this up. This is Cait. Don’t let me fuck this up. Don’t let me fuck this up. Don’t- Oh god, my turn.*

Nora stood up.

“I first met Cait in a fight club. She’d been doing drugs. She was all but dead. And yet…she was one of the most alive people I’d ever met, even half dead.”

“And she had good reasons to be angry. She’d had a hard life. Never had anyone she could count on except herself. But she was still so ready to form attachments.”

“She took Minutemen under her arms, and made them better than they’d ever thought they could be. She took my daughter under her wing, teaching her to love life.”

“And she was brave enough to risk everything to stop doing drugs. And then she was even more alive, burning bright.”

“Because Cait, for all that her life had been hard…hell, bad. Cait loved life. There was nothing she loved so much as being with friends. When she had ones she could trust.”

“But the greatest gift she ever gave, she gave to my daughter. Cait made sure that Nat knew that she’d restored Cait’s faith in family. I am more proud than I can ever express that when Cait finally was willing open herself up to being in a family it was mine she joined. And I can never express how profoundly sad we are that we lost her so soon.”

“Cait never had a last name that I knew of, and based on stories she told of her parents, I know she’d have hated having whatever godforsaken name they had on her monument. I thought about formally adopting her as a sister, but Cait really was her own person. That wouldn’t have been right either. Better but not perfect.”

“And for what she meant to me, my family, and all of us, I wanted it to be perfect. In the 10th Century Ireland was unified by a high king. A man who made Ireland Ireland. And he was a man who also fell in battle holding his country together by sheer force of will. His name was Brian Boru, founder of the O’Brien dynasty.”

“That is a name worthy of Cait, today here interred as Caitlyn Boru. My friend, my daughter’s aunt, and our guardian, now and forever.”
The entire group was silent for a long moment, and Captain Danse called, “Present Arms!”

The Minutemen of the Detachment, brought up their laser muskets. “Half left face!”

They turned. “Ready!”

They brought their muskets up. “Aim!”

They tucked them into their shoulders. “Fire!”

Seven shots. “Ready!”

They cranked. “Aim!”

They tucked them into their shoulders. “Fire!”

Seven shots. “Ready!”

They cranked. “Aim!”

They tucked them into their shoulders. “Fire!”

Seven more shots. Twenty One in all. “Order Arms!”

As one, seven butts hit the concrete. Danse turned. As Cait’s coffin was slid into the mausoleum, the flag over her coffin was held, then folded. The last man handed it to Danse, who marched over to Nat, and handed it to her, “With the thanks of a grateful nation.”

Nat took the flag. Then they covered the entrance with the last panel, inscribed simply with Cait’s name, and the date March 8, 2288, and one word. “Guardian”

Nat set aside the flag, and picked up the bouquet that Marie had helped her make, and walked over to the front panel, set the flowers down, and then pressed her face to the marble. And cried.

After a few moments, Piper went over, touched Nat on the shoulder, and the two walked back.

One by one, the mourners walked by shaking hands and murmuring condolences. Occasionally hugging members of Cait’s family. Until the Filmore’s came by. First Quentin shook everyone’s hands. Then Nathan did the same. Allie shook everyone’s hands, until she got to Nat. She knelt down, took Nat into her arms, and hugged her tightly. She wiped away Nat’s tears with her thumbs and then murmured, “You are a very special girl, to have been chosen by someone so wonderful.” And she kissed Nat on the cheek, stood up and rejoined her family.

“…while War never changes, neither does Hope…”

Nora sighed deeply, looked up into a beautiful early spring sky. She looked at her family and whistled shrilly. Dogmeat came like a flash, bounding up to Nat, and licking her face, making her smile a little. Nora took Nat’s hand, and Piper took Shaun’s. Then shyly, Shaun reached out to take Nat’s.

Nora looked at her whole family…less Codsworth…and said, “Let’s go home.”
The quote is from Finnegans Wake. Which I thought was appropriate, and would be at least a coherent quote, which is more than I can say for Ulysses.

And the chapter is a long one, but Cait deserved a proper send off on all levels; Irish, military, and emotional. And for those of you who were genuinely upset as opposed to just reacting...just as Piper's marriage to Nora was the emotional anchor that held Nora together; Cait's death, I hope you're starting to see, is important in what it's beginning to teach these disparate groups about true humanity.

For anyone longing to learn more about Ard Rí Brian Boru, you'd do worse than to start here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_Boru

Tomorrow is my Birthday...I have successfully made it around the sun one more time without managing to win the Darwin Award in any of a number of ways. But what that means is that there will be three days off for me. But Tuesday, at least, I will begin posting "To Plant Companionship Thick As Trees"; Chapter One, "Trouble Brewing".

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