To Plant Companionship Thick As Trees
By ItinerantPedant

Summary

Without the Institute to constantly interfere the Commonwealth is making strides in truly unifying.

But there is trouble on the horizon. Nora is still struggling with the implications of her actions, while outside the Commonwealth, threats are gathering force. If Nora and Piper can face them together perhaps the Commonwealth will truly rise as a nation and grow across the region, or the entire region could sink back into anarchy.
Nora pressed the button. For moments, nothing appeared to happen. Then as the fireball emerged from the ground, there was a bright flash, and she watched the shockwave spread, and as it spread she heard the heartrending wail of an infant crying for its mother.

Nora shot up in bed, gasping, drenched in sweat. Piper woke up next to her. She reached out to rub her wife’s back.

“Is it the dream again, sweetheart?”

Nora flopped back, hands over her eyes. “Yes. Every time. The light comes out and I hear him. But not him, infant him. Crying.”

She rolled over and looked at Piper, whose concern was evident in her eyes. Nora went on, “As much as I know it had to be done, no matter how sure I am of that, and to be crass how little of his life I took, I killed my son.”

“He was a monster Nora,” Piper said.

“You think I don’t know that? I fought knowing that until I had my nose well and truly rubbed in knowing it. That lab was monstrous, Piper. University Point was a crime. But my subconscious has other fucking ideas.”

Piper reached out and caressed Nora’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, babe. If there were something I could do, I would.”

Nora sighed. “I wake up in a blind panic and for a few seconds I think I did the wrong thing. And then my brain comes back online, and I think ‘Of course I did the right thing. What was the other choice, let the Institute kill everyone, bit by bit?’”

She shook her head, “But it doesn’t take away those five seconds. I’m starting to understand how Cait got hooked.”

Piper said quickly, “Blue, don’t even joke about that.”

“I’m not joking, Thing,” and as Piper’s eyes widened, she added, “I also have no intention of doing it. Not least because it doesn’t actually fucking work. It just substitutes in one horrible thing for another.”

“Blue, I’m calling it. We’re going to pack up and go see Marie. You need help about this. It’s been 6 weeks, sweetheart. If it were going to get better on its own, it would have done so, damnit,” Piper said.

Nora sighed. “You’re right. When you’re right, you’re right. And you’re usually right.”

After a further, blissfully dream free, four hours of sleep, Piper and Nora woke up. They went downstairs where Codsworth was waiting with coffee. When Shaun and Nat came down rubbing sleep from their eyes, Nora and Piper greeted both with a kiss.
Shaun, of course, didn’t actually need sleep. As a synth, he could integrate memories in parallel with his waking activities as opposed to old fashioned ‘normal’ people who required REM sleep to defragment their cerebral hard drives. But Nora was determined that her son live as normally as possible, which included 8 hours of shutdown time. Or sleep, as in “Dammit Shaun, put the gizmo down, it’s past your bedtime,” would have it.

Codsworth produced breakfast, and Nora looked over her family. Nat had integrated Shaun into her life rather easily. It certainly helped that Shaun had almost within the first week refurbished the presses at the Publick. That had gone a long way to defusing any sibling rivalry.

The way in which Piper and Nora simply acted as if Shaun was who they’d been after all along also helped. After her epiphany…admittedly at the hands of her wife…Nora had embraced the “Shaun as synth” equals “Her baby” attitude.

And after six weeks with Shaun in the house, it was as if Father was the anomaly. Except to Nora’s subconscious. That part of her was having none of it. And it was killing her sleep. Her hard drive was getting cluttered.

“So, it’s almost May, and I bet Sanctuary is getting pretty,” said Nora.

Piper picked it up and said, “We were thinking of pulling you guys from school, taking your assignments from Mr. Zwicky with us, and heading out there for at least a few weeks. What do you think?”

“No school? Why are you even asking?” said Nat.

Nora shook her head, “Not ‘No school,’ we’re just going to get you experts. I think maybe Rosalind can teach you guys math, Marie for biology. Preston can handle social studies. Piper can drill you on English.”

Shaun looked pleased, as time with his other mom seemed to be something he really enjoyed. Maybe on a subconscious level it was because he knew his affection for her couldn’t possibly be programmed in. Nat on the other hand.

Nat said, “Awww. Doesn’t all the red ink she puts on my copy count?”

Piper said, “Split infinitives are something up with which I will not put.” And she smiled at her sister.

Nora said, “At the end of the week, we’ll head out. Pack for a long trip, guys.”

They both nodded, and finished breakfast. They left for school. Since Nat was now writing for Publick Occurrences, and because now that Piper had been proven right about McDonough sales had increased, the paper needed, and had hired, a new papergirl. Erin Reische had gotten old enough that her family let her take a job, as well as go to school. She’d done an excellent job of filling Nat’s shoes.

In addition to Diamond City sales, in fact, the radio network allowed editions to be printed in Sanctuary and Bunker Hill as well. Piper was very obviously thrilled that her paper was finally taking off. And the radio network also meant that Publick Occurrences wouldn’t miss a beat while Piper went north with her wife in an attempt to make the nightmares stop.

That afternoon, the pair of them stopped by The Dugout Inn, for brief drink. When they arrived, Vadim and Yefim were in another of their incessant squabbles. Yefim saw Piper and Nora walk over to order and said, “Oh, here we go.”
Vadim shook his head, “Quiet Yefim. All right, you. Tell me…Diamond City Radio, it is terrible yes? Makes you want to cut own ears off?”

Nora shook her head, “Oh, I don’t know Vadim. It’s kinda soothing. I hear Travis stumbling through an introduction and I know I’m home again.”

“Bah!” Vadim scoffed, “Travis, he is terrible. Makes me want to go back in time and prevent invention of radio. Someone needs to get rid of him. We need a new DJ for radio. I don’t think many would notice if he, you know, disappeared.”

Nora’s jaw dropped, “Are you serious?”

Vadim crossed his arms, and said, “Did we not just agree is serious problem? Calls for serious solution. First, you get him to follow you out of town…”

Piper’s voice rose, “Vadim, this isn’t funny!”

Yefim patted the air, “Vadim isn’t serious. He doesn’t want to kill Travis.”

“Good,” Nora said. “Because if someone was getting killed in that situation, it wasn’t going to be Travis.”

Yefim looked contrite, “Sorry, we were just joking around a bit.”

Vadim nodded, “Is true. Only jokes. Travis is good friend. Yefim and I worry about him.”

Yefim nodded and went on, “Poor Travis he means well…but he does not have the confidence he needs for that job. Or anything else really. And so he is always awkward. He does not believe in himself you see. He expects he will fail at everything, and so he does.”

Nora held her temples, “So what is it you two jokers have cooked up between you?”

Vadim said, “We have foolproof plan. Let us get down to brass tacks. Ever been in bar fight?”

Oh for...

“I’m not some common thug Vadim,” Nora said sharply.

“Bar fights are excellent ways to make enemies, Vadim. You know that,” Piper added.

Vadim looked sly, “What if it was for good cause? Then would you be willing? I want to stage ‘fight’ here in Dugout. Nothing too serious, we make sure Travis wins and feels good about self later. I want you to be there to help it look real. What do you say?”

Nora shook her head, “It won’t work.”

Vadim answered, “Ah, but you haven’t heard best part. I have contacts, people I can count to look tough, but take dive. For money. They confront Travis here in Dugout. You step in and give push for him to stand up. Then you take them down, nothing gets too rough, and Travis has something to feel good about self. Simple, right?”

“Are you insane, Vadim? That’s even dumber than the idea I thought you had. Count me out,” Nora said.

“Bah! I go with original plan. Hawthorne will do as well as famous General. Better even.”
Nora looked at him with wide eyes. “Vadim, when is this supposed to go down?”

“H-h-hi, Vadim,” she heard from behind her.

She turned, and Travis was there. She quickly said, “Shouldn’t you be at the studio?”

He shook his head, “No, I play music on a loop when I eat or sleep. People really complement me on those times.”

A leather clad punk reached out and spun Travis around. He said, “I don’t like you. And I don’t like your radio. What ya gonna do about it?”

Piper, next to her, said, “What are…”

The man glared but stuck it out, “Maybe I don’t like your little radio program. What do you have to say about that?”

Travis was cringing, “What’s this about?”

Hawthorne had walked over, “Hey there pal.”

Travis looked over Leather Guy’s shoulder. “Oh, it’s y-you,” he said.

Hawthorne said, “Is everything OK here?”

Travis shook his head, “Does it look like everything is Ok? Because no, no it is not. I don’t…I have no idea what I did to deserve this. I just wish he’d go away.”

“Why not stand up to him?” Hawthorne asked.

“No!” exclaimed Travis, “I mean, that would be bad. It could turn violent.”

Hawthorne smiled, “Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

Travis stammered, “Well, if you think it would work. Ok,” he looked at Leather Guy, “That’s…well, that’s enough.”

Leather Guy sneered, “I’m sorry. You say something?”

Travis said, “I said…that’s enough! Leave me alone.”

Leather Guy said, “Sounds to me like you were thinkin’ about saying ‘Or else.’ Were you Travis? Were you thinking about saying ‘Or else’? I’m wondering what comes after that. What are you gonna do, little man?”

“I’ll…I’ll beat you up,” Travis stammered.

Oh no…

Leather Guy looked over his shoulder at Hawthorne and sneered, “Big mistake Travis. I’m gonna destroy you and your friend here.”

As Leather Guy wound up for his first punch, another bargoer, in a Wastelander’s coat and dusty trousers straight up cold-cocked Hawthorne. The kind of hit that leaves a victim with a concussion if they’re lucky. Brain damage if they aren’t.
Travis looked panicked as he ducked the first swing.

Piper moved to the right, but Nora was right there. She wasn’t some kind of martial arts expert, but the Farm had covered the basics of unarmed combat for agents.

*Only Rule: don’t remain unarmed.*

Nora reached behind her, and Leather Guy and Bushwhacker having set the terms of the engagement, grabbed a full wine bottle, and swung it at the side of Leather Guy’s head. Hard. “Christen a ship” hard.

The bottle shattered, and Leather Guy’s eyes rolled up in his head and he dropped exactly like somebody who’d just been hit in the side of the head with a full bottle of wine would.

Bushwhacker looked like he was going to continue, but Nora drew her pistol and leveled it at his face. “I would not continue on your current course of action, were I you,” she said.

She prodded the unconscious form of Leather Guy with her foot, and said, “Take your ‘friend’ here and get out of this bar. Never return.”

Bushwhacker glared at her, but dragged Leather Guy out by his shoulders. When he’d left, Nora relaxed and holstered her pistol. She turned back to the bar. “What was that?!?” exclaimed Vadim.

“That was an actual barfight,” Nora said, “Not a guy planning to take a dive, Vadim.”

“Well it could have gone better, anyway. Help me with next part of fool proof plan?”

Chapter End Notes

This Book's title is based on a Walt Whitman Poem from his "Leaves of Grass" collection entitled "For You, O Democracy".

In Switching from Yeats to Whitman, there's a tonal difference as well. Despite his history as a nurse in in the American Civili War, Whitman was ever an optimist, deeply in love with the ideals of his country. This book is about growth. In multiple ways. I hope it's good....

The poem from which the title derives:

*For You, O Democracy*

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,  
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,  
By the love of comrades,  
By the manly love of comrades.
For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.
Nora gave Vadim an incredulous look, “Now what, you madman?”

He laughed, “This part is simple. You have seen Scarlett, yes? She has worked here for some time. Now I am just simple bartender, but I see things. I see how Travis looks at her. And I see that sometimes she looks at him. If someone who is not her employer suggests she go spend time with Travis, it might do both some good.”

Nora rolled her eyes, but then, she’d actually seen what Vadim was talking about.

And I have a reputation to uphold. Nick and Ellie are taking forever, Danse and Haylen are settled enough I keep expecting the announcement, and how else am I supposed to retain my title as the Nosy, Busybody Aunt of My Country?

Still, “Why do I have to be involved in this?”

Vadim sounded like he was explaining something to the terminally slow, “Think about it. I am Scarlett’s boss. I tell her she needs to go see Travis, maybe she is thinking she is no longer just waitress.”

Nora was taken aback, “That…is surprisingly insightful of you, Vadim.”

Vadim nodded, satisfied, “Just do whatever it takes to get her to see Travis. It will all be worth it. She is on break now. Always goes to fields in back. And you and I never spoke about this, yes?”

Nora and Piper left, and headed for the Outfield. “You know this is crazy, right Blue?” Piper said.

“I can’t believe I’m doing it, but did you see Travis leaving after we had to rescue him? Like a beaten puppy. And Vadim isn’t wrong about Scarlett and Travis,” Nora said, “Maybe we can do this, have it be the end of it, and the worst that’s happened is that Travis gets a girlfriend, and you get to tell a story about me helping Vadim. Against my much better judgement.”

Piper laughed. “That’s true. Nick will never believe me when I tell him about this one.”

They found Scarlett having a cigarette under one of the lights. Nora approached her, “Scarlett?”

Scarlett looked up, “I’m on a break right now.”

“Can I ask you something personal? It’s about Travis,” Nora said.

Scarlett’s eyes widened slightly, “Travis? Really? Did he…did he mention me? I heard about the fight. Travis was very brave.”

That’s a word for it. Railroaded is another.

“Would you like it if he had mentioned you?” Nora asked.

Scarlett’s stammered, “Well, yeah, I guess I would. I mean I’ve definitely noticed him. Maybe…no. I couldn’t go over there.”
Nora said, with complete honesty, “Look, Travis is a nice guy. I can tell that you like him. And I think he likes you. Just go talk to him.”

Scarlett nodded, decisively, “OK, I will. Thanks,” and she stubbed out her cigarette and walked off in the direction of the radio studio.

Nora watched her go, and then turned to her wife. “And now I’m back in high school. If I regress any further, someone is going to start talking about ‘cooties’. Just shoot me.”

Piper snickered. “I heard from Billy, who heard from Sally, who was told by Betty, that Piper is in love with you!”

Nora laughed as well and took Piper’s hand. “Maybe I’ll pass her a note in algebra next hour.”

They walked back to the Dugout to tell Vadim if his “foolproof plan” had any more steps, he could do it without them. But when they got to the Dugout, all they found was Yefim, frantically pacing, “This is terrible. I knew it! I knew this was bad, and look what’s happened now. You’ve got to help. Those men you fought. They took him. They came back as soon as you left, said Vadim owed them more money. He wouldn’t pay, and they grabbed him and said that they’d make him pay, and then they just dragged him out. You have to do something.”

Nora was instantly all business, “I’ll bring him back. Do you have any idea where they took him?”

Yefim shook his head, “Talk to Travis. Maybe he knows where they took him.”

Nora nodded and ran back to Travis’ shack and burst in. Scarlett leapt out of Travis’ lap in surprise.

“Have you seen Vadim?” Nora asked. “He was grabbed at the Dugout and Yefim thought you might know where those guys you fought might have taken him.”

“Wait…really? Oh man. Oh wow. Is this…is this because of me? It is, isn’t it?” Travis said.

Nora shook her head, “This is between them and Vadim.”

“Don’t do that to yourself Travis,” Piper added.

“Look I don’t really…I don’t have…a lot of friends. If Vadim is missing, then I’m going to help get him back.” Travis said, shaking.

Oh hell no.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Travis…,” she started.

“Since I’m the one who knows where they are, you’re going to have to bring me,” he stammered, “I mean probably?”

“I don’t have time for this. Fine, you can come,” Nora said.

“Good. I didn’t want to have to argue with you about it. I’ve heard enough to know they’re probably holed up in the old Beantown Brewery. We gotta go in there, show them we mean business, and…and then we can bring Vadim back and everything will be OK. Right?”

Nora nodded and all three of them left for the Beantown Brewery. The trip was uneventful, as the Hangman’s Alley Garrison had pacified most of the area between Diamond City and the Brewery.

When they got there, Travis turned to Nora and said, “So this is it. Odds are if they’ve got Vadim, he’s inside. We…We’re gonna be OK right?”
Oh boy…time to at least talk him down a little if I can’t get him to stay outside.

“Just keep a cool head, alright? Don’t think about it too much,” Nora said.

“OK, right. Sure. Yeah.”

Piper added, “And we’ll all walk out of this in one piece.”

Travis looked nearly panicked. “Any, uh, last minute advice? I’ve never done anything like this.”

Maybe I can limit the tragedy potential a little.

Nora nodded, “We’ll go in first and you stay behind us. Watch our back.

Travis nodded jerkily, “OK, whatever you say.”

Nora shook her head and drew her pistol. Quietly, she eased the main door open. The inside was dark but not impossible to see in. And she heard snoring.

Creeping around a corner, she saw a Gang Member sleeping in a gift shop.

Why’s it always gift shops? Quiet, quiet, knife out, and…

Nora pounced on the hapless Gangster, and covered his mouth and twisted his head and slit his throat, while pointing his head away from her. The blood splashed away and she looked over her shoulder. Travis hand was over his mouth in shock.

When she felt the man under her go slack, Nora wiped her knife, stood, and whispered, “The longer it takes for them to figure out we’re here, the better the chance of finding Vadim alive.”

The three then crept down a hall to the brewing floor, with the hall dumping them off into a Foreman’s shop. Nora crept left and peered down, and saw a lone gang member on the brewing floor. She put away her pistol and unslung the rifle.

At that range the shot was child’s play, but she looked around to see what else was going on. Bushwhacker was outside the factory manager’s office across the Brewery floor. And she could see two more forms inside the office. One looked like Leather Guy, and the last one looked like a basic Raider boss.

She signaled Piper to watch behind her at the other end of the shack, then mentally visualized the steps from shooting the guy on the floor, followed by Bushwhacker and then Leather Guy and the Boss when they came running out, as well as rehearsing what she’d do to keep Vadim alive if they went the other way. Which came down to suppressing fire over Vadim, who was just visible, or shifting targets if they were in sight through the door or windows.

Ok, and begin. Shot and the floor guy is down, eyes up and rifle coming up, Bushwhacker starting to react, nothing effective yet. Sight on him, and squeeze and shoot him in the head, splash of blood on the window, he falls back. Leather Guy coming out, Boss turning to Vadim.

Shoot Boss twice in upper torso. Right through the heart, he’s collapsing, Leather Guy running now, swing left and through his chest, rushed, he’s still squirming. Squeeze again, and he’s down. Now listen.

There was nothing. No running feet. No angry shouts. Nora slung her rifle, drew her pistol and moved cautiously across the walkway to where Vadim was being held. But there were no further
Gangsters in evidence.

When she arrived, Vadim was kneeling, hand tied behind his back. He looked up at them and grinned hugely, “Thank you. I didn’t know if anyone would come. I thought perhaps this is the end. Thank you. You are true friend. And Travis, I am surprised to see you here.”

Travis said, “Hey Vadim. I’m glad you’re safe.”

Vadim smiled again, as Nora cut the ropes holding his hands and he said to Travis, “How did you get roped into this?”

Travis shook his head, “I...I wasn’t forced or anything. I wanted to help.”

Vadim clapped him on his back and said, “Ha! You are full of surprises, my friend.”

Then Vadim turned to Nora and said, “And you, my friend! For you, I have reward. When these dummies are not looking I help myself to their chems and caps. I fill pockets. All for you!”

Nora was gobsmacked, “They had you tied up? Threatened to kill you? And you decide, ‘Hey, time for some petty larceny’?!?”

Vadim laughed, “Da! You have it right!”

Nora shook her head, “Oh. My. God. Alright, out of here. Travis, wait up for me outside.”

As the two men left, Nora took an opportunity to check the terminal of the leader, whose name seemed to be Tower Tom.

So...oh ho! They’re getting nervous about the Minutemen. Good, assholes. Your days are numbered.

And, Ok. That explains why the opposition was so light. They have Raiders out at BADTFL and the Ration Stockpile looking for food. All this beer’s given them the munchies. Well, gave them the munchies.

Nora packed up and she and Piper left. They met Travis outside. He was looking up at the stars.

“Man, what a day huh? I just wanted to say thanks. This has been…well it’s been crazy. But I learned a few things,” he said.

Nora nodded, and said, “You came through it all pretty well, Travis.”

Travis looked over at her, “Thanks.”

Piper came up and punched his shoulder lightly, “Pretty well??! I barely recognize you Travis.”

Travis smiled, and it actually looked almost confident, “After all this, I think about the things that used to worry me so much and it just seems silly, you know? Like, was I really that worried about being on the radio? Thanks again. I owe you.”

He walked away. His shoulders were still a little hunched…this was Travis…but maybe ‘Foolproof Plan’ had actually worked out in the end.

Nora looked over at Piper. “We should send Yefim some flowers. Maybe a sausage plate from Polly’s.”

Piper looked confused. “Why Yefim?”
Nora took her wife’s hand as they started back for home, and their own family. “I never realized what a constant struggle it has to be keeping Vadim from dying in any number of bizarre ways on any given day.”

She shook her head, “I suddenly really feel for poor Yefim.”

Chapter End Notes

A little opening vignette for the book. Travis couldn’t stammer his way through broadcasts forever.

And even if it’s just too "High School Confidential" for words, Scarlett and Travis deserve a little happiness...
Three days later, Nora and her family had loaded a large number of belongings onto a pack brahmin, and began heading for Sanctuary. Nora wanted to travel on foot to get a feel for the new post-Institute, CPG Commonwealth rather than flying. Which did not go over well with either Shaun or Nat, both of whom felt that a flight, possibly with loops and strafing, was called for.

The caravan crossed the Charles at the Mass Avenue Bridge. Though the dead end remnants of the Brotherhood were just a mile up the road at the police department, no one had seen fit to do anything about them since the Battle of the Castle. CSIS reports suggested that they had not yet contacted the rest of the East Coast Brotherhood in DC, but at any rate, with the destruction of the Prydwen, the entire East Coast had been cut off from anything resembling support from the West Coast Brethren.

In either case, between the manner in which the NCR and the CPG were pressing them, it seemed that the Brotherhood had finally and fatally overplayed their hand, 210 years from their founding. Nora was hearing reports of restive peasantry in the Capitol Wasteland centered around places called Megaton, Big Town, and of all things, Rivet City.

At any rate, The Brotherhood had been rendered a quiescent rump of its former self. The caravan moved along Memorial Drive with less than no difficulty. They picked up Highway 2, and then moved through Greygarden. The robots there had proved one of the three breadbasket communities of the CPG, along with Abernathy and Warwick. Nordhagen, by virtue of its sandy soil had turned into a corn producing powerhouse, agriculturally, but the three major farms were known throughout the CPG for productivity.

And at Greygarden, none of the crop went to maintain the population. Literally everything went to export. There was only one location that potentially exceeded any of the above. The new settlement at Spectacle Island, made possible by a combination of air and boat travel? It promised to out produce literally every other farmstead in the Commonwealth. Combined.

In fact, Spectacle Island factored hugely in the CPG plans to incorporate both Diamond City and Goodneighbor. Bunker Hill had joined in the wake of the Second Battle of Bunker Hill, based on security concerns. The two major Downtown Cities?

First, they hated one another, though in some sense the impetus for that animosity had expired at the incarceration of McDonough. Second, the only thing that might entice one or both to join was either a) a food surplus sufficient to guarantee growth for more than a decade, or b) the joining of the other entity.

Nora’s money was on Hancock breaking first for all that she herself was a prominent Diamond City citizen. In either case when one went, the other would follow within weeks. And massive amounts of potential food would be the triggering event. Hence the interest in the Island.

Nora shook her head, and watched as the Greygarden robots tended the crops, and then the caravan, having loaded up with a ton of produce, Brahmin dairy, and some Brahmin meat, continued north. Starlight Drive-In was next, and it produced a fair surplus, but that was absorbed by…Concord.

Rising from its postwar ashes, Concord was a new jewel of the Commonwealth. While the Sanctuary/Red Rocket/Abernathy complex remained significant, Concord had something they didn’t.
The NEW Commonwealth Institute of Technology. At pains to call itself “CIT” like its pre-war counterpart, this entity was a center of learning. The old Museum of Freedom had turned into the administration center, but buildings lining the three north/south roads had all turned into colleges in the last few weeks.

Nora was happy when she’d heard reports about the structure of CIT had less to do with Politburos and was truly academic in nature. Allie Filmore had been appointed President of the new University, and Madison Li the Provost. In Nora’s opinion, making Allie responsible for CIT as a whole while Madison was responsible for the academics of the CIT made perfect sense.

And Concord was bustling. It was early May, and the scientists of the Institute were converting to the professors of the CIT. At the end of summer, in August, the first class, the Class of 2293, would enter. Nora was looking forward to that. Increasingly the attitude of Institute refugees was trending towards, “This isn’t quite so bad…”

As Nora and her family wandered the streets of Concord, what had been, the day following her release from the Vault, a war zone, looked for all the world to Nora like a pre-war college campus. *I want my children to have opportunities. I want everyone’s kids to have a chance to be more than farmers, and if they want to be farmers, to be really good at it.*

As they were walking through, and Nora was gawking at the changes six weeks had brought, Allie Filmore came up and greeted them warmly. “Nora, Piper! And Nat and Shaun! How are you all? What brings you out here?”

Piper smiled and said, “Bit of vacation, bit of business.”

“My dreams are getting worse, or at least not better, Allie,” Nora said bluntly.

Allie gave Nora a sympathetic look. “If we could invent a pill to fix PTSD we would. I wish it were that easy.”

Nora nodded, and then gestured around the campus, “Speaking as a non-scientist/engineer, are you guys going to have classes in the other liberal arts…literature, art, economics, sociology…psychology? I could use a shrink.”

Allie nodded. “As you can imagine, it’s a bit harder to find faculty for those. Sheng Kowalski tried to get us to let him teach economics, but frankly, one of our researchers is a literature buff…he’s going to be the English Department for a while, by the way…and he compared Sheng’s ‘syllabus’ and the plot of ‘Atlas Shrugged’ and laughed for half an hour, then scribbled ‘Fuck NO!’ on it and sent it back.”

Nora’s lips quirked, “Good. Somebody else who can’t stand the little shit.”

Allie laughed, and then turned serious. “Nora, it would be a great help if you used your law degree to help us with Political Science, Philosophy, and of course Law.”

“I’d be happy to do what I can Allie, but I don’t know if moving out here is in the cards,” Nora said, but Piper interrupted her.

Piper said, quite firmly, “We will go, as a family, wherever we need to go so Nora can stop having such awful dreams.”

Nora turned, “But I love Diamond City as much as you do these days, Thing…”
“And I’m not suggesting that we move, Blue. I’m saying I might just be open to long absences is all.”

Nora nodded, “How’s everything else going Allie?”

“Better now that we’ve had a chance to walk everyone through your ‘evidence’ and everyone heard your ‘trial’ of Father. Isaac Karlin was big help, with he and his people testifying about what they saw in the FEV lab the day of…well, before they left,” she replied.

She went on, “And the documents that Nick and Preston brought out. There’s a lot of people who resent you for making them acknowledge it, but we’ve finally reached a point where more people agree that it was right than wrong to end the Institute.”

Nora nodded, “But reading between the lines…”

“Less than half the people here would congratulate you personally, that’s for sure.”

Nora smiled grimly, “Well I’d rather they hate me and be alive than that they be dead. Because the rest of us rolling over and dying for their comfort wasn’t going to happen. I mean, they need to get in line behind my own sub-conscious for god’s sake.”

Allie nodded and they walked together to the far side of town. On the north side of Concord buildings were being turned into houses and apartments. Nora looked around at her hometown.

*If someone had told me that Concord would become the Harvard of a new nation I’d have laughed my ass off at them. And yet here we are.*

“Well, here’s something else for them to hate about me…you have got to not just study science. Most of the Institute’s crimes came because science was unconstrained by ethical limits,” said Nora, “God knows lawyers are imperfect. Everyone’s imperfect, but you have to encourage balance.”

Allie nodded, “I think you’ll find our Provost agrees with you. She’s up in Sanctuary this week though, so you can see her when you get there.”

Nora gave Allie a hug, and said, “Say hi to Nathan and Quentin for me. And happy birthday to Quentin for me.”

Allie smiled as she hugged her friend, “I will.”

Then in turn she hugged Piper, and Nat, and Shaun. Then waved goodbye.

*And more progress. Allie knows who Shaun is, and why Father created him and she’s still treating him like a little boy. Not like a thing.*

Before they left Concord a phenomenally handsome man came running up to Nora. He gave Dance a run for his money in the ‘manly’ department. He nodded at Nora, “It needs some refinement, but I think we can consider my serum a qualified success.”

Nora looked at him, incredulous, “Brian Virgil?!? This is a ‘qualified success’?”

He nodded, “There were some side effects to the process. I seem to have hair again. And I’ve retained some muscle mass. The genetic resequencers need more work. Still I take your point. This is a significant advance. But only for one strain of FEV. It will take years, perhaps decades, to generalize my formula. Still you have my gratitude.”
Nora nodded, “Wow. I guess, you’re…you’re welcome.”

He smiled, and Nora was even more tongue tied. He said, “When you see Madison ask if we’re still on for dinner tonight?”

Nora nodded.

Piper leaned in and whispered, highly amused, “Would you like a mop for the drool, sweetie?”

Nora looked embarrassed, but Piper smiled and said, “No one said you have to blind yourself to the rest of the world’s attractive people. Even if I can only admire that on a theoretical basis, I do get it, honey.”

Nora laughed and they left Concord.

A half hour later, they come up the rise to the Red Rocket garrison, just as one of the Vertibirds was taking off from Sanctuary Field. Thanks to the growth of Sanctuary’s business district, outside the settlement walls, Sanctuary the town had begun to merge with Red Rocket the garrison. Even more than at Cait’s funeral, Sanctuary was giving Diamond City a run for its money on size, if not security.

The wall around Sanctuary was much less robust than the Green Monster but then, it wasn’t in the middle of Boston either. And without McDonough to make sure than Diamond City was throttling trade, Sanctuary, Bunker Hill, and other major settlements were approaching Diamond City levels of prosperity.

Danse came to greet them as they approached the gate along Highway 2. He saluted as they walked up, and was still in his armor, of course. Chief Haylen came running as well, and she hugged everyone.

“How was your trip, General?” Danse asked.

Nora smiled, “Informative. The CIT is bustling and the robots in Greygarden seem to be giving Blake and Connie a run for their money.”

Danse nodded, “Amazing how well everyone is doing now that trade isn’t a one way street. And with all the travel, Cait’s Own is finding it easier to roam wider on patrols…the caravans are good for making sure the roads themselves are clear.”

Nora looked pleased, “How much counts as pacified and how much as civilized?” The Minutemen had decided on a four level scale to describe an area: “Wild”, i.e., like it was when Nora first emerged; “Traveled”, i.e., visited but not enough to make sure Raiders didn’t occasionally strike; “pacified”, i.e., it was unlikely that Raiders would strike absent a major raid; and “civilized”, i.e., where someone unarmed would be safe, absent an overwhelming Raider attack.

Danse led them into his office. Nat and Shaun had never been inside before and their eyes got wide at racked munitions and ammunition.

“Hands to yourself Shaun,” said Nora, “This isn’t like taking apart an alarm clock.”

Danse proudly showed them his map. Most of the northwest quadrant qualified as dark green “civilized” from just south of Sunshine Tidings, and then over to Starlight Drive-In, then diagonally up to Tenpines Bluff and back around to Sanctuary. Plus little blobs of dark green around Diamond
City, Bunker Hill, and The Castle.

“Pacified” light green areas surrounded the other major garrisons of Taffington, Hangman’s Alley, and Egret Tours, and ran in thick lines across to County Crossing, up to Greetop Nursery and The Slog, over to Nordhagen; also down through Oberland Station to Egret Tours; and finally down from Greygarden to Diamond City and thence to the Castle.

Yellow “traveled” areas filled in the remainder of the northern half of the Commonwealth and from Diamond City to Goodneighbor and then to Bunker Hill. Also from Egret Tours to Somerville Place. And a notional “traveled” on the sea routes from the Castle to Warwick and from the Castle to Spectacle Island.

The rest of the map remained “wild”, colored orange, except the Glowing Sea, the area around Quincy, and the area around Gunner HQ at GNN studios. Those were colored red.

Nora nodded in satisfaction. Her long ago, “at her wits end” rant to the Abernathy’s was coming true. Literally. She had just strolled, with her wife, her daughter, and her son across half the Commonwealth and never had to draw her weapon, let alone use it.

Danse leaned over as they were examining the map. “So why are you really here?” he asked, quietly.

Nora grimaced, “The nightmares won’t quit.”

Danse nodded, “I wondered. There’s a group of us, Nora, that meets three times a week in Sanctuary. Come and talk with us, please?”

Nora’s eyes widened, “You’re in group therapy?”

Danse shook his head, “There’s no shame Nora. You’re wounded, and I’m wounded. You just can’t actually see the worst scars.”

Nora nodded, “Ok, Roger, I will. I promise.”

Nora and her family headed out, back across the ‘Old North Bridge’ that had turned into a wooden Rialto, lined with shops, and into Sanctuary. The caravan terminated there, but Nora sweet-talked the caravaner to deliver her goods and her family’s possessions to her former home. Now the ‘General’s Residence’.

Her family unlocked and walked into her former home. Nora had brief frisson of emotion as Shaun wandered into the room where he’d lain as an infant. There were two beds, at Nora’s request, for Nat and Shaun.

In a sense her family had reached the ‘summer residence’ indeed. And as they put away their possessions, Marcy came in.

Nora turned, “Hi Marcy! How goes it?”

Marcy smiled, “Well, we’re getting closer on John Hancock.”

Nora raised an eyebrow and said, “Really. How in hell have you managed that?”

Marcy smirked, “I may have to toot my horn a bit. He’s always held back and I finally got exasperated. Asked him what the damn problem was.”

“Well, I guess he figured it was time to spill because he told me the issue was that Goodneighbor
was built around one thing. Being ‘Sin City’ for the Commonwealth,” Marcy said. “So I told him we didn’t give a shit what he did inside his walls. Outside, his Triggermen better pay attention to due process, but if he wanted to let it all hang out inside, fine by me.”

She went on, “So he asks if the included Commonwealth citizens. I said, more like folks from other settlements…he’d be part of the Commonwealth. And I was pretty sure that I could sell an agreement to let him have Goodneighbor his way, if he agreed to nothing outside the law outside his walls. Besides, no one walks into Goodneighbor not knowing where they’re headed. He agreed in principle.”

Marcy looked triumphant. “I figure that’s it. It’s a matter of weeks until Goodneighbor falls in line and joins. And when that happens…”

Nora finished, “The City Council in Diamond City will join in weeks, if not days. And with all that behind us, we just have to make the rest of Captain Danse and Colonel Garvey’s map dark green.”

Marcy nodded. Nora smiled. “Thanks for the update, Marcy.” Marcy waved and headed out, replaced almost immediately by Madison Li.

Before Madison could say anything, Nora said, “Brian wants to know if dinner is still on.”

Madison smiled a little secret smile. “I can’t personally arrange every pair. But, damn, did Madison ever win the lottery. That body and mutual interests. Whew!”

Madison got serious, and gave Nora a significant look. “I need to speak with you. Bring your wife…this impacts her as well,” Madison said.

Nora and Piper followed Madison to the carport. Madison turned, “What do you know about synths?”

“Artificial people. Ought to have the same rights as people. Made by the Institute,” Nora said.

“Don’t age,” said Madison.

“What?” said Piper and Nora simultaneously.

“A synth does not age, or change from its body’s initial configuration. The lack of cellular decay is one of the ways to determine whether someone is a synth,” replied Madison.

Nora looked over her shoulder, “So that means that Shaun…”

“Will remain ten forever, yes,” replied Madison.

“What happens when Piper and I are gone? When Nat is gone? He’ll be helpless,” Nora said.

Piper looked at Madison, “There has to be something.”

Madison nodded. “I can’t make him age. It’s built into the basic coding of synth biology. If I mess with that…well, a systemic cascade collapse is the least of the potential problems. But…”

Nora looked at Madison, “What?? Don’t just leave it hanging.”

“If I restarted the synth program, a small facility at the CIT, nothing widespread, but as a service, I could make synth bodies progressively age, using Dr. Amari’s memory transfer modification of her
memory loungers.”

“A service? Not an excuse to start the whole miserable problem over again?” Nora asked suspiciously.

Madison shook her head, “We earned that suspicion but no. Think about it. What if Marie and Preston want a baby? Roger and Meredith? Other synths are out there. With free will comes falling in love, Nora.”

Madison smiled a little crookedly, “We’d just have to take the phrase, ‘Make a family’ a little more literally than usual.”

Chapter End Notes

I might as well have named this chapter "Blatant Backstory" or "Infodump". Or I could have gotten playful and called it "Exposition Lad Vs. The Narrative Thrust".

But I went literal.

Oh well. Hopefully it isn't TOO boring hearing what's happened since they buried Cait.
“New synth production would have to be put to a vote. At least the CPG representatives,” said Piper.

“Well, not as ‘Let us start synth production,’ though. They’d just say no. And then for Shaun’s development, I’d have to do something illegal, Piper,” said Nora. “I won’t let my son stay 10 for eternity.”

“Ok. Maybe I can start a series of articles about Shaun and the other synths. Raise some awareness,” mused Piper.

Madison nodded, “I thought you should know because I figured you might want to do something, yes.”

Nora pinched the bridge of her nose, “Yeah. As much as it’s just one more damned thing, I needed to be aware.” She looked up, “Thanks Madison. Have you seen Marie?”

“She’s down at the hospital. As if you needed me to tell you that,” started Madison.

They called into the house before they left and told Shaun and Nat they were headed to see Marie. Nat had other things to do, like set up her terminal, and Shaun still didn’t like being poked and prodded. Which he assumed was what was going to happen the second he stepped into that building.

When they got to Marie’s she came over to greet them and after exchanging pleasantries, she looked at Nora shrewdly, “But of course you are not here merely to catch up? What is bothering you, Nora?”

“I keep dreaming about the Institute. About the moment I killed Father,” Nora said and then she explained her recurrent dream.

Marie nodded. “You are correct, both of you. This is a new symptom of Nora’s PTSD, as Allie implied, no doubt the result of your more recent experiences. I cannot ‘fix’ it for you. Your memories are your memories, but over time we can remove the emotional linkage.”

Nora said, “Roger told me about a group that meets three times a week.”

Marie nodded, “Oui. I think that would be a good start. And the cooking, as I have said before. Also, farming.”

“What?” Nora asked.

“I have been having very good results when I put some of the more upsettable Minutemen into groups and they farm. Something about coaxing the dirt to give life resonates. And physical labor that lets the mind wander is very good for your condition Nora,” said Marie.

“Anything that works, works for me,” replied Nora.

After they left, Nora with an appointment for Group that night and a work assignment for the next morning, they went shopping for dinner ingredients.

The “Old North Bridge” had a number of vendors along it, and Nora and Piper were able to find a
number of ingredients. Nora became unreasonably excited at the Molerat cheese. She called Piper over, “Do you see this sweetheart?”

Piper looked confused, “Yes. It’s cheese. In a water bath. So?”

Nora gestured at the vendor, who let her have another sample, a small cube. “Taste it!”

Piper popped it into her mouth. “Hmm…salty. A little sharp.”

Nora was nodding enthusiastically, “It’s a dead ringer for feta. And I already found some vinegar and cooking oil. We’re having grilled radchicken breast and tato rind and feta salad.”

Piper nodded. When they got home, Nora prepared the radchicken breasts with herbs from Sanctuary’s own gardens. With the rise of the Abernathy’s farm, Sanctuary had begun specializing in non-staple crops, including wild onions, sage, basil, parsley, and other herbs. Piper smiled as her wife began humming to herself, moving purposefully around the kitchen. When Nora lost herself like this, usually cooking, Piper could actually see the weight of the world leaving her.

Nora carefully drizzled cooking oil on the radchicken breasts and put chopped up parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme on them. Then she started the fire in the grill. She came back in and began chopping up tatoes and removing the interior section. After she finished, she called Shaun.

“Sweetie, take these to the restaurant, and tell them I don’t need ‘em and they can have them,” she said.

Shaun nodded and took the produce off.

*One of these days we have to recreate tomatoes and potatoes as separate items. Tossing off the part I don’t need is getting wasteful. And how in hell did a fruit and a vegetable merge anyway?*

She cubed the molerat feta, and chopped some wild onion. Then she put everything in a bowl, and poured in the vinegar and the vegetable oil. Then she chopped more basil and parsley, and tossed in some salt and pepper and the gently tossed the salad, until everything was well mixed.

By then, the fire was hot enough for grilling, and Nora put the breasts on for about 10 minutes on one side then flipped for about seven. She prodded them and they were firm with just a little give when poked she plated everything and brought the rest of the salad in the bowl and called everyone to the table.

As Shaun sat down with Nat on one side of the table, opposite from Piper and Nora, and they reached for forks and knives, Piper saw a tear run down Nora’s cheek. “Blue, are you Ok?”

Nora laughed, “Never better.”

Piper looked at her suspiciously, “Is this another Irish thing?”

“Maybe?” Nora said, “But not really. I am sitting in my dining room in my home in Sanctuary Hills, with my spouse, and my son and daughter, enjoying a beautiful late spring evening.”

She looked at Piper, “Do you know how long I spent trying to recreate this? And now, after having given up, here it is…”

Piper looked at Nora, “Don’t you see our home…”

Nora interrupted. Shaun and Nat were watching rapt. “Yes, sweetie. Our home is really ‘home’ to
me. But Diamond City, while home, is and always will be my ‘post-war home’. As thoroughly as Sturges and Preston fixed this place? It is heart achingly my ‘pre-war home’. And now we’re all here, including Shaun, sleeping in the room he slept in when he was just a tiny baby. Well when the…you know what I mean.”

Piper nodded, “OK, I get it now. Just when you stop trying to get something, it drops in your lap. As much as you were happy without it, now that you do have it, it fills that last little hole, right?”

Nora nodded, “That’s exactly it, Thing.”

They all ate enthusiastically and then Nora looked at her Pip-Boy. “Crap, time for Group at Marie’s,” she said, and kissed Nat and Shaun on the head, and gave Piper a quick kiss as well. Then she ran off.

A couple hours later, she returned. Piper could tell she’d been crying, and she seemed washed out. Not unhappy, but emotionally wrung out. She kissed Piper, but went no further, and the pair got ready for bed. By the time Piper got there, Nora was fast asleep. Piper grinned to herself, and spooned up to Nora.

The next day, Nora was gone before Piper woke up. She found Nora working in a no longer wild strawberry patch, weeding. Nora smiled and waved. Piper blew her wife a kiss and went to work, with the first of many articles pushing a “Will no one think of the (synth) children” agenda.

That night, Piper eagerly waited for Nora to get out of the shower. But when she did, Nora rolled over and went to sleep. Piper was becoming cross. More than a little Horny. The next day was the same, with the added distraction of Nora’s Group. She’d come home tear streaked again. And fell asleep immediately. Again.

This went on another couple days. Enough was becoming enough. That fifth night, Piper caught Nora in the carport before she could get inside. She didn’t want an audience.

“Blue! What gives?”

Nora frowned, “What do you mean?”

“Are you going to make me spell it out?” Piper said, crossly.

“What are you talking about?” Nora asked.

“You haven’t been…I’m not able to…Blue. Why are you avoiding sex with me? I feel like you’re deliberately avoiding any chance I might have to start something.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not doing any such thing. I’ve just been tired,” Nora said.

Piper shook her head. “It’s more than that, Blue.”

Nora shook her head, “Nonsense, Thing. Now, I stink, if you haven’t noticed. I need a shower.”

“Can I join you?” Piper said.

Nora shook her head, “I’m genuinely filthy Piper.”

So Piper set up a little seduction scene, with candles and she tried be posed as sexily as possible without actually crossing the line into feeling silly. But when Nora got out of the shower and came in, without missing a beat, she kissed Piper, and slid under the covers and was asleep in moments.
Piper was on the verge of real tears of frustration when she heard the door knock. Swearing under her breath, she pulled on a T-shirt and answered the door. It was Roger Danse in civvies. He looked apologetic as he walked in.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he started.

“It’s Ok, Danse. It’s not like you’re interrupting anything,” Piper said, a little bitterly.

“I know,” he said, “I overheard you and the General…Nora…talking earlier. I really shouldn’t be saying any of this but Meredith is pushing me to, and usually when it comes to non-military matters she’s way better at this than me.”

Piper crossed her arms, “Oh, what the hell are you trying to tell me?”

“I think you’re right. Nora is avoiding you.”

Piper’s eyes widened, and he raised a hand, “She had a breakthrough that first night in Group. And in a way, I think that’s your problem.”

Piper pursed her lips, “Ok, this needs an explanation. Spill.”

“This is stuff that got said in Group, so you can’t let Nora know I told you. Please!”

“OK, Soldier Boy. Mum’s the word,” Piper said.

“How much do you know about Nora’s pre-war murders?”

“Those weren’t m…,” started Piper.

“That was her word,” he said, “And when we all pushed back, she was adamant that ‘murder’ was the right word.”

“Ok, but what does that have to do with her and me?” Piper asked.

“Everything, I think. You know she was a spy…an assassin. And she was picked for her…bisexuality.”

“Ok, Danse, I know that we don’t conform to what the Brotherhood wants a couple to be…you can take the boy out of the Brotherhood, but you can’t entirely take the Brotherhood out of the boy...” Piper said.

“I’m sorry. I’m working on that. But…well, if the government picked her for her flexibility and she was primarily an assassin…,” he looked troubled.

Piper nodded, “Go on.”

He looked at her, turning bright red, “Don’t you think there was a reason they did that? Because in Group she told us of several times…”

Piper finally caught on, “Oh! You mean she’s killed other people just before or after…” Her eyes went wide, “That’s what she meant when she said that to Father.”

“It’s a real problem for her, Piper.”

“Well it’s not like she’s going to strangle me sometime after sex,” and Danse blushed bright red, “Because she forgot where she was…”
Danse shook his head. “No, it’s deeper than that. She killed her son, Piper. He had to die, and we all know it. She knows it. But…”

Piper said, “But, what?”

“She sees herself as betraying…killing…people with whom she has intimate relationships. Her feelings of guilt are associated with a lot of things, but she thinks part of the dream is about betraying people who love and trust her. This is what she said in Group, mind you,” he said.

Piper smiled, “Thanks Roger. It helps to know where it’s coming from.”

“What are you going to do?” Dance asked.

Piper looked serious, “I’m going to give her a week or two to get this out of her system, and then we’re going to have another talk.”

He looked troubled, but he nodded once and left.

The next week and a half was hard on Piper. Keeping information to herself was not something she did well. Holding her tongue was nearly impossible, but she did it for Nora. Nora had stopped crying in Group as far as Piper could tell, but Nora was still totally “exhausted” after work. Then, one day after Group, Nora came home.

The children were already in bed, and Piper was writing an article about synth human relationships, using Marie and Preston, and Roger and Meredith, as well as the new relationship between Z1-14, who was now going by the name Henry, and of all people Rosalind Ormon.

She was wrapping up the article, [...and don't these couples deserve the profoundly human experience of babies too? Don't they deserve the chance to place a baby to their breast and know, like millennia of people before them, that they are parents...]

Suddenly she felt arms go around her, while someone kissed the side of her neck.

“I am so wet for you, Piper Wright,” she heard breathed into her ear.

Piper turned her head and Nora was there, face flushed. Piper cupped her wife's cheek, "Done being an idiot, Blue?” she asked.

Nora smiled ruefully, and nodded.

"Good, then let’s get to bed. Because I need, first, to jump your bones. Then make love. Then maybe just plain sex. I have never been so unbelievably horny in my life, Blue."

"I'm sorry Piper."

"Why? Because you were working some things out? Pfft. I'm the one who should be sorry. But I won't be."

"Why should you be sorry?"

"Because I don't plan on stopping until you pull a muscle, Blue."

Chapter End Notes
I want to start with, if you're wondering how someone milks a molerat, I wonder how someone milks a GOAT. They're both mammals, and the major size difference between those two animals is leg length. So it makes sense. To me. Especially if you live somewhere in the wasteland where Brahmin are impractical (nothing gets my...ahem...goat like trying to work around two brahmin in Hangman's Alley...).

Also I have NO idea how tomatoes and Potatoes can mix. Rhyme maybe. All I can say is, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Oy...

Recipe time (appropriate this time of year, and this is dead easy, but super tasty):

Tomato Feta Salad
2 pints Tato Rind or Cherry Tomatoes
1 Medium diced Wild or Red Onion
2 Tablespoons Vinegar or white wine vinegar (or some white wine from a bottle Vadim swears, "...is good, really. Do not open for taste. I swear is good.")
3 Tablespoons cooking oil, or olive oil if you live in the Italian Wasteland
2 teaspoons sea salt
1/2 teaspoon ground pepper (If you manage to loot or scavenge some Penzey's Four Peppercorn Blend that works REALLY well)
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
2 to 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
3/4 to 1 pound molerat cheese (feta if you're long on goats and short molerats or live in the Greek Wasteland)

Mix chopped taco rind (or halved cherry tomatoes) with all other ingredients save the cheese. Toss well.
Cube molerat or feta. Fold carefully into salad to minimize crumbling.
Chill slightly or serve at room temp depending on your power and refrigeration situation.

Grilled Radchicken Breasts
4 Radchicken breasts
Oil (or Olive oil if Italian Wasteland, see above)
3 to 4 Tablespoon of Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme (stolen from Simon and Garfunkel) (Or if you can loot a Penzey's store in your local Wasteland, Penzey's Italian Herb Mix...)
Grill until firm but not rubbery.
Nora Wright. You’ve Destroyed the Institute...What Are You Going to Do Next?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nora woke up with the sun in her eyes. She was very relaxed. Piper’s arms were around her, and she thought for long moments.

*I am too lucky. Piper is more patient than I have any right to expect.*

Piper had been right. She'd pulled a muscle...or at least cramped one. But she owed her wife. The three weeks in which she'd worked on her intimacy problem had been harder on Piper than her, she was reasonably sure. If last night was anything to go by.

Nora wasn't done working on her emotional issues, by a long shot. But she'd had a breakthrough...the realization that her past assassinations and real intimacy were not actually linked. She'd been placed...threatened, blackmailed...into circumstances where she had had no choice.

And from the moment she realized who Father was, she'd been equally constrained. Breaking free of these constraints had proven as painful as anything she'd had to do. She’d finally admitted that she was scared and reluctant to have sex, because of what she was currently dealing with. That she wanted to wait until she’d managed things. But Marie had pointed out that ‘managing things’ was a lifetime affair and then asked Nora a question she couldn't...wouldn't...dodge. "How is what you're telling me you’re doing fair to your wife?"

Nora had had no answer. She had walked for while after Group. No matter how she turned it over in her mind, her concerns and issues weren't Piper's fault. Piper had always been loving, playful, affectionate, and caring. Nora's issues didn't come from her. And the more Nora thought about how unfair she’d been, the worse she felt.

Until she’d had the realization that Piper had actually been waiting patiently, or mostly patiently, on her. And at that moment she realized how badly she wanted her wife. And now she was lying in bed, next to a softly snoring Piper, contemplating what her back felt like.

*Totally worth it. A relationship isn’t all about sex. But it’s an important part of a healthy one.*

Nora climbed stiffly to her feet and made coffee. They could have brought Codsworth with them but he was at home in Diamond City, making sure things there ran smoothly. So here she was, making her coffee. And deciding, based on how her back felt, to skip weeding today.

She was sitting at her kitchen bar sipping her coffee when Danse “Ahem”-ed from the doorway.

She turned, “Yes?”

“General,” he said, and Nora was instantly on alert, “I’m afraid we may have a situation.”

“Ok...what?” Nora asked.

“We’ve been monitoring traffic from the Gunner’s...or D’s group has. And they’ve been active just south of Sunshine Tidings.”

“That far north?” she said, shocked.
He nodded. She thought for a second, “Send a patrol to see what’s going on.”

Danse gave her a look, “I already did that, ma’am. I’m not helpless.”

Nora shook her head, “Forgive me Roger. I should’ve known if it were straightforward you wouldn’t be here in my doorway. Coffee?”

He nodded and took a cup, “I’m not happy about losing a patrol. It might be nothing, but…”

“It could be those mercenary pricks coming up the west side, getting ready to do us a dirty…”

Danse nodded. Nora smiled, “I’ve been looking for a valid reason to be bad tempered lately. Work off some aggression and irritation. Might as well head on down.”

“Head down where, Blue,” Piper said, yawning.

“ Weird shit, south of Sunshine, Thing,” Nora said, “Up for a little look?”

Piper smiled slowly, “Now? Sure, I’m feeling relaxed. I could head out for a while.”

Nora smiled as well. Danse blushed. Piper was just glowing.

“Whatever it was, it may have taken out a patrol, so we should go ready,” Nora said, “Stimpacks. Radiation meds. Food, water. Ammo. Grenades. Stealth Boys. You know, staples.”

Piper nodded. She added, “We should have Preston and Marie see about the kids.”

“Umm…,” said Danse.

Piper frowned, “Yes?”

“I’m supposed to ask…,” he started.

“Meredith asked you about babysitting, didn’t see?” Nora asked.

He smiled, and nodded, relieved.

Nora smiled, “Ok, Roger. That works for us.”

Piper smiled as well. If this wasn’t exactly what she’d been writing about, she’d eat her hat. Which Nora wouldn’t have minded.

After Danse left, Nora turned to Piper. “If that wasn’t adorable, I don’t know what is,” she said.

“I’ve seen it once before to that extent. It was just after Meredith laid an epic lip-lock on him right
after we found out he was a synth. That man is nuts about his girlfriend. You mark my words as the Nosy, Busybody Aunt of Her Country…we’ll be at a wedding within months.”

“The what, Blue?!”?

“Oh. I never mentioned that? Sometime last Christmas, I got to thinking that if George Washington had been ‘The Father of His Country’, based on how many people, especially Nick and Ellie, I was working on fixing up, I was ‘The Nosy, Busybody Aunt of My Country’.”

Piper was looking at Nora, mouth agape.

“What?” Nora asked.

“Oh. My. God. That is PERFECT!” shouted Piper.

Nora gave her a look. “Shit. You’re figuring out how you can work this into every article you write, aren’t you?” Nora said.


“You have no idea, Blue.”

“I’ve already made my peace with the statues, Thing.”

“Statues?!? Ego much Blue?”

Nora smiled, “I’ve set out to change the Commonwealth through sheer force of will, Thing. What do you think?”


“Dandy, just let me let Preston and Marie know to check in with Roger and Meredith from time to time,” Nora said.

“Training wheels, huh?”

“Absolutely. I’m not that crazy, Thing.”

Piper smiled again, and the pair of them let Nat and Shaun know that they’d be gone for a day or two. Shaun was a little worried, but his big sister just said, “They do this all the time. The only time I worried was when Mom left to find you. It’ll be fine.”

So as they made their way out, with a stop in the hospital to let Marie know what was up, Nora went over with Piper what it could be. Possibilities one through ten were Gunners.

One of these days, we’ll have to do something about them. Problem with Gunners is, unlike the Brotherhood, there isn’t a single point of failure. Even if we neutralized GNN, that wouldn’t be the end of it.

Nora sighed. They made their way south by easy stages. It was getting onto dusk when they left Sunshine Tidings Co-Op headed south. Caretaker had sent them off with the latest from D. There seemed to be something up south and west of them.

“D’s guesses are as good as gold, Blue. With PAM backing her up,” Piper noted.
Nora nodded. “Ok, thing, let’s go with old time manners. Really silent, hand signals only, sneaky as shit. I prefer for us to be the only people who know there’s a fight.”

Piper agreed. And with a lazy smile, she put finger to her lips.

Which is how they found themselves laying on a rise looking down at a carpark through scopes, in Nora’s case, or binoculars, in Piper’s case, at Gunners standing in the Nuka-World Transit Center.

Wow. Nuka-World. That’s a blast from the past. Well, time to kill some Gunners.

Outside the transit center the entire Minutemen patrol laid where they’d been cut down. Inside, Nora could make out a sizable Gunner contingent. She looked over at Piper and said, “What do you say? Shall we thin them out?”

Piper nodded quietly, and since Nora now had more options than just shoot and move she got on her radio, and called Sunshine Tidings for an artillery mission.

The Gunners had had no warning that they were the target of artillery, and the precision, or imprecision, of Nora’s artillery was such that she actually got what she wanted, which was rounds impacting all over a 50 yard radius around her aim point. Cars were exploding. Ammo was exploding. An Assaultron was exploding. And Gunners were dying. In droves.

Nora added to the general sense of excitement by sniping the leader of the group and then anyone who looked like she or he was trying to get organized. Eventually, the artillery called, “Rounds Complete.”


Eventually she and Piper walked into the transit center.

“Nuka-World? What’s that?” asked Piper.

“An amusement park. Well, more like group of parks. Nate and I came here a couple times, back when,” Nora said. “It was kind of an American ritual. You went to Nuka-World. You took kids to Nuka-World. It was a thing.”

“Never heard of it,” Piper said.

“I’m not surprised,” Nora said, “It was located south of Worcester, near Sutton. There was a Monorail here that took you from parking to the park. Or you could drive there. But that place is so far from here that for all intents and purposes it might as well be on the moon.”

Nora knelt next to the commander, and found a set of orders.

{Commander Kaylor,

Your orders are to investigate the Nuka-Cola Family Radio signal that appeared today. Our intel has determined it’s coming from the Nuka-World Transit Center, and we’ve reason to believe it may be linked to Sergeant Lanier’s missing recon team. Your primary objective is to secure the surrounding location and report back to me. You’ll then receive further instructions based on your status report.

- Colonel Cypress}

“Great. They’re curious about a damn amusement park and 10 good people get killed figuring out
what these maniacs were up to.”

Piper pointed at a sign over a station building. “Nuka-World” it said. She looked at Nora, “We can at least look,” she said.

Nora sighed, and the pair of them opened a door. They heard someone calling for help.

“That, I did not expect,” said Nora.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I decided VERY early on was that Nora and Piper's relationship would be happy, healthy, and loving.

The intent was twofold: to give Nora a stable base on which I could pile all kinds of crap, over and over again, poor woman. The other was quite deliberately to show not just the BEGINNING of a relationship, the fun 'will they/won't they, oh my god they did!' part, but the day to day parts. But I also wanted and still want to show that Piper makes Nora hot and vice versa. And that 'hot' comes something more than just sexual tension. It also comes from a deep, abiding, and reliable love.

Because as usual, the two of them are going to need it.
Both women drew their pistols and went down the escalators. The last time Nora had been here…

“C’mon honey,” Nate said, excitedly, “We’ll miss the train!”

Nora laughed, “Nate Greene, you’re more excited about this trip than when we came here last time.”

“We were 12 then,” he said, “They hadn’t even opened Safari Adventure let alone the Galactic Zone, sweetie.”

Nora smiled, “Yeah, but Dry Rock Gulch was open. Remember how mad you were that you couldn’t beat One-Eyed Ike to the draw and I could?” Nora asked.

Nate’s expression said it all. He was still not happy about beaten to the draw by a girl. Even thirteen years earlier. Nora remembered really rubbing it in, so she decided to let him win this time, when they went to visit Dry Rock Gulch.

If they even got to it. Nate was dead set on seeing the Galactic Zone, and the Nuka Galaxy lines were rumored to be hours long. But Nora was just two months pregnant, and she was in total agreement with Nate about going on rides they wouldn’t be able to in just a few more weeks, let alone after the baby was born.

They got to the bottom of the stairs and there was the monorail. The last time they’d gone, with their parents, it had been an hour and a half drive from Concord. The monorail, at least while it was underground, traveled three times as fast as a car, and the trip from the Transit Center in Sudbury would only take about 20 minutes.

It was sleek and modern, and red and white, like a Nuka logo. Nora was drawn to the souvenir shop, but Nate pulled her onto the train, “There’ll be plenty of time to get plush toys when we get there, honey,” he said.

Nora had to admit he was right.

There was trash everywhere as they went down the stairs.

This place has really gone to pot.

At the bottom of the stairs, they peered through. There was a man, slumped on a pile of junk, holding his side.

As Nora and Piper moved into the station, covering either direction, he spoke, “Shit they’re gonna die.”

Nora kneeled and said, “What happened to you?”

He looked up, and gasped and gripped his side harder, then said, “Raiders, that’s what. Those bastards have my family. You…you gotta help me. Please.”
Nora asked, “Are you OK? You look terrible.”

He coughed and said, “Tell me about it. My family and I ran into some traders a while back told us they knew a safe settlement…at Nuka-World. But when we got there…,” he grimaced. “Found out they were Raiders the whole time, stringing us along. I managed to escape but my wife and son are still back there. I wanted to get some help and go back for them, but I didn’t count on taking a bullet.”

Nora’s bullshit meter was at four alarm.

*If he’s hurt that bad, where’s all the blood? He can’t move, but he can play Mr. Exposition. Right.*

“Let me help you first, I have stimpacks,” and she kneeled and reached for his ‘wound’.

He shook his head, and turned away, “No. No…I’ll be fine, save it for my wife and kid. For Lisa and Cody.”

Now Nora was certain. “I’m offering you a way to heal yourself, why pass that up?” she asked, staring him down.

He relaxed and his hand fell way from his perfectly healthy side, “Damn it. Look you got me. I ain’t injured OK? I just can’t do this anymore. The Raiders back at Nuka-World put me up to this. They lure people in and they kill ‘em for fun, and I’m done doin’ their dirty work. Let em find me and do what they want.

Nora looked at him, aghast. “Why do you help them?”

*Nuka-World has turned into a big Augusta. In the ‘Happiest Place on Earth’. I think I’m gonna be ill.*

He shook his head, and his words weren’t what Nora expected. And she was still half seeing Augusta. Maybe that’s why she missed the clue.

“Besides not wanting to die? I’m not the only one they’ve got stuck under their thumb. If I don’t pull through their lives are at stake just as much as mine. I figure what’s some strangers life compared to those of people I know and care about?” he said.

“Let me help. I’ll go face them. You don’t have to die,” Nora said.

Piper was a reporter. She was used to being lied to. But not this way. Not a nesting doll of duplicity. She missed it too, and said, “You can trust us.”

He looked stunned, “Are you serious? This is no walk in the park.” Nora nodded and he went on, “You have to turn on the power over there in the control room. I shut it down to make it look good. And, thanks.”

Nora found the terminal immediately, and it was easily activated to turn on power to the station. The lights came on, and a woman’s pre-recorded voice spoke about special end of season passes, leading up the spectacular Halloween extravaganza. More important than the potential deals available in 2077, was the powering up of the monorail.

Nora and Piper climbed aboard, and looking at her wife, Nora gave her a grin and pressed the activation lever.
The doors hissed shut and an announcer said, “Please stand clear of the doors,” and then repeated the request in Spanish. After about 15 minutes of high speed underground travel, the monorail decelerated, and burst into the sunlight…

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The park was beautiful. In the distance, Nora could make out the Galactic Zone and Safari Adventure to either side of Dry Rock Gulch, the haunt of Nora McAllister, The Deadeye Kid, fastest gun in the West…Side of Massachusetts.

Closer in, there was Kiddie Kingdom and Nuka-Town USA. And the World of Refreshment even further to her right. They entire park was bustling, cars pulling into the parking lots, with verdant green belts between the parks themselves.

Nate wrapped his arms around Nora, resting his hands on her tummy. “I can’t wait to bring little Shaun or Kathleen here.”

Nora smiled and laid her own hands over his. “First we actually have to have the ceremony, soldier. Make me an honest woman.” But she turned her head and they shared a tender kiss, as the announcer began speaking.

“Hello and on behalf of the Nuka-Cola corporation, we’d like to welcome each and every one of you aboard the Nuka-Express monorail. For your own safety, please remain seated or utilize the provided handrails while the train is in motion. If you’ll direct your attention to the right side of the monorail you can observe Nuka-World’s famous Fizztop Mountain.”

The mountain really was remarkable. You could almost believe that it was covered in snow. The announcer went on, as the monorail went around a bend, “Standing at over 100 yards Fizztop Mountain is the largest man-made structure in Nuka-World and features the five star Fizztop Grille. Coming up is the heart of Nuka-World, Nuka-Town USA….”

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“…the heart of Nuka-World, Nuka-Town USA…” and then there a crackling noise, shocking Nora from her reverie.

A man’s harsh voice came on, “Well look who learned the truth and still showed up. I guess Harvey played his cards right after all. I only got a minute so you better listen and listen good. The name’s Gage. Porter Gage. And our mutual friend Harvey only told you half the truth. You’re still headed straight into a death trap. But if you somehow make it through alive, I have an interesting offer for you. In the meantime, have fun and put on a good show. I’ll be watching.”

That prick. That was his second order cover. And like a rookie straight out of the Farm, I fell for it. Damnit! And now I’m headed for a Raider Nest. Time to get my damn game face on.

The doors opened and Piper said, “I think we’re in trouble, Blue.”

Nora just looked over and nodded. Piper saw something in her wife’s face she hadn’t seen in a while. The coldly professional assassin was coming back.

Piper would have been more upset if she hadn’t had the uncomfortable feeling that they’d need her.

Nora made her way over to an elevator.

Powered down. And there’s fencing to keep the kiddies from falling 30 feet down. Even If we could squeeze through that tiny opening, we’d just fall. And then we’d be in the middle of a Raider Nest, with broken ankles. Pass, thanks.
The loudspeaker crackled, “Attention all my favorite undesirables out there. In case you haven’t noticed, looks like we got ourselves some fresh meat for the Gauntlet.”

Nora looked Piper and said, “What is it with these assholes and a PA system?”

Piper shrugged and looked around and found a terminal behind a counter. She checked it and then showed it to Nora.

It had four menu entries:
[You're dead
You're so dead
Enjoy dying
Time to die]

“Nice,” Nora said. There was a stairway on one end leading down. There was painting in the wall: “The Gauntlet” it read. The pair pulled their pistols, and crept down the stairs.

“And she’s off. Let’s hope our latest prey can draw a little inspiration from our previous victims,” said the omnipresent PA guy.

Turning and starting down the other flight, Nora saw a body next to an open doorway. She froze. Slowly she holstered the pistol and unslung her rifle. She took one step at a time.

“Jeez, vic! Get a move on before we all die of boredom, willya?” came over the PA. Piper jumped. Nora didn’t even twitch a muscle.

*If I thought for one second that were possible, I’d sit here for the next month, asshat.*

Nora finally saw a turret all the way across the room, and one along the right wall, half obscured with the junk that had piled up. She scanned the area. Those were all that were visible. Not all that were in there. For certain.

Sighting on the one with the most direct line of fire, on the far side, she said, quite loudly, “Testing audio triggers!”

Nothing happened except her wife smacked her, “Damnit Blue, give me a heart attack, why don’t you?”

Nora just shook her head slightly. She fired, exploding one of the two visible turrets. The other one spun up, but she destroyed it as well, and took a step down. Then to the landing. By then she heard the buzz of a turret standing down.

She gestured for Piper to look left, while she looked right. They stepped cautiously in, and began shooting. Shortly all the visible turrets were blown up. Nora slung her rifle and pulled her pistol. As she moved through the room, she cleared each corner as it became visible. Soon all turrets were down.

“Our new vic sure knows how to dodge some bullets. Good thing that’s not all we got in store for her.”

*God this guy is annoying.*

The next chamber would have been the death of her. Except she was neither stupid nor impatient. Moving carefully, her light caught the trigger wires. All of which were easily deactivated. She moved to her left to a door. To a typical wastelander the lock was incredibly difficult.
It barely took Nora longer than she’d have taken with the key.

“So our little vic managed to pick one tiny little lock. Let’s see how long the Gauntlet lets her enjoy that one.”

_I would love to get this guy at my mercy. I wonder if it’s possible to kill someone by bleeding him to death through his ears?_

She went through the door an up a set of stairs, then around a corner. There were three doors.

“It’s decision time. All doors lead to death. Some just a little slower than others.”

_Through. The. Ears._

But she took the hint. She shined her Pip-Boy light through the seams. Only the leftmost door didn’t have a glint of metal that indicated a trigger anywhere along the perimeter. She opened it and found a hallway and a stair down.

“She went through the door an up a set of stairs, then around a corner. There were three doors.

“All doors lead to death. Some just a little slower than others.”

_Through. The. Ears._

But she took the hint. She shined her Pip-Boy light through the seams. Only the leftmost door didn’t have a glint of metal that indicated a trigger anywhere along the perimeter. She opened it and found a hallway and a stair down.

“Hope someone brought their RadAway because our little vic is about to get roasted like a squirrel on a stick.”

Nora shrugged and gave Piper a Rad-X dose and took one herself. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, her Pip-Boy was chattering at her. There was a door across the room and the pair of them were quick to open it. Not so quick that Nora didn’t check it thoroughly first, and she did have to pick it, but when they got through the doorway, they kept going until Nora’s Pip-Boy showed normal radiation levels and both took RadAway. Two each for good measure given how long they’d been in a highly radioactive environment.

As they went down the stairs to what had been access tunnels, the PA Announcer called out, “Someone thinks she’s a real tough gal eh? But the gauntlet ain’t through with her yet.”

The door let her into a room with a terminal, that she easily hacked, with the PA guy once again complaining about her pace.

_If boredom is going to kill you, why aren’t you dead yet?_

The terminal showed her that the next room had no less than 12 turrets. She overrode their friend/foe programming and activated them in the hope that the next Raider through the room would get a brief but fatal surprise.

When she went down to the next room, to cover the hacking job she shot the incredibly obvious toy trigger. Which led PA Voice to complain, “What? Call me crazy but I think our vic’s got something against fun.”

As she went through next door, she heard the voice say, “Time for things to get dangerous!”

She peered around the corner.

_Ah! By ‘dangerous’, he means all the free explosives these idiots left here for me to take._

As Nora harvested the mines, PA Voice bitched again, “Is this some kind of joke? I knew we should have put turrets in there. “

_Nah, the last room was full of turrets. More turrets would be boring._

Nora stored the mines in the satchel. If nothing else she could use them to have her people make
grenades. The next challenge was a narrow plank bridge over a mirelurk infested area to a door on the far side. She briefly considered just killing them from up above, but the two women tiptoed across the bridge where Nora picked the lock on the other door. As it swung open, PA Guy was getting irritable, “What the hell? God damn, Derek. That door’s supposed to be boarded up!”

The next door was an even bigger gift.

*Three explosive canisters. Two tripwires. One pressure plate. It’s some kind of demented Christmas song.*

Nora made her way carefully, ignoring PA Voice’s jibes, and harvested a large number of frag grenades. It was truly thoughtful how much in the way of munitions they were handing her. At the far end of the tunnel, there was what looked like a HVAC and plumbing control room.

When she entered, the door slammed shut behind her, and she heard a hissing. “Let see if the vic can kill the gas before the gas kills her,” taunted the loudspeaker. Nora had taken a normal breath before she entered, but now she moved quickly. There was a valve, but she ignored that in favor of an active control terminal in a caged off area.

*Master computer control is more likely to get me what I want. Ugg radroach. Shoot. Lucky this isn’t a laser or a revolver. Those might ignite this shit.*

She hacked a very easy terminal and opened the security doors at both ends. She and Piper both went up a stairway into a maintenance shed. Nora sniffed experimentally.

“That’s right vic. Breathe that fresh air in. While you can.”

Nora and Piper found themselves in a shed with…yep. Giant ants.

*I’ve been wondering where these were since I woke up. Every radiation and post atomic world movie I ever saw had Giant Ants. I wonder if these assholes would be surprised I’m a little disappointed they aren’t bigger?*

The ants went down quickly and as the last one went down the PA Voice called, “Goddamn! Look who’s in the homestretch. Time for a little audience participation.”

Nora peered out, and sure enough, there were Raiders lining up along the rest of what she assumed was the route. She pulled a pair of Stealth Boys and handed them to Piper. “Wait twenty seconds then head out,” Nora whispered.

She activated her own and made her way along the route. There was one area with trip wires, and she harvested the grenades instead of getting bogged down deactivating triggers. Then she moved on, around a corner, past a turret that didn’t pick her up thanks to her Stealth Boy, and then through a door at the end of the passage.

As she went through the door and held it for Piper, who was right behind her by then, a horn went off, and PA Voice called, “Well I’ll be damned. You know what that sound means? Get your ass down to Cola Cars. The main event’s about to begin.”

*This was the warm up? Oh for…*

*Well, I do have all these explosives burning a hole in my pocket.*

Chapter End Notes
I decided, when I was writing the last chapter, that I wanted to do some 'scene setting' in Nate and Nora flashbacks. Which, by the way, are a LOT easier to write now that most of Nora's backstory has been filled in and I don't have to hide her DIA history...

Also, if you ever needed proof that 'protagonist' $\neq$ 'author', Nora's distress at Disney-W...I mean Nuka-World...being taken over by Raiders is it. My personal reaction, were I to be frozen, wake up in the wake of a nuclear war, and discover that Immortan Joe had set up base camp in Disney-World would be, "Yeah. That sounds about right to me..."

Three back to back beast chapters, this being the first, coming up. So we'll see if I can keep up the writing pace. Mrs. Pedant, who also writes fan fiction, is PISSED at how fast I write. But I'm in a section that I have to get right. Someone (untagged commenter) made the comment that Nora and Piper still need to have a talk, in the wake of the relationship drama of the last two chapters, and they do, but first I'm putting poor Piper through a version of the wringer I put Nora through in the first two books. When my favorite couple come out the other side, BOTH of them are going to have a much better idea of what the other has been through.

Then they get to talk...
An Offer They Can’t Refuse

There was a ramp that the two of them went up, and then they were looking, from ‘backstage’ so to speak, at Nuka-World’s bumper car arena.

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“Vous’d smack a pregnant woman around, Nate?” Nora called as she threw her car into reverse.

“Well, she beat me to the draw again, so even if Nuka-Girl flirted with me, I have to get my own back,” he said.

Nora saw out of the corner of her eye the 12 year old in a blue car bearing down on Nate, and she adjusted her own course backing up to perfectly set Nate up.

Which was how he found himself first jarred sideways by a twelve year old, followed closely by his duplicitous spy wife putting her own car into forward, and hitting him so he spun around. Twice.

Then as Nora giggled and drove away, he just laughed long and loud. “I guess this is your arena too, huh, honey?”

Nora just nodded and blew him a kiss. As she took revenge on the 12 year old for hitting her husband. She was a duplicitous spy type after all.

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There were two men, one in makeshift Raider Power armor and one carefully tightening bolts on the armor with a ratchet wrench.

“You got me wired up yet Gage?” asked the guy in the Armor.

Gage nodded, “Yeah boss.”

Nora recognized Gage’s voice. It was the guy with the “offer” from the monorail.

Boss nodded inside the Armor. Even with an only partial helmet it was hard to see. You could easily hear him however, “Finally. Now go shut off that damn alarm.”

Gage nodded again. “All right. I’m on it.”

The man in the Armor looked around, then up, “Now where… Ah, there’s my next victim now. Don’t look like much.”

He gestured to Nora’s right, “Hers a quick rundown of how this works. You go stock up and make yourself presentable, then we’re gonna give these folks a show. A show where I decorate these walls here with your lovely brains.”

He laughed, cruelly, “Thanks to this suit, I’m the only one that wins this fight period. Think you’re hot shit getting this far? Think again. All right Gage. Let her through, something tells me I’m really gonna enjoy this.”

The door to Nora’s right buzzed then clicked open. As she walked through PA Voice was back. “It’s almost time. After a run like that, this should be our best slaughter yet. Remember longest survival
time against Colter is still one minute, thirty-seven seconds.”

Nora shook her head and went down a flight of stairs, staring into an employee locker room. The area was thoroughly repellent. There were bodies on hooks, and one woman, slumped in the corner, pistol in her hand, and half the side of her head blown off. The note in her pocket said, “To the Assholes who trapped me in here: I'm done playing your little game. I ran your stupid Gauntlet, and I made it this far, but I'm done. So no ‘big show’ for you. Aren't you just the bravest bunch of dipshits to watch some guy in supercharged Power Armor beat up on someone with nothing. I'll blow my own brains out, thank you very much.”

This is rigged. There has to be a way out. Vent. Something. Maybe that asshole Gage. He said he’d have an interesting offer.

As she dropped the evidence that she wasn’t going to be able to take the big guy out head on, the intercom crackled. It was Gage. “All right. Listen the hell up if you want to make it out of this alive, I’ve only got a minute.”

Nora said, “I’m listening.”

Gage chuckled, “My kinda gal. Look you made it this far, you obviously got skill. But the fight coming up is rigged. You get me? Overboss Colter, his Power Armor is set up to draw energy from the electric grid in the arena. Damn thing’s invincible. You name it, someone’s tried it; minigun, grenades, not a scratch. You get what I’m saying?”

You’re saying we’re dead.

Nora asked, “So how do I beat him?”

Gage replied, “You want to win? I stashed a weapon in the bottom locker immediately to the right of the intercom. Get it.”

Nora reached down and lifted the weapon, incredulously, “Is this…a…squirt gun?”

“Yeah yeah, I know what it looks like. You’re going to have to trust me,” Gage answered.

Sure. Because in my experience Raiders are so totally fucking trustworthy. Maybe we can jump out of the arena into the audience and get out that way…

“Seriously?” Nora said, “Is this some kind of a joke?”

Gage sounded smug, even over the beat up intercom, “Nope. It’s the perfect weapon. Once the water hits Colter’s electrically charged power armor, the circuits are gonna short out. It’ll kill his defenses, but you’ll only have so much time to some damage before they recharge. You take him out I promise you it’ll be worth every minute spent in the gauntlet.”

Nora looked over at Piper, raised an eyebrow. Translated it meant, “Can you believe this shit?”

Piper shrugged. Translated it meant, “I can’t believe this shit either, but you got anything better? ‘Cause I don’t.” Piper was a pretty eloquent shrugger.

“Are you sure about this?” Nora asked.

“Sure as shit. You just be ready to take him out when he’s vulnerable,” Gage answered.

Nora shrugged, resigned. She walked into the restroom and filled the high capacity squirt gun. And
tethered it to her wrist. Then she handed Piper half her Stealth Boys.

“I want you to get stealthed and hide out in the arena. Near the stands. If I look like I’m going down…”

“I rescue you,” Piper finished.

Nora shook her head. “Get out of here. Keep Nat and Shaun safe.”

Piper kissed her wife, hard. Then she pulled back. “Bullshit. Never gonna happen, Blue. If we go down, there’s a whole Commonwealth that will look after Nat and Shaun. You only have me. I. Will. Not. Leave. You.”

Nora shook her head. But there was nothing she could do. So she gestured and Piper Stealthed up and the two of them, looking like one of them, walked to the entrance to the arena.

Colter was waiting. He waved his arms, pumping up his arena.

“Disciples. Are you ready for blood?”

Nora heard Piper’s gasp beside her, and the whispered, “Blue!!”

As Colter called, “Pack. Are you ready to get wild?” Nora said, “I heard.”

Piper said, urgently, “I really don’t want to be here now.”

“Operators. Are you ready for me to notch another kill?”

“Stay strong Piper. I’m sure she isn’t here.”

Colter pointed, “And you…”

Nora whispered, “Get ready…”

Colter shouted, “Are you ready to die?” and the door opened.

Both women darted through, but as soon as she cleared the door, Nora activated her own Stealth Boy and snuck left, while Piper, presumably, snuck right towards the stands. Before Colter could do anything, Nora zapped him with the squirt gun.

And for a wonder, it worked. She saw the sparks, and heard Colter call, “Gage, what the hell just happened,” just before she activated one of their mines and tossed it at his feet, then after the blast, aimed carefully at his eye slit. At the last moment he moved, so she opted to finish off her magazine as a partial offering to the gods of probability theory.

Based on the swearing she knew she was hurting him, so she added a frag grenade, one of the ones the Raiders had thoughtfully supplied them with. He was stumbling now, half blinded from flash burns.

His armor came back online with a buzz, but she swung up her squirt gun. And shot him again. And again, the sparks, this time to a pained roar from Colter. Nora activated another Stealth Boy and then tossed yet another frag grenade. Then she drew her pistol and darted up close.

Colter was weaving from side to side, shaking his head like a horse with a fly problem, but Nora just got up close and aimed at the side of his head. She emptied her magazine. And she got lucky. Three bullets got inside his partial head armor. Two ricocheted. Colter went down, his head a barely
recognizable mess on his shoulders.

The stands went silent. Before she reappeared, Nora said to his corpse, “This arena is mine. Asshole.”

A woman with a posh aristocratic lilt to her voice called, “Gage, what the hell just happened?”

Gage said to the rest of them, “You saw it. We all saw it. Colter’s dead. We got ourselves a new Overboss.”

*What?!!*

A man called out, “This chick? Are you sure Gage?”

Sexist asshole.

Then another woman, whose voice genuinely dripped menace said, “You’d better know what the hell you’re doing.”

Nora heard a gasp next to her. Piper was still using Stealth Boys. But Nora clearly heard, “Oh my god. Blue. That’s her. That’s…mother. I may have been nine when…but I know that voice…”

Gage was saying, “Hey we talked about this. She survived the Gauntlet. She was smart enough to take my advice, and strong enough to kill Colter. How about we show some respect, huh?” as Nora was whispering, “Are you sure?”

Piper whispered, “I’m positive, Nora. It’s her.”

Nora nodded slightly, and said, “Ok, we’ll talk when we can. Later.”

The crowds left, slowly. Gage looked Nora over, “What’d I tell ya? Worked like a charm.”

Nora looked him over. Typical Raider. Mohawk. Welded up, cobbled together armor meant to intimidate as much as protect. Eyepatch, so someone somewhere didn’t manage to finish the job. She said, “So you actually wanted this…Overboss dead?”

He nodded, “Dead…out of the way. Same difference. The plan was a success.”

*So they’re offering to make me ‘Overboss’. I guess they think everyone’s either sheep or wolves. Guard dog doesn’t even enter into their universe. So if I’m not dead, and therefore not a sheep, must be a wolf.*

*I can make them think that.*

Nora smirked, “Death by squirt gun. I’d love to see his tombstone.”

Gage laughed, “Tell me about it, I’d love to have seen his expression when the suit shorted out.”

He turned serious, “I get that you have no idea what’s going on and everything is coming at you real fast. But you need to listen. Takin’ out Colter wasn’t a last minute decision. It was something some of us here have been working on for a while. Now that he’s actually gone, we’ve got ourselves a vacancy in the Overboss department.”

He smiled a nasty smile, and pointed at her. “And guess what…you got the job. All I’m askin’ is that you trust me and give us a shot, I swear it’ll be worth it. There are three raider gangs that run Nuka-World. The Disciples, the Operators, and the Pack. And yeah if the names didn’t give it away they
ain’t your run of the mill raider gangs.

He shook his head, “These morons don’t exactly play nice with each other. Thanks to Colter, this place is a powder keg ready to blow sky high. On wrong move, and we’re gonna have a blood bath on our hands. I think you have what it takes to turn things around, keep these gangs from tearing each other apart.”

You’re assuming that this place going down in a three way blood bath isn’t exactly what I want.

Nora shook her head, “Why me?”

Gage pressed a button and opened the doors to the arena. He said, “This ain’t the place. Meet me at your new quarters, the restaurant on the top of the Fizztop Mountain. We can talk there.”

He walked away quickly, and Piper let her Stealth Boy expire.

“Blue!”

Nora turned, “Are you 100% sure?”

Piper nodded, and Nora said, “OK, well something tells me this place is monitored, so let’s head out before we talk, Thing.”

The pair gathered themselves up and walked out of the arena, and into the largest single Raider Nest/Camp/City Nora or Piper had ever seen. Well-armed sociopathic maniacs were everywhere. Interspersed were miserable looking people in rags with collars. With a small block with a light on it.

As they began walking, a pair of Raiders accosted one of the collared people.

“Hey you, were you just sleeping??”

The poor, tired-looking woman replied, “Well, yeah boss. I’ve been up forever, and we barely get any food…”

“Oh, you don’t like the deal, huh. Should we put you outside and let the Bloodworms have you? Hmm?” asked one.

The other said, “I think we should. Be lesson for the others not to lip off.”

The woman, clearly terrified, begged, “No! No, boss. I’ll…uh…I’ll get back to work. See?” as she swept a patch of dirt fruitlessly.

The Raiders laughed nastily and moved on. Piper had stiffened, but held herself back. At the end, she said, “Slaves, Blue. They’re keeping slaves.”

Nora nodded. She looked around and briefly counted noses. “Hmmm.”

“What?” asked Piper.

“Not enough data, Piper. Let’s stroll over to Fizztop and get the rest of the sales pitch,” Nora answered.

As they walked towards the center of Nuka-Town, they saw a woman without a collar, but not dressed like a Raider, talking to a man in a longcoat. She said, “Word is Super Mutants just hit the place. Should be easy pickings.”
The man looked interested, almost shark like. “If there’s anything left. How good is this source of yours?”

The woman spread her hands, “It’s good, Shank. I don’t bring you bullshit.”

Shank nodded once, sharply, “And I’d like to keep it that way.”

As they walked around a central market wall, they saw a number of slaves cooking, cleaning, running errands.

“Uh huh,” said Nora under her breath.

Piper was looking around, barely able to keep her outrage off her face, “Look at all of them, Blue.”

Nora nodded, “I am. There aren’t enough slaves.”

Piper looked over at Nora shocked, and Nora shook her head and went on, “I don’t want more slaves, it’s just that we have what, a 5 to 1 Raider to slave proportion? It should be more like 10 to 1 the other way for a stable population. The only way they can sustain this is by raiding.”

“Well duh, Blue, its right there. In the name.”

They were walking down Main Street Nuka, USA. There were Raiders chatting, taking target practice, using chems, chatting about using chems while taking target practice. There were only a few slaves, carrying food to kitchens or moving firewood. There were none farming.

“Yes, Piper, but what you’re used to is groups of maybe twenty. In Boston, and with a lot of salvage and working farms to hit. I will bet you any amount you care to name that these guys have all but bled dry anything within a day or two’s walk of this place.”

She nodded to herself, “Gage is right to be worried. And to be blunt, I’m not sure we shouldn’t let the place blow.”

“What about the slaves?” Piper asked.

“That’s why I won’t. The plan is to listen to this asshole’s pitch, agree to any fucking harebrained scheme he offers, and then the second their back is turned, we’re on that monorail, and we come back here with Cait’s Own and any militia not nailed down.”

Nora ticked her fingers, “Planting is over, and weeding and maintenance takes way less people. It’ll be almost five months before the real harvest. We can come in here with an army.”

“OK…” said Piper.

“So no one is listening, or even close. Let’s talk about your mother,” Nora said.

“Not yet Blue. I still have to stop feeling like I should be running screaming into the hills,” and Piper gestured around them.

Nora looked over. Her wife was in fact looking a little panicky. Nora held her hand, “It’ll be OK Piper. I promise.”

Pier gave Nora a wan smile, but she stopped looking like she was going to run any second.

There was a scaffold elevator available and the pair boarded and pressed the up button. When they arrived, Gage was waiting. They stepped off. He looked at Piper for a second, hard, then shrugged and turned to Nora.

“Welcome home boss. The digs are yours now, hope you like the look. Colter had some peculiar tastes. But the view is something, huh? Everything you see is under your control, now that you’re in charge,” he said.

Nice sales job. Fuck you.

Nora raised an eyebrow, “If I’m really running the show now, let’s get to work.”

Gage smiled, “I’ll be honest with you. This operation needs someone to step in and take the reins. Sure as hell ain’t gonna be me, leading outright ain’t my style and there’s some blaming me for supporting Colter all this time. My talents are best used helping a new Overboss get all this shit together.”

Right…

Nora just started at him, deadpan, “Sure. I understand. So are you going to paint the bullseye directly on my back or what?”

He had the good sense to look a little abashed. As much as a metal clad, mohawked, eye-patched Raider could. “Ha. Ain’t gonna lie, it’s part of the reason you won’t see me stepping up and running things. But It ain’t gonna be that bad.”

He started looking off over the park, “Let’s take a step back, and talk big picture. Nuka-World…shit, this was the dream,” he pointed, “Huge, built like a fucking fortress. You run this, the world is yours.”

He turned back to Nora, “We had a good head start on it. Hell of a lot of work just went into getting the Disciples, the Operators and the Pack to work together. But we got here. Bout a year ago we push through the front gates, take over Nuka-Town, get the traders under our thumb.”

“Then…Colter got lazy. He was content to sit on his ass, never bothered putting in the effort to finish. The gangs got restless, started pissing each other off, it was…is…a real mess,” Gage finished.

Nora shook her head and rolled her eyes. “What kind of a mess am I walking into here?”

Gage shrugged, “It was little shit at first. Heated tempers, arguments, the occasional shooting. Got worse over time though. Gangs started staking out as much territory as they could all being on top of each other like this. Started looking for excuses to turn on each other. If something ain’t done to settle things down, it’s gonna reach a point there ain’t no coming back from.”

Nora looked over and said, “This would be a lot easier to manage if I brought my own crew in. It’s small, but full of people I can trust.”

Gage shook his head, “Nice try, but no. I let you walk out that gate for any reason before you get things settled down, I won’t live out the day. No. I’ve got control of the train’s power. You ain’t doin’ shit ’til you get these idiots to work together again. After that? In and out all you want, boss.”

Nora nodded, “I suppose that makes sense, Gage. Even if it would be easier, I can do this. I can make it work.”

Gage relaxed, “Man, I sure hope so. I’ll help you, OK? Walk you through everything. First you gotta
get the gangs behind you.”

Nora barked a single harsh laugh, “Have any advice?”

Gage looked thoughtful, “OK. The Disciples like violence. The bloodier the better. Tell em they’ll get plenty of it.”

Nora looked out of the corner of her eye. Piper had gone white. Gage continued, oblivious. “The Operators are in it for the money. The Pack? Hell I dunno, they follow the strongest. Show some teeth I guess.”

He looked her in the eyes, “Look, technically you’re already the new Overboss. That’s like half the work done right there.”

No. When I finish making these people think I’m one of them, THEN the jobs half done. The other half is figuring out to how to roll them up all at once and pacify everything from Boston to Worcester.

Because I bet these guys control most of Western Mass. And if the CPG takes Nuka-World from them…we’ll have liberated Massachusetts.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, let’s take the revelations and world building in the order they came, especially since the first thing is something I’ve been hinting at and waiting to uncork since Book 1, Agent of Change.

Yes, Piper’s Mother is EXACTLY who you think it is. That’s taking everything up to 11. Now Nora is helpless to stop the torment of HER wife and can only be there for her. When this is over, both of them will have a MUCH better idea of everything the other has been through. I’ve been seeking other ways to throw symmetry at the couple. I’m not done yet...

Second, I did a lot of Internet research to supplement my History of Early England work at college (circa 43CE-Roman Invasion-to 1485CE-End of the Wars of the Roses at the Battle of Bosworth Field and the rise of the Tudors) concerning serfdom. One of the realizations I had about Raiders is that they, in addition to the Brotherhood of Steel, had historical antecedents. The BoS was feudal as I have belabored in text and comments to an almost obnoxious degree. But Raiders are an older model. They come from the period of ‘barbarian’ migrations following the fall/atrophy of the Western Roman Empire, circa (dates hazy...) sometime in the 5th Century, as early as 405CE and possibly as late as 493 when Theodoric bisected Odoacer (literally and actually).

They resembled common bandits on one level, but on another, with certain groups (the Raiders at Corvega, Libertalia, the Ration Stockpile, and especially at Nuka-World), weren’t so much ‘bandits’ as proto-warlords. They would offer ‘protection’ (mostly from themselves...a condition that pertained in many ways in the early ‘Dark Ages’) and certainly strongly reminded me of the period after the invasions of Britain by the Angles and Saxons. Who eventually became Anglo-Saxon Warlords. Then Kings. There is an argument to be made, and I’m making it, that the way to see the Raiders is as early Dark Age war bands.
Which leads to discussing serfdom, and if you think its hard to nail down exactly when the Western Roman Empire fell, try figuring out how many peasants were needed to keep one sword swinger in armor, stabby things and food. Especially when the peasantry was broken down into so many subgroups (freemen, villeins, cottars, boarders, and slaves). Now figure how many per head basher. Estimates as high as twenty to one and thirty to one were bandied about...but these raiders don't need a damn horse, squire, etc., so I ramped back the ratio.

But no matter how you slice it, there are too many Raiders in Nuka-World. And it's been going on a while. And if you reach a point where you have to walk more than one day, to steal/sieze/raid one day's worth of food and water? You're hosed. That's where I imagine these idiots are. And that's Nora's point. But before they break up and scatter? The Raiders clearly will massacre everyone at Nuka-World and raze the place (under the toddler, 'If I cannot have it, I break it,' rule).

But the flip side is that the Raiders at Nuka-Word have probably primed anyone in Western Massachusetts to see their vanquishers as saviors. Nora is following a 'high risk/high reward' plan...
It had been a long day. Nora shooed Gage out of the apartment area, and she and Piper got busy at least tidying up the ‘bedroom’ area. It really was just a dumpster fire. Trash and crap everywhere. It was like squalor was a damned aesthetic choice with these assholes.

If I were inclined to really take over the first thing I’d make them do is spend about week picking up.

After a while it at least looked like falling asleep wasn’t an invitation to tetanus. They got undressed and laid down in bed, and Nora turned over and looked at her wife.

“Ok, Thing. There’s no way that belligerent asshole Colter let them watch him, there’s no one here, and I’m pretty sure fixing things like listening devices isn’t their ‘thing’. So let’s talk.”

Piper sighed deeply. “I know what I heard Blue. I was nine the last time I heard that voice, telling daddy he was a sap for guarding these people when he could take anything he wanted from them.”

“Life’s funny,” Piper said, “Not funny ‘Hah ha!’ More like funny, ‘Hey doesn’t this fish taste funny?’ You find your son and discover he’s a monster, and I discover my mother is a monster, and then find her.”

Nora said, “Are you going to be Ok?”

Piper smiled a little shakily, “Sure. Hey maybe I can kill my mother, and then you and I can have Hers and Hers matching nightmares.”

Nora stiffened, “Not funny, Thing.”

Piper looked abashed, “I’m sorry Blue. I know there may come a time where I have to kill her, and believe me, this is one of the few times it won’t be impossible for me to kill someone in cold blood, but…I feel like that’s crossing a bridge I’d prefer not to.”

Nora took Piper’s hand, “Well, get her in the open, let me get within a mile, and problem solved.”

Piper said, “That just pushes pulling the trigger off on you. It would still be my decision and I know it.”

Piper gave her wife a sad look, “No, Blue. It’s my mother, and she’s my problem. And I have to meet her tomorrow.”

“And if she figures out who you are?” asked Nora.

“You once told me that the best lie is a half-truth,” Piper said. Nora nodded. Piper went on, “So
there’s no reason to complicate things. You’re a tough alpha bitch and I’m your sex smitten chickie. We just don’t tell her the part where you’re General of the Minutemen, and I’m your sex smitten reporter wife.”

“So you’re sex smitten?” asked Nora.

“Yeah, but I’m not feeling it at the moment, Blue. Being surrounded by hostile assholes who would kill me if they knew who I really was kills my mood,” Piper said.

Nora smirked, “If I were like that, I’d never have been able to work in Beijing. And if we get overheard it’ll just help your cover…” but Piper just shook her head.


The next morning dawned bright and early, and both Piper and Nora made a conscious choice to ignore it. Raiders were not known for being ‘morning people’. While it might be useful to catch the first batch off guard, it wasn’t worth the additional suspicion.

When they finally rolled out of bed, they strapped on their equipment, and then headed out.

“First stop the Pack,” said Nora as they walked down Main Street.

“Not the Disciples?” asked Piper, “They’re closest,” and she gestured around the side of Fizztop Mountain.

Nora shook her head, “I figured we work our way up to that. If you want…”

Piper spoke up quickly, “Nope, ‘Disciples last’ works for me. ‘Disciples never’ works too, but that isn’t an option.”

Nora said, “Honey, if I could…”

They arrived at the Bradburton Amphitheater. The Pack Raiders added ‘ridiculous’ to ‘menace’ with garish outfits and brightly painted weaponry. You didn’t know whether to run or laugh. Which may have been the point.

They entered, and headed for Mason, the Pack’s ‘Alpha’. When they got there, they found him finishing up with a Raider who wanted to complain about something. Judging by Mason’s response, which was basically, ‘Deal with it yourself, or maybe you should be a slave’ being leader of the Pack consisted of doing basically nothing much.

They walked up and Mason looked them over, “Now that I get a closer look at you, not sure I buy the new Overboss thing.”

Nora smirked and said, “I’ll send you my resume and references.”

Mason just looked confused and irritated, “The fuck’s a resume? Whatever. Don’t matter. Name’s Mason, Pack Alpha. This here’s our side of town. You might be Overboss for now. But I’m the boss of the Pack. It’s going to stay that way. Long as you don’t forget that, we’ll be fine.”

*Well subtle insults didn’t work. Time to show cruder ‘teeth’.*


Mason sneered, “Hah. Never heard that one before. It ain’t like anyone’s broke up about Colter. Just
figured on his replacement being different. But Gage says you’re the boss.”

Nora said, with an artful tinge of contempt, “You don’t want to be Overboss?”

Mason shook his head, “If I thought the other gangs would go along. Yeah. I’d run this place in a heartbeat. Might have to, if you turn out to be a turd. Least it ain’t Mags Black or that freak Nisha. ‘Sides, you can possibly be worse than Colter.”

*Hmmm. Bit of a chink in the armor there…time to exploit it.*

Nora stared him down, “I have big plans for this place, you’ll see.”

*Like turn all of you into a pile of burnable corpses, and seeding the place with reliable people.*

“Maybe you’re the real deal. But we thought Colter was the real deal. And now he’s lying in a pool of his own blood. Things were good in the beginning. Real good. But that was a year ago. Then he went soft. Wanted to ‘take stock in what we achieved’,” Mason said.

*Now I have him talking. Bingo.*

Nora nodded, “I’m listening.”

Mason looked off in the distance, “Sure this place beats some of our old shit holes. But it ain’t a palace of caps either. Ain’t none of us happy,” he looked at Nora, “Not even the Disciples. And they’re normally a chipper bunch long as they’re drenched in blood. Things were going to hell fast, but Gage put the brakes on that. Got us together and promised us he’d find someone to deal with Colter. And you did just that. Let’s cut to the chase. You gonna do right by the Pack?”

*Now I have him where I want him…*

Nora stared him down, “Be a good dog and do what you’re told and you won’t be put down.”

Mason half raised his hands, “Whoa there boss. Not in front of my guys alright? Last thing either of us need at this point is a dominance fight, right?”

Nora nodded once, satisfied. “I’ll be around. Next time have your people properly respectful.”

And with that she swept out, Piper following her, worshipfully. As they waked over to the market, Nora smiled, “I thought I was going to lose it if you stared at me any more vapidly.”

“Just making sure if Mother-Dearest compares notes with these guys, she hears the same thing,” Piper said.

Nora smiled, and then they were in the market, and she had her Overboss game face on again. She toured the stands, checking in on the vendors, all of whom were slaves. There were also traders, non-enslaved. They occasionally expressed some sympathy with the vendors, but Nora noted that the sympathy didn’t extend as a far as not taking advantage of the deals the slaves were obliged to offer.

The tour was mostly uneventful, except the town doctor. When Nora got to her, she said, “Oh, uh, hello boss. Congratulations on taking out Colter. I’m uh sure you’ll do great.”

Nora looked her over. She didn’t seem that servile. More like she was winding herself up to something.

Nora replied, “Why would you congratulate me, it’s not like you’re free to go.”
The woman looked around. Then she said, “To be honest I don’t know you yet boss. Sorry I’m so nervous. I don’t mean any disrespect. I don’t know where I stand with you and I don’t want to piss you off. That and well…I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t wondering how you were plan to run the place. This is your show now. Business as usual or….you could, uh…get rid of the raiders if you don’t exactly agree with how they're running the place.”

Nora stared incredulously.

Sincere or trap? Doesn’t matter, I have to answer the same way in either case…

“Are you insane?” Nora said, “I could have you flayed alive for even suggesting that.” When the woman paled, Nora went on, “Never mind. We’ll never speak of this again. The doctor is too valuable to waste as an example.”

Nora stalked off, feeling like shit.

After leaving the market the pair headed for The Parlor. It had been a dinner theater back before the war. Now the Operators called it home. When they entered, they listened briefly as Mags and her brother got a briefing on Nora. The consensus was she must have killed a Vault Dweller, due to the Pip-Boy.

At that Nora walked in, Piper again on her heels like a lovestruck puppy. It really was all Nora could do not to laugh, as that was so far from Piper’s actual personality. There were two Raider Bosses this time, one of whom had to be Mags Black. She spoke and her patronizing attitude came through as clearly as it had in the Arena. “I suppose we all owe you for putting down Colter.”

The man next to her put in, “Man was an idiot. Made us all look bad.”

Mags smirked, “A clown stuck in his own little car. I want to know what did you feel? When you brought that walking pile of human garbage to his knees.”

Gage says the Disciples like blood, and maybe so, but these guys are sociopaths. I think they revel in their cruelty. ‘Making caps is their sole motivation’ my ass.

Nora asked, “What were you discussing when I walked in?”

Mags shrugged, “You. You’re an unknown quantity. And we’re interested in knowing who we’re dealing with. So, what went through your head when you crushed the life out of the oaf?”

Definitely. They don’t just like caps. They like taking them in the cruelest manner possible.

Nora said, with studied indifference, “Bored. Kind of like this conversation now that you mention it.”

The man bristled, “Hey, you don’t get to talk to Mags that way.”

Mags laid a placatory hand on his arm, “It’s all right. Regardless. Gage’s decree makes you the new Overboss. You’ll come to understand soon enough that we are the only crew you should be backing around here. Because we’re the only ones who see this place for what it is. A monument to the only thing that matters.”

Time to see how much fucking with she’ll put up with.

Nora looked her over, “Soda?”
Mags lip curled, “Caps. This place was built for the sole purpose of taking caps out of the pockets of fools.”

*Well not for the sole purposes. But, like, top three. Maybe the top, but not sole reason.*

The man added, “Instead Colter had us sitting on our asses for the better part of a year, while he lived large on that mountain.”

Mags finished, “And that means if you’re going to be in charge we’d like some assurances that you’re going to restore this place to its true purpose. And that we’re going to get back to robbing people of their fucking money.”

Nora smirked at Mags to send the opposite message, then she said, “Actually I’m really more in this for the soda.”

The man stiffened, “Great another nut…”


*Message received. And he’ll be easier to manipulate than I’d even hoped.*

The pair left, and walked along the pond to the Disciples area. Nora could feel Piper tensing up. She whispered as they walked, “Just keep your role up, and if your mother recognizes you, think, ‘What would sex smitten chickie Piper say to her mother’?”

Piper gulped and nodded. They both took a deep breath when they got there and then walked in.

There was a woman talking to Piper’s mother, “C’mon girl. You know we should run this place. Not some li’l greenie Gage dragged in.”

Piper’s mother said, “We’re giving him a second chance. Gage screws this up, he knows we’ll skin him alive. So shut up and be patient.”

*That was no idle threat. Piper’s mother is as much of a monster as Shaun was.*

*Oh, Piper, I’m so sorry this happened to you too.*

The woman, who spoke with a southern accent, turned to third person in the group, a hulking man, and said, “What about you big guy. Nothing to say on the matter?”

He spoke, low and rough, “As long as she doesn’t get in my way, don’t much care…”

The woman sneered, “Yeah, figured as much.”

Piper’s mother dismissed them, “Both of you get out of here and make sure the others get the message.”

She turned to the pair, and started to say something. Then her eyes widened slightly.

*She’s recognized Piper. Let’s see if she says something.*

Piper’s mother turned to Nora and said, “So you’re Gage’s little pet project.”

Nora gave her a look, “Pet project? What’s that supposed to mean?”
Piper’s mother shrugged, “Gage didn’t say? Apparently we’re not good enough to run this place ourselves. Gage wanted to bring in his own pet puppy to run the place. But I guess training a puppy is easier than getting us to do what he wants.”

Nora said, “There’s only one pet here and she’s all mine,” and then she turned to Piper, and pulled her face back roughly by her hair, and planted an aggressive open mouthed kiss on her, all while watching from the corner of her eyes at Piper’s mother.

She could see Piper’s mother visibly seethe.

Got her!

When Nora broke the kiss, Piper played along and remained clinging to Nora’s arm. Her mother finally said, “Enough! She told you who I am?”

Nora nodded. The woman said, “I go by Nisha now. Means ‘night’ in Sanskrit,” she turned to Piper, “Got that, Piper? No other names.”

Piper nodded and gulped. Nisha turned to Nora, “I’m guessing she didn’t take a lot of taming, huh?”

“Not so you’d notice, no.”

“And her sister?” Nisha asked.

“Who?” Nora replied.

“Dead,” said Piper.

“Ah well, probably for the best,” said Nisha. Nora could feel Piper stiffen imperceptibly next to her. Nisha went on, “Everyone knows we wanted Colter dead. If I had my way though it would have been a long slow painful process. Whatever.”

Nisha gave Nora a long hard stare, “I lead the Disciples. We’ve only got one rule around here and that’s keeping the peace of this alliance. Otherwise, the way we see it, this world stopped caring about rules when people started dropping bombs on one another.”

Nora smirked, “I bet you guys are GREAT at parties.” Piper just simpered at her mother.

Nisha gave Nisha a long hard stare, “I lead the Disciples. We’ve only got one rule around here and that’s keeping the peace of this alliance. Otherwise, the way we see it, this world stopped caring about rules when people started dropping bombs on one another.”

Nora gave Nisha an appraising look, “How many people?”

Nisha sneered, “Who’s counting? We send the traders in to clean the place out when it gets… ripe. Of course we lose traders too. The Gauntlet never sleeps. Let’s just hope Gage is right about you. He made a lot of promises to get us here and never followed through. So you better not screw this up, because I’m not about to tolerate another round of bullshit.”

Nora stared at Nisha, one hand around Piper possessively, “I’m going to do things my way.”

Nisha replied, “I have a few things for you to consider. We don’t make empty threats. We aren’t swayed by caps like those spoiled brats, or those savage animals who can’t control themselves. Fuck this up and I will kill you. Although I admit I have even better plans for Gage. But if you support us
and keep your promises like a good little Overboss, we back you, you get to live, and everybody wins.”

Nora glared at Nisha, “I don’t make promises and you’ll do what I say.”

Nisha smirked, “Looks like you’re already a step above Colter.”

Nora nodded, and pulled Piper around so that Nisha could see her hand on Piper’s butt and crotch, rubbing. Nora looked over her shoulder and said, “Good. I don’t like my…possessions…to get ideas.”

Nisha’s lips thinned, “I’ll see how this plays out…for now.”

“You do that,” called Nora as she left.

When they were well clear of any Disciples outside, Nora relaxed a little, and simply put her arm round Piper’s waist. “Thanks for playing along, Thing.”

“I should be thanking you, Blue. Making sure I played the role of sex starved bimbo helped keep my mind off of how much I wanted to barf, scream, and shoot her. At the same time,” Piper said.

“I’m sorry babe. That had to be hard. I only had to see Father that one time after the FEV lab, and then I was there to give him a piece of my mind. Not pretend to be into his agenda,” Nora said.

Piper shook her head. “We need to figure out how to get the fuck out of here. In part so I can stop thinking about how I’m pretty sure she was sizing me up for who’d she’d whore me out to after she killed you. I know my mother. She has no intention of being a good little minion.”

*She’s still wild to get away from here. Not that I blame her. I’m not sure Piper isn’t right about the ‘whoring out’ thing. That woman is a psychopath. How on earth did she give birth to my wife? Her dad must have been a certified saint.*

They rode the elevator slash scaffolding back up the Grille. Gage was waiting. He smiled at them, and said, “Well you’re back in one piece. That’s a good sign. Everything all peachy with our friendly neighborhood psychopaths? Hope you didn’t promise them too much.”

Nora just stared at him. Eventually, she said, “What comes next?”

He smiled, “Next? The fun stuff. There’s work to be done. This place is huge and divided into sections. Parks or whatever they called em back in the day. We need to take ‘em all back. Every section we take gets us more resources and more breathing room. Stake a claim, assign it to a gang, Who gets what is your call. Whoever gets it will appreciate it and the others will be jealous.”

Nora just shook her head, “I mean when do we start Raiding out?”

“Keep yer pants on boss. We gotta tame this place first. Keep these maniacs happy here before we move on,” Gage said.

*Great. Tame pre-war amusement complex for kill crazy psycho- and sociopaths. Then figure out way to run for it. Then come back here and clean house. And apologize to that doc, I guess.*

She merely said, “I thought the point of having minions was to get them to do the dirty work.”

Gage said, “Yeah give it time. You still gotta prove yourself.”

*About the time I do that, you’ll all be dead or captured.*
I'm in the middle of yet another Nisha chapter at this point in time, and I have to say, writing that woman makes me want to shower afterwards. The stink is hard to get off of my soul.

Also? I got rid of the insanely ridiculous masks that cover their eyes. This isn't a Raider Gang full of force users.
Child Unfriendly

Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: Abusive Parent(s)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After laying out, for all intents and purposes, the terms of Nora and Piper’s confinement, Gage took off. Nora looked at her Pip-Boy. It was just a bit after noon. She looked over at Piper, who still looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“OK, Piper, we could eat and head out to start clearing a park, or we could talk about Mother-Dearest,” she examined Piper, who was still freaked out based on how wild her eyes looked.

Nora looked thoughtful, “Maybe we should wait to start until tomorrow in the morning. As I recall, these parks could take all day, minimum, just to see everything in a park. I can’t imagine clearing them of whatever threats give those crews of bloodthirsty maniacs pause will take any less time.”

Piper just bit her lip and nodded. And she sat back and looked around. Colter was fond of his drugs, but he also either had good taste, or someone had it for him, in whiskeys. By the time she found and opened a bottle Nora had gotten done cleaning out a pair of glasses with some purified water.

Piper poured them both huge tumblers. Took a gulp. And then she looked over at Nora. “She-,” she started. Then she subsided. Raised a finger, “I was-,” and she ran down again.

“Sweetheart,” started Nora, “Would it help if I told you what I saw when we were with her?”

Piper just nodded.

“As soon as she turned to us, she made you. She knew. I can’t say why. I have theories, but without knowing what exact species of psychopath she is, it’d be a guess,” Nora started. Piper gulped and nodded for Nora to continue.

So she did, “But when I grabbed you like I owned you? She hated that. At a glance I’d say she isn’t big on letting go. She’s Ok with Nat being dead over you being mine, because Nat wasn’t owned by someone else. Not because she cares, but because she can’t stand someone else having something she sees as her own, even after she tosses it away.”

“Would she hand you out like a party favor? Say to that homicidal maniac we saw, the chick with the Southern Accent? Maybe. I can’t say no. But you’d be expensive. Because you don’t get any more ‘hers’ than ‘came from her body’. That’s what I have.”

Piper said, “I’m not sure you’re not giving her more credit than she deserves. I hate her. I hate her because at one time I loved her. She faked affection, or maybe she loved the idea of having something she absolutely owned, for a good long while. Maybe you’re right. Maybe Nat was the last straw and she felt trapped, ‘cause she felt like we owned her rather than vice versa, but I have to say, what good parenting examples I got came from Dad.”
Nora gave Piper a long look, then opened her arms. Piper fell into Nora’s arms and Nora held her for a long while. Eventually, Piper began talking.

“She wasn’t bad at first. But I would hear her and Dad fighting more and more often, and it really got bad after Nat was born,” Piper said, her face buried in Nora’s neck.

“And looking back I can see signs. She had a temper, or I thought she did,” Piper went on, “And these days I can see that about the time I turned 4 or 5, Dad really started intervening a LOT between us. I remember him stopping spankings that went on and on, at least I think they did.”

Nora held Piper tighter, as Piper mused to herself, “Can I say I was abused? No,” she looked into Nora’s eyes, “But I think that was because Dad may have stopped anything from getting too out of hand.”

Piper laid her head down again as Nora held her, “I was nine. For all I know Dad MADE her leave after Nat was born.”

Nora whispered in Piper’s ear, “I love you, Piper, and it’s going to be Ok. I will do whatever I have to to get both of us back to Nat and Shaun.”

Piper just hugged Nora more tightly, and then Piper sat up in Nora’s lap and said, “So now what?”

Nora shook her head. “We’re stuck, sweetheart. We have to keep playing their game until they decide to allow us and or require us to head out to the Commonwealth. I suspect that they plan to use the train to put together a Raiding force at some point. They’ll have to turn it on then.”

Nora looked grim, “That’s when we’ll have to break for it. Yelling for help on the radio as we go.”

“Will that work, Blue?” Piper asked.

“It’s gonna have to Piper. It’s all we have.”

Piper looked morose. “Of all the things I thought I might find here, my piece of shit mother is not what I would have thought.”

Nora shook her head, and said, “Father was a disappointment, but never for one second did I feel from him even one tenth of the menace that Nisha puts off just standing around.”

“Gloria,” Piper said.

“Her name is Gloria? Hah,” said Nora.

“Yeah, Gloria. Fuck you mom!” Piper called, but not loudly. “None of your secrets are safe with me, you bloodthirsty bitch.”

Eventually, the two women made dinner, and drank a bit too much, but not TOO too much. The ‘highlight’ of the evening was Piper breaking down crying over as she put it, “The shame of you seeing that pure, first class, unadulterated bitch that I came from,” according to Piper.

Nora had kissed Piper, and told her if she didn’t hold Father against Nora, Nora wasn’t about to hold Nisha against Piper, and they spent the night with Piper wrapped in Nora’s arms…Piper very badly needed to be held that night.

The next day dawned and they headed out. Kiddie Kingdom was one of the closest parks, and was actually as old as Nuka-Town USA. As they headed out over parking lots, Piper turned to Nora and
asked, “Are you going to kill my mother?”

Nora thought for a second. “Piper, honestly, it really is up to you. You were right, this is your decision. If you really truly need for her to die, but can’t do it yourself? I’ll kill her.”

Nora looked over at her wife, “It won’t bother me, I promise you. There are people I killed in China that don’t bother me even a little bit. Nisha, or Gloria? She’s in the ‘better dead’ column, for sure.”

“Let me tell you something else, sweetie,” Nora went on, “Any of that ‘my problem therefore I have to do the job myself’ bullshit? Leave it alone. I may have made a lot of personal progress, but even if I know for a fact that I’m more than JUST an assassin, I am still a damn good, professional assassin. If you need me to, I will be happy to kill Nisha, and I swear I will only think better of you if you don’t do it yourself.”

Piper looked over at Nora gratefully, even if this wasn’t exactly a typical married couple conversation about mothers-in-law and said, “OK, Blue. I’ll keep it in mind. So what’s up with the area ahead?”

Nora looked thoughtful, “Kiddie Kingdom? It was the most child friendly park in Nuka-World. Not that the others aren’t aimed at kids, but this is the one that is aimed directly at children, almost exclusively. Although that doesn’t…”

"…just ‘cause its for kids doesn’t mean that it isn’t for adults too. Besides we need to check on this for little Shaun or Kathleen. You know I’m right, Nate.”

“Fine, honey. But I still think the Fun House is a bad idea, I was reading…”

“Oh, pooh. I’ll be fine. I’m two months pregnant, not a cripple,” Nora replied.

Famous last words. The first part was easy. A house of mirrors. A silly little area, and not nearly complicated enough to act as a metaphor for her time in the DIA, in BLACKLIST. Now that had been a real funhouse of conflicting mirrors, where every turn was an invitation to exposure, betrayal, or sudden violence.

They made it to the exit, where they had to run against walkways moving slowly in reverse, while signs exhorted them to take it easy, and ‘Go with the flow’. Someone in the art and ride department was phoning it in.

Or more likely pitching this to 10 year old sensibilities. I should just be happy there isn’t a fart joke. Yet.

All of that was easy. The little jumps to move across a water pit? Also easy, although Nora wondered how they planned to handled anyone who missed. The water looked cold.

Then they came to the Hypno Halls. Each hall in the maze consisted of a tube rotating in one direction with lit swirling lights and a counter rotating disk at the end, so that focusing on the far end did not help. Nora barely made it to the end of that section.

Please let me not barf. I’m a tough secret agent, damnit. Are those chairs? On…the…wall…? Oh fuuuuuck…

Nora threw up epically, all over a chandelier sticking out from the side of the wall. Her inner ear and her eyes were having a fight and then the hormones coursing through her body came over to make it a three way gang fight that left her wrung out and shaking, as park attendants came running up.
“…mean that everything is childish and simple. God, I hope we don’t have to visit the Fun House,” Nora finished.

“Why?” asked Piper.

“Bad experience,” replied Nora.

“How much can you tell me about your earlier visits here?” Piper exclaimed.

Nora shrugged. “It’s a little weird sleeping in the Fizztop Grille. As a law student and a newly returned vet, Nate and I couldn’t afford the place, and now it’s the trash filled hovel I hang my hat in while I’m here. Mostly, I’m just shocked the place survived, but now that I know it survived, it’s depressing how full of trash and shit this whole area is.”

As they approached the entrance to the Kiddie Kingdom, there was a pile of burning tires and a warning sign from the Raiders saying “Radiation”. But Nora’s Pip-Boy was silent.

As they entered the park proper and turned left to move past some vendors and head towards the Ferris wheel and teacups ride, a voice came over the PA.

_I swear, if I’m ever given a chance I will fucking. Outlaw. PA. Systems!!_

The voice said, “Well now friends it seems we have an uninvited guest in the park. Up. Up performers. It’s time for another show. Though I doubt you’ll make it to the theater, stranger. Shall we take bets on where this one shuffles off? What do you think friends? The tunnels? The Fun House?”

_Oh god. Not the Fun House. I’m gonna barf again, aren’t I?_

Nora and Piper were moving towards the teacups when her Pip-Boy went absolutely bug nuts as a geiger counter. They were getting misted by sprayers set along the walls. Nora and Piper pulled back.

“What the fuck was that Blue?” asked Piper.

“At a guess? Back in the past, you could use misters to cool people off. But these seemed hooked up to radioactive water. Here take a couple Rad-X. Let’s get through this as quickly as possible,” Nora said.

The PA crackled again. “Do you enjoy that lovely glowing mist? Feels great to us! Why, we’ve got sprayers all over Kiddie Kingdom to keep you cool…and irradiated.”

The next few minutes were an exercise in feral management. Basically, there were a ton a feral ghouls, and curiously more than a few of them were gaudily painted. But they went down as easily as any other ghoul. Still, there was a ridiculous number of them.

The scale of the slaughter was becoming troubling. There were lot of ferals and thus, a lot of feral corpses. And while ferals were a threat Nora knew they’d been human once. Thinking, feeling…loving.

_I guess this is a zombie metaphor in more than one way. I’ve never seen a zombie movie where the protagonist doesn’t have to confront a friend who’s been ‘converted’. I’m getting really tired of killing these. And yet…I have no choice. Can we just finally get rid of the ferals and keep the_
Piper and Nora made their way through the park. In the distance across a plaza Nora could see her nemesis, the Fun House. She gulped audibly.

Piper looked over, “What the hell, Blue?”

Nora smiled wanly, “I have bad memories of this place, Thing,” she said.

“Why?” asked Piper.

“I was two month pregnant with Shaun. Nate had proposed. We were in Nuka-World to celebrate. I already had morning sickness. There’s...things...in there. I puked. It went everywhere. They had to clean up. Everyone knew. I’ve never been so mortified.”

“Let me be clear,” said Piper, “You killed and stole and committed murders...your words...all through your mid-twenties, and your greatest regret is blowing chunks over an amusement park ride.”

“Piper, my love, you have no idea how big the mess was. I didn’t throw up. I sent out for other people’s meals to puke up. It was biblical.”

“Ok, Blue. Let’s go check the scene of the scriptures. How bad could it be now?”

They opened the door and stepped inside. The PA crackled, “Welcome boys and girls to the Fun House. And aren’t we having fun?”

And then voice chuckled evilly.

Nora said, “Why don’t I skip everything and just throw up all over the place right now?”

Chapter End Notes

The best guess on the mix of unbelievable pathologies I'm ascribing to Gloria/Nisha is Psychopathy with Narcissistic Personality Disorder for an extra helping of 'self-centered'.

I did some research on female psychopaths as mothers (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-equation/201307/the-psychopathic-mother) and I found that more disturbing than my excursion with NUKEMAP outlining what the Natick Bomb was...

Some key pieces of information: "Research suggests that male and female psychopaths are a lot alike in terms of their core personalities. They are self-centered, deceptive, shallow emotions, and lack of empathy. They exploit others for self-serving reasons, lack remorse for their actions, and blame others for the consequences of their actions. Both also use their charm and physical appearance to manipulate others although women may use sex more often, and outright violence less often, than men. [...] However, there are some gender differences. Female psychopaths are much less common than males and may use different strategies to get their needs met, perhaps as a result of gender role expectations. In comparison to male psychopaths, for instance,
female psychopaths were less likely to engage in animal cruelty or physical threats and
more likely to use flirting and verbal manipulation. In addition, because of their primary
caretaking role, female psychopaths are more likely to target their children.

[...]
The psychopathic mother doesn’t see her child as a separate person. Instead, the child is
viewed as a personal possession whose sole purpose is to meet her mother’s needs.
Mother-child interactions are very controlling and any affection is tied to behavior that
feeds the mother’s ego. Natural resistance or rebellion on the part of the child is viewed
as betrayal and is met with harsh criticism or punishment to bring him or her back in
line. In fact, she cannot allow her child to develop “normally” because of her need to
mold him or her into exactly who she wants him/her to be.”

This aspect of "not being my possession = betrayal" is going to play out over and over.

This isn't angst. It will be abuse, of a good woman who's trapped by her need to not let
the psychopath know who she or her wife really is. Seriously, I need to be clear: Nisha's
behavior is and will be reprehensible. The views and actions of the CHARACTER are
not the same as the AUTHOR.

On a happier, or at least funnier note, the first time I did the hypno halls, I did NOT see
the terminal outside the door. When I, personally, finished the things the first time? I had
to put the controller down and walk away. Because barfing was definitely on the table
and likely to make its way to the agenda that day. So I imagined what a mother in the
exact middle of morning sickness season (Months 1 to 3) would react.
Nora looked around the area. It was not how she’d remembered it. For one thing, Nuka-World was at great pains to have everything as clean, and clean-cut, as possible. If Nora puked here now, she wasn’t entirely sure you’d be able to tell.

They tried going through the exit door, but some asshole had chained it shut. The only way in was through. Nora gulped.

*This is ridiculous. I was less nervous when I was stalking Kellogg. Ok, that’s a lie, but close.*

They entered the Hall of Mirrors. A number were knocked and more were so d-…

“Don’t worry, the mirrors are too dirty to reflect anything. In your case I’d say that’s probably a benefit,” came the voice.

They made their way through the maze. There were a couple tripwires and a mine, but at this point, those kinds of static booby traps almost weren’t worth mentioning. When they were able to exit and found themselves in the conveyor section, they found that it had been turned way up, but nothing that Nora couldn’t handle.

As she looked up, she saw a figure in the control booth.

*Gotcha, asshole! Oh shit-*

A couple grenades were bouncing down the conveyors, and Nora grabbed Piper’s hand and put on a burst of speed and the pair of them just barely managed to dive around the corner before the grenades blew, stopping the walkway. Nora looked up, but she couldn’t see the figure in the control room.

Up the stairs and she was at the spinning platform room which was no harder than it had been over 211 years ago, although now the water also looked irradiated as well as cold. When she got to the far side, she opened the door to the Hypno Halls, and just as quickly, shut it.

*Urp. Do not puke, do not puke…*

“Hey,” Piper said, looking up from an unsecured terminal next to the door, “Let’s try this setting,” and she looked up at Nora, “Anti-nausea mode.”

Nora opened the door. While the tubes and discs were still spinning it was at half or maybe one third speed. Nora’s stomach settled immediately. She looked over at Piper, “I love you, Piper. I love you sooo much,” and Piper just laughed.

They made their way through the halls quickly, slowed only by missing sections on the final tube, that required that they pause and wait until a missing section had rotated out of the way, and then by a pair of feral ghouls who once again, went down immediately.

The next chamber was the scene of her crime. Nora was in much better shape when she arrived, and not suffering morning sickness either. The room was just annoying, but she owed Piper, and pointed at a chandelier sticking out. “Right there, Thing. They had to shut the ride down for an hour and hose it off.” Piper laughed, and as they went down a staircase to a ‘wall’, where they sidestepped a
portrait, the voice said, “Feeling dizzy yet? Can’t tell which way is up?”

Nora actually laughed and called out, “Not like last time, no.”

The very next room tested that. They opened the door and the floor was spinning, and the spinning room itself was filled with ferals. They fired into the group over and over, until the door automatically closed. They opened it and repeated the performance twice more, until all the ferals were down.

Then Nora mentally marked the door on the far side that she wanted to get to, and stepped onto the platform, keeping an eye on her target no matter what was happening. She made it to the far side and sure enough, that was the exit door. As she opened it the voice called again, “Well you’re a bit hardier than those others it seems. But not much smarter I’m afraid.”

She held the door open for Piper to cross, and they both went to the chained exit door, but there was a service door as well, to the right of the exit. Nora drew her pistol and said to Piper, “Let’s see if we can corner this asshole.”

They made their way to the control room where Nora had seen their tormentor, but it was empty, except for a prerecorded message, “Sorry. Already gone little Raider. But don’t worry. I still have plenty of surprises for you.”

Nora turned to Piper, “Maybe I shouldn’t be calling this guy an asshole. He’s assuming we’re Raiders and although he’s a little sadistic towards them, I wonder if it isn’t warranted.”

Piper said, “You have a point. If he thinks we’re the bad guys, his taunting at least is less offensive.”

Nora nodded. They continued on, out of the Fun House and into the park. Where they unfortunately found themselves stymied. There was a high barricade funneling them into the rocketship ride. And that ride was set up to either bludgeon them directly with ride ‘cars’ or to rush them along into…

Yep. I can see land mines. So get whacked to death by amusement park ‘rocketships’ or rush along into mines that I won’t have a chance to disarm. I could climb the barricade, but…didn’t he say something about…

Piper spoke up, “He talked about tunnels. Maybe that’s how we get past that huge crapshow there. There’s a service entrance right there,” and she pointed at an alcove next to a funnel cake shop.

The door was locked but it was not at all challenging to Nora, and it popped open almost immediately. There was a stair down that the two followed. It led them to a large room full of bunkbeds, with plants and grow lights as well.

“It’s a poor man’s vault, and with 100% less evil,” said Nora.

Piper was poking in another unsecured terminal, and said, “Hey Blue. Looks like these ghouls were park staff. They saw what was going on in the world, and set this place up just in case and on the day, rescued as many park visitors as would listen to them. But most of them were ghoulified. They were led by someone named Oswald and someone named Rachel. Anyways, they figured out radiation didn’t hurt them and as part of defending themselves, hooked the misters up to a radioactive water source.”

“Oh no…,” Nora said.

Piper nodded, “Oh yes. Later a batch of them went feral. These guys called it the ‘affliction’, but it’s going feral, for sure. Probably because of…”
Nora finished, “All the radiation. Rotted the brains. Their defenses killed them.”

Piper nodded. “You have to admire this guy, if it’s Oswald. He was smart enough to see what might happen, managed to plan for it, tried to save as many as he could from it, and protected his people as best he knew how.”

Nora said, “So we do our dead level best not to shoot him. I’d already settled on that when he called me ‘little Raider’. Look at this from his point of view. We broke into his house, shot the joint up…admittedly in self-defense, but we broke into his house, so to speak…and chased him around. I just want to get to him, and turn the fight off.”

Piper nodded. “Let’s see if we can find him.”

They moved further in, passing through several residence areas and inside ‘farms’. Eventually they found themselves over a reservoir of profoundly radioactive water. There was a window overlooking the control room of thick, bulletproof glass. There was a speaker where they could hear what was going on.

A ghoul in a top hat was talking to a feral.

That’s new. I have never ever seen a rational Glowing One. But damn if that isn’t exactly what I’m seeing.

The Glowing One was speaking to a feral who was strangely quiescent. “What are you doing out of costume again? You know Nuka fires people for breaking character,” he said as he daubed paint on the ghoul.

Nora was banging on the glass, but couldn’t even hear her own pounding on the speaker. He certainly hadn’t heard her. The Glowing One went on, “Yes of course I’m kidding. But seriously, the clown makeup helps scare the invaders off and there’s a new one in the park.”

He shook his head at…something, “No. No I don’t think that’s going to work this time. There’s something different about this one.”

“Sorry. I know you can’t help it,” he said as the feral squirmed. “We just have to hold out until she gets back with a cure. Then we’ll drive the raiders out and get the farm back in order.”

He finished and put away the paints. He turned back to the feral, now garishly painted, “There! Back in character. I need to prepare more surprises for our visitors, so I’ll leave you to find your way back.”

And then he threw down one of those magician’s smoke bombs. When it cleared he was nowhere to be seen.

Nora and Piper headed up a set of stairs that led to yet another service entrance. This one let out on the Nuka Racers track, as they discovered as one of the cars whooshed past just before Nora could step in front of it.

“Fuck,” Nora swore. “Ok, we’re going to have to move fast and keep our eyes open. Or get hit.”

As they ran along the track, Nora kept an eye on the rear, and called, “Left,” or, “Right,” as needed. A brief but exciting 5 minutes later they had exited the track, near King Kola’s Kastle. As they opened the main gate to the Kastle area, Nora saw the flash of a missile launch and swearing, dropped and yanked Piper down with her.
The missile exploded some forty feet behind them and as Nora waited, another one fired off and missed them by even more. Then they were up. There were yet more ferals shot and more Rad-X taken to combat the misters.

“Why can’t I be killing Raiders instead of these poor bastards,” Piper said as yet another feral went down, this one heavily encrusted with charred scar tissue.

“Good question,” replied Nora, “Because the ghouls aren’t heavily armed and they won’t all gang up on us and make it a 200 to 1 fight. So we have to secure this place and give it to one of the Raider groups, so we can get out, call the Minutemen and even the odds.”

“It was a rhetorical question Blue! Sheesh,” said Piper.

Nora just grinned at her wife as they went back to dispatching the poor bastards with the melted brains.

After a few minutes the waves stopped charging them, and the two of them entered King Kola’s Kastle.

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“KKK? Was there no one on the entire naming committee that didn’t have their head up their ass?” observed Nora crossly.

Nate smiled, “You’re still pissed about the Fun House.”

“You are god damn right I am still pissed about the Fun House, even if they gave us these tickets to the magic show when they realized that a lawyer was the one they’d made vomit all over the place,” Nora said.

“And it didn’t hurt that you failed to mention the whole ‘month and a half of solid morning sickness’ part of the story,” Nate added.

Nora shook her head, “They didn’t ask and I have no obligation to clue them in.”

“So just turn that frown upside down and let’s see a magic show,” Nate said.

“Nate, my husband to be, you do realize that I have terminated people with extreme prejudice for lesser offenses than using that sort of inane phrase, right?” asked Nora.

Nate grinned and mimed locking his lips shut.

They entered the theater, richly appointed, and made their way to their seats, near the front.

The announcer called, “And now…The show you’ve all been waiting for. Oswald the Outrageous.”

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As the door to the theater opened at their touch, Piper and Nora walked in. Nora looked around, “Two centuries have not been good to this place,” she said.

“You were here too?” Piper asked.

Nora nodded. “It was a magician, named Oswald. The Outrageous.”

Piper said, “Just like the guy who set up the performer’s ‘vault’ under the park?”

“I suspect it actually was the guy. He was good. And I suspect he’s the Glowing One as well,” Nora said.
They heard from a speaker, “You’ve finally arrived. Quick, the show is about to begin.”

They made their way to the theater, a wreck with no seats but a mostly intact stage. And then, no longer a loudspeaker, just the Glowing One himself, “And now…The show you’ve all been waiting for. Oswald the Outrageous.”

There was a puff of smoke in the middle of the theater, and there was a Glowing One in a magician’s outfit. He looked them over and said, “I’ll admit I didn’t think you’d make it this far. I can tell you’re different than the usual invaders. So I’ll not bother with the usual tricks and illusions I use to scare off the superstitious. When the bombs fell everything changed. We changed. And somehow I received a gift. Actual magic. The stuff of legends, perhaps you’d like to see some?”

Oh no.

Sure enough, Oswald sent out a Glowing One’s radioactive pulse. And three ferals, formerly dead, rose up and attacked. And just as quickly went down to Nora and Piper’s pistols. And Oswald pulsed again, “No matter you do I can heal my friends and we will protect what is ours.”

“Dammit Oswald, we’re trying not to have to shoot everyone. But you’re giving me no choice,” Nora said as she first shot one of the three ferals, and leaving the other two to Piper, shot various non-vital pieces of Oswald.

He grimaced, and with smoke bombs, disappeared and reappeared on the balcony. “Well it seems your asinine assault won’t be dissuaded. Then I guess it’s time for our final act. Join me on the roof of King Kola’s Kastle, and we’ll see an end to this production.”

One final smoke bomb and he was gone. “Dammit,” Nora said, “He’s making it really god damn hard not to kill him.”

Piper said, “We have to try Blue.”

Nora nodded. “I know. I’m just bitching, Thing. That’s all. This would be a lot easier if he’d just be reasonable.”

They went to the elevator, the only way up the roof that Nora or Piper could find. They pressed the up button and waited. Nora holstered her pistol and gestured for Piper to do the same.

When the door opened, they saw that Oswald was waiting on them. They stepped out, and he said, bitterly, “You Raiders are all the same. You come into someone’s home, steal their belongings and kill those they care about. I’m not going to let you kill any more of my friends. This is our home, not yours.”

Nora shook her head, and pleaded with him, “I’m not your enemy. This can end without bloodshed.”

He was surprisingly animated in his expressions for a Glowing One. He pointed at them and said, “We’ve defended this place for over 200 years. Do you think you’re the first outsider I’ve met that’s chosen to brand ‘feral’ ghouls monsters? How many of them have you needlessly slaughtered while ignorantly thinking you’re doing the world a favor?”

This is neither the time nor place to talk about feral vs. sentient ghouls. And if he thinks it’s an ‘Affliction’, he doesn’t actually know that much about his condition.

Nora said, “Oswald, I’m begging you. Please leave. I can’t explain why, but I do not want to hurt you or your friends any more…and for me to be able to not hurt you, you have to go.”
Oswald shook his head, “Perhaps I would leave… but I made a promise to keep this place safe until my Rachel finds a cure. My beloved left this place years ago to find a cure for this disease. In return I swore I’d keep our people safe by defending our home. When Rachel walks back through those gates with the cure in hand, then you’ll see, everyone will see, I was right.”

Nora looked him in his green glowing eyes, willing him to accept her offer, “Oswald, I appreciate how much you’ve done and still do for your friends. I wish it could be rewarded with a cure, but I promise you, there is no cure. You’d be better off trying to find Rachel so you can be together.”

He shook his head, “You’re wrong! There is a cure,” but then he said, “There has to be…but… maybe she needs my help. If Rachel is still out there, I’ll find her and we’ll search for the cure together. I’ll gather what remains of my friends and we’ll leave this place in peace. Don’t worry about the radiation. It will no longer burden you and your kind.”

With that, Oswald the Outrageous swept out of Nora’s life.

After a few moments appreciating that they had not gotten stuck killing a noble if woefully misguided man, Nora turned to Piper, “One thing left. We have to decide who gets this park. I was thinking that it would be funny to give it to Gloria and the Disciples. On the one hand they get the first park, yay,” Nora said sarcastically. “On the other, it’s the ‘kiddie park’. It tickles me to imagine her trying to decide whether to be offended or flattered.”

Piper looked at her, “I don’t really know which way she’d go…”

Then Piper finished, “But either way it messes with her head. And I like that.”

Chapter End Notes

How in hell would you even GET a sentient Glowing One? Maybe he really IS magic. I’ve left it ambiguous, but Oswald is something else.
When they got back to Fizztop Mountain, it was dusk, and they were both exhausted. Nora found Gage and told him to assign Kiddie Kingdom to the Disciples.

He grinned, “Good one, Boss. The rest of the gangs will understand you’re messing with Nisha, but at the same time Nisha can’t bitch because she was first in line. Slick.”

Nora smiled nastily, “That’s me. Slick. Right Piper?”

Piper giggled and agreed. Gage rolled his eyes and headed out for the night.

Nora turned to Piper, “You are disturbingly good at that.”

“What?”

“Playing a brainless bimbo, Thing,” said Nora.

“What I am good at, Blue, is doing anything I can think of, at every moment, to stay alive and make sure my mother doesn’t hear anything that raises her suspicions,” Piper answered.

“Good point, sweetheart. I am beat. Let’s get to bed,” Nora said.

Piper and Nora went up to their ‘bedroom’. On impulse, if impulse could be defined as ‘being filthy and irradiated’, the pair of them searched the rest of Colter’s living area and turned up a shower that was clean enough. So the pair of them took their RadAway, showered quickly and then climbed wearily into bed.

Nora could tell Piper was still in need of a good cuddling so she scooted up behind her wife and wrapped her arms around Piper. Nora said, “Tomorrow, we’ll see about the bottling plant.”

Piper leaned back and twisted her head round for a kiss, then settled in. They were both asleep in moments.

The next morning they geared up, and headed out north again, towards the ‘World of Refreshment’.

As they walked, Piper quizzed Nora about the park from her trip with Nate in the fall of 2076.

“I’d just gotten released from the DIA the month before, and I was a little over two months pregnant,” Nora started.

“What was that like?” Piper asked.

“Being pregnant? It was, well, like….,” Nora started.

“Nevermind,” said Piper, “I’m getting off track. I still want to know, but we can talk about that later. So you visited this place a year before the war.”

Nora nodded, “We originally intended to just be here for a day. But it turned into four days. We did Kiddie Kingdom and World of Refreshment on the first day. Then we went to Safari Adventure and Dry Rock Gulch on the second day. Galactic Zone was new so we did that on day three and four,
and ended up in Nuka-Town for a half a day at the end. “

“Because I was pregnant I had to stay off the roller coasters, so I didn’t do Mad Mulligan’s Mine at Dry Rock. But I still kicked Nate’s ass at the gunfight. Again,” Nora smiled at the memory.

“Again?”

Nora laughed, “When we were twelve, I was the only one of us to beat One-Eyed Ike to the draw. Nate was always pissed at that,” Nora looked over and discovered that her wife was looking at her, well, adoringly.

“You don’t have to put on the act,” Nora said, “No one is watching us.”

Piper shook her head, “No, it just dawns on me that there’s whole parts of your life I’ve still yet to learn about. Someday we’re going to clear out some time and I’m just going to learn everything.”

“I’m an open book now Piper.”

“I know. As am I. You’ve seen, with your own eyes, the worst thing about me. My piece of shit Raider Boss Mother.”

Nora took Piper’s hand. “Did I ever tell you how happy I am that you married me?”

Piper laughed and nodded, “Constantly.”

“‘Well then. I have never been—shit!” Nora exclaimed.

“What?” asked Piper, as Nora yanked her hand away and drew her pistol. As Piper was looking around wildly, Nora fired. Two shots, and Piper turned and something out of a horror movie was 6 feet from her and…undulating…towards her. It was a 6 foot worm or eel like thing the color of blood, and had a circular maw surrounded by tiny teeth, like a lamprey or hagfish’s mouth.

Two more shots from Nora and the thing was dead. Nora looked over at Piper, “Came out of the ground. Two of them. I guess these are ‘bloodworms’.”

Piper shuddered, “I call ‘em, ‘Nasty’.”

“That too. Ok, no more wool gathering while we’re out in the park, clearly,” observed Nora.

“Yeah. Because if one of these things gets ahold of me, I might never stop puking,” said Piper.

Nora nodded, and they proceeded much more quietly as they made their way to the start of the World of Refreshment Ride. As they approached, something looked off. When they arrived Nora looked at the water and said, “Well, that’s new. Is that…Quantum?”

Piper looked at it and said, “I think so.”

“Ew. A river of soda pop. That we need to wade through. We’re gonna attract every giant ant in the park until we wash off after this one,” said Nora.

Piper just gripped her pistol as they made their way across the shallow water. Peering inside, they could make out the start of the ride. Apparently they tripped a still active sensor, as the Nuka-World jingle played, and a pre-recorded woman’s voice said, “Welcome to the Nuka-Cola World of Refreshment, now featuring a river of Nuka-Cola Quantum. Nuka-Cola Quantum. Twice the calories, twice the carbohydrates, twice the caffeine, and twice the taste. And just look at the amazing blue glow. So sit back and enjoy the ride as we take you through the Nuka-Cola world of
refreshment.”

“Brace yourself, Thing. By the time we get to the end of this, you’re gonna want to poke your eardrums out,” said Nora.

As they made their way down the ‘canal’, actually a water or Quantum covered tram track, a bizarre, blue glowing mirelurk popped up. Piper and Nora both reflexively shot into its underside and mouthparts and killed it rapidly. As they crept along, they tripped the next sensor and an animatronic John Caleb Bradburton began miming mixing chemicals, and the woman’s chirpy voice came back, “Nuka-Cola began its journey in the year 2042 when our founder John Caleb Bradburton was a budding chemist. He dreamt of a delicious soft drink that would provide energy, focus, and 120% of the daily recommended allowance of sugar.”

Another type of mirelurk, looking much more like a lobster, but still with that blue glow, emerged from the water and proved a bit more resistant. It took a lot more bullets to go down, but the two women had more than enough time to kill it before it got close. And again, the woman’s voice came over the loudspeakers as animatronics ‘drank’ Nuka-Cola, “It took almost two years to perfect the formula but in late 2044, Mr. Bradburton was finally successful and Nuka-Cola was born. It quickly surpassed other lesser beverages to become America’s number one favorite soft drink. Not one to rest on his laurels Mr. Bradburton and his team of talented beverageers continued to create new and exciting formulas.”

Piper said, “I see what you mean. All the work we have to do to power up a settlement, but this place has no problem maintaining this…this inane narration for over 200 years.”

Nora grinned at her wife, “And we aren’t even halfway through.”

Then they went around a corner where two Mirelurks came after them. At this point it was not a surprise and they easily dispatched both. Moving further down into a diorama of a western town, the voice said, “Out west, they enjoy regional favorites such as the classy Nuka-Cola Quartz, and the refreshingly patriotic Nuka-Cola Victory. Or for those that prefer a more timeless, root based beverage, they pick up a delicious Nuka-Cola Wild.”

Then they went around another curve and the voice informed them, “While out here on the East Coast folks delight in the refreshment of an ice-cold Nuka-Grape, Nuka-Orange, or Nuka-Cherry. And be on the lookout for our special pre-release shipments of Nuka-Cola Quantum coming soon to your favorite grocer or restaurant.”

Piper looked at Nora, “There was a ride,” Nora nodded. Piper went on, “That people went on,” Nora nodded again. Piper finished, “Where the point was talking about regional tastes in soda?”

Nora nodded, happily. “Now you know why I said you’re gonna want to puncture eardrums.”

They continued to a bar with an animatronic bartender and an animatronic woman, and the ride proudly proclaimed, “Hey, Mom and Dad! Are you ready for a night out on the town? Then pick up an Ice Cold Nuka-Cola Dark and experience the most thirst quenching way to unwind.”

Then the voice continued, more quietly and much faster, “35% alcohol by volume. Do not consume Nuka-Cola Dark if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. Do not operate motor vehicles or heavy machinery for at least 8 hours after drinking.”

Piper looked over at Nora, who said, “If you’re curious, that basically makes it whiskey. I have no idea how it tastes. Pregnant, remember?”
Piper just shook her head. They moved around a bend where on the left there were windows looking over a factory floor. The relentless narrator said, “But this isn’t just a ride. It’s one of several operational factories actively producing Nuka-Cola. Here in the mixing area, we combine just a hint of 17 select fruit flavors to produce that unique Nuka-Cola taste.”

At the same time as they were getting coy hints about the Nuka-Cola recipe, two Mirelurks attacked, and there was enough noise from the fight that they heard the sound of robots powering up. Nora peeked into the bottling plant and to her horror, she saw two Assaultrons, active and running, presumably towards them.

“Piper! Assaultrons. Take cover,” she said urgently.

They both crouched behind diorama walls and sighted down the waterway. When the first one appeared Nora began firing as fast as possible from her rifle. The first robot went down quickly, but the second got within 20 feet before it went down.

Nora blew air out, “That was close, wasn’t it, Thing?”

“Mm-hmm,” Piper replied, but something in her tone made Nora look over. There was a nasty laser burn through Piper’s leg. Nora’s stomach dropped out.

“Oh god, Piper. Are you Ok? That’s stupid, or course you’re not Ok,” Nora said, near panic. She jammed two stimpacks into Piper’s thigh.

Through gritted teeth Piper said, “Not so easy when it’s YOUR wife who’s hurt, huh, Blue? Next time you do something reckless think about how you feel…right…now.”

Nora smiled through her tears, “Is this your teachable moment, Thing?”

Piper nodded, “I never realized how easy it was being the one wounded. I just have to hurt. Not panic, and cry, and worry.”

Nora just stood there for a second, feeling awful, then she got out a bandage and wrapped it around Piper’s leg. They moved more slowly with Piper limping, but that came to an abrupt halt as the next bit of narration occurred, “Here in the bottling chamber, we carefully pour each delicious liquid into our new, space age rocket bottles. Each bottle is carbonated and then sealed with one of our signature bottle caps.”

Aka, money. It’d be funny to point out to that supercilious sociopath Mags Black the linkage between her precious ‘caps’ and soda. What else is around here… Hey, that’s a suit of…

“Power Armor! Holy shit, Thing, they have a set of Power Armor in Nuka colors,” Nora said. She quickly picked the lock holding the door shut and then turned to her wife.

“Voila. Your chariot awaits, madam,” and Nora gestured at the suit. Piper climbed in, and immediately the servos compensated for her limp, and helped regularize her stride.

“This works like a dream, Blue. Thanks!” she called.

With Piper considerably better protected Nora calmed down. She really wasn’t used to seeing someone else get shot.

God, what must I have put her through when I got shot in the Institute?

With a new appreciation for the kind of strength Piper had had to show over and over just by being
married to her, they continued around the tour. The last set of windows looked out over a battlezone with brewing vats. There were several mercenary’s bodies and a number of ballistically decommissioned robots. The mercenaries looked like they might be Gunners. Perhaps SGT Lanier’s unit.

The omnipresent and ominannoying announcer spoke, “And now for a special surprise, this is where we produce the newest member of our family, Nuka-Cola Quantum. That Blue glow isn’t just for show folks. Quantum contains a top secret additive to give you a nuclear boost of energy.”

As they neared the end of the ride, one last Mirelurk emerged. It was quickly dispatched. And to Nora and Piper’s great relief the announcer bid them farewell, “On behalf of all us at Nuka-World we hope you’ve enjoyed the ride and learning more about Nuka-Cola!”

But the exit was blocked so Nora and Piper were forced to head into the industrial section. As Nora crept along she heard the less stealthy but very reassuring clomp of Piper inside a suit of Power Armor.

They made their way through a number of control rooms. Nora made sure to check the scene of the battle in the Quantum area. Based on the holotapes she found, this was indeed SGT Lanier’s squad, minus a few who must be waiting somewhere in the park. The Gunners here were wiped out by a combination of mirelurks and Assualtrons. And one who apparently elected to go out on her own terms rather than get eaten alive by Mirelurks.

There were a couple exits from the building. Nora’s instincts as a sniper argued for the third floor exit and nobody else got a vote. The pair crept out onto a balcony overlooking a loading dock and retention pond. Which was fascinating, until Nora was thrown to one side by a sonic blast from some kind of Mirelurk that looked more like the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

As she got stiffly to her feet, Piper pumped a full magazine into it. Its blast had done exactly nothing to her, as her sonic dampers had cut in automatically. By the time that the two of them had looked back to the loading dock, there were two Mirelurks, one already half way up the stairs, and one moving from the retention pond to the stairs. Nora put two rounds into the one of the stairs until it went around the corner headed for them.

Piper called, “I have that one, you take the others,” and gestured down. There were now two of the crab creatures on the move. Nora sighted on one, cutting its legs out and immobilizing it, then shifting to the one just now coming out of the pond. That one still had an exposed head. And at that distance, Nora didn’t need a sniper rifle to hit it. The scope just allowed Nora to pick which eye she’d shoot through.

About the time Nora heard Piper’s pistol cough twice dropping the one on their level, Nora was killing the crippled Mirelurk below. And as if on cue, there was a trumpeting cry and a Queen, but glowing blue, emerged from the pond.

Nora wasted no time at all shooting out the two acid ducts on either side of the Queen’s head. Then she emptied a full magazine into one of the Queen’s two eyes. The massive crab began thrashing as Nora reloaded.

The Queen wasn’t dead, but it was obviously a matter of time. Her acid ducts were ruined, her sight was all but gone, and her tormentors were not within reach of her physically. With a vision of Theresa O’Brien’s acid burned and ravaged body in front of her, Nora made it hurt.

First she immobilized the Queen, by shooting out her legs along her right side. Then she began, methodically, to pepper the Queen with 7.62mm slugs. ‘Cruel’ was the only way to describe what
was going on. This may not have been the individual responsible for Theresa’s death, but Maxson had already been killed, mid-rant, and this Queen would do as a stand in for the one at The Castle.

Had Gage been on site, he probably would have been impressed, and possibly frightened out of ever crossing Nora. What he wouldn’t have had any way of knowing is that by merely existing, he’d already crossed her and placed himself, fatally, on her radar.

Finally the Queen heaved one last time, and flopped over. Dead.

Nora and Piper waited. Nothing further volunteered to die. The two of them went down and then out the back, through the loading entrance, and then headed back south along the river outside the World of Refreshment dividing the east side of Nuka-World from the West. It was mid-afternoon. By the time they made it back to Nuka-Town it was late afternoon, and the two of them found Gage waiting by the Fizztop Grille entrance.

He raised one eyebrow, the one over his ruined eye, at Piper’s colorful armor, but said nothing else. Nora simply looked at him and said, “World of Refreshment. Operators. Let them make soda.”

Gage smirked, “Boss. I have to say, you raise rewarding these guys to an art form. Nothing comes without a little ‘fuck you’ embedded in the gift. Bravo!”

*That’s the point, asshole. When I sweep in here with the Minutemen, I want these useless fucks wondering if it’s me or the other Raiders they need to worry about most. Sun Tzu may have been writing to instruct barely functional morons, but he wasn’t wrong. ‘Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.’*

*I plan to have won before I ever arrive.*

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of thematic games I played in this chapter. Plus a meta-narrative one. I frankly love this chapter, especially knowing what’s coming...

One of the things I find hilarious is the reverence for Sun Tau. I lampshade it here. It’s not that he is WRONG, it’s more that he was writing these maxims down for the purpose of seeking employment, and it consists of some really obvious statements, occasionally in cryptic or oracular language to dress up the fact that he’d dumbed things down for some REALLY inbred boneheads. (Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz’ book “On War” shares many characteristics, simple concepts dressed up in complex phraseology to impress, complicated by the German Enlightenment's absolute CRUSH on the dialectic).

"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win" is congruent with Rommel's maxim that "Amateurs study strategy, professionals study logistics". Rommel's statement shows you HOW victorious warriors win first. Sun Tzu advertises. Rommel delivers.
Piper and Nora headed for the Grille, Piper traveling up first alone because of the weight of the armor, and when she got to the top she got out of the armor and racked it in the corner. Nora followed her up. At which point Nora practically tore off Piper’s pants to examine her leg.

Piper had been shot through and through. But it was a laser burn and the two stimpacks had gone a long way to helping her. Nevertheless, Nora insisted on helping her to the bed, where she laid Piper down. Nora examined the wound, in many ways to distract herself from her feelings of guilt. The muscle and other tissues had already closed up and her skin was growing over. There was already a rim of healthy pink shiny skin around the entry and exit wounds.

Nora looked up at Piper, and something in her expression made Piper tell her, “It’s going to be OK Blue. It just aches a little now.”

Nora shook her head, “It’s my fault. If I’d been faster-“

“Blue! Don’t do that,” Piper said, “I’ve been shot before. I’ll get shot again. It was bound to happen sometime.”

Piper looked at Nora tenderly, “You set out to make the Commonwealth safe, and you’re succeeding, sweetie. In the six weeks since we invaded The Institute, I haven’t been shot at or in danger at all until the last couple days. That’s all you. And I’d like to point out that we’re not in the Commonwealth now. In the old days, before I met you? I got shot at once a week or more.”

She pointed down at her leg, “This? It happens, Nora. You can’t control everything and I am telling you, as your wife, it is not good for you to blame yourself every time you prove that you’re human.”

She looked up at Nora and smiled and took Nora’s hand, “Even if it did hurt like a son of a bitch when it happened.”

Nora’s face fell again, and Piper laughed at her. “I love you Blue, but god it’s easy to tease you.”

Nora just stared at her wife. Then grinned when Piper hissed as Nora shot her with another stimpack.

“And you’re easy to distract, Thing,” said Nora.

Piper flexed her leg experimentally, and this time she didn’t wince. She smiled up at Nora and said, “I think I’ll be Ok tomorrow. Where to next?”

“Safari Adventure,” said Nora.

Pier looked confused, “That’s the furthest away. Not Galactic Zone?”
Nora shook her head, “Nope. I’ve given the Disciples a park, and the Operators a park. I need to give the Pack one. And that’s Safari Adventure.”

Piper nodded, “Makes sense.”

After they ate and Nora sewed up the hole in Piper’s pants, they went to bed and set the alarm to get them up early. When they woke up, Piper swore like Nora. Way worse than a sailor. Nora looked her wife’s wound over and pronounced her healed, “Not even a scar, Thing. Now get up. This is day five. Nat, Shaun, and the rest of them must be going nuts.”

At that, Piper suddenly sat straight up and started getting ready, “Oh, shit. That’s the day I became convinced you were dead last time, Nora. We have to finish up these assholes’ demented plan and escape.”

Nora nodded, “That’s the plan, Thing.”

Piper looked over at Nora, “Why aren’t you freaking out? I hate to say it but you’ve been the old Nor…”

“I’ve been acting like a professional assassin, haven’t I? Well, these people?” she gestured around at the park, “They deserve what I do. I’m no more conflicted about killing and betraying them than I would be a Radroach.”

“I suppose that makes sense. I’m sorry you have to do this, but sometimes…”

“Sometimes violence IS the answer, Piper,” Nora finished.

“Got it,” said Piper. “Ready to go.”

The pair of them headed north from Fizztop. They were moving cautiously but quickly past Kiddie Kingdom, when they heard a voice. It was Nisha. Before she turned, Piper plastered a simper on her face, Nora just went poker faced as they both turned.

Nisha was strutting up in form fitting leathers, and looked Nora up and down. Nora was wearing her usual, combat boots, black fatigue pants, a dark green t-shirt, fingerless gloves, and her black denim vest covered in pockets. She had her messenger bag satchel slung over one shoulder and her rifle over the other.

Nora didn’t look like much, and not at all like a Raider, but her clothes were Tinker Tom specials, and the vest was literally stuffed full of equipment, lock picks, a couple grenades and easily accessed stimpacks. Piper was wearing her red leather longcoat and a Tinker Tom blouse and leggings tucked into her own boots.

Nisha looked them both up and down, and said, “I just don’t see it.”

Nora stared back without expression and said, “See what?”

“I don’t buy that you’re some kind of Raider,” Nisha said, “I think you’re a pair of wastelanders who wandered into the Gauntlet at just the wrong moment and got lucky.”

“Why?” Nora asked.

“Because this slut,” she gestured at her daughter, “Was too much her father’s daughter.”

“You don’t think I could fuck the nice out of her?” Nora challenged.
Piper sighed, “Plus nicely fuck me. That works too.”

Nisha just glared at her daughter, “Shut up, cunt. Your betters are talking.”

There should have still been a Motion Picture Academy, because Piper earned an Oscar in that moment. Nora saw her wife’s eyes just barely flicker wider for half a second before falling back into vapidity.

*Whatever happens to you, Gloria, will not be over quickly. And may god have mercy on you, for I surely will not. And if He exists, He won’t, either.*

Nora just said, “You don’t think I make a credible Raider? Why’s that?”

“I don’t think you have what it takes to kill in cold blood,” Nisha said.

Nora genuinely burst into laughter. “I…You think…Oh, this is too funny,” and Nora looked at Nisha, “From where I’m standing right now, I could put a 10mm between your eyebrows, pulping your brain, and leave your quivering corpse for the Bloodworms to find.”

She smiled, “But I think that would be too quick. Based on your stance you’re an experienced knife fighter, so I’d never go at you that way, head on. But if you ever went to sleep for any reason, I could easily slip into your bedroom, unseen and unheard, and put my hand over your mouth and nose as I use this knife,” and as if by magic Nora’s survival knife was in her hand, “To slice your carotid, from here to here,” and she showed Nisha on her own body starting just under her laryngeal prominence and up her right earlobe.

“However, you’d pass out from blood loss after about fifteen seconds, and I’d have to manage the splashing blood, which is annoying.” Nora said, stepping closer, and putting away her survival knife in her thigh sheath. “So, I’d probably use this,” and she produced an anodized black stiletto from a cross draw sheath along her lower back, “And catch you in a crowd scene. I’d come from your right and you’d never see this until it entered your eyeball as I jabbed in at an angle towards your left side, so as to catch your primary motor cortex.”

Nora smiled now, “You’d drop, immobilized. Your body would seize up, and I’d move the stiletto to maximize your brain damage. It would actually take you quite a while to die, but die you would. And there would be nothing for you to do about it,” and now she stared into the face of the woman who’d just called her own daughter a cunt, “Except silently panic as you felt your life leave you as your body died.”

Nora turned away, then looked over her shoulder, “Or I’d introduce a paralytic neurotoxin into your food. You muscles would seize up, and you’d have a long, long time to realize that you’d never draw another breath as your body slowly and painfully shut down.”

Nora turned and waved to Nisha, “Have a nice day. Enjoy your piece of Nuka-World.”

*I don’t think I’ll point out I could put a bullet into her eye from the top of King Kola’s Kastle. That’s only a 1200 yard shot. Easy peasy.*

*Because I might have to use that one.*

Nisha’s jaw had dropped. She didn’t look quite so confident. Slowly she turned and went back into Kiddie Kingdom.

Nora and Piper continued on, up the river. After they’d gotten far enough away, and behind several bushes, Piper stumbled to one side, bent over and vomited. Nora came over and rubbed her wife’s
Piper was panting and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She was pasty white. Nora opened a can of purified water and handed it to Piper, who swished a little in her mouth and spat it out, then took a long drink.

“Blue…” she started.

“All words, Piper. Every. Word.”

Piper gulped and nodded. “I…oh god. I came from that? How?”

“Your dad must have been something Piper,” Nora said.

Piper smiled sadly, and nodded. “I worshiped him. Every time I thought I couldn’t handle it, with Nat, I always thought, ‘Would Dad accept me giving up?’ And the answer was always, ‘No.’ So I didn’t. Even when I was 14 years old trying to teach a five year old her letters and colors.”

Nora wrapped her arms around Piper, and silently rocked her. Presently she felt Piper’s chest heaving in sobs. Nora kissed her wife’s hair, and murmured comforts into her ear. Eventually the sobs subsided. Nora pulled back, and gently wiped away Piper’s tears with her thumbs. She looked into the face that she loved so much, and said, “I am so amazed at how well you hold it together, Piper. I know that isn’t easy. There’s literally no one in the Commonwealth who knows better than me how hard it was to pretend to not be bothered by those awful things your mother said, and just keep playing your role.”

Piper took a deep breath. “Ok, Blue. I think I’m ready to go.”

Nora smiled tenderly at her wife. “You’re not really ready honey, but Ok. We’ll move on slowly. Besides I want to come at Safari Adventures from behind. Near ‘The Angry Anaconda…”

Piper gave Nora a look, “The what now?”

“They’d just started building it when I was here with Nate. A roller coaster for Safari World called the Angry Anaconda. I think because the Nuka-Galaxy ride in the Galactic Zone wasn’t really a roller coaster. Thank god.”

“Huh?” asked Piper.

“I wasn’t supposed to ride roller coasters pregnant,” and Piper had a look on her face, “What’s the look for, Piper?”

“I…you…she…oh, it’s stupid,” said Piper bitterly.

“Ok, babe. Spill it.”

“It’s not fair,” said Piper, “You got to have Shaun, to have him grow in you. Even that piece of shit back there had me and Nat in her. To be mothers. Maybe it’s the article I’ve been writing about babies, synth and otherwise, that’s had me thinking about this, but I spent nine years as Nat’s parent, but she’s still my ‘sister’. You’re her mom. I never had that special relationship.”

At Nora’s hurt look, Piper added hastily, “And I really am happy about how Nat sees you. But when do I get to be a mom?”

Nora smiled sadly, “If I could be a man for you Piper, I would. If that’s really what you want.
But…"

“But we’re both women. Biology says, ‘Fuck You’ to lesbians,” said Piper bitterly.

“At least we have wombs. Look at poor Sun and Carrington. Love at first sight over Danny Sullivan and they can only adopt, ever,” said Nora.

Piper nodded, sadly. “This is one of those things. Believe it or not, Blue, I want to have a baby with you. I want to be the mom. I want…” she broke off as Nora took Piper’s hand and held it up to her cheek.

Then she looked at Piper, “Piper Louise Wright, I will move heaven and earth to give you a baby. We’re already figuring out a way for Roger and Meredith to have a baby, so anything could be possible” and she looked into Piper’s eyes, “I will give you a baby, Piper. I don’t how, and I don’t know when, but I promise you, I’ll find a way to give you morning sickness, and swollen ankles, and a bladder that won’t hold anything, and screaming and telling Marie my parents were never married during the delivery,” and she smiled at Piper, “And I will give you the moment we put our son or daughter on your chest and you hold our baby for the first time. I will find a way.”

Piper looked over at Nora. She was dead serious.

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Nora of the Apes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Piper’s step had gotten its bounce back and she looked worlds better than when her mother had finished with her earlier. As luck would have it, this end of Nuka-World’s ‘river’ was a muddy bottom, easily crossed, and then they were scrambling up a bank to the Angry Anaconda construction site. Scaffolding rose high above them and there was a trailer that looked like a foreman’s shed. Nora was about to walk up to it when Piper grabbed her.

“Blue!” she stage whispered.

Nora knelt, “What?”

“Something’s out there.”

Piper was right. There was rustling and a weird scratching noise. Then, about 50 yards away some…thing…stood up on hind legs. It resembled a Deathclaw, but instead of the traditional horned head, there was a blunt wedge shaped head, reminiscent of an alligator.

Well, wonderful. Somebody found a way to make Deathclaws worse. That is quite the fucking accomplishment.

Fortunately, the thing was casting about. And its belly was fully exposed. Nora carefully aimed at the center of its body, and in three rounds had punched the thing’s heart out of the other side of its body. She had only a few seconds to enjoy herself before the next one loomed up a bit over 100 yards away.

It was facing the wrong direction, so Nora shot it in the back of its head, and when it turned and roared, she sighted on the back of its throat, and shot it several times. It gurgled and died.

That is one huge mouth.

The pair waited to see if anything else popped up, but nothing did. So Nora did what she’d originally planned and checked out the shack and managed to scavenge a fusion core from the shack’s power unit and then stuck her head inside. There several skeletons, one with a lab coat. There was an ID card clipped to the lab coat. It said ‘Robert Hein’ and had a picture of distinguished looking bald man in his fifties. It had a magnetic strip, so Nora pocketed it.

As they left the shack a man came running up, carrying a sledgehammer. He was roughly the size and shape of a Super-Mutant, but human. He ran up and said, in a thick indefinable accent, “Lady! Cito see you kill Monster. You Friend?”

Nora looked at him in concern, “Are you OK? Why are you talking like that?”


Nora looked at him, and then a long moment later asked, “What the heck are these things. Are they some kind of Deathclaw?”
The man shrugged. With his muscles, and size, it was a lengthy but very impressive process. “Death? Claw? Cito not know. Cito only know ‘death’ bad and Monster bad.”

Nora smiled encouragingly, as if to a toddler, and said, “Well, it can’t hurt you anymore Cito.”


Nora looked him over. He seemed sincere. She said, “If I can. Do you have any idea where they’re coming from?”

Cito shook his head, “Cito not know. New friend follow Cito. Cito show you thing. Use thing to kill monsters.”

Nora asked, “What kind of ‘thing’, Cito?”

Cito just shook his head, and said, “Lady come. Help Cito and Cito family.”

Cito began jogging off, in a rather careless manner as far as Nora was concerned. They followed him at a distance and remained sneaky. Which was lucky, because as he was going past the large carnivore cages, a large carnivore attacked him. One of the ‘Monsters’ leapt at him from a cage to his left.

Well, so much for Cito…

That thing missed! Jesus that guy is fast. And, whoof, strong… Line up a shot, but I’m just slightly… and it’s down…speeding events up. It was actually over when Cito broke the thing’s leg with one swing.

Cito looked down, and then turned to them. “More Monsters soon. Come. Come.”

He led them to…

The Primate House. Of course. Female chimpanzees and gorillas will adopt. And a small human looks like a mangy great ape. But really?

Cito went in and turned back to the two women as they came in, “This home. This family.”

Then he chuffed companionably at the gorillas, several of whom chuffed their greetings back.

He looked at Nora and Piper, “No worry. They not hurt you. You friend Cito mean you friend Cito family.”

Nora couldn’t help it, “How did you end up being raised by these gorillas?”


If he remembers his human parents, he must have two or three years old at minimum.

Nora smiled, “You have a lovely family Cito.”

Cito smiled, without exposing his teeth, “You say nice thing. Cito like new friend. Now you help Cito. Family in Danger. Hide here from Monsters. Here only place safe. Here have no food. Here

Piper said, “I hope you know somewhere to start.”


Cito held out a holotype, gesturing for them to take it, “Help Cito.”

A man’s voice, clearly a ghoul, came on, “This is...Doctor Darren McDermot, last known survivor...*cough* at the Safari Adventure...Replication Facility. This is...my final recording. I've done something horrible...*cough*...the thing I created...the thing I called the Gatorclaw...*cough*...they must be destroyed. They can't be...tamed, they can't be controlled...*cough*...their sheer ferocity is like nothing I've ever seen. And now...the Nuka-Gen Rep...*cough*...Replicator is out of control. It's producing them at an... alarming rate...Please...somebody. Anybody! Find my passcode...or Dr. Hein's...*cough*. Shut down the Replicator before it's...*cough*...before it's too late. And if this recording should reach Dr...Hein. Please...*cough*...tell him...to forgive me.”

Nora walked back out of the side room, and Cito looked hopeful. He said, “Dead man have important thing?”

Nora nodded, “It seems the Gatorclaws...the ‘Monsters’...are coming from a animal cloning facility somewhere beneath Safari Adventure.”

Cito looked confused then his expression cleared. “Shiny thing help new friend?” he asked hopefully.

Nora nodded, “Do you know anything about a cloning facility near here?”

Cito’s huge brow furrowed with effort, “New friend say strange words. Cito not know what new friend want, but Cito know more about wrinkly man. Cito see wrinkly man come out of big triangle house long time ago. Go to big triangle house. Find Clo-ning fa-cil-i-ty. Stop Monsters.”

He smiled widely, “Cito come with new friend. Cito help!”

Nora looked around. These gorillas were doomed if they went out there for any reason while the Gatorclaws were around. She made a quick decision, “No. Stay with your family. I’ve got this.”

Behind here she heard Piper say, “But... No, you’re right.”

Cito clasped Nora’s arm, “Cito stay. Protect family.”

Nora and Piper crept out of the Primate House. And made their way through the park. There were a number of Gatorclaws; in the restroom area, at the main entrance, at the amphitheater, in the small mammal section and inside the maze to Cappy’s Treehouse. And at the Reptile House, naturally.

Thanks to the silencers on their weapons, and the tendency of the animals to open their mouths wide when surprised, like an alligator, Nora and Piper were never really in any danger. Even in close
quarters Nora stuck with her sniper rifle. It might not be the preferred weapon for short distances, but the steel jacketed slugs complemented Piper’s pistol, penetrating hide when the pistols weren’t sufficient.

Finally, Pier and Nora were reasonably certain that they’d gotten all the Gatorclaws outside the cloning facility. They went to the ‘triangle building’ and slipped silently inside. There were taxidermied animals, including a massive lowland Gorilla. But there was an additional feature in the information center, not traditionally found…a massive lethal carnivore at full bloodthirsty lurk.

Nora patiently waited until she had a clear rifle shot at the belly, long hard experience since literally her second day out of the vault having drilled into her that if you can’t see the belly, the thing isn’t going down easy, or at all. It turned and Nora began firing, as fast as she could pull her trigger, and filled it’s gut full of lead. After three shots the beast tossed its head up and collapsed.

The pair of them went down into the complex. They found a terminal that showed that the entire facility had been placed on the highest state of security alert. It wasn’t clear why until Piper was poking around next to the security door and found a holotape. It was a ‘manifesto’ from the Animal Friends and Defenders, which was a group Nora had never heard of. At all. But their platform was about exactly what you’d expect from people who used the term ‘manifesto’ unironically.

Hein’s passcard easily got them into the next part of the facility, where they found a lab, in utter disarray and a wealth of medical supplies that Nora shoved in her satchel under the rubric of ‘never too many first aid meds these days’. After Nora had thoroughly and professionally tossed the lab, while Piper provided color commentary, probably fed by her tender emotional state after dealing with Nisha, they found a way into the sub-sub-basement of the facility.

Where they found, in order, 6 inches of water, two Gatorclaws, and one cloning terminal. The two Gatorclaws went down, one after the other. When Nora checked the terminal, she found that the Gatorclaw program was endlessly repeating.

She was only able to swap one program for another, not shut the program down. But an endless supply of gazelles might be…interesting…and in the end it was more of an assured source of protein than a firehose of horrors.

She switched it over and saw a message that said [Incubation started. Final two iterations of prior program completed.]

Nora took this to mean that she had two last Gatorclaws to deal with. She was correct. She looked towards the replicator. Two more come out, and were dealt with the same as the others. At this point, it wasn’t like ferals…a mob of Deathclaws or Radscorpions would have overwhelmed her…but one at a time they were highly manageable given what she now knew.

When the last Gatorclaw had gone down, Nora breathed a sigh of relief and headed back to Cito.

_The key is getting him to keep his head down until I get here with the Minutemen. If I can be sure he plays it cool with the Pack, he should be Ok until Aunt Nora swoops in…and slaughters all of them._

As they entered the Primate House, Cito called eagerly, “New friend done? No more monsters?”

Nora nodded, “And they should not be coming back. Your family’s safe Cito.”

Cito smiled widely, still not showing his teeth, “Cito so happy. How Cito thank new friend?”

Nora looked at him earnestly, “I have some friends moving in here. But if you play it cool we can all get along.”
At least until I swoop in…

Cito nodded, “Cito trust you.”

And just for a change, as long as I can get this done quickly enough, I’ll actually BE trustworthy.

Chapter End Notes

One of the issues with novelizing Fallout 4/Nuka-World/Far Harbor is when you run into a quest that's a thinly veiled version of MMO 'grinding' quests. Essentially, Safari Adventure is 'Kill x Gatorclaws', Dry Rock Gulch is 'Kill x bloodworms plus the Bloodworm Queen' and Galactic Zone is 'Collect 20 Star Cores'. Some of it I solve with Flashbacks to sex it up. I'm still not exactly HAPPY with this chapter, but there's a limit to how much polishing I want to do with this turd, given that Dry Rock Gulch has some stuff I want to do that then leads to the Galactic Zone and Nuka-World REALLY goes off the rails. Sorry.

Consider it penance for enjoying Nora smacking Nisha down and squeeeing over the baby promise (as I said in comments...given that Piper had just LITERALLY lost her lunch in fear vomiting, Nora would have promised to grow a second head if that was what Piper expressed an interest in then Nora was going to commit to it...but now that the promise is out there, Nora's mind is working on it...).

I threw in a Classic SF Author Easter Egg, because why not?

Also Great Apes could adopt humans, in theory. Gorilla and Chimpanzee mothers have been known to adopt another gorilla or chimpanzee baby. A 3 or 4 year old human child? Maybe. It's not outside the realm of plausibility, although there are no documented incidents. Actually, the implausible part is that Cito has remained in adulthood. Adult Gorilla males are usually forced away, or challenge the Silverback for troop supremacy. I suppose the Cito could be the new Silverback for that group, but that just opens a Pandora's box of icky possibilities.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorilla)

It's a Monday sort of chapter, for a Monday sort of day...
After Nora and Piper got back to Nuka-Town it was late afternoon, and as Gage walked over, Nora just looked at him, and said, “Safari Adventure. The Pack.”

Gage grinned, but he did observe, “That’s kind of on the nose, Boss, you sure?”

Nora nodded, “They had to wait until third, they can have an appropriate park.”

For what it’s worth…

Piper and Nora went to bed that evening and again, Piper clearly just wanted to be cuddled.

_This situation is killing her. It’s day 6 and we have two more parks to clear. Hopefully we get this done fast and we’re back by what? Day 7? 8?_

Nat and Shaun must be going nuts.

The next morning dawned and once again they put on their equipment and headed out. “This is beginning to feel monotonous, Blue,” Piper observed. “Doing the same thing, park after park…”

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“…I’m just saying,” Nate said, “We keep doing the same thing park after park. How many plush toys can one woman need, anyway?”

Nora smiled, “I have had to be a lot of things. I’m going to be a mom now, and I need to work on soft and fuzzy.”

“Sure, but you don’t have to corner the market on soft and fuzzy,” he said, but he was smiling as he said it.

Nora looked up at the sign for Dry Rock Gulch. “You want hardass, Nate? I’ll give you hardass,” she said over her shoulder as she sauntered up to Sheriff Hawk.

He was a Protectron, in a cowboy hat and vest with a star, and he said to Nora as she came up, “Hope y’all are having a good day here at Nuka-world. Ready to saddle up and ride into the Wild West?”

She nodded enthusiastically, and all resolutions not to bruise Nate’s ego forgotten in the wake of the ‘soft and fuzzy’ crack, said, “I sure am, sheriff. Got anything that needs doing?”

He said, “Sure do. We got us some no good outlaws, holed up in Mad Mulligan’s Mine. We could sure use a hand around here. What do you say? Want to be my deputy?”

Nora nodded enthusiastically, as Nate said, “Hey, wait a minute.” She turned and stuck her tongue out at him, and turned back for the next part of Sheriff Hawk’s speech.

“The door to Mad Mulligan’s Mine is locked up, I got a spare key in the safe, by the theater, but I plum forgot what the combination is. You’ll need to talk to my three amigos, the Phosphate Kid, One-Eyed Ike, and the Giddyup Kid. Prove to them you’re tough enough to take on the outlaws, and they’ll give you their part of the combination. Good luck, little doggie.”
Nora grinned and walked up the street to One-Eyed Ike’s stable, and that Protectron came out onto the busy street. He stood in front of Nora and said, “So you’re the new deputy huh? Well, I ain’t impressed yet, Let’s see how you handle a good old fashioned quick draw duel. The rules are simple. We’ll each walk into the street, and then I’ll say draw. First one to hit the other wins.”

The Protectron handed Nora an old style Colt Peacemaker specially modified for Nuka-World, in a gun belt, which she strapped on, and then she swaggered out into the middle of the street. Passersby stopped, as Ike began counting down.

“One…Two…Three…Draw.”

In a blur Nora had the pistol up and then brought it smoothly down on Ike, then pulled the double action trigger. The gun roared realistically, and One-Eyed Ike clapped his manipulator to his chest. The crowd clapped at Nora’s performance. Ike said, “That was some fancy shooting there partner. You’ve earned this. You show those outlaws what a real deputy of Dry Rock Gulch can do.”

Nora turned to Nate with a huge smile. “Your turn, sweetie!”

When the inevitable happened, she wasn’t merciful either. She made sure Nate bought her TWO plush Giddyup Buttercup dolls from the vendor.

"…Blue? Blue!” Piper said.

“What?” Nora asked.

“You were a million miles away, Blue,” Piper said.

Nora smiled and nodded, “Yeah, I guess. This was my absolute favorite park when I was young and even when I came back when I was pregnant with Shaun.”

“Well it’s about to be my least favorite park,” said Piper, gesturing at a sheet of plywood on which someone had painted in large letters, “Danger: Bloodworms!”

“Great,” said Nora as she pulled her pistol and began creeping into the park.

Nothing came out of the ground until Nora saw, of all things, Sheriff Hawk just up the road. When she went to go over to him and stopped tiptoeing, all hell broke loose. The vibrations of her walking apparently were what the Bloodworms were hunting, because four shot up out of the ground, including two behind Piper, which they’d clearly quietly walked right over.

Nora choked down bile, as she turned and shot the two behind Piper as Piper was shooting the two behind her. The soft invertebrates were highly susceptible to ballistic damage as their pliant flesh was torn apart by bullet shockwaves. That was about the only thing to recommend them.

Piper looked from her targets, immediately behind Nora, to Nora’s targets, immediately behind her, and looked sick to her stomach. But she said, “I think sneaking isn’t such a good idea. I’d like to wake these guys up as early as possible.”

Nora nodded. “I’ll go one better, Thing,” as she took a frag grenade and tossed it well down the street, far over Sheriff Hawk’s head. When it blew, 6 of the damned things popped up at various points along the street, and Piper and Nora began shooting. They were converging on where the grenade had blown, so it was easy, if disgusting, to deal with.

When they finished with that batch of parasites, Nora jumped up and down experimentally. Nothing
happened, so she finally walked over to Sheriff Hawk.

He waved to them and said, “Hope y’all are having a good day here at Nuka-World. Ready to saddle up and ride into the Wild West?”

Nora smiled, despite her current situation, and Piper watched in amazement as Nora said, “Well howdy there, sheriff. Looks like some pesky varmints here in the Gulch need straightening out.”

Sheriff Hawk simply gestured and said, “I don’t know about varmints, but we got us some no good outlaws, holed up in Mad Mulligan’s Mine. We could sure use a hand around here. What do you say? Want to be my deputy?”

Nora just smiled widely and said, “I guess I could bring a little law ‘n order to these parts sheriff. You got yourself a deputy.”

Sheriff Hawk replied, as his programming demanded, “The door to Mad Mulligan’s Mine is locked up, I got a spare key in the safe, by the theater, but I plum forgot what the combination is. You’ll need to talk to my three amigos; the Phosphate Kid, One-Eyed Ike, and the Giddyup Kid. Prove to them you’re tough enough to take on the outlaws, and they’ll give you their part of the combination. Good luck, little doggie.”

Nora nodded, and headed up the street. Before they got to the first corner, Piper caught up with her, and said, “What gives?”

Nora just smiled with her eyes far away. “I used to love this park…,” and her eyes focused on Piper, “I guess I’m just thinking, ‘What’s the harm in enjoying one of these outings just for a change?’ if you really have to ask.”

Piper shook her head, “Bloodworms, Blue. That’s what’s the harm.”

“Pfft,” Nora said, and peering around the corner, at a short street to her right that ultimately led to Mad Mulligan’s Mine itself, and then under handed a grenade into the middle of the intersection. Two Bloodworms popped out and Nora immediately cut them down. She looked over at Piper, and gestured, “See? Easy peasy.”

Piper nodded, “OK, I take your point, these things just creep me out.”

Nora smiled at Piper, “I understand sweetie. They are pretty much completely disgusting. But now that we know how they act, they’re not that dangerous,” and she tossed grenade across the street and into the food court.

One Bloodworm popped out, and Piper shot it easily. “See?” said Nora. Piper nodded.

“I guess,” she said.

Nora and Piper continued down the Main Street, and shortly One-Eyed Ike came out to greet them. “So you’re the new deputy huh? Well, I ain’t impressed yet. Let’s see how you handle a good old fashioned quick draw duel. The rules are simple. We’ll each walk into the street, and then I’ll say draw. First one to hit the other wins.”

Nora smirked at Piper, and cracked her knuckles, “Hold on to yer hat One-Eyed Ike, because I’m about to show you the fastest gun the West.”

One-Eyed Ike looked at Nora, “Let’s see if your shooting is a fast as your mouth partner,” and he handed Nora the Nuka modified Colt Peacemaker on its gun belt. She strapped it on and went into
the street. This time when Ike counted down, she fired as the gun came up, even faster than her last two times.

The result was the same though, as Ike said, “That was some fancy shooting there partner. You’ve earned this. You show those outlaws what a real deputy of Dry Rock Gulch can do,” and handed her a slip of paper, that said “1-Right 34”. Nora tipped an imaginary hat, and moved on down the road. As she approached Doc Phosphate’s saloon, a Bloodworm popped out the ground, but Piper cut it down almost immediately.

*I can see how the Raiders are using these things as a terror tactic. Until you know how they’re triggered and how they behave, and if you’re not armed? Horrorshow. If you DO know, and are armed? Easier than ferals.*

*But 10 times more disgusting.*

She walked into Doc Phosphate’s Saloon. As she walked up the Protectron called, “You look parched there, stranger. You know what you need? A bottle of Nuka-Cola Wild. The root based flavor with teeth. Hospitality is a big deal out here in Dry Rock Gulch. That’s why I want you to handle tending the bar. I got three orders of drinks I need you to deliver. One is just upstairs, and the other two are in town. You game?”

Nora smiled hugely and said, “The people of Dry Rock Gulch are about to meet the friendliest bartender in town. You have my word.”

Behind her, Piper said, “Oh for pity’s sake,” under her breath and rolled her eyes unseen. Nora was having more fun than Piper felt was appropriate under the Raider surrounded, trapped until they did the maniacs’ bidding, circumstances.

Doc Phosphate continued as if Piper hadn’t spoken, “Appreciate it. You’ll be delivering to Prospector Owen upstairs, and Miss Trixie and Handy Hank in town.”

Nora took the bottles and headed off. It was good thing she’d done this back in 2064. Because the actors playing Prospector Owen, Miss Trixie, and Handy Hank were long dead. When she’d dropped off each Nuka-Cola Wild she returned to Doc Phosphate. He called as she walked in, “Good job. Did Prospector Owen give you one of his tall tales as a reward. How about Miss Trixie and Handy Hank?”

Nora nodded, recalling that long ago, in both senses of the word, summer of 2064, and said, “Oh yeah, Owen, Trixie, and Hank told me all about the California Gold Rush. Fun and educational.”

Doc Phosphate handed her a slip of paper reading “2-Left 24” and said, “That’s good to hear. Here’s my part of the combination.”

Nora smiled and they left the saloon headed for the Giddyup Kid. Nora stopped suddenly, and Piper froze. Nora tossed another frag into the faux cemetery and when it blew three Bloodworms came out of the ground. And were almost as quickly dispatched.

Piper looked over at Nora. “Ok, Blue, I see your point. Still, this isn’t a vacation.”

Nora just waved her off and walked over to the Protectron standing outside a small, child sized corral, who said, “Oh Thank goodness it’s the new deputy. You gotta help me. My herd of Giddyup Buttercups have all fled the pokey. You gotta track em down and bring em back. Now Giddyup Buttercups can’t resist the taste of Nuka-Cola. So check all out refreshment stands. What do you say, deputy? Want to help an honest horse trader out?”
Nora remembered. This part of the task was specially designed to put a kid in the middle of the concession stands. Where, at a minimum, an indulgent parent would be wheedled into a Nuka-Cola or two. She remembered where she’d found it back with her parents and Nate’s family in 2064.

So she nodded, and said, “Rustle up some horses for you, huh, Cowboy? I’ll be back before sundown.”

She walked very directly to the spot the Buttercup had been last time and found one right there. These robots were nothing if not faithful to their programming. She took it back to the small corral and the Giddyup Kid said, “Good job there cowgirl. If I ever need someone to tame those broncos again, I’ll give you a holler.” He handed her a slip that said, “3-Right 4”. Then he said, “Here’s my part of the safe combination. Good luck in Mad Mulligan’s Mine.”

The two of them went to the theater and looked inside. There was a large giant ant hill in the middle of the performance area. But a grenade took care of all the ants and Nora and Piper strolled over and opened the safe. Inside was a ‘key’ to Mad Mulligan’s Mine. It was actually a token to open the gate. You could buy them at the coaster, but in order to make it fun for the kids they’d added the ‘combination’ story line.

Nora and Piper headed over to the ‘coaster. Nora dropped the token into the slot and the door creaked open. There’d been some changes since she’d come in 2064. She’d hadn’t even come in in 2076, but she was pretty sure that the gift shop/exit hadn’t been chained off then, either.

At any rate they went into the ride area, a tunnel leading to the boarding zone, where they saw a desiccated corpse. Its hand was clutching a note that read, “We’re not letting those damn Raiders take over this park. Dry Rock Gulch always had the best defensive positions. We’ll make our stand there.”

The body was too decayed to make out a cause of death. The two went on, and past a fake mine tailing pond, when Piper said, “Is that brahmin…moving?” The animal burst with noisome pop, and Piper shouted as she and Nora shot Bloodworms oozing from the carcass.

When nothing was moving any longer, Nora tried smiling, “Well that was…disgusting.”

Piper said, “Yeah. Still having a hoot of a time or is this enough nasty for you?”

Nora shook her head, and the pair went around the corner quietly. They were in the ‘coaster boarding area, but you couldn’t see the main boarding area. The pair crept up closer and looked around some piled planks.

It was the largest, most disgusting thing Nora had seen in a good long while—a large pulsating Bloodworm surrounded by small larvae smack in the middle of the boarding waiting area. She heard Piper quietly gagging behind her, and she pulled Piper with her as she picked the lock on a door to the control room. The pair of them got positioned to cover the door. Nora whispered, “I’ll throw a batch of grenades, and we shoot anything that comes at the door.”

Piper gulped, or gagged, and nodded.

Nora pulled the pin on a frag and threw it, and pulled the second pin and threw that. The first frag landed about 10 feet from the…queen?…and blew, disintegrating most of the larvae, but awakening several Bloodworms scattered about the area.

The second grenade lodged up against the bulk of the queen. When it blew, the queen…popped. In a gush of blood and vitreous matter and things best not contemplated. The remaining worms charged
the door, the floor keeping them from burrowing to the two women.

Piper held them off. She had not had the front row seat for the queen’s destruction that Nora had. Nora was a coldly professional killer, but some things you can’t possibly get used to and that had been one of them.

As Nora was composing herself in the wake of the fight, Piper looked around. On another skeleton in this room she found another note. Wordlessly, she handed it to Nora. Nora took it and read.

{Bloodworms. Should've known they'd nest down below here. Came at us through the dirt. Only a matter of time now.

I'm not letting them take me. Not some worms. Not some Raiders. I'm going out on my terms.

My name was Sam Teller. I ran caravans and did good, honest deals out of Nuka-World for years. I fought the Raiders when they came. I led the holdouts. I was a mother and a wife and a sister and a daughter, and fuck you for taking that all away from me.}

The skeleton only had half a skull.

Nora looked at Piper. “Now it isn’t fun.” Her eyes had gone cold, and Piper knew her wife well enough to know exactly how furious she really was.

Nora took the note with her and they walked out of the rollercoaster and back towards Nuka-Town, right past Sheriff Hawk, who said, “Did you have fun in Mad Mulligan’s Mine? Tussle with any bad outlaws?”

Nora just grunted at him and stomped off. When she got to Fizztop Mountain, she looked at Gage. She said, “Dry Rock Gulch. Disciples. And tell that bitch Nisha I want a signed thank you note,” so that her anger wouldn’t raise Gage’s suspicion.

One more fucking zone.

*Then they give me a way out, or they find out I’m not trapped in here with them, they’re trapped in here with ME.*

Chapter End Notes

I want you to imagine that you go back to something that really REALLY used to make you happy. And then imagine that it's been ruined, irreparably, for you. That no matter what, no matter what kind of rebuilding gets done, that it will NEVER again be that place for you...

And that you didn't admit that for quite some time. And you realize you'd been willfully blind as well.
Nora won the game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, so she took the first shower. She’d dried off, and gotten dressed and was thinking about which box of Blamco Mac ‘N’ Cheese to make for dinner when Nisha rode the scaffold up to the Grille.

As luck would have it Piper had already gotten in the shower and so missed the first part of Nisha’s performance, where she’d walked in, made thinly veiled threats and challenged Nora to show her bona fides as a killer.

“I still don’t buy you as a cold blooded killer. Bitches can talk a good game, but proving it…” she’d finished.

Nora glared at her, “Would you like me to show how I kill people right now?”

At that point Piper made a mistake. She didn’t know she’d made a mistake. Nora didn’t know she’d made a mistake. But they had.

Piper had been listening and came back from the shower wearing nothing but her towel. Afterwards, Piper had told Nora she’d walked in that way because she thought her presence might back Gloria off.

Instead, it had set Nisha off. She looked over at Piper, and then back at Nora with a sneer. “Ok, Overboss. If you aren’t gonna prove what a killer you are, then you can prove how ‘bad’ you are other ways.”

She gestured at her daughter, “Fuck this bitch ‘til she bleeds.” At Nora’s look, she said, “I’d never make you throw away a toy. Just make the slut suffer. Nothing permanent, if how she looks is important. You know how to make a toy hurt without maiming it, right?”

Piper didn’t have to act, the trickle of a tear running down her cheek was enough to make her mother smile, nastily, and slowly stalk over to her. Nisha pretended to examine the tear. “Oh, look. The cunt thinks you’ll hurt her.”

Nisha turned to Nora, “You think I give a shit that this is my daughter? I have no daughter. Just meat that I used to have, and now you use. So fine! Use her. I’ll watch. I like watching little bitches cry when they get used.”

She looked Piper up and down, “Usually they’re dead by the time I leave, but there’s a first time for everything. Maybe I’ll learn to enjoy leaving my toys alive. Probably not. But stranger things have happened.”

Nora stood up, and she took one step towards the pair, but only to cover bringing her pistol up. Held
on a straight line with Nisha’s head. “I don’t play with my pets that way, bitch,” she said, letting her
anger out in measured, calculated, cold, and professional doses.

“They’re pets, not toys. Get it right. Your daughter,” and Nisha flinched ever so slightly, “Likes
being my pet. I’ll never hurt my pet, so get that notion out of your system. You work for ME, not the
other way around.”

“But you want me to show you I’m the real fucking deal? A stone cold killer? Fine. Line up the
people in your gang you don’t need anymore, you nasty little shit. I’ll get rid of ‘em. Right fucking
now.”

She looked at Nisha contemptuously, “Unless you don’t want me bleeding your people any more
than I want you fucking with mine, your daughter or not.”

Nisha looked at Nora. Her stare was mean, calculating. Hard. Nora just looked back impassively.
Then Nisha nodded once sharply, and said, “Tell the cunt to put some fucking clothes on and then
you two come with me.”

Nora gave Piper a look when Nisha turned her back, and Piper gulped once, hard, and threw on her
clothes, wet hair and all.

Nora leaned in and whispered in Piper’s ear, “No matter what happens, I love you. If I say ‘Run’
you pop a Stealth Boy and run like hell. I promise you, I’ll be right behind you.”

Nisha was waiting impatiently at the bottom, and when they arrived on the scaffold she stalked
impatiently off.

“I do believe we’ve pissed her off,” Nora said.

Piper was ashen colored. “What’s going to happen Blue?” she asked.

Nora looked over at Piper, “I’m going to be asked to execute Raiders.” She added in a whisper,
“You need to understand, I wouldn’t normally be cruel. But I might be here, to make a point, OK,
Thing?”

Piper closed her eyes, and then opened them. “Whatever you have to do, Blue,” she whispered back.

I hope I don’t need that blank check.

Nisha slowed down to let them catch up. She sneered at Piper, “Wet pussy make it hard to walk,
Piper? Or fear of me?”

Piper just recoiled a little, and scrunched into Nora’s side. She’d decided that ‘Pet seeking comfort’
was a believable reaction.

If you aren’t dead within a week, it will be because Piper decided we should spare you. Gage pays
for Samantha Teller. But you are Piper’s choice. Not mine.

You are a fucking monster. Worse than Father. He just didn’t give a shit. You’re HAPPY making
people suffer. You get off on it.

Nora just pulled her wife in tighter. From the outside it might look like possessiveness, but it was, in
reality, comfort. Piper looked about, and whispered to Nora, “I trust you, Nora. You’ll get us out of
this.”
Yeah, but at what price?

They walked into the Disciples complex. There were two gang members chained to a wall, looking miserable. They’d been stripped, but were clearly too well fed to be slaves. Nora walked over to join Nisha. “These two? What’d they do?”

Nisha looked over, “Does it matter? They didn’t do what they were told. So you outlined a lot of ways that you could ‘kill’ me, with no problem. A bullet. A knife. Two knives. And poison…”

Nora looked over, “I don’t have a neurotoxin on me…”

Nisha smiled, but not kindly, “That’s Ok…I’ll settle for other examples. I believe you mentioned a bullet…”

Nora drew her pistol, and turned, aiming at the first prisoners’ forehead. She squeezed the trigger one time. Her pistol barely coughed as it kicked in a familiar way. The bullet entered her victim’s forehead, leaving a neat hole just about four tenths of an inch in diameter.

When it entered him, it shattered his cranial plates and shock waves spread in his brain, as the bullet flattened, and then began tearing its way through his flesh. By the time it had transited what was left of his brain and reached the back of his head, a divot almost 4 inches in diameter exploded out the back and made a garish splash on the concrete wall behind him.

As his corpse slumped in its chains, and his leg tapped out his death spasms, Nora thumbed the safety catch on her pistol in a well-practiced movement and holstered it. She turned to Nisha, and said, “You were saying?”

Nora didn’t dare look at Piper, but she knew Piper had seen worse in some firefights. Nora looked over at Nisha, coolly. Nisha just shook her head, “Anyone can use a gun. Knives are where it’s at. You said something about slitting a carotid artery?”

Nora simply drew her wide bladed survival knife and walked to the other prisoner. His eyes were wide. Panicked.

There is no way to keep the wound from splashing all over me from this position. So make it work for you, Nora. Bathe in it and maybe this psycho mother-in-law will call it a day.

She walked up and he began thrashing, desperate to survive. It wasn’t going to work, but instinct wouldn’t let him give up. She grabbed the top of his head and tilted it back, stretching his neck out as he gabbled for mercy.

She looked down with a sneer for her audience’s consumption, and then placed her knife at his throat. The carotid artery was actually about an inch deep, and it took a fair amount of force to penetrate to the cartilaginous box of his Laryngeal Prominence. She felt the knife tip slide along the cartilage. In her mind’s eye, she saw Samantha’s partial skull and the note she’d left, and as the blade slid in she pressed it deep enough and felt the artery roll, then separate.

She drew the knife up diagonally towards the man’s left earlobe and then watched as a splash spurted out and struck her in the middle of her chest. Over the next 30 seconds each rapidly shallowing beat of his heart splashed more blood over her. Soon her midsection was soaked, and splashes at high as her neck were spattered with bright red arterial blood.

He slumped, rapidly dying. She looked over her shoulder at Nisha. She caught a glimpse of Piper, who’d gone ashen again.
I'm sorry you have to watch this, but the only way out of this is through. These people have to die for that to happen.

“We done here?” Nora asked.

“Almost,” said Nisha. She gestured. Two Disciples brought out a woman, a slave judging by her collar. Her eyes were resigned. Dead. She looked at Nora with barely any emotion.

Nora didn’t dare look at Piper. Nisha said, “You showed me a knife. And something involving my eyes and brain?”

There was a cruelty in Nisha’s voice that said she thought she had Nora.

“I’m sorry. I truly am. But sometimes, it’s me or you, and I have to pick me…

And more importantly, my wife and children. I will protect her and get back to them and that means…

Nora reached behind her with no visible hesitation, and drew her stiletto. It had waited patiently since she’d bought it, a weapon of last resort. She had reached that point.

She held it down at her side and calmly walked up to the slave, whose eyes followed her movements with a dull curiosity. All hope had long ago abandoned the woman. Nora let the knife slide into her thumb, forefinger and ring finger as the guiding instruments. Her hand came up, underhanded.

The stiletto was aimed at her victim, with only a square inch or less visible to her. She came from her victim’s right, held between two Raiders. The woman’s eyes followed Nora. Nora took a step in and, as she grasped the slave’s shoulder, she stabbed into the woman’s eye, her wrist rotating and she felt the knife penetrate the cavity for the woman’s ocular nerve and then penetrate the thin spongy bones in the sinuses.

Nora’s knife was moving from her victim’s right to left and destroyed the primary motor cortex, and the woman slumped in her captor’s arms. They let her fall to the ground and as she did, Nora’s knife came free.

The slave lay in a heap on the ground.

It’s not the first time I’ve had no choice about killing someone who didn’t deserve it.

No, it isn’t. But it shouldn’t ever get easier. I don’t WANT it to get easier. Time to see if this is enough for the in-law.

Nora looked over at Nisha. “Next,” she said. “Name the method.”

Nora didn’t look at Piper. She didn’t want to look at Piper.

Nisha looked down at the woman on the ground, still in the process of dying. She looked over at Nora. There wasn’t respect, thank god. But there may have been the beginnings of fear.

“I guess…”

“I think we’re done here,” said Nora. She looked up. Piper was staring at her. She gestured. Piper shook herself and followed as the two of them left.

When they were outside, and well clear of the Disciples, Piper said, “Blue?”
“Wait. We need to get back to the Grille,” Nora said.

They rode the scaffold. The two of them walked across the restaurant, and through the door. They walked to the shower. Nora turned to her wife and began tearing off her clothing. She let every blood soaked item, except for her boots, fall in a pile. She looked at Piper.

“Burn them.”

“Blue?”

“BURN THEM!” Nora screamed.

Then she fled into the shower and began scrubbing all over. Angrily. Harshly.

About twenty minutes later she came out and got her spare outfit from the messenger bag. She looked at Piper.

Piper looked back.

“You’re not a monster, Nora.”

“Then why do I feel like one?”

Piper gave her a sad look, “Because I put us in this position. I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Piper.”

“It is. At its root it is. And I have to live with it. Nora. Nora! Look at me! We have to make her death mean something. We have to live, and escape, and end this…”

She gave Nora a desperate look.

“We have to end this.”

Chapter End Notes

The title is based on Victor Frankenstein reaction upon finally creating the 'monster' that many misname Frankenstein (Dr. Frankenstein and The Monster).

The full quote, even more appropriate if too lengthy is, "I had desired it [the creation of the creature] with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."

I suppose if I’d REALLY been on my game I would named the PRIOR chapter, "The Beauty of the Dream Vanished..." and this one, ...And Breathless Horror and Disgust Filled My Heart."

Anyway, the chapter has everyone in Nuka-World wondering exactly who the monster is here, much like "Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus" leaves us all making our own choices about just what, or who, is the real monster.
The End of Hope

Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: Abusive Parent(s)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nora and Piper were approaching the Galactic Zone. The spire at its center towered over everything. Nora looked up and sighed.

“We just get this one last zone figured out, and maybe we can get loose,” Nora said.

Piper shook her head, “I don’t know anymore. I think my mother has us where she wants us. I’m terrified of her. I hate her,” and she looked over at Nora, “But I don’t think we’re getting out of this one.”

Piper looked up at the spire, “I’m going to snap. Or you’re going to snap. Or that bitch is just going to get tired of playing with us, and even assuming she believes our cover, murder us anyway.”

Nora looked over at Piper. Her eyes were dead. Like the slave’s. Then Piper looked at the entrance to the Galactic Zone, and her eyes refocused. There were brightly colored bots, destroyed, mingled among what looked like traders or wastelanders.

Nora and Piper searched the bodies, and one, a younger woman, had a holotape on her. Nora slotted it into her Pip-Boy and saw that it was a journal, belonging to Tiana Alston.

The first entry available was for 4/8/2286. It read: [Dad said we're heading out to the Galactic Zone again tomorrow.]

I'm still not sure how I feel about these salvage runs. It's amazing to see how much of the old tech still works-- I wish I could stay and study it all. But Dad's crew is just there to rip it apart and haul it back for scrap; As if the world didn't have enough rusted metal and broken circuit boards already.

At least I only have to take half shifts. I'm looking forward to getting back to my work on Star Control. I just hope the old mainframe is still running.]

The next one, only 4 days later, was dire: [It's all my fault.

I told him. I told him there weren't enough cores left to turn it on. If he had waited an hour, we could have pulled them from around the Zone, gotten Star Control back up and running. I already had people looking. I could have made it work. But he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't listen. And now-- God, I hope he's all right.

I can hear the screams. We're going to wait for nightfall, then make a run for the gate.]

“They didn’t make it,” Nora said.

Her legs collapsed and she sat next to Tiana’s corpse. “I don’t think we will either.”
She looked up at Piper, “I think this is where we die, Piper.”

Piper nodded, and collapsed next to her wife. She leaned in, “I think you’re right. We finally pushed our luck too far.”

Nora closed her eyes, “All I can do is make them hurt, as bad as possible.”

“Badly,” Piper said.

Nora gave a sad chuckle, “Even now, Piper?”

Piper began crying, “I don’t…I want to make it back…I don’t want to die. I don’t.”

*I have to lie to her one last time before the end. I have to lie to her. I have to lie FOR her. If there is a god, don’t hold this one against me.*

Nora said, “There is a chance. Maybe, if we get this zone ready, and we give it to your monster of a mother, we can make the other two gangs jealous.”

She looked at Piper, “Then we run for it, live off the land here.”

“So? Die slowly instead of fast?” Piper asked.

Nora answered, “We start hunting Raiders. But only Pack or Operators. With our disappearance, it will look like Nisha…that bitch Gloria, is making her play to take over. They turn on each other. Then the Pack and Operators get to thinking, ‘With all these casualties, time to finish the other guys off for good.’ Then we go in, get the train power controls from Gage, or more likely, his body, and we go home.”

Piper looked at Nora, “You think that could work?”

Nora nodded, “Absolutely.”

*It’s never going to work. There’s too many places where we could get caught. Too many places where everyone has to act exactly the way I want them to. Too many places where sheer dumb bad luck could end the cycle of violence. Everything has to work perfectly for this to work out. And that never happens.*

Nora looked over at her wife and hugged her. Then she lied, again. “Absolutely, Piper. We have a chance.”

Piper sniffled and looked dubious, but she had perked up a little. The two of them made their way through the entryway, made to resemble some futuristic starport’s entry. Inside it didn’t look awful. To their left was the Starlight Theater, to their right a set of concession stands and stairs and ramps leading to the Spacewalk and Rob-Co Battlezone. And straight ahead was Starport Nuka, at the base of the spire.

Also straight ahead was a floating eyebot, that some asshole had equipped with a small laser, with which it shot Nora. She yelled at the heat that her armor layer dissipated across her torso. Much stronger and it would have penetrated, and the bot might have done so on its next shot had Piper not shot it. It fell, buzzing to the ground.

Another bot…a Mr. Handy variant…shot flaming hot carbonated beverages at them. Nora saw the plant that had caught most of the blast shriveling, and in turn Nora shot the floating Mr. Handy down. Piper was destroying a Nuka-World Protectron at the same time.
She looked over at Piper, “Shoot bots on sight, Piper.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that out on my own, Blue.”

Piper was definitely sounding better.

*Crisis over.*

*It’s a pity we’re still going to die here. The best we can hope for is to be killed. God help us if they capture us.*

Nora waved and the pair made their way towards Starport Nuka, at the center of the Galactic Zone. There was a concession stand above them, and Star Control in front of them. Before Nora went into Star Control and started figuring out what was up, she wanted to be sure they both didn’t eat flaming hot soda. She and Piper went up a stair and ‘killed’ three eyebots and one of the flaming soda Mr. Handy’s.

Then the pair of them listened. There were no further robot sounds in the vicinity so they went back down and opened the gate to Star Control. It was a large group of computer banks, with a diorama in the middle showing an advanced set of Power Armor painted Royal Blue. At the center of the computer bank was a terminal.

Nora logged in easily, as the setup was not encrypted. In large part because the system was basically not taking calls…

`[****** MAINLINK(R) SYSTEM BIOS - V10.2.1.1 ******]
COPYRIGHT 2076 ROBCO(R)
LOAD V2.05
EXEC VERSION 57.09
LOAD ROM(1): STAR_CONTROL

*********** STAR_CONTROL - V1.1.7 ***********
INIT RobCo Data Exchange Protocol V3.11... [OK]
LINK Establishing Mainframe Interlink... [OK]
MOUNT Mounting STAR Cores... [0/35] [FAIL]

No Star Cores detected. A minimum of one (1) control core is required to initialize Emergency Operations Mode. Boot sequence aborted.]

Piper was looking over her shoulder. “What the hell is a ‘Star Core’?”

Nora shrugged and began looking around. She pointed when she saw the corpse of a Trader. He was holding a circuit board that had a glowing orange status light. She looked over at Piper, and raised an eyebrow.

Piper looked at the console and back at the object in Nora’s hand, and said, “These slots look to be about the right size. And it looks like there’s 35 of them, so why not try?”

Nora shrugged and slotted the circuit board into the opening. It fit like a glove. She turned back and opened up the terminal…

`[****** MAINLINK(R) SYSTEM BIOS - V10.2.1.1 ******]
COPYRIGHT 2076 ROBCO(R)
LOAD V2.05
EXEC VERSION 57.09`
Nora selected Emergency Operations Mode and the display shifted...

[***** EMERGENCY OPERATIONS MODE *****]
Insufficient Star Cores to assert control over linked robotic systems. Emergency Protocols will become available as additional Star Cores are installed.

STAR CORES:
1/20 Star Cores required for basic operation.
1/35 Star Cores required for full functionality.

AVAILABLE COMMANDS:

[ ] View System Logs
[ ] View Star Core Network
[ ] Emergency Protocol

Nora started with the logs. The first couple entries were pre-war technician logs, and mainly concerned the large number of malfunctions created by using Star Cores, and the inexplicable lack of funding. Then someone named Kendall began using it. First about 4 years ago, when the group of traders broke in, and began salvaging the area. Then on the 4/11/2286...

[Kendell's Log - 4/11/2286]
Colter's gangs took Nuka-Town. We got survivors incoming. I had the boys throw up some defenses, but they ain't gonna last long.

I told Tiana to turn on that Defensive Mode she told me about. She panicked-- said we'd taken too many Cores from this thing; it couldn't handle the reboot. Sent everyone she could find to go strip Cores from the other rides.

The girl means well, but with the gangs breathing down our necks, I gotta do something. What's the worst that could happen?

“The bot’s could go nuts and kill all of you,” said Piper under her breath, “But that won’t be us. Right, Blue?”

Nora looked over at Piper, and said, “I guarantee the bots won’t get us, Piper.”

Because the Raiders are going to kill us.

Nora checked the 'Star Core Network’. First there was an introduction about ‘Systemized Telemetry for Automated Robot Control (Star Control)’. Basically it was a method of overriding normal
programming from a central mainframe at will. It sounded like the kind of thing Rob-Co would come up with. Everything she’d read about Robert House before the war indicated he was exactly the kind of control freak that would want to be able to override bot programming remotely.

She needed a certain amount to shut down the bots defensive systems programming and return them to their former function of selling t-shirts and slinging sodas. Then she got a readout of the scale of the task in front of her.

[Accessing Star Core Interlink... done.]

[1] Star Core(s) are currently installed.

A total of [34] other Star Cores were detected within range. Isolating locations...

[1]: In the Star Control Chamber  
[6]: In the Galactic Zone Grounds  
[7]: In Nuka-Galaxy  
[4]: In Starlight Interstellar Theater  
[6]: In Vault-Tec: Among the Stars  
[6]: In RobCo Battlezone  
[5]: Outside the Galactic Zone]

Nora slumped down in the chair.

Great. I'm going to die here, and I have to spend my last days on a fucking scavenger hunt. Poking around in trash looking for glowing circuit boards.

I should just end it now, on my terms. Make sure there’s no way those sick fucks catch us and we spend our last hours being gang raped.

I could shoot Piper before she even knew what was happening. Then put the barrel right inside my mouth. Make damn sure I die…

Nora’s radio crackled.

“General? General, come in if you’re here. This is Colonel Garvey. We’ve made it through the tunnel.”

“General, come in. This is Preston Garvey, standing by…”

Chapter End Notes

Every human being has a 'worst day of my life'.

And I hope you're as happy as Nora was when the radio came to life....

There's more here, but I'll just that moment in time lie. Any questions I'll answer in comments.
Piper was looking at Nora with eyes as wide as saucers. She had no idea how close it had been.

_I’ll never lie, but no one says I have to volunteer info. ‘Remember that time in Nuka-World? Yeah, I’d reached the end of my rope and I was getting ready to kill you and then myself. Funny old thing that.’ Won’t lie if she asks though. Never again._

Nora reached for her radio, “Preston, this is Nora. Piper and I are in the Galactic Zone. It’s that park furthest south and west. Meet me at the entrance. Stay hidden, and do not go anywhere near the middle park, Nuka-Town. There’s hundreds of Raiders there. Hundreds.”

“Roger,” he replied, “Will be there shortly.”

Nora turned to Piper, “Now we’re definitely going to live.”

Piper looked over at Nora and her eyes filled with tears.

“What’s the matter honey?” asked Nora.

Piper let out a huge breath, “We’re going to make it back to Shaun and Nat.”

She looked at Nora, “And we’re not alone anymore. We’re not alone.”

Nora nodded. Piper kissed her, and said, “Blue, I have a confession.”

Nora looked at her, one eyebrow up.

Piper went on, “I wasn’t going to risk getting captured. After what my mother said, the thought that she might turn me over to a Raider…”

She looked at Nora with tears in her eyes, “I couldn’t face that. I was going to kill myself. Like Sam. Or that woman in the Gauntlet.”

_Funny old thing that._

Nora shook her head. “You weren’t going to kill yourself, Piper.”

Piper started to say something, and Nora went on, as tears began flowing down her own cheeks, “Because I was close to killing you and then myself. Just now…”

Piper looked at her in shock, then both women knelt next to one another, and held each other, and cried.

That was how Preston found them.

He’d brought a small squad of Minutemen with him and the 10 of them gathered around them inside the park. Preston cleared his throat. “I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said.

Nora laughed through the remnants of her tears, and wiped her face as Piper did the same. She stood, and hugged Preston, and said, “I have never been happier to hear a voice on a radio as I was just now.”
Preston smiled, and Nora went on, “How in hell are you here anyway?”

He looked back to the circling hills, “We walked. Down the tunnel. It took about ten hours of walking to get here. It was pretty tight so it was ten hours hoping no one was going to send a train.”

Nora nodded, “But how’d you know where to go?”

“You artillery mission, General. We went to the target and found the transit center. Then we checked the terminal and it said the train was shut down by remote override,” he smiled self-deprecatingly, “So we assumed it had something to do with you. We camped for a couple days but when nothing happened, we went after you. 10 hours later, here we are.”

“You took a hell of a chance,” Nora said.

Preston nodded, “I know. Based on the boarding area that tunnel is barely big enough for the train, and the rail is above the train, so getting under it isn’t even an option in a pinch.”

Nora said, “I’m glad you did. So now what?”

“I go back and we bring the Minutemen through the tunnel,” he said.

Nora nodded, then said, “Wait. The only thing stopping Gage from powering up and sending that train through is that he’s worried I’ll leave. We have to stay here or he’ll assume, correctly, how I’m trying to get away.”

She thought, and then said, “Try this. Can we set a radio repeater, maybe right here in the Galactic Zone? Then we consult with the Minutemen back in the CPG. No one risks their ass in that tunnel again. You guys lay low with a good view of the monorail station. We finish here. So Gage doesn’t have any reason send the train. And therefore splatter you.”

“Then when we’re done here, we go with my original plan. Sow dissension. If I’m right about what the situation is around here, they’ll have to raid into the Commonwealth. We make sure the first trainload runs smack into Cait’s Own. Then we load up trainloads of Minutemen.”

Nora looked over at Piper, then Preston, and finished, “And we clean this place out.”

Nora added, “Simple. Nothing relies on people acting just so.”

Piper said, “It requires them sending us with the first raiding party.”

Nora shook her head, “Not really. That would be best, but Danse and Cait’s Own can wipe out a group of Raiders as easily without us as with. And with radio, we can still coordinate the attack. Whether we’re at this end or that one.”

Preston nodded, and several Minutemen tried to go up the spire. They came back a few minutes later. “No good,” one of them reported, “The power’s out. But we found this,” and they held up another Star Core.

Nora took the core, put it in the mainframe, and then pointed at the Arc Jet G-Force Ride. “That’s nearly as high as Starport Nuka. Put the antenna and repeater there.”

The Minutemen went out, and Nora called after them, “All the bots are homicidal. Shoot in sight.”

After an hour they came back and reported that they’d emplaced the repeater, and killed several bots. And brought back two more Star Cores. Nora thanked them then turned to Preston. “It looks like if
we hit the Battle Zone, the Theater, Vault-Tec and the general area of the Galactic Zone, we’ll have enough to deactivate the bots. I’m going to take Vault-Tec. You take that whole squad and check out the Battle-Zone. I suspect it’ll be really dangerous and full of bots…”

“…this place is loaded with bots, Nate.”

“I know,” he said, looking around enthusiastically.

A voice came over the PA, “Welcome to the RobCo Battlezone. Please find a seat. Our next show begins in just five minutes.”

Nate and Nora sat down with a ringside seat. When the ’show’ started, it was impressive, from a certain point of view. Eyebots were destroyed. Protectrons were destroyed. A pair of feminine looking robots called Nukatrons first destroyed a group of eyebots, then were in turn destroyed by a hulking Sentry-Bot.

Sometime in the middle of the mechanical carnage, Nora leaned over and said, “The bot your co-workers got you isn’t from RobCo right?”

He never took his eyes from the arena, but he answered, “No. General Atomics make Mr. Handy’s.”

“Good,” she said, then involuntarily ducked as one of the bots blew up.

“Join us on a journey into the future, where humanity has set out on a new voyage of discovery, seeking adventure among the stars.”

They moved into a diorama of astronauts on the surface of a desert world. “Arcturus Prime, a frontier
Nora could just make out a door behind a faux rock outcropping. She felt bizarrely guilty walking over the diorama, but she was rewarded when the room proved to contain one of the Star Cores. It unfortunately contained a hostile Protectron as well, but they dropped it easily.

Piper took Nora’s hand, “Maybe this isn’t impossible.”

Nora smiled. “Yep, but now...” and she was interrupted, “But life is possible...underground. Welcome to Vault-Tec’s Colony Arcurus. Welcome Home.”

The room looked for all the world like any Vault-Tec facility, but with astronaut animatronics in space suits. As they moved through the entryway, the announcer continued, “With Vault-Tec’s modular construction techniques, new colonies can be established on almost any world in a matter of weeks.”

The only actual way out was to the right. There were doors along the left wall, but they all ‘opened’ onto blank concrete walls. So they went down the stairs, where lights came on in an atrium full of plant life, and the announcer said, “And these are no dark bunkers. Your colony will feature beautiful expansive common areas, where you can relax in an earth like setting.”

The atrium was not that wonderful, just marginally not awful. The hostile bot really detracted from the ambiance though. Piper actually beat Nora to the draw that time, in part because Nora was looking in every corner for the red glow, but in truth mainly because there was small voice in her head that was replaying the highs and lows of the last day.

As the Protectron buzzed its last, Nora shook herself and looked over a Piper, "Good one, Thing."

They wound back to the right again, and the announcer come back, "Step into your spacious private suite, equipped with all the comforts of home."

Apparently home included an angry Mr. Handy, but Nora saw the movement early and emptied a magazine into it, out of sheer nerves.

*I have got to get it together. Although I can buy bullets if I waste 'em, so better safe than sorry.*

There was a door in the wall to their left, which led to a backstage room, with a Star Core. And a terminal. This one required hacking. Quite a lot, actually. When Nora had finally cracked it, Piper was looking at her adoringly, and said, "That's my vulgar, filthy mouthed wife. I love you, Blue!"

Nora chuckled, but said, "Yeah, well, I don't exactly love Vault-Tec. Look here," and she pointed at the screen.

"They were experimenting on park visitors and dosing them with radiation. I guess I'm lucky the place was closed," Nora shook her head, "They just can't NOT be total fuckers."

She shook her head and they left the small area and headed back to the living area. Then they went down a hall then back to the left and they were outside a hydroponic facility. And again, "Enjoy a rich varied diet, locally sourced from your colony’s own hydroponic gardens. Just smell the freshness."

At the end of the room, there was a hole, but also a door to the left, out of which emerged another angry Handy. Both women fired and within a couple shots each it fell to the floor. As they entered the lab, the announcer again came on and said, "And with Vault-Tec’s cutting edge science and
technology, you can rest assured that your colony will have the resources to face any challenge."

There was a hole in the wall ahead, that lead to another room, a mock-up of a reactor. One that was so realistic that it irradiated Nora and Piper when the former spotted a Star Core in the room and went to collect it. Once she was out, they returned to the tour path, and went on to a walk meant to imply looking over a host of worlds, as the announcer said, "A thrilling new adventure awaits. Imagine hundreds of colonies spread throughout the galaxy and beyond."

As they walked out there was another walkway of streaking lights, meant to evoke interstellar travel, the announcer said, "Imagine a future among the stars. Imagine Vault-Tec."

Then as they walked out to the exit, it said, "For more information or to sign up for the Vault Program, please see a sales associate. Thank you and enjoy your day here at Nuka-World."

Nora and Piper made a beeline for the door labeled, "Employees Only". Once Nora had picked the lock, they found themselves in an office complex, with a window on a control room. Inside the control room they could easily make out three more Star Cores in that room alone.

"That's all six," said Piper.

Nora nodded, and got out her picks. The lock was hard, but not terribly hard for Nora. She'd always been a better lock-picker than hacker. Soon they were in the room, and collecting the Star Cores. Thanks to Vault-Tec's evil ways, one of the men in here, driven to paranoia, had shot the other then himself on the day the bombs had dropped, or at least inferring the events from the computer journals suggested that.

As they left the ride, Piper turned to Nora, "Ok, Blue, I get it. I am giving you an official spousal 'get out of jail free' card. If we ever find someone from Vault-Tec for you to hold responsible? Do whatever you want."

"Anything?" Nora asked.

"No more than twelve hours of torture. That's about my only limit on that one, Nora."

Chapter End Notes

So...a lot of couples have 'passes'...a celebrity or three that they indulgently allow their significant other to fantasize about, 'if you can get there...'

This is Piper's version.

Also, on a lore level it's kind of impressive how thoroughly Vault-Tec was dedicated to being asshats. They couldn't leave an AMUSEMENT PARK ride alone.
Nora and Piper left the Among the Stars exhibit, and went past several souvenir concessions. Staffed with bots that they had to dispatch.

After eliminating yet another Mr. Handy, Nora said to Piper, "I really want to get the defensive protocol shut down. I feel like we're wasting potential resources here shooting up bots."

Piper looked a little surprised and said, "I hadn't thought of it that way, Blue, but you're right. When we reprogram these guys they start working for us, don't they?"

The two of them met up with Preston's group. Although all ten of them were there, three were looking a little worse for wear, and Nora handed Preston a batch of stimpacks. Preston looked over at Nora.

"Not your fault General, but I didn't expect your report of 'battlebots' to mean 'every thing that beeps is going to try to kill you,' including the concession bot," he said.

"If there were friendly bots here, I'd have said so," Nora said, "However, we need to only go to the places where we have to to get Star Cores. I'd like to save as many assets as possible."

Preston said, "That makes sense. We've got 7 cores. We found another one just outside the Battlezone as we left."

"And I've got 6," Nora said. She gathered all of them and slotted them. She checked the readout. They'd found 17.

Nora smiled. "All we have to do is go into the theater and we're all set. That'll give us 21. We can shut down the defensive protocols and spare the rest of the bots."

Preston nodded. They left the three 'walking wounded' Minutemen at the control center, and 2 more to watch over them. So Nora, Piper, Preston, and 4 more Minutemen headed for the theater. There was one Protectron and one Mr Handy that had to be gunned down on the way to the theater, but they got in with no injuries.

Inside the group fanned out. The theater had two hallways running down either side, and the two groups converged into the theater. When they arrived they found, of all things, a Sentry Bot acting as a bartender. As a Minuteman shot at the two Mr. Handy's that were in the theater as well, everyone else concentrated fire on the Sentry Bot. It went down rapidly. And the usual destruct sequence blew apart whatever barware had managed to survive 210 years.

Damn. That thing would be useful to have kept. Oh well.

The two teams then dropped the Handy’s. The theater was one of those dinner and drinks affairs, with a twist. You sat in little rocketships, as if it were a drive-in of the future. Nora called over to Preston, “I'll check this side and the theater. You check that side.”

Nora had already seen the Star Core in the bar and went to collect it. Then she went back to her hallway, and went down to the end and found the kitchen. Plus a Mr. Handy. And two turrets. It was an interesting few moments and at the end both Piper and Nora had grazes from the laser turrets.
They had both, correctly, assumed the Mr. Handy with flaming soda was more dangerous. And both got shot for their troubles.

“Hers and Hers stimpacks, Blue?”

“Oh shut up Thing. Or I’m going to do some un-Generish things to you!”

Piper giggled, “Promise?”

“Who’s feeling randy now?” Nora asked.

“The woman who knows she finally has backup, that’s who.”

“Ok. I can see that,” Nora said, then saw that the Minuteman that had come with them was deeply engrossed in the contents of the pantry.

“Hey, soldier,” she called.

He looked over. She pointed over at the Star Core he’d missed. “That’s what you’re looking for. I suggest you examine it for…ohh…30 seconds or so. Very intently.”

When he bent over, Nora grabbed her wife and kissed her passionately, then put her forehead to Piper’s. “I love you and I never ever want to be in that position again. Let’s never get trapped by your psychopathic mother ever again.”


“Ok, soldier, let’s go,” called Nora.

He looked up, blushing and the three went up the elevator at the end of the hall. It let out in scaffolding above the theater and the three followed it around to the projection room. Inside the room was yet another Star Core.

Nora looked round, “Well, that’s enough even if Preston doesn’t find one.”

She poked through the computer and started laughing. She pointed at the screen. “I wonder if it’s around here somewhere.”

“If what’s around here, Blue?”

Nora smiled, “‘The Chartreuse Slime 2: Slime to Die’. I loved that movie.”

Piper gave her wife a profoundly disappointed look. “Really? ‘Slime to Die’? Do I even know you?”

Nora stuck her tongue out, “You don’t like it?”

Piper shook her head, “I haven’t seen it. I don’t need to. It’s the ‘Chartreuse Slime’. Two. Certain things don’t need confirmation.”

Nora looked over the list, “Oooh! And they had ‘Yikes! There’s Blood Everywhere’. That was a classic.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

Nora shook her head and then found the Holotape storage with a glad cry.
Piper shook her head. “You may be a holotape hero, but you have shitty taste in actual holotapes, Blue.”

“You just don’t appreciate a good horror movie.”

“This has to be a reaction to our close call. You’re manic,” Piper accused.

“Maybe,” Nora allowed, “But that doesn’t change the fact that I love a good cheesy horror flick. Hey!,” and Piper winced at whatever atrocity to good taste was likely to follow, “They’ve got ‘Nuka-Valley Massacre’. That was a classic take-down of consumer-culture. Very subversive.”


Piper’s shoulders slumped. “Ok, Blue, just loot ‘em all why don’t you?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Nora said, and filled her pockets.

Piper sighed. If she had to watch some woman shove her head into a vertibird rotor while menaced by zombies on a movie night with her beloved to celebrate that the two of them hadn’t had to do something very similar for real, it was probably a price worth paying. Probably. Maybe.

They went down the elevator that went down at the projection room and met Preston. He was triumphantly waving a Star Core. Nora smiled. “One to spare.”

They all left the theater and made a beeline for Star Control. The group triumphantly slotted the last few Star Cores. Then Nora checked the system.

[****** MAINLINK(R) SYSTEM BIOS - V10.2.1.1 ******
COPYRIGHT 2076 ROBCO(R)
LOADER V2.05
EXEC VERSION 57.09
LOAD ROM(1): STAR_CONTROL

************* STAR_CONTROL - V1.1.7 *************
INIT RobCo Data Exchange Protocol V3.11... [OK]
LINK Establishing Mainframe Interlink... [OK]
MOUNT Mounting STAR Cores... [21/35] [OK]
CONNECT Connecting to linked robotics... [OK]

Completing boot sequence. Please wait...

AVAILABLE COMMANDS:

[ ] View System Logs
[ ] View Star Core Network
[ ] Emergency Protocol
[ ] Protocol: Defensive Mode

Nora selected ‘Protocol: Defensive Mode’

The system offered her:

[Protocol: Defensive Mode
Status: ACTIVE]
Description: Engages live-fire defensive mode for all linked robots and turrets. Activating this protocol will require a system reset.

NOTE: A critical fault has been detected. Please disable this Protocol and contact a RobCo Enterprise Systems Engineer for assistance.

When she toggled Defensive Mode Status to INACTIVE, the screen wiped then slowly line by line displayed

[Deactivating Defensive Mode... done.]

Then

[Initiating System Reset... done.

WARNING:
A critical fault has been detected in the [Defensive Mode] protocol. [Defensive Mode] will be disabled until the fault has been repaired.

“That means?” Piper asked.

“Means we can’t make them hostile to Raiders until someone like Sturges or PAM comes in and really does a reset,” Nora said, “But we can still use them to clean this fucking place up, when we take it from the Raiders.”

Preston said, “We’re taking it? Not just wiping out Raiders?”

Nora started to roll her eyes, then stopped herself.

*He doesn’t know about…*

“Slaves, Preston. Most of the traders who lived here became slaves. They’ve been raiding and taking slaves from all over Western Massachusetts for a long time now. And I bet if we incorporate Nuka-World into the CPG, we can add most of Western Mass. What’s left of it.”

She looked over at him, “But even if that Doc and the rest of them tell us to pound sand about joining? We have to come in here and liberate them.”

“Give everyone here a ‘New Birth of Freedom’?”

“Yes, Preston. Especially since we’re going to be freeing the slaves.”

Chapter End Notes

Every marriage has its ups and downs. And there are the things about your spouse that you don't necessarily LOVE, but more than merely tolerate. Though sometimes you pretend to merely tolerate. Because to do otherwise would further encourage them.

Because the names on the terminal amused me, outrageously.

Note that the movie that is being described as Nuka-Valley Massacre is ACTUALLY George Romero's "Dawn of the Dead", wherein both the living and the dead can't come
up with anything better to do than go to the mall, and references the original scripted ending of the film where the final two survivors would commit suicide, in one case (the female reporter) by sticking her head in the tail rotor of a helicopter.
Nora said to Piper, “You know we have to go back, right?”

Piper took a deep breath and nodded, “I know. Just like I know Preston’s guys are going to be just outside Nuka-World. And I know that Cait’s Own are five minutes jog from Vertibirds that are about 20 minutes flight from here. And we have radios.”

Nora looked at Piper, “You gave that some thought.”

“Nora, my mother told you to rape me for her amusement. I am deeply, viscerally aware of our every escape route,” Piper said.

“Wait a minute…,” Preston started.

Piper looked over at Preston, “My mother is leader of one of the Raider groups.”

Nora added, “And she’s a monster. She makes Father look like Albert Schweitzer.”

Then Nora shook her head, “This is going to go a LOT faster if we bring you up to speed on what’s going on here Colonel.”

Nora outlined the major events of the last seven days. Leaving nothing out. The Minutemen were listening, rapt, as she talked of the Gauntlet, and her ascension as ‘Overboss’. And the revelations about Piper’s family. And then as she spoke of Nisha’s ‘test’.

Nora looked at Preston, “I’ll put myself at the mercy of the CPG government, when we get back.”

Preston shook his head, “I don’t think that’ll be needed…”

Nora shook her head, “You don’t understand Preston. I’m not speaking officially, but I’m not giving you or anyone else a choice. I’m fucking standing trial.”

“Fine,” he said, “Good luck finding a Prosecutor.”

“I’ll bet I can find a CIT professor that wants to try me.”

“Since I plan to defend you, I welcome the opportunity to match wits with a theoretical physicist in a court.”

“Since I’m not seeking martyrdom, I’m fine with that,” said Nora.

Preston looked surprised. Nora went on, “I can think of several levels on which what I did could be justified. Even to that poor woman. But I have to subject myself to laws. Or the CPG is a just another Raider group.”

“That’s a little harsh,” Piper said.

Nora shook her head, “No. Either the CPG is a modern nation of laws, or it’s a Dark Age nation of powerful people. It MUST be the former.”
Preston and Piper nodded. Piper said, “Ok, Blue. I thought the guilt had gotten to you, but you actually thought it through.”

Nora nodded. “Speaking of thinking it through,” she turned to Preston, “I need you to coordinate the defense and any rescue force. I’ll have to switch off the radio now, since it might give me away. I’ll check in at Midnight and Noon and whenever possible, but don’t assume the worst just because of two or three missed contacts. If I’m being coerced for any reason, I’ll say I’m ‘dandy’.”

Preston nodded. Nora added, “And tell Nat and Shaun that their sister and moms are Ok,” then she looked at Piper, “And tell Madison Li, I need to talk to her the instant I get back.”

Preston saluted. Nora nodded and they separated. Preston headed south to take up a good spot to keep an eye on Nuka-Town and the station. Nora and Piper to head back into the belly of the beast.

As they walked back, Piper asked, “Do I want to know how close it was?”

*I was waiting for you to turn your head…*

“Do you really want know?”

Piper turned, and surprised Nora, “Yes. I do.”

Nora sighed, “I was waiting on you to turn your head so you wouldn’t see it coming, love.”

Nora began crying again, “I didn’t want you to hurt or have fear. Just…nothingness. Piper, I am so…”

“Don’t you dare say sorry,” said Piper, “I know what you were willing to do. I’d have been gone without even knowing what happened. You’d have to know you did that. And then you’d kill yourself.”

Piper looked down then back up, “I’m sorry. I had no idea my mother would be here. But I feel like it’s my fault.”

“It isn’t Piper. It never was. It certainly isn’t something you made happen,” Nora said. “Sometimes the Universe is a bitch.”

“Preston proved that idea wrong,” and Piper kissed away Nora’s tears. “Now let’s go look Mother-Dearest in the eyes and smile while we plan to take everything away from them.”

Nora smiled, and they made their way back to Nuka-Town. When they arrived, Gage was waiting. “Well?” he said.

Nora smirked, and said, “Galactic Zone, Operators. And that’s that. What more do you lazy fucks want? Ready to work for a living yet?”

Gage looked for all the world like someone who’d just been told the Governor had contacted the Warden and called it off. “Well, I’ll be dammed. You actually did it. Nuka-World is ours. All of it.”

Nora raise one eyebrow at him and said, “Why are you acting surprised?”

He shook his head, “Hey, no disrespect boss. You’ve just gotta understand. We ain’t ever been on ground this solid before. Now that we’re here, let’s keep this party going…I’m thinking it’s time we expanded our Commonwealth raiding.”

*Yes!! Now just send me along to do the ‘raiding’. I’ll have a couple days in the Commonwealth*
Nora smiled, and said, “Aiming pretty high aren’t you Gage? Why stop there? Why not take over the moon while we’re at it?”

Gage laughed, “Heh. Naw. The little green men can keep that one. Taking back Nuka-World is a big fucking deal, no question. But it can’t be the end of things, needs to be the beginning. These bunch a savages need a goal, something to focus on. If they ain’t got it they’ll wind up turning on each other.”

He looked thoughtful, “And an operation this big, we’re gonna need more of…well, everything. Nobody’s gonna hand it to us, we need to take it. Commonwealth has a ton of shitty little settlements that could be put to better use, don’t you think?”

Nora snarked, “Aw nuts. I was starting to get cozy in my little castle.”

Gage looked worried, “Now you’re starting to sound like Colter. You remember, the idiot who’s body we recently dumped in the river? He was always content to just barely scrape by. Look where that got him. We don’t gotta rush into this headlong. We take it slow, be smart about it.”

Nora nodded and gestured for him to continue, and he did, “If we’re aiming to grab a piece of the Commonwealth it’s going to take the right contacts and a lot of muscle, right? I say you go have yourself a chat with Shank. He’s the point man for everything entering and leaving Nuka-World. He floated this idea before. Been itching to talk to you since you took over, so I bet he’s got a good idea of where to start. He’s in charge of the caravans, so odds are you can find him somewhere near the Marketplace.”

“Nice,” said Nora. “I’ll chat with him. In the meantime, you get a fucking party ready. These guys need to get ready to cut loose. And I want them to know who to thank for that.”

Gage nodded, “Good point boss. One blow-out, coming right up.”

He left, and when he was gone Piper turned to Nora, “What. The. Fuck. Blue?”

“Why are you inviting them all, including Mother, to a party?!?” Piper went on.

Nora said, “I know it’s going to be hard. On both of us. But whoever goes raiding with us? I want them massively hungover and strung out. In addition to being outnumbered and surrounded the moment they come out of the Transit Station.”

Piper sighed, “Fuck. That makes sense. But I plan to wear a Stealth Boy in case it all turns to shit.”

Nora said, “Three. Wear three. I will too,” she turned and looked over Nuka-Town. “What I wouldn’t give for a bucket of Tetradox 2, A and B. Give these guys a heaping helping of A in the booze, and then put B in the water supply.”

Piper looked over. Nora nodded. “Yeah, that’s the stuff I used on Fowler. Synthetic puffer fish toxin.”

“All I see you use is guns…I forget…,” Piper started.

“If I had to take the chance on it not working, I could kill someone with an empty syringe full of air. Plus a little topical lidocaine so the victim stays asleep,” she looked far away, “That’s how I killed Hua Jiao. After…”
Nora shook herself. “Nevermind. It was another time. I wasn’t the same person.”

Nora turned and made sure no one could overhear and activated her radio, “Garvey come in, unscheduled contact.”

The radio crackled softly, as Nora had turned it way down. “Roger. We read you General. How are you feeling?”

“I feel utterly shitty, thanks. The current plan is to conduct a raid tomorrow. I’m making sure they have a party and get hammered and high tonight. Make sure Cait’s Own are in position. I and Piper are likely to be with them, so I’d appreciate it if that gang would shoot really straight, thanks.”

“Roger.”

“And if it plays out that way, we have two days, so I want every Minuteman not absolutely nailed down on their way to the Transit Center.”

She could hear the operator change, as Garvey came on, “Already on that general.”

“OK. I’ll contact again when I can,” Nora said.

“Roger, out.”

Nora clapped her legs and stood up, “Time to go chat with this dick, Shank. He’ll be outside the market.”

“If he’s where we saw him last,” Piper pointed out.

He was. When Nora walked over, Piper hanging on her arm, he looked up and said, “Well look who it is. Liking what you’ve done with the place, boss. Gangs certainly seem pleased with their new little kingdoms. Pack’s a little sulky, though.”

He went on, “Haven’t seen people this revved up since last time someone spiked the water fountains. Never formally introduced myself. Name’s Shank. And if you’re standing here…well I suppose Gage figured you might be the one to finally get things back on track. How long it take him to convince you it was time to move on the Commonwealth?”

“No time at all, he was holding ME back. Wanted to secure Nuka-World first.”

“Well, he had a point. Before you got these guys room to breathe a raiding party might have just turned into a shitshow. But now, giving the gangs spots to call their own around the park, it bought you some good will.”

Then he looked feral, “But providing them with their own domains, carved from the settlements of the Commonwealth, well…I can’t think of a better way to solidify your place around here…plus make us a pretty penny along the way. If that interests you all you got to do is say the word, and we can let the fun begin.”

Nora looked over at Piper, who giggled inanely, and said, “Consider the word said. I want to take the Pack. They’ve only got the one park here, so it’s only fair they get the first settlement to play with.’

Shank nodded, “Good point, boss. Shall we get started?”

“Make sure Mason and his guys know what they’re being given. Because I want them in good mood
for the party we’re throwing to celebrate taking all of Nuka-World.”

“Gotcha, boss,” Shank said.

“Ok, then, I’m holding you responsible for making sure they’re ready to go tomorrow. Don’t fucking disappoint me,” Nora said.

Shank’s eye flickered to Nora’s waist, and he gulped and nodded.

_Heard the story did we? Good. At least I’m getting something from that poor woman’s death. When I roll in here early tomorrow morning, he’ll shit himself getting the Pack moving._

Then Nora went into the market and went to the doctor. “Gimme two syringes of Addictol.”

“Gotta flush the system, boss?” asked the Doctor.

“None of your fucking business,” Nora said, feeling shitty about herself.

As they walked away Piper asked, “Actually, why are we getting that?”

“Because as a side effect of cleaning you out, Addictol blocks all psychoactive drug effects for 6 hours. So you and I will take the hits just before the party, and we can drink all we want with no effect. I’d prefer to be in full control of my senses when dealing with that bitch, Gloria,” Nora looked over and winked at Piper, “The things you learn in spy school.”

Chapter End Notes

A listicle of deadly toxins can be found here (https://www.thoughtco.com/deadliest-poisons-known-to-man-4058116) but certain substances can be found on most lists, including ricin, nerve agents (esp VX and its derivatives, nasty for their persistence, as seen in news reports near you at this time...August 2018), Betrachotoxin from a tree frog, and Tetradotoxin from puffer fish, famous for killing a certain number of gourmands notable for having more elan than brains in eating puffer fish sashimi.
Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: Abusive Parent(s)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next couple hours Gage and the rest of Nuka-World scampered about setting up a party. Unlike a Commonwealth party, this was light on food, but with way more chems, and very very heavy on the booze. Piper and Nora spent most of their time cleaning their weapons, and making sure they had a good supply of necessities. Just in case some random encounter blew up in their face.

Eventually night was falling. It was strangely pleasant out, which given what was going on, was a little dissonant. Nevertheless both Piper and Nora took their shots of Addictol.

The powerful drug ran through their brain chemistry like a strict schoolmarm, putting up ‘Closed for Business’ and ‘Detour’ signs on their mesolimbic pathway, shutting down the way the brain rewarded itself. Then it ran around putting ‘Nope’ signs on the endocannabinoid and opioid receptors. Finally it went and had a stern talk with the serotonin and dopamine generation and reuptake systems, and gave them a VERY strict set of min/max restrictions.

Fortunately it drew the line at messing with the adrenal cycle. Their ‘fight/flight’ system was not messed with. A good thing for two spies stuck in the middle of the biggest raider camp going. But for the moment, Nora and Piper got no kick from Champagne. Mere alcohol didn’t thrill them at all.

Nor did cigarettes, Jet, Psycho, Buffout, Med-X, Day Tripper, Daddy-O, Marijuana, Cocaine, Heroin, coffee, self-righteous diets, or Hubology. Nothing addictive was getting through. For 6 hours, they could neither get addicted OR get high.

When they were done prepping, they went down the scaffold and joined Gage, grabbing a drink each.

*Might as well get started.*

Nora looked at Gage. “I assume that my underbosses understand they’re expected to put in an appropriately fawning appearance?”

Gage chuckled, “Yeah boss. Nisha still has a stick up her butt for some reason she’s not talking about, but some of the Disciples are saying that you put on a show the other day.” He examined Nora closely.

Nora nodded. “Yeah, she apparently needed knife pointers. Who knew?”

Nora then looked around and had a pair of chairs put up on a small pile of pallets and then she and Piper sat on them, like thrones. She sat back and looked over the entire squalling, drinking, chem-using batch like some kind of Viking leader watching a feast.

Mags Black, unsurprisingly, noticed first, and came over to greet Nora. “If it isn’t the Overboss,” and
she tipped her drink to Nora, “Have to admit, you worked out better than I thought.”

Nora nodded slightly and sipped her own drink, “Yes? Enjoying your zones?”

Mags smiled, but interestingly it was less supercilious than thoughtful. “Yes. Especially the soda plant.”

Nora tilted her head, “Oh?”

“Turns out the purpose of this place is soda after all,” Mags leaned in, “And the bottle caps with which to seal it away. Interesting take, Boss.”

Nora nodded to Mags regally, and turning to Piper, said, “Bring me some more of this whiskey, would you pet?”

Piper nodded, and headed off.

Mags leaned in again and asked, “Is it true your plaything is Nisha’s long lost daughter?”

Nora smiled a slow lazy smile and nodded, “Yes. And apparently this displeases the woman.”

Mags laughed, “I had no idea who we were bringing in, Boss, but you are definitely what the doctor ordered.” And she clinked glasses with Nora. She turned away and wandered a short ways off to chat with Gage.

Piper returned moments later, and turned to Nora worshipfully and gave her the glass, while Nora tilted her head slightly to indicate Mags. “We have a fan,” then raised her eyebrows at her wife.

Piper nodded as well, then resumed happily sipping her own drink. By this time they should have been tipsy, so Nora leaned in to plant an aggressive kiss on Piper, and then whispered as they broke the kiss to up the giggle and silly a notch.

Piper turned out to be frighteningly good at ‘bubblehead’. It was a little concerning. Finally Nora leaned over and just asked, “How did you learn to act like this?”

Piper giggled inanely then leaned back, “There was a girl I knew, a little younger than me, who came from the Upper Stands, and you’d think the altitude had caused brain damage. Daddy’s caps definitely took care of any problems caused by her utter inability to think.”

She sat up straight and smiled idiotically and said through her fixed grin, “I just do what she did. Works.”

Nora winked and turned back to the throng. Eventually Mason visited.

He walked up in his garish outfit, and said, “Boss.”

Nora said, “Good boy. Anything on your mind, Mason?”

Mason said, “I’ll admit, after you got back at first, we were a little pissy, but since you decided we get the first Commonwealth spot, it’s all good again. Gotta say, Boss, you’re better at keeping the peace than Colter was.”

Nora said, “I keep my pets happy. Some people,” and she gave Mason a significant look, “Have issues with that.”

Mason nodded, “I’ve heard something like that, Boss. You’re gonna have trouble with her.”
“More trouble you mean.”

He nodded, “Yeah. More trouble. We all heard about it. The three freaks at the top wouldn’t say shit if their mouths were full of it, but my low level guys talk with their low level guys. When they’re not getting shanked.”

Nora raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t dream of crossing you, Boss,” he said.

Nora looked back at Mason. “Good, I like you Mason. Don’t do anything that you’ll regret tomorrow.”

He smiled.

*Like refuse to surrender. You’ll do time…all the time really. But you’ll live.*

*But honestly, I don’t actually expect that any of you will actually live through this. None of you are anything but complicit in atrocities. And you know it. And you can guess how you’ll get treated. Which I don’t get. We’re going to imprison you or maybe execute you by firing squad, we’re not going to gang rape you to death or eat you alive…two tricks Raiders as a group are known for.*

*Still, what I wouldn’t give for a crimes against humanity trial against one of the principles. Maybe Gage. He has enough of a survival instinct. Yeah. I’ll give some orders.*

She nodded at Mason, “Enjoy the party, Pack Alpha. But remember who’s in charge, right? Hate to start a dominance fight just as we get busy with the Commonwealth. Be a fucking pity if the Pack lost out on its fair share because it was settling an internal struggle at exactly the wrong time.”

At this point, Nora noticed that Piper was missing. As she began to panic, she looked around, searching frantically, but trying to keep it low key. Then she saw Piper.

As Mason and Nora had chatted and Nora had subtly threatened him, Piper’s drink had run out. Like a lot of whiskey drinkers, she’d learned to actually enjoy the taste in ways vodka, gin, and ‘shine drinkers didn’t usually, martini aficionados notwithstanding. So she’d actually been drinking her drinks, enjoying the ability to indulge with no ill effects whatsoever.

She’d gone for another drink and had two, one in each hand, reasoning that Nora's ‘pet’ would always bring her ‘mistress’ back something even when she did something for herself. And as a pretext for getting her own drink. Piper’s independence had always caused her problems. She knew that. This time…

As she turned back from the drinks stand, her mother was right in front of her.

“So, Piper. Don’t have time for me anymore, huh? I’m hurt,” Nisha said.

“What do you want, mother?”

“Is that any way to talk to me? I know you’ve abandoned me for that cunt who fucks you. But surely you have some time to spare to pay attention to your only mother?” Nisha asked, smiling.

“Let’s catch up,” she went on. “What happened after I left your father and your sister?”

“He died. She died,” Piper answered and tried to turn away.

“Look at me!” Nisha barked.

Involuntarily, Piper turned back. Nisha smiled again, and said, “Let me show you something,” and
she pointed Piper at a small structure that at one time had been a public restroom. She guided Piper relentlessly by her elbow. The grip wasn’t hard, just implacable.

Nothing had quite gotten to the point where Piper thought she had to run or fight, but she knew for sure that wherever Nisha was taking her to was calculated to be as cruel as possible. Internally, she was panicking. Nisha led her to the door to the ladies side of the structure.

Inside the room, which had been emptied of its original fixtures, were slaves. Female slaves. And they were being abused. None fatally, at least not yet, but Piper had no faith that would continue.

Piper wanted to scream, but she couldn’t. She and Nora were so close that she had no choice but to see this…atrocit… and simply blink. But her mind was running in circles, screaming.

Nisha put her mouth right up to Piper’s ear in a grotesque invasion, and whispered, “This will be you one day. Soon. When she gets tired of you…or we get tired of her.”

There was a long pause, while Piper stared in horror at the things that were happening.

“But,” Nisha’s whispered words made Piper jump, “If you work with me, against her, I can spare you this. I can.”

Mercifully, they turned away, but Piper could still hear…sounds…from behind her. She realized she heard similar sounds, but lower pitched, from the side with a male label. Her imagination filled in the blanks. Then it shut down in protest.

“All you have to do is choose to be a good daughter. You know that being a good daughter will keep you safe. It’s the only way to stay safe. Someone like you needs a protector,” Nisha said, mouth still obscenely right in her ear, “I can provide one. Not Dixie. Oh no. She doesn’t play well with her toys. They don’t…last.”

Nisha made a tsk, tsk in her ear, “And I’m betting Savoy isn’t your…type. Although really, does that matter? There’s a lot I bet you could put up with in order to survive. He isn’t too interested in that sort of thing anyway. He’d take you on as a favor to me. And there’d only be occasional times you’d have to do…things. For appearances sake.”

Nisha chuckled into Piper’s ear, “But you’d be safe. You’d live.”

“That’s your choice, slut. Be a good daughter and live, or…”

Nora’s voice cut through the fog. Piper realized she must have SEEN Nora approach, but she hadn’t registered what her eyes were telling her.

“What’s going on here?” Nora asked, sharply.

“Why nothing,” Nisha said, “Just a little mother daughter catch-up time.”

“Uh-huh,” Nora said, “Well, I was missing my drink,” and she took it, and Piper’s elbow, and then took her wife away from her mother-in-law, to her wife’s immeasurable relief.

Then Nora looked in the rooms. Piper, and only Piper, knew Nora well enough to hear the sudden tension there. “Very nice,” she said. “Your contribution to the party, I assume?”

Nisha nodded, “Of course. After food and chems and booze comes the fucking. I saw there’d been an oversight. I corrected it.”
Nora nodded, “Well, as I’ve told you. I’m mindful of,” and she emphasized the word, “My possessions. So, while I applaud your initiative, I’m concerned about…wastage. I’m going to have Gage take a thorough inventory of my assets that are being used, and then I’m going to hold you personally responsible for seeing they’re ALL returned, in functional condition, to their assigned tasks tomorrow.”

She stared at Nisha, hard. “Do I make myself clear, Nisha?”

“Crystal, Overboss.”

“Good, now come with me. It hasn’t escaped my notice that you’ve so far failed to visit me, and show proper respect,” Nora smiled at Nisha insincerely.

Nisha smiled back, just as insincerely, and said, “An inadvertent, but nevertheless grave, oversight on my part Overboss. Of course I will accompany you back to your…throne, shall we call it?”

“I think that’s a fine term, Gloria…I mean Nisha,” Nora said.

Nisha went white and glared at Piper, but the latter was still in her own head, rocking back and forth in a fetal position, figuratively speaking. Nora smiled blandly at Nisha’s sudden look of rage. She took advantage of Nisha’s loss of emotional control to call over Gage.

She quickly and economically outlined what was going on in the lavatories, and her expectation that within the next five minutes he was to know exactly how many slaves, male and female, had been placed there and to ensure that Nisha ensured they were all functional and returned by the morning.

When she finished, he raised an eyebrow, and Nora snapped, “We don’t have enough fucking slaves to do what we need them for as it is. I’m not losing even more because Nisha wanted to make a fucking point. Now it’s your job to help me make mine with her.”

He nodded and left. By that time, Nisha had barely managed to get her temper under control. Nora guided Piper to her chair, and sat in her own. Nora was concerned about Piper, but right at that moment she had to manage Nisha in such a way as to not fuck up what was due to happen tomorrow morning.

“So, Nisha,” she began, “How does it feel to be my favored?”

Nisha frowned, “Favored how?”

Nora smiled, “Why to be given two of the closest, and therefore most profitable, parks in Nuka-World of course.”

Nisha looked at Nora, her eyes widening slightly, “Is that how you see it?”

Nora shook her head, “It isn’t important how I see it, sweetie. It’s important how the other two groups see it. And I promise you, that’s how they see it.”

Nora smiled, “Why look at the salvage in Kiddie Kingdom alone. And the opportunity to use all those wonderful toys.”

She smiled again, and looked Nisha up and down, “And Dry Rock Gulch. All those bloodworms available for sport and so very close to you. Why, you might even find another queen. The fun would go on forever.”

Nora sat back. “And look where you’re located here in Nuka-Town, right around the corner from
both of your little fiefdoms. My, I have smiled on you like a favorite, haven’t I?”

Nora leaned forward, “Such a pity it would be if the Operators and the Pack were to become jealous. Don’t you think?”

Nisha was seething inside, realizing how badly she’d been outmaneuvered. She couldn’t move against Nora later tonight as she’d been planning, not any more. She’d have to call off Dixie, immediately. If she let Dixie go through with the kidnap of Nora and her daughter, Nisha wouldn’t live out the night.

Nora was watching the play of emotions on Nisha’s face.

*Oh god, I was right. She’s planning something nasty, or was. Piper and I were doomed.*

Finally Nisha said, “So true, Overboss. We’ll just have to make sure we play fair, now won’t we?”

Nora nodded, “It would be best. For your sake.”

Nisha nodded one final time and stepped away. As she stalked off, Gage came back and said, “All done with your task boss. I have the counts, and made sure the Disciples watching the place know their jobs.”

Nora nodded, and then said, “I need some reliable guards for the front here. I don’t think Nisha is going to try anything…at least not anymore…but no reason to take foolish risks. And with that, I’m taking Piper and we’re going to bed. Some of the company has proven tiresome.”

Nora turned and took a shaken Piper back up the scaffold. As soon as they were up, Nora disconnected the power. The lift was dead until and unless someone in the Grille hooked it up. Then Nora went and repeated the exercise with the inside elevator. Then she laid mines all through the inside. As well as several where the scaffold let out.

Then she turned to Piper, and said, “Oh, sweetheart. I got there as fast as I could.”

Piper began tearing up. “There was a stupid part of me that kept hoping that Nisha would say she’d had to be cruel. That she didn’t mean it and now she wanted to help me. But then she showed me that room. And she told me that she was going to put me in it, or one like it. And I freaked.”

Tears were running down, “I lost it completely, Blue. I barely remember anything until you brought me back…and even then…”

She shook her head, and took a deep breath. “Ok. I’m Ok. I have to be.”

Nora looked at Piper, and said, “You are not Ok. But I’m sorry that you’re right to the extent that you do have to fake it until midmorning tomorrow. I plan to put the Pack raiding party on the train at 7:30. Early enough to fuck with the Pack, but late enough that Cait’s Own will even have had time for a hot meal before they ambush us.”

Now Nora took Piper’s hands in her own, “But you need to see someone about all this. This has been horrific. It’s taken both of us to the very brink. You need to get the kind of help I’ve been getting.”

Piper shook her head, “Don’t be silly, I haven’t seen half of what you have. I’ll be fine.”

“Piper, you won’t…”

[58x802]
“I’ll be fine, Blue!”

“Alright Piper. Get some sleep, and I need to be sure to make my midnight check in.”

When Nora checked in at midnight she relayed the new instructions to Preston to pass to Danse and Cait’s Own at the Transit Center. And then she sat watching Piper sleep. She was pretty sure she’d brushed back Nisha, but she still was waiting for the boom of her mines going off.

At 5:30 she woke Piper with a kiss, harvested her mines, and turned the scaffold back on and she and Piper rode it down. They went to the marketplace, where they found Shank, sleeping it off.

Nora kicked him, not gently. As his eyes fluttered open she kneeled down, and said, “Get the fucking Pack moving ASAP, or I’ll flay you alive. We’re wasting daylight.”

His eyes opened wide, and he began scampering around, forcing Pack raiders from beds and getting them moving. Nora waited, externally pissed and impatient, internally pleased.

_Took him ‘till 6 just to get his own shit together, It’ll take at least an hour but not more than an hour and a half to get these shitholes organized and on the train. Right on time. Ish._

_Best you can hope for from Raiders._

By about 7:15, Nora and Piper were packed into the monorail with about 40 Pack members, including Mason. As the doors to the monorail out of hell closed, the announcer came on.

“Please stand clear of the doors. Por favor, mantengase alejado de las puertas.”

Piper’s hand was tight on Nora’s as the monorail moved slowly around the bends and then picked up speed and swooshed into the tunnel. After about 15 minutes, it decelerated, and then moved into the light in the Transit Center, with the announcer calling, “We are now arriving at the station. Please be sure to collect any children and personal belongings before exiting the Nuka Express.”

_Does a group of Raiders count?_

Mason called, “Ready, Pack?!?”

Howls, hoots, and screeches came back, as the group moved into the light. When the last Raider had left the center, the entire area around the Transit Center magically sprouted Minutemen. On the parking structures, from behind cars, trashcans, traffic barriers, and on top of the Transit Center behind them.

Nora heard Danse’s electronically amplified voice, “Pack Raiders. Put your weapons on the ground, and your hands in the air. You are surrounded and any hostile action on your part will result in your immediate death.”

As Danse began speaking, Nora heard a pair of Vertibirds spool up, and by the time he’d finished they sounded like they were about to take off.

At that moment, Mason shouted, “Fuck you! Get them!” and Nora and Piper fell to the ground instantly. One of the reasons Nora had selected the Pack for the outside raid was their love of colorful clothing. Danse had given strict instructions to not shoot at anyone wearing black or deep maroon. Nora had been counting on the Pack sticking with their flamboyant style and had been happy to note that she’d been right, earlier that morning as the Raiders filtered into the station.

_Normally I like being right most of the time. Why couldn’t Mason just fucking surrender?_
Because that would be too easy, and you don’t get to be a Raider Boss by being reasonable.

The area around Nora and Piper boiled with laser fire, but fortunately it didn’t occur to the Raiders with them that Nora and Piper weren’t what they seemed, and they didn’t have time to wonder why those two women seemed so magically immune to being targeted.

After a while, the firing near the two died down, and they could hear the sound of 5mm miniguns cutting down the few stragglers who’d broken from the group. There weren’t many. The kill zone had been tight and exits thoroughly covered.

Nora stood up and walked over to Mason, who was alive, but gurgling up blood. He didn’t look like he’d make it. She kneeled next to him. He looked up and blinked a couple times. His mouth opened and closed.

Nora looked at him and said, “You should have just fucking surrendered. Now you’ll probably bleed out,” she gave him a sympathetic look. “You deserve to know how this happened. I was never actually the Overboss. Never even tempted. I’m Agent Whisper of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service. I went to find out what the Gunners were up to and I found you guys, threatening the Commonwealth. I’m a spy and a troubleshooter, and you guys are trouble.”

She stood up, “I’m also the General of The Minutemen, and I’m taking an army back with me.”

Chapter End Notes

I went back and forth and back and forth on this. "Rape as dramatic device," is as old, and offensive, as "fridging" a woman as a way to motivate a man. But literally anything else I could think of as a threat was something the two had already dealt with, or would be instantly fatal to an enormous bunch of slaves. There've been enough damn slave deaths. I don't want to write any more.

That's the danger of a psychopath as a villain. It escalates and escalates and escalates and before you know it some poor schmuck is delivering Gwyneth Paltrow's head in a box to Brad Pitt. (It's the less fun version of how DC Comic's Power Girl ended up like...that: an artist went, "Will they object to this? No? Ok, this? No? Ok, this?" and before you know it even BATMAN is making jokes about it.)

Anyway, Nisha is now the worst mother that I can imagine.

Also, THIS is your brain on drugs: https://www.livescience.com/62367-this-is-your-brain-on-drugs.html
As a pair of Minutemen carried away the not yet dead Mason on a stretcher, Nora got on her radio and called for her Vertibird. In seconds she heard from Chief Conklin. “Roger, Minuteman Six Actual. Minuteman Six Victor airborne on your grid, Echo Tango Alpha 5 mikes.”

I’m home. We’re home.

We’re home.

In a bit less than 5 minutes Chief Conklin was landing. He’d ‘floored it’ on her behalf. He knew that there were two children waiting who’d just the prior day learned that their mothers were alive, and they were not waiting patiently.

As Nora and Piper climbed aboard, the Chief handed both of them headsets. As Nora plugged in he said, “Welcome back, ma’am. I have very strict orders from a particular girl and boy to bring you back ASAP.”

The miles from Sudbury to Concord rolled under them swiftly. Conklin had floored it for them again. Apparently Nora’s colorful terminology had thoroughly impressed itself on the Brotherhood aviators, and thence from them back to the Minutemen. At any rate, that rate being rapid, they returned to the Sanctuary airstrip. As the Vertibird flared and then descended gracefully, two smaller forms tore themselves away from two women standing on the edge of the airfield.

Unsurprisingly for Nora, but to Piper’s shock, Natalie Wright made a beeline for her sister and buried her face in Piper’s chest, arriving moments before Shaun lept into his mother’s arms. Shaun merely hugged Nora desperately, but Nora heard Nat crying into Piper’s chest. Piper might be her ‘sister’, but Nat’s reaction was that of a child for her mother.

Nora looked over at Piper who had a befuddled look on her face. Finally Nora took pity. “Piper,” she called, “It doesn’t matter what she calls you. It’s how she sees you.”

As Piper’s own tears started, Nora added under her breath, “But I haven’t forgotten, love.”

Then Shaun detached himself and ran over to hold his other mother. And rather than tear Nat away from Piper, Nora joined all of them. After a few minutes, Nora looked up. Marie and Meredith had finally come over close enough to speak.

Nora took care of the most important part first. “Preston is fine and he’s keeping an eye on the Raider City in Nuka-World. He has strict orders to avoid engagement and yell for help at the slightest sign of a problem. He’s OK, Marie. He saved my life. Both our lives really.”

Marie looked relieved, “I am very pleased to hear that, Nora. I was worried for my Preston.”
Nora smiled, “Well he did something crazy, but it paid off in ways I can’t even talk about right now. I will say, you better marry the boy before he develops too much fondness for crazy stuff.”

“Speaking of…” started Meredith.

“I left your boyfriend at the Transit center. He played it perfectly, Haylen. He’s standing by, but I think we need to have a council, and fast. Are Marcy and Allie, or Madison available?”

“It’ll be more than that, Nora. Marcy already has the Vertibirds out collecting the settlement Reps. You have maybe an hour and a half, and you’ll be talking to the better part of the Commonwealth.”

Nora nodded. “Makes sense. Is Madison around?”

Meredith nodded, “She and Allie already arrived. They’re up in Sanctuary.”

Nora said, “Ok, standby and get ready to start a planning session. Based on how I left them, if no one reports back for about two days, the Raiders in Nuka-World won’t suspect a problem. After that, every hour adds risk.”

“So?” said Haylen.

“They have slaves, Haylen. Hundreds of slaves, and many hundreds of Raiders. No one has seen anything on this scale since the Lyons’ took on the Enclave.”

“You know about that?” Meredith said.

“Spy, Meredith. I downloaded the entire Brotherhood history before I left,” she looked bleakly at Meredith, “This won’t be a minor engagement. This will be a real, honest to god invasion, complete with civilians in the mix. We have to get this right.”

Meredith nodded, but it was Chief Haylen who stepped away and began getting ready to work.

Nora and her family turned and went across the bridge to Sanctuary. When they got near Nora’s house, and the town hall, Nora and Piper sent Nat and Shaun off while they talked with Allie Filmore and Madison Li.

Nora started up front in a way that set the tone. “How familiar are either of you with either Tetradotoxin or Batrachotoxin?”

Madison got a curious look, “I’m…aware. Batrachotoxin is faster acting but both of them are neurotoxins, whose mechanism is to paralyze even involuntary muscles. Suffocating the victim. Why?”

“I need a synthetic version,” Nora said. She outlined what she remembered of Tetrodox 2’s effects.

Madison got a look. “We’re trying NOT to be the dangerous, unethical Institute Nora. This would not help.”

“Can I talk to you privately, Madison?” Nora asked.

Madison nodded, and Nora pulled her aside. She spoke low and urgently, “I hope I don’t have use it, but I might need it. Piper’s mother…I…”

“What?” asked Madison.

Nora sighed and outlined the many run-ins with Gloria/Nisha the pair had had, culminating in the
lavatory rape room Nisha had arranged and threatened to put her own daughter in. Madison looked queasy by the end, but said, “I’m assuming that you want this for Nisha, as a final demonstration.”

Nora sighed, “Yes. And No. While I wouldn’t exactly feel bad introducing that psychopath to what can happen? What I really need is something that will stop that woman, or anyone I scratch with my knife, cold. Instantly. If you want to make it more merciful, fine. But if I hit Nisha with it, I need it to immobilize her in less than a second.”

Nora looked at Madison bleakly, “Because if I have to use it? I’ll probably be up to my ass in Gatorclaws, and need to do three things at once.”

“Gator-what?” asked Madison.

“Don’t ask. Nuka-World was not a barrel of monkeys worth of fun. But…”

“Now what,” asked Madison.

“On a completely different note, I plan to force a vote on synth babies and aging right after we pacify Nuka-World. No better time than as a returning hero, no?”

Madison smiled, “I would hate to go up against you for real, Nora.”

“Hey. I can be cuddly. Ask Piper. But in addition to creating synth babies…”

“Yes?” asked Madison.

“Dr. Li,” and Madison started at the formality, “Can I assume that you would take DNA from both parents as the synth baby blue print, then iteratively clone them?”

Madison looked surprised but said, “Yes, that’s exactly the plan. In layman’s terms.”

“Do the parents have to be members of the opposite sex?”

Madison frowned. “No. Any two gametes would do.”

Nora said, “And if you can do that, can I assume you could in theory take two ova, and extract the DNA from one ovum and mimic penetration by a sperm of the other ovum with that DNA?”

Madison was not stupid, she could see where this was going. “You want to have a baby with Piper.” It wasn’t a question.

“We had an epiphany as a couple. So, yes.”

Madison looked off into the distance. Apparently scientific revelation was found up and to her right. “Yes. It would be relatively easy if you would be Ok with a girl. You don’t have a Y chromosome between you. Otherwise, I’d have to create one from a pared down X. It’s relatively easy to force diploid fusion even without spermatozoa. We did that all the time with synths.”

She refocused. “Yes. If you let us harvest eggs we could easily give the two of you a daughter. It would take more work for a son.”

Nora said, “What would it take to harvest some of my eggs?”

“10 minutes, and 30 minutes recovery,” Madison answered.

“Ok, do it.”
“Excuse me?”

“You heard me Madison. Let’s go,” she turned to the group, “I have to do something with Madison. Take about an hour. Get ready for a planning session with Captain Danse and Chief Haylen. And a back to back CPG confab.”

The pair of them walked to the hospital. “What’s the urgency Nora?” asked Madison.

“Madison,” Nora said, “You may not have noticed, but I don’t live a sedate life.”

“I see. But…”

“Look, believe me. I plan to be here for everything. Birth through College Graduation. But I’m also realistic. It is possible, however unlikely, that I might find myself exceptionally dead. I still want Piper to be a full on mom. If she wants,” Nora said.

They’d arrived. Madison led Nora to Dr. Curie’s outpatient area. She rummaged through a batch of items, and found several things she was looking for.

She turned and set Nora on the bed. “Pull off your pants.”

“Oh Madison, I never knew.”

“Brian is more than enough for me, you hootchie. But I am going in through your vagina. And without buying you dinner. Now lay back and shut up, Nora. It sounds simple but I need to make sure I don’t hurt you and that I get the eggs harvested as well.”

Madison injected Nora with something, and shortly she found herself coming to, without any feeling of having gone ‘under’. “All done,” Madison said.

“And?” Nora asked.

“I got 25 ova. They’re safely stored. You may be a little sore. About like an enthusiastic time with Piper and some toys.”

“Madison!”

“Oh you have no idea how you talked under sedation,” Madison said.

“Really?!?”

“No. Now let’s go rejoin your wife. If you have an…accident…I’ll tell her about these. Otherwise, this is YOUR job, Nora.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m thinking if they have ‘topical cellular regeneration enhancers” they probably have a way to stimulate ova production for harvesting as well.

Lucky Nora. Since she's so damned impatient and all.

And maybe she has reason to worry. Or maybe not.
I'm sure she has no abdominal wounds in her future.

NOTE: Apparently we have the techniques to force diploid fusion in zygotes from haploid gametes today, something that wasn't true even a little while ago....
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK6517/

(If you really want something to happen, make it part of making it easier for a research biologist to produce clones of mice so their experiments have better controls...)
When they got back, several Commonwealth Settlement Reps had arrived. Connie Abernathy for Abernathy Farm and Eric from Tenpines. Also the Reps from Starlight Drive-In and Sunshine Tidings. The rest were still in flight and due to arrive shortly. Except a Greygarden Rep. That was a tricky issue. While the robots weren’t being ordered around by anyone, the CPG was still grappling with the implications of synth sentience.

And to be honest, declaring Ms. White a person actually was more of a stretch than declaring the old Nick Valentine one. Nora was content to let the CPG Council wrangle that one, and they were welcome to it.

Nora joined the rest of them in walking up to the Sanctuary Town Hall, the old house across the street from the General’s Residence.

She walked in and found that the settlers had been very busy since Cait’s wake. The house had been gutted and turned into two large rooms. An office area with three desks, one Marcy’s, and a HUGE conference room in the back. They took their seats and began chatting.

Eventually, others began filtering in. Oberland, Egret Tours, Somerville all arrived together, having been picked up by one Vertibird. County Crossing, Greentop, The Slog, Bunker Hill, and Nordhagen arrived together for the same reason. Then the ‘bird from Warwick and Spectacle Island arrived. Roger Warwick was the rep.

Nora looked around. They were all there, but Marcy wasn’t calling the meeting to order. Nora looked over at Marcy with a question in her eye. Marcy just smiled and gestured at the door. From behind Nora there was a familiar voice.

“I can’t say how honored I am that the first time The Man invites me in, I have to vote to put the smack down on someone I might’ve run with,” John Hancock said from behind Nora.

Nora turned around. John was smiling, in opposition to his statement. He shook Nora’s hand, “I read the report of what you told these guys, sister. I’m just fucking with you. Those assholes give good old fashioned crooks a bad fucking name.”

Nora made to scoot over a seat and offered hers to John. His deep black eyes twinkled as he sat down. He looked around the table. “Sixteen. An even number. Now what?”

Allie Filmore said, “Seventeen,” from behind Hancock. “I appreciate Concord being invited as well, Marcy.”

Marcy looked up with some asperity, and said, “I invited the CIT. I want you to be seated as the CIT. And any settlement that has a problem with that, we should have it out now.” She looked around the table.

The Somerville rep cleared his throat. “I have to admit that we’re a little concerned. We spent a lot of time worrying about what the Institute might do to us. It’s a little weird to be sitting at the table with them.”

The rep from Nordhagen nodded. “I’ll second that. No offense, Marcy, but are you sure this was the
Nora was watching as Allie’s face fell. Then John Hancock spoke, “Everyone here who’s ever visited Goodneighbor knows that we always defended ourselves and that will never change,” and he looked around the table as Allie’s shoulders slumped, “And they also know that Goodneighbor is where any poor misfit without a home can go.”

He looked around the table, “The Institute is gone, last I checked. A CPG that doesn’t take in refugees with the same open arms as Goodneighbor isn’t worth joining. And the CIT isn’t the Institute as far as I’m concerned.”

Kessler from Bunker Hill said, “You usually open your arms so you can pick their pockets better.”

John looked over and laughed. “Usually. But they’re still safe inside the walls and part of the family,” he leaned back and smiled, “AFTER the pocket picking.”

The table erupted in laughter, and Nora looked over and Allie was looking at John with gratitude.

*Just remember the part about pocket picking Allie. But you can count on him to STAY bribed, unless I miss my guess.*

Marcy looked around the table, “Any further objections? Seeing none, this meeting of the Commonwealth Provisional Government Council is called to order. The first order of business is to receive a report from General Nora Wright on the situation in Nuka-World.”

Nora stood and said, “It would be more appropriate to say this is a report from Agent Whisper of the CSIS. I was acting more as a spy than a military officer at the time. If I go back…”

“When you go back,” said Connie Abernathy.

“If,” repeated Nora, “And I’ll explain in a moment.”

Nora then outlined affairs as they stood when she left Nuka-World that day, including the status of the gangs, their precarious situation economically, their need to raid into the CPG as a result, and the status of their slaves.

Nora wrapped up her report, “In particular the slaves are abused in every way, and frequently murdered and tortured for the amusement of their owners. In fact, as result of operating undercover, I have to report myself for the murder of a woman,” and she outlined the events leading to the death of the slave at her hands. After she concluded her story, she looked around the table, “I would prefer to have a formal trial, but if, pending that trial, the council sees fit to relieve me, I am certain that Colonel Garvey and Captain Danse can conduct the assault with no loss of effectiveness.”

The table was silent. Then Allie spoke up, “I believe that Agent Whisper could argue the needs of maintaining her cover to excuse an illegal action. We do not expect our spies to remain within the bounds of the law at all times.”

Nora opened her mouth and Allie raised her hand. “When I spoke with Nora over a month ago, she pointed out I and the rest of the CIT needed to study ethics as well as science. I took her comments to heart, and I began researching research ethics. Which lead me to a discussion that scientists had after World War Two about using the data from human experimentation in concentration camps. Other than shaming me, and making me very glad I was Facilities when I was in the Institute, I remember reading about the decision ultimately being reached as ‘While we would never condone the experiments, it would be a waste of those poor people’s sacrifice to destroy the data for which they gave their lives.’”
Allie looked at the table, “Nora was forced into a situation where she could either commit this crime, or she and Piper would have been killed. To allow that killing to destroy not one but two lives, seems an unforgivable waste.”

Nora heard another voice, Meredith Haylen, from behind her.

*Next time I take a damn seat FACING the door.*

“I’m here for the military briefing next, but I couldn’t help but overhear,” she said.

“Point of order,” said the Nordhagen rep, “We haven’t opened this meeting.”

The County Crossing Rep said, “You’re newer here, Walter. We don’t exactly follow strict parliamentary procedure. We tried it for the first two meetings and then we actually, and literally, threw the book out the window. Go ahead Chief.”

Haylen nodded. “In addition to Dr. Filmore’s ‘Two wrongs don’t make a right argument,’ I’d like to add an ethical, and in a way legal argument. Nora was placed in an untenable situation, but ultimately while it was her hand that used the knife, and while the slave was not morally culpable the way the two Raiders that she killed prior were, she was nevertheless an instrument of Nisha’s will. By placing the slave where she did and Nora where she did, deliberately, Nisha is responsible for the death.”

John Hancock spoke up, “I’d argue a third point. At this moment those poor bastards are all dead. Effectively, every slave there is already dead. The most we could charge Nora with is molesting a corpse.”

Nora looked at Hancock, “Really?”

John looked back and winked.

Nora sighed, “I killed her. Maybe I had no choice. I mean I had a choice, I could have died instead, but they’d have killed Piper as well, or worse. I made my decision.”

Haylen said, “That’s the point Nora. You had to kill that woman, who was an innocent, to protect Piper who was also an innocent. To Hancock’s point, the slave was already effectively dead. Your choice was one corpse or three. It sucks, but there it is.”

Marcy said, “The council of the CPG, being a judicial body in being at this time, will vote on whether to convict Nora Wright of murder.”

“All those in favor?” There was silence.

“Opposed?” Every hand went up.

Marcy looked over at Nora, “Based on your history, I’m sure you’ll hold yourself guilty, but legally, you have been formally acquitted.”

Nora shook her head, “I’ve never heard of a kangaroo court determined to reach a verdict of innocent, but I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

Marcy looked around the table. “Now, having heard of conditions inside Nuka-World, and the potential threat it poses, all those in favor of a Declaration of War?”

Every hand went up, with Connie Abernathy adding, “Even without slaves, it’s them or us.”
Marcy said, “The motion passes. As of this moment, the Commonwealth Provisional Government is at war with the Raider State of Nuka-World.”

“On that note,” said Haylen, and she began rolling out maps of Nuka-World.

“How did you get maps that quickly,” said Nora.

“This unit has extensive records of pre-war facilities of interest, Agent Whisper,” said PAM.

At that point Nora rolled her eyes and went to the other side of the table so she could see who was coming in as the CPG council filed out. D and Deacon, as well as Danse, Haylen, Ronnie Shaw, and Glory filed in.

“Colonel Garvey isn’t here seeing as he is in Nuka-World and putting a Vertibird in there to pull him and his team out would tip our hand,” Danse said, “But he gave me his pre-approval of any plan I could come up with.”

D said, “Based on your reports and PAM’s analysis we can confirm that the Raiders at Nuka-World have effectively stripped an area 50 miles in radius all but bare, with the exception of the Commonwealth. They would have been here in weeks regardless of your activities. Thanks to you, we can strike first. We estimate the size of their force to be about 500 people.”

Danse stepped in, “Although we have made strides in replacing losses from the Battle of the Castle, current strengths of Cait’s Own is down to about 250 total spread across 5 garrisons: Red Rocket, Hangman’s Alley, Egret Tours, Taffington, and The Castle. If we strip them, and we will, that gives me about 200 troops to work with.”

He continued, “Complicating our task is the goal of breaking those Raider groups forever. BoS records indicate that there were a number of named Raider gangs of comparable size to those Nora found in Nuka-World on the West Coast. Notably, a gang called the Khans existed in one form or another from 2141, some sixty odd years after The Great War, right up until their final destruction less than a decade ago.”

He pointed at the map. “While it’s not Nora’s fault, merely sweeping in from the monorail station, while I can make it effective, is not going to work if the goal it to eliminate these gangs. Each of the gangs has outposts and power centers outside Nuka-Town. The gangs could and would melt away into the countryside and we’ll be dealing with them for decades.”

Nora looked at the map supplied by PAM, and turned to Danse, “So your solution is?”

“Box them up, isolate them from each other, and defeat them in detail.”

D stepped in, “Based on your work, Whisper, PAM estimates that in the first part of a Minuteman invasion, the three factions are likely to turn on each other, especially if we use CSIS assets to sow confusion. So we will. This greatly increases the odds of success with relatively low casualties.”

Haylen stepped up, “We will set up triage stations and a field hospital here,” and she jabbed a point just south of the Transit Station, “And later on, we will have MEDEVAC Vertibirds standing by.”

“Why only later?” asked Nora.

Danse came forward, “Because at the outset all 14 Vertibirds are going to be loaded with troops. At the outset of the battle we will deploy all of Cait’s Own, all 200 of them. 60 will go in the first trainload, and as we send that train every Vertibird in the Commonwealth will take a squad of 10 Minutemen and place them at blocking positions outside the entrance of each park.”
He placed blocks down on the map. 10 small blocks outside each gate of each park. Then he placed two large blocks outside the two northernmost gates to Nuka Town. “Two vertibirds each will place twenty troops at both these gates,” and then he plopped down a big block, “And the 60 on the train will join Colonel Garvey’s 10 scouts to form a 70 person Company to start towards the Main Gate of Nuka Town.”

Nora looked at the map and nodded. “The blocking forces don’t attack, they just keep anyone from any park from getting out or getting help from other parks?”

Danse nodded. “The Vertibirds are too valuable to risk as air support, and missile launchers and our few Fat Men are going to be Weapons Hold at all times, on the assumption that these Raiders will keep civilian targets amongst them. I’ve impressed on Cait’s Own the need for strict target identification. This will be primarily a small arm conflict. Which means that we need to make them come to us.”

D took over again, “The trick is going to be to get the Raiders to exhaust their strength counterattacking before we launch our own attack. That’s where we plan to put infiltrators in, to encourage reckless behavior.”

Nora looked up, “PAM, odds of success?”

PAM said, “The overall odds of success are 84.6%. The odds of success with low casualty rates is 45.5%.”

“Define low casualty rate, PAM,” Nora said.

“20%.”

“Odds at 30%, 40%, 50% casualty rates?” asked Nora.

PAM said, “56.7%, 78.8%, 83.9%”

Nora looked around. “So we’re going to lose a batch of people to be sure of getting these guys?”

Everyone around the table nodded. Nora hung her head for a moment, and then said, “Ok, then. If you’d seen what I’ve seen, you’d agree that we need to. Can everything be ready by first light tomorrow?”

Danse looked thoughtful, then nodded. D just nodded.

“All right. We go as soon as possible. Danse, plan on dropping me and Piper with the blocking group here,” and she pointed at the northeast gate to Nuka-Town.

The gate closest to The Disciples.

Chapter End Notes

Time to get a little look at how the Commonwealth is run.

It’s not terribly democratic in that each settlement gets a vote, whether it's Greentop Nursery or Diamond City (when it joins). At some point they're going to have to reconcile that....
Nora's statement about staying bought is related to a quote by Steven Cameron, a US Senator prior to the Civil War, and Secretary of War in Lincoln's cabinet, until he was ousted (for corruption mind you) in 1862 (and given the EPIC levels of corruption at that time in general, it must have really been something to behold). The quote being "An honest politician is one who, when he is bought, will stay bought." Amusingly, there's another story about Cameron: asked about Cameron's honesty by Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, a Congressman from PA, and a FIERCE abolitionist (do you detect a through line about slavery here? Because you totally SHOULD...) Stevens said, "I don't think that he [Cameron] would steal a red hot stove." When Cameron hotly demand that Stevens retract his statement, Stevens said, "I believe I told you he would not steal a red-hot stove. I will now take that back."

And if you'd EVER tried to follow Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Order, you'd understand why I threw in a joke about LITERALLY throwing it out the window...

As for the council of war notes, for context today the US Army considers casualties of 10% of unit strength to be severe, but back during the Civil War casualty rates of 50% or more were not uncommon (JL Chamberlain's 20th Maine started Gettysburg with approx 350 personnel and ended the battle with less than 100), and during the First World War, there were regularly battalions that suffered casualty rates of 70, 80, 90, 100% casualties (literally 'disappeared into No Man's Land').

And the plan that Danse, who is turning into the Plans Officer for the Minutemen, has come up with is a venerable one, best summarized as "strategic offense, tactical defense". To put in the Civil War reference, that was the plan for Lee's 1863 invasion of Pennsylvania. In fact, he had NO BUSINESS pushing the situation after 1 Jul 1863 any further and should have withdrawn. So much for the vaunted "genius" of Bobby Lee.
The Power of Creative Quitting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nora walked out of the conference room, and saw that the whole CPG Council was there waiting.

“We have a plan, and PAM assures us it has a high probability of success.”

As the smiles began, Nora added, “With high casualties.”

She looked around the room, as the representatives instantly sobered up. She then turned to Marcy, “Marcy, do me a favor and call an impromptu council. D, I need you to stay, as well as Captain Danse and Chief Haylen, and First Sergeant Glory. Especially her.”

Now Marcy was frowning, trying to figure out what that group had in common. But she said, “Any objections?”

The rep from Nordhagen said, “This is irregular…” at which point the rep from County Crossing said, “For god’s sake, Walter, don’t make us throw YOU out the window too.”

“No objections having been completed, the CPG Council is back in session,” Marcy said, “You have the floor General.”

Nora nodded. “I’ll take the floor first as the General, but then as Nora Wright, private citizen.” She took a deep breath. “I have been talking with Madison Li.”

“We saw you wander off with her, what gives?” asked Connie.

Nora said, “I’ll address that with you later Connie, it’s personal and not germane now,” she looked around, “I want to make a plea on behalf of two of my best officers, and by extension many others over the Commonwealth. I want to restart the synth program.”

The room exploded. But, interestingly, John Hancock wasn’t one of the speakers. He was looking at her thoughtfully.

Yeah. I saw that in you so long ago, John. Now let’s see if you’re inside the tent pissing out, or outside the tent pissing IN.

Nora whistled shrilly. The babble died down, but not all the way. It was when Hancock shouted, “Let the sister speak!” that Nora could be heard.

Hmmm. Inside pissing out, it seems.

Nora looked around, “Not wholesale. But as a public service.”

Marcy spoke for them all when she said, acidly, “What kind of public service could that be?”

“Better not be labor,” said Glory, ominously.

Nora made eye contact with Glory as she said, “Babies. I have two officers in synth-human relationships. One is a synth, the other is in a relationship with one,” and no one had to guess at the identities. This was becoming real rather than theoretical. Furthermore, all the suspicion fled from Glory as she realized where this was going. She’d resigned herself to be a small and shrinking
minority in the Commonwealth. This was the opposite of what she’d been thinking.

“When we invaded the Institute and liberated all those synth, we restored to them the free will that should have been theirs all along. And as Madison pointed out to me a while back, with that free will comes falling in love. I’m not pushing them to do so, but it’s fairly obvious to me that Roger Danse and Meredith Haylen are just marking time, for whatever godforsaken reason, before they get married.”

She looked over at the couple, and she saw tears in Meredith’s eyes, and Roger was blushing, but he said, “Because of what I think you’re about to ask, ma’am.”

“Madison tells me that they can create a small program, and they could produce babies, and then iteratively older and older synth children, using memory transfer to age the children of Roger and Meredith. Or Marie and Colonel Garvey, if they want.”

Nora looked around the room. “I’m about to ask them, and others, to risk a 3 in 10 or 4 in 10 or even 5 in 10 chance of dying to protect you. Give them the chance to create, literally, families if they make it back.”

Allie broke in and said, “With the power supply as it is in Concord, we could never have more than a small program, but setting aside my CPG Council member hat, as President of the Commonwealth Institute of Technology, I will commit to whatever level of oversight the CPG feels is needed to ensure your acceptance.”

“Finally,” Nora said, “Putting aside my ‘General’ hat, I implore you. My son Shaun, is a synth. He’ll be ten forever unless you agree. Please don’t condemn my poor son to an eternity as a child after I and Piper die,” Nora’s voice broke. “Please!”

She looked around, “I’ll leave while you deliberate…”

“I don’t think you need to do that,” said John Hancock, “You said you threw the rule book, literally, out the window?” and he pointed to the County Crossing rep.

The rep nodded. John went on, “Let me be honest. Just as you threw the rule book out the window when it wasn’t working? I’ll set up a damn synth facility in Goodneighbor for these people if the CPG says no, so all you’re deciding is whether you’re going to have any input on what goes on.” And he looked belligerently around the room.

As the room broke into a babble, Nora leaned over, “Ok, John, what is that likely to cost me?”

Hancock looked over, and said, “You wound me,” and then he smiled, “Honestly? Usually my help comes with a price tag, but you know what, sister? No price tag. Sometimes you gotta do what’s right, whether it’s profitable or not.”

Nora looked at him in shock, and he nodded, smiling.

The group eventually coalesced, and turned to them. Marcy was smiling, “The CPG Council agrees,” and Nora heard Glory say, “Yess!” under her breath.

Marcy then smiled even wider, almost sharklike, “And we’re appointing John Hancock the commissioner to oversee synth production.” Hancock looked at her in shock, and Marcy winked at him and said, “Families are of the people and for the people John. It’s appropriate,” and she added more quietly, “And you’re twisty enough to spot anything underhanded.”

John laughed. “You have a point sister.”
At that precise moment, they heard Meredith burst out with a loud, “Yes!”. Danse was on his knee in front of her and she was nodding. Hancock managed to be the first to congratulate them.

With that finally taken care of, Nora went across the street. Piper was waiting there for her. She was naked.

“The children are with Marie,” she said as she walked over and slowly began undoing Nora’s buttons. “And I want you, Nora. It’s the first moment we haven’t been surrounded and about to die…”

“Are you sure, honey? You’re kind of in a vulnerable…”

“God’s sake, Blue. Shut up and fuck me.”

Several hours later, Piper was sitting up, panting in panic. They’d fallen asleep afterwards. Nora sat up with Piper, and reached out and Piper threw herself into Nora’s arms, “Oh Blue! It was so real. I was in the…”

Nora was rocking her, “You were in that room. I can guess Piper. Shhh.”

Piper was crying, “Oh god, Blue. It was so real, right up until the knife was along my throat…”

Nora was rocking her. “I know baby. I know.”

She pulled back and looked in Piper’s eyes, “I wondered.” She kissed Piper, “Let me make you dinner. Bring the kids home.”

After Piper went and got Nat and Shaun, Nora brought her whole family over into the kitchen to help. Under strict supervision they made grilled Brahmin steaks and vegetables. Nora made sure to touch Piper a lot. At first Piper flinched, but fairly soon she was smiling when Nora would caress a shoulder, or kiss her hand.

Nora was trying to desensitize Piper.

Then they had a talk with the children. Nora started, “We have to go back with the army.”

Before Nat or Shaun could protest, Piper added, “Because we know better than anyone where to go and what to do.”

Nora then said, “And because it’s my job.”

Shaun said, “Then quit.”

Nora looked at him and said, “Does me being the General scare you?”

Shaun looked at her seriously, “No. But I think it scares you.”

Nora tilted her head, “Why?”

“You tense up, mom. Whenever you have to do General stuff, you get this wrinkly look in the corners of your eyes.”

Nat chimed in, “He’s right. You do mom. You’re doing it right now. And you never used to when you were just working with the Railroad. Even when you headed out to the Institute that first time.”

Nora leaned back, shocked. Piper piled on, “You know what, Blue? They’re both right. I think
you’re OK with danger for just you. But being responsible for all those people? I don’t think you want that. You do it, because someone has to and you’re actually good at it, but you aren’t happy about it.”

Piper looked round the table, “And I get it, because I’m the same way. I’ll go anywhere for the truth, but I don’t like being responsible for other people. I’m happy to be ‘responsible’ for you,” Piper made air quotes, “Because you’re my wife, and I know you can handle yourself.”

Nora looked around the table, “You understand at this point, this,” and she gestured around their house, “Is now the General’s residence?”

Nat smiled, “So we’d have to go back to Diamond City? Oh darn.”

“Huh. So you’re a Diamond City Girl?”

Nat smiled at her mom and got up on her chair like it was a soapbox and said, “You better believe it lady. You’re a real lost lamb, you know that?”

Nora laughed loud and long and hugged her daughter. Then she looked around the table. “It’s settled. I lead this attack, and then I’m just Nora.”

“Well, and Agent Whisper too, right mom? I kinda like knowing you’re Jane Bond,” said Nat.

“Did D put you up to that?” asked Nora.

“Me? Never,” said D from the doorway.

“D! Damnit!” exclaimed Nora.

D raised her hand, “I promise, pure chance.”

“Oh bullshit. Did PAM predict this entire conversation? And are you all conspiring to sneak up on me today?” Nora asked.

D smiled, “No. But in a way she’s responsible for me being here. Did you know Stanley quit?”

“No, I didn’t. Why?” Nora asked.

“He fell in love…”

“I knew about that. Everyone around Danny that day knew that. What’d he do? Move in with James Sun?”

D nodded.

“Wow. Ok, I did not see that coming,” said Nora.

“So I’m here to officially offer you the job of Deputy Director of the CSIS.”

“You know I created the entire agency right?” Nora asked.

D nodded, “I was there too. But it’s time to let the Commonwealth grow, Nora, and that means it’s time for you to step back and just do what you’re good at.”

“Ok. I won’t lie. The kids are right. I’m not happy being General, but I agreed to do it and I’ll do it as well as I know how.”
“And your ‘know how’ is why I’m here. That’s why PAM is responsible for me standing here. The CSIS is…ahem…’56.9% more effective with Agent Whisper in the Deputy Director Position.’”

Nora laughed, “Fair enough. One more battle and I’m out.”

D said, “And I’m also here because Madison and Marie have the thing you wanted.”

“Ah. Right,” said Nora.

Chapter End Notes

Nora is going to use any weapon in her arsenal to get what she wants out the Council, if she any.

And the world is conspiring to sneak up and spit-take Nora. At exactly the time her wife is on the verge of a meltdown. The universe, or if this were fiction the author, is a dick.
I’m Going To Nuka-World

Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: Abusive Parent(s)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next ‘day’ Nora was up long before the sun. Captain Danse was already at the Transit Center, along with his fiancée and his 60 men. Nora was lounging along the runway, waiting, with Piper and 140 other Minutemen, to board her Vertibird for Nuka-World.

And there were more Minutemen, militia, waiting their turn to board the train and Vertibirds after the initial troops. They weren’t going to entirely rely on Cait’s Own. She’s meant what she’d told Mason. She was bringing an army. 300 militia, 500 Minutemen in all.

Her radio crackled, “Hammer ready to embark. Echo Tango Delta 10 mikes.”

She keyed her own radio, “Roger. Anvil mounting up.” She got her feet, a rucksack loaded with ammo and food for three full days on her back. She waved her hand around her head in a circle, and a long line of Vertibirds on the run way began spooling up their rotors as teams of soldiers stood up all along the runway, and boarded their transports. At 10 minutes, she called, “Anvil, airborne.”

“Hammer, finishing boarding now.”

The vertibirds orbited for a minute getting into formation. Then they moved their rotors into the forward position, and they departed, headed west. For Nuka-World.

Nora watched the miles roll under her. She looked. Piper was pale, but functional.

I hope she’s going to be Ok with this. Nuka-World, and her mother, was as bad as it gets. But I cannot be ‘ready to get help’ for her. Just be ready to encourage her when the time comes.

Roughly twenty minutes later, Nora could see Nuka-World. The monorail was just pulling into the station below. In moments, troops would begin arriving and meeting up with Preston’s men. And the ‘birds were splitting away from the formation, and descending.

At almost exactly the same moment, in 12 places around Nuka-World, 14 Vertibirds landed briefly, just long enough for the soldiers aboard them to jump off and orient themselves on the gates they’d just landed in front of. Then the Vertibirds were off in a roar of rotors. Nora looked at her unit. She called, “Anvil set,” on the radio, confident that the other groups were in position and ready.

She began to hear shouting. Gunfire. No one headed out the gate. Yet.

The CSIS assets must be having fun now.

Nora watched as the monorail departed on its 30 minute round trip to bring another 60. That group would head for the Galactic Zone. Nora’s two groups in theory could help the Kiddie Kingdom blockers if needed.
And the Vertibirds would be back in about 40 minutes with another 120 Minutemen bound for the World of Refreshment. The plan was to clear World of Refreshment and Kiddie Kingdom first and fast. Then join the crew coming from the Galactic Zone and clear Dry Rock and Safari Adventure. And if needed, help clear Nuka-Town. Nora hoped it wouldn’t be needed, because it would mean that the main attack was going poorly indeed.

The first attack almost came as a relief. The Disciples charging them didn’t have slaves intermixed, so the Minutemen were free to use grenades and missile launchers. Based on the explosions Nora could hear, the people in her group weren’t the only ones that had the luxury of mass slaughter. She even saw the flash of a Mini-Nuke at the front gate.

That’ll get their attention, I bet.

The next wave also had no hostages and was easily cut down. But that was the end of ‘easy’ for the rest of the battle. At least for Nora. It sounded like the gangs had not moved any slaves out into the parks yet. Because the small blocking forces never let up on the use of explosives throughout.

That’ll make clearing those parks go faster.

By now the sun was coming up, and she could see that the Disciples in front of her were using human shields. Nora and the other three snipers in her blocking group were kept busy indeed. As they cut down more and more Disciples, the slaves they were hiding behind began breaking away. The Disciples shot several, until the group, by unanimous decision, made cutting down any Raider pointing a gun at a slave the priority. And the Minutemen began taking casualties themselves.

Most of the men and women who broke away from the Raiders milled about in confusion. They’d had no hope for so long, it didn’t even occur to them that the Minutemen weren’t just another Raider gang.

“Commonwealth Minutemen!” Nora yelled, “We’re here to rescue you!” And she waved them over to her. They looked at Nora in confusion barely able to believe what they were hearing.

Piper began shouting, “Get over here, guys,” and when that didn’t work, she shouted, “We have food and water, damnit!”

That got the slaves moving, finally.

Nora had a thought and she called over to Piper, “Make sure they have callouses and bruises,” and at Piper’s confused look, said, “At some point, Raiders are going to try and get away by pretending to be slaves.”

Piper gave her a ‘Gotcha!’ look and checked the men and women, and went one better than Nora and told them, “If you don’t recognize someone, let us know. We want to be sure to get ALL the Raiders.”

At that exact moment 14 Vertibirds roared by overhead, headed for World of Refreshment, and the firing at the front gate picked up in tempo. There were two more abortive attempts to break out under cover of slaves, and the last attack had more than a few Raiders dressed as slaves. Nora took them prisoner, took their weapons, handed the weapons to the slaves they’d rescued, and after tying up the Raiders securely, said to the slaves, “If they do anything that worries you at all? Even a little? Shoot ‘em.”

Nora had held her position taking a few casualties until she was down to ten, five of them killed outright, until she saw Garvey’s group breaking out into the Fizztop Mountain section of Nuka
Town. Then she moved forward. Shortly she had a group of 100 Minutemen mixed between Cait’s Own and militia. And she invaded the Disciples’ camp.

It was bloody. Very few Disciples surrendered, and those that did mostly did so to attack Minutemen with their knives as the Minutemen moved forward to capture them. Several more Minutemen were killed. It wasn’t long before Nora’s troops weren’t accepting surrenders, simply cutting down anyone not wearing a collar with or without their hands up.

Nora and her group moved up the ramps leading to the top of an internal structure. About half way up, a screaming Dixie came charging down the ramp, and was almost instantly converted to meat, tumbling down the ramp and ending in front of Nora’s group bleeding from over 50 bullet and laser wounds.

Nora looked over at Piper, “Looks like Dixie didn’t want to surrender.”

At that exact moment Savoy popped up and leveled a cavernous .44 Magnum at Nora. Piper screamed and began shooting him. He went down. She kept shooting. His head was pulped by her bullets. She kept shooting. Slowly, Nora got behind her wife and whispered, “He’s dead Piper. He can’t hurt us. He’s dead.” Finally Piper’s second magazine ran out, the receiver locked back, and Piper stopped, breathing heavily.

The team finally was able to make their way to the top. When they finally reached the top of the ramp they leveled their weapons at Nisha, who had just that very moment slit the throat of a slave, a man, whose panicked eyes locked on Nora’s for the longest 15 seconds of her life. As she watched consciousness and then life slip from him, her lips were moving soundlessly, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

Finally she looked up at Nisha. Piper had her pistol aimed directly at her mother’s head. Nisha sneered at them both and pointed at the three slaves surrounding her, lying in rapidly spreading pools of blood, all from slit throats. “I’m not letting anyone else have my last few toys.”

She looked at Piper and said, “So go ahead, slut. Kill your mother. I fucking dare you. I DARE you!!!” and her voice reached into a shriek.

The Minutemen with them were staring at the confrontation as Piper’s finger tightened and then, ever so slowly, relaxed. Her pistol rose until it was pointing straight up. “No. You’re going to stand trial. And then, I imagine you’ll be put in front of a firing squad. Because Nat should know what a piece of shit you are too,” and as Nisha looked shocked, Piper went on, “Oh, yeah. Natalie was always alive. I lied to you. She calls Nora mother. You lost even that, Gloria.”

Gloria’s face twisted in animal rage, “I was going to have you raped to death and you can’t even pull the fucking trigger, you useless piece of shit. You. Fucking. Coward!”

“It would be easy to kill you, Gloria. I’m going to do this the hard way,” Piper said, “I’m going to come to your trial, and every day I’ll wear something bright and happy and colorful. And I’ll smile the whole time. The. Whole. Time.”

Piper turned away, and took a step. Nisha shrieked and leapt at Piper’s back, a knife coated with the lifeblood of three slaves held poised to strike.

Nora drew her knife from her thigh sheath, and in a blur, drew it across Nisha’s upraised forearm.

There was a shallow red cut along her forearm as Nisha fell to the ground. Piper gasped and turned around. Nora kneeled and looked into Nisha’s eyes. They were wild, and they were making tiny
movements. Nora held up her knife. “This time I made sure to have that neurotoxin, Gloria. Your major muscles are paralyzed. Soon even your eyes and eyelids won’t be able to move. You’re going to die now. And you failed to get Piper to do anything you wanted. Your daughter is with me.”

Nora smiled at Nisha as she froze into immobility. “She was never my ‘pet’. I’m her wife, Gloria. You couldn’t fuck her up and make her your own, because she has a happy family. And the best part of me telling you this is knowing just how awful you have to feel because you can’t control her. She has a family, and a dog, and a successful paper. And she is happy. And you are no part of any of that.”

Nora twisted Nisha’s head to look directly at her and said, “I’m sorry we never got to try you in a court. But I was pretty sure you’d try something like this. And now you’re stuck in there hearing this and knowing that in a few more minutes your brain will begin to die. I wanted to be sure you suffered Gloria. I wanted to be sure that your cruelty to my wife these last days was repaid with you inside your head, silently panicking as you realize that you are not dying quickly. Or well.”

Nora stared straight into Nisha’s eyes. “I hate you in ways I have never hated anyone ever before. Not even Kellogg. Because you hurt my wife. And for that, your last sight will be of the woman who took everything, including both of your daughters and all of your precious Raider accomplishments, away from you.”

“I’m here watching you die, and enjoying it, because I hate you, Gloria.”

And Nora watched the entire time until she was sure that Nisha was dead.

She stood up and looked over. Most of the Minutemen were staring at her in shock. Piper was crying. Nora wrapped one arm around Piper, and gently turned her away from her mother’s corpse. The two of them walked out of the complex, Piper’s head buried in her wife’s chest.

Outside, they made their way to the front of Nuka-World. Gage was being marched down the street. He called, “Boss! Boss?” and then his voice trailed off as he realized Nora was not a prisoner.

Nora smiled nastily at him, and said, “I was a spy, Gage. I came to find out what you were up to. You put your worst enemy in charge of Nuka-World. And now you’ve lost. I’ll see you at the trial, you worthless piece of shit.”

Nora looked away from Gage and saw the doctor from the market looking at her in shock. “You came here for us?”

Nora shook her head, “Not at first. I came here to find out what was up. But, yes, I and my wife,” and she looked down, at Piper’s face buried in her chest, “Stayed for you. Even if that wasn’t why we came.”

“How?” the doctor asked.

“Because everyone should be free. To be doctors, or merchants, or farmers. Without fear and free. No slaves, ever.”

The doctor said, “So what should we do now?”

Nora looked at her, “Whatever you want. But…maybe…you’d like to join the Commonwealth? We’re building a nation. I thought maybe you’d like to join. If you can forgive me for having to say horrible things to you when we were undercover.”

The doctor’s jaw dropped, and Nora went on, “But whether you join or not, if you need help, call.
The Minutemen will come.”

She and Piper left, and stepped aboard a Vertibird. Danse was with them. Preston was staying behind to mop up, and help rebuild the traders’ defenses. The train was going to have to be reserved for prisoners for a while. There were quite a lot, with Gage and Shank chief among them.

When their Vertibird landed, and they got on and flew away from Nuka-World, Piper was quiet. Nora talked around the silences, but over Piper’s head she was giving Roger concerned looks. Danse shrugged helplessly.

Marcy came to meet them at the airstrip and Nora let her know the remaining Minutemen would be coming back over the next few days. And to hold off on any parades. She took Piper home. Piper wasn’t totally silent but she was…off.

They had a serious argument the next day. About an hour before Nora left for her group therapy, she looked at Piper and said, “Please come. It would do you good.”

Piper said, “Why? It’s not that bad. I mean, she’s dead now. There’s nothing left to worry about.”

“Piper,” Nora started, “What you went through would affect anyone…”

“I’m not ‘all messed up’, Blue. It wasn’t fun, but I’ll be fine soon.”

“Piper, you won’t be fine. You need to talk about it, if not with me then someone. You need help…”

“I don’t! Dammit Blue, go to your group and leave me the fuck alone! I don’t need ‘help’!” she shouted.

Nora’s face fell and she left.

_God dammit. You can’t have the realization for her, you can’t HAVE it for her, you can’t have it FOR her…_

She went into the building where Marie held Group. Danse was there. He looked concerned for her and then Nora felt a tear running down her cheek. She wiped it away with the heel of her hand. And closed her eyes.

She heard Marie say, “All right then. Let us get st…” and she trailed off. Nora opened her eyes. Roger’s eyes were focused behind her, and from behind she heard, “Hi. My name is Piper. I really need some help working through some really bad things that happened to me recently, and someone I love very much suggested that I could get some help here…”

Nora turned and looked up at her. Piper was smiling and tearing up herself, and she said, “I love you, Blue. So what’s the process here anyway?”

Chapter End Notes

_Rot In Hell, Nisha._
Noir-a

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next day, a vertibird arrived with Colonel Garvey aboard, and he came into town to report. When he walked in, Nora took one look at him and said, “Uh UH. Turn around, Colonel, and get Marie and say hello first. Then bring her up as well.”

A bit over a half hour later, he and Marie arrived. Nora smiled and greeted them and brought them in. Preston said, “Most of the remaining Minutemen will be back soon, but I’m leaving 50 of Cait’s Own as security for the traders. The doctor there, Mackenzie Bridgeman, has already talked them into joining the CPG.”

Then he looked serious, “But we suffered casualties. About 200 out of 500. Most of them from the militia. Waking into ambushes. Mines. That sort of thing. So while I figure we can have a victory parade in a few days from here to CIT in Concord, is it something we should be doing?”

“It sounds like a good idea to me, Preston. The ones who are dead wouldn’t begrudge the rest of them a victory parade. And the ones who are alive need to know that their loved ones are proud of them,” Nora said. “Speaking of which, when are you and Marie finally going to get married? Even Roger popped the question. You’re taking forever.”

Statues EVERYwhere. It’ll be glorious.

“Well…” he said.

“I mean you can’t be chicken. So that’s not it,” and Nora looked over at Marie suppressing a smirk. Nora went on, “It must be something else….let me see…I’ve got it! You need a house, right here in Sanctuary. For the two of you.”

Preston looked up, desperate for any lifeline. “Yes, ma’am. That’s it entirely.”

“Oh, that’s easy peasy. Take this place,” Nora said.

“But this is the General’s Residence,” Preston said.

Nora nodded, smiling. “Yes, it is. Good thing I quit as General this morning, and Marcy accepted my resignation. As well as my recommendation for my successor,” she pointed at him, “You. So move in here, General Garvey, marry Marie, and if you have a goddamned brain cell to knock against at least one other, contact Madison Li about tissue samples for a baby. You dope!”

Preston looked shocked for a minute and then as his brain processed how he’d been maneuvered, he smiled and nodded. He turned to ask Marie to marry him, and she didn’t even give him a chance to finish the question before she nodded and kissed him.

The next few days, Nora stayed in her former house, still hers at least until the parade, and she and Piper went to Group therapy. Every day. Piper’s memories, while awful, were fresh and they were able to desensitize her pretty well in a relatively short period of time. They hadn’t had the chance to become well-worn habits, like Nora’s or Danse’s.

On the day of the Parade, Nora put on the General’s Uniform for the first, last, and only time. Sergeant Major Shaw looked at her and said, “You were the best goldurned, fishmongering,” and
Piper began giggling for no reason Ronnie or Nora understood, “lawn darting General I ever served with. I’m going to miss you.”

Nora smiled at Ronnie, “Well you’re still stuck with me, Sergeant Major. I’m the new Deputy Director of the CSIS.”

Ronnie waved her hand, “Doesn’t count. You’ll be eyelash deep in secret shineography. Not the same thing.”

Nora smiled, “I’m going to miss you too, Ronnie. Take care of Preston for me?”

“Will do, ma’am,” and with that, the pair led a sizable group of Minutemen from Sanctuary through Red Rocket and down to Concord, where the scientists cheered as loudly as anyone else. When they arrived, Nora handed Preston the Minuteman Flag in a brief ceremony, and stepped off to the side as he dismissed the troops. To the biggest party Nora’d ever seen, and way more civilized than her last party.

When Nora looked over at Allie watching over all the people eating and drinking and laughing and playing, Allie looked proud of her work. Nora leaned over, and said, “I guess it makes sense, now that I think about it. Not only are you the college with the highest academic standards, you’re also the biggest party school in the Commonwealth.”

Allie looked puzzled, “We’re the only college in the Commonwealth…”

Nora looked over, “Shhhh. Frat boys are an endless source of disciplinary fine revenue.”

Two days after that Nora and Piper, and Shaun and Nat and Dogmeat, loaded their belongings on a Vertibird. And Nat and Shaun got to ride in one for the first time. Chief Conklin made it last, orbiting Boston and then Fenway a couple times before landing. Finally they arrived back at Diamond City, where they dropped their belongings off with Codsworth, before joining Ellie and Nick for noodles in the center of town.

Nora looked over at Nick, “How’s it going Nicky? Anything new?”

Nick shook his head, but Ellie said, “Actually there is,” and Nora perked up. “We could use your help on a case,” said Ellie.

*What am I going to have to do?!? Lock them in a room with no clothes on? These two will be the death of me yet.*

Nora raised an eyebrow at Ellie, but Nick said, “Not the…”

“The Marty Bullfinch case,” Ellie nodded, “Marty was Nick’s partner. Emphasis on ‘was’. He must have been some kind of desperate to come to us for help after all this time.”

Nick snorted, and slurped a noodle with some relish, then said, “Marty and I never exactly saw eye to eye. Mostly because he was usually passed out on the barroom floor.”

Ellie said, “Aww, C’mon, Nick. Think of the good times.”

Nick rolled his eyes, and said, “What? When he quit?”

Ellie chuckled, “Yeh. That’s the one I was thinking of.”

She handed Nora a tape, “Here.”
Nora popped it into her Pip-Boy, and they all listened, “Nicky, you old bucket of bolts, it's Marty. I know it's been a while, but I came across a little mystery I thought might get your circuits firing. You remember that ugly grasshopper statue on top of Faneuil Hall? Turns out it's got a note in it. A note, written by the son of one Shem Drowne. I don't expect that name means anything to you, but the guy was a coppersmith, way back when folks did shit like that. Apparently, this note leads straight to the old guy's stash. I don't know what's in it, but I'd sure like to know if it's still there. I'm gonna go do a little recon of the hall. If you decide you wanna get the team back together, you let me know.”

Nora looked over at Nick, “Faneuil Hall? Yeah, you need me. First thing in the morning.”

Piper said, “Sounds good.” At Nora’s look she said, “What? ‘Among the Mutants in the Cradle of Liberty,’ will move a TON of papers and you know it.”

Nora said, “Piper, we are literally drowning in caps.”

Piper said, “Habit, Blue. And I like scrapping for sales.”

Nora shrugged, “What the hell? At this point, offering to French kiss a Super-Mutant is probably less dangerous than most stuff we’ve done.”

Ellie laughed and said, “If you see him, tell Marty I say ‘Hey, where’s my twenty caps you old letch?’ Also, ‘Hi.’”

Nora caught Nick watching Ellie leave with more than a boss’s interest.

Nick! You could see that without a skirt covering it ANYTIME YOU ACTUALLY ASKED!! You idiot!

Nora looked at the three of them, and she felt a nostalgic tear form. Piper noticed, and asked, “What’s wrong, Blue?”

Nora smiled, “It’s us three, again. Remember? Back before all the craziness, just the three of us? Bombing around the Commonwealth?”

Piper laughed, “You Irish and your happy tears,” as she wiped away one of her own.

“It does feel good, doesn’t it,” said Nick.

“That it does, Tin Man. First thing in the morning?”

Nick nodded, and Nora finished, “Don’t put the moves on Ellie now.”

Nora blushed.

The next morning the three set out for Faneuil Hall. That Nick kept insisting on calling ‘FAN-you-ell Hall’ instead of ‘FAN-ell Hall’ like you were supposed to. Hell, it was lucky he didn’t come with them to Nuka-World. He’d probably have referred to the city north of there as ‘WUR-chest-err’ instead of ‘WUSS-ter’. Also, he probably wouldn’t have survived that first encounter with Gloria. Let alone the rest of it. So probably his pronunciation wasn’t really the issue.

At any rate they reached the carpark across Congress Street from Faneuil Hall, and…”Goddammit. I know they don’t fucking breed, so what gives?” said Nora quietly, as she watched a Super-Mutant patrolling in front of Sam Adams’ statue.

She sighed, “Well to paraphrase Glory, ‘If I gotta do it again, I guess I gotta.’”
She sighted and dropped the Mutant, then two hounds, and another Super-Mutant in the scaffolding along the side. By then there were two more coming around the side that Nora also shot in the head.

And that was it. As they walked up to the front doors, Nick grinned, “Ahh. Faneuil Hall. Cradle of Liberty turned slaughterhouse.”

They moved quietly into the historic building. Scene of speeches by Sam and John Adams. The eulogies of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams by Daniel Webster. Home of just a fuckton of Super-Mutants.

Nora slung her rifle and pulled her pistol for close quarters work. By this time, Piper was nearly as silent as Nora and the pair of them were a well-oiled machine. They went through the Super-Mutants in the basement gift shop like a hot knife through butter, and the group in the main hall on the second floor almost as fast.

They moved up relentlessly, their silent pistols leaving a trail of very surprised, very dead, Super-Mutants. Finally they reached the fourth floor, headquarters of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts as Nick said, “Goodness. Did Marty really try and get through all this on his own?”

The final Super-Mutant went down in hail of pistol rounds as did his hound. They went up through a trap door. There was a body only a few days old. Nick looked down, “Hmmm. Guess Marty never quite made it. Don’t worry pal. We’ll close this one out for you.”

Nora frowned, “You didn’t like him…”

Nick said, “Doesn’t mean I won’t close his case for him. Some things are sacred.”

Piper climbed down from a huge gilded grasshopper. She squinted at the paper. “Oh sheesh. The spelling is atrocious. I don’t even know where to start.”

Nora looked at it and said, “It’s from before Noah Webster’s dictionary regularized spelling in America. It says there’s a treasure at Shem Drownes’ grave,” she looked up at Nick and Piper, “Which I happen to know is at Copp’s Hill Cemetery. Just down from Cabot House.”

They climbed down and made their way to Copp’s Hill. On their way they went past the Old North Church. There were still scorch marks and synth’s chassis and Courser bodies from that final attack on the Railroad. “Wow,” said Piper, “You were here?”

Nora nodded, “It wasn’t fun.”

They continued on to the Cemetery, where they found Deacon Shem Drowne’s grave. Nick dug, and presently they found a coffin. Nora pried it open, and they found…a skeleton. But also bars of copper and silver. Nick smiled and said, “So Shem Drowne had himself buried with all his treasure. Guess some people just can’t let go.”

Nora smiled, “Well I can. Piper and I are hip deep in cash. You take this Nick. Buy Ellie something nice.”

“I could manage that,” he said, and they moved off back towards Diamond City. Along the way, they walked past Cabot House. It was lit up, and patrolled by bots. There were signs warning off intruders.

Nick looked at Nora, who took one look at the setup, and turned to her friends and said, “Fuck THAT. It’s probably some fucking Cabot. They said cockroaches would survive a nuclear war, and
if so,” and she pointed at the building, “THAT is your proof. ‘Here's to dear old Boston, The home of the bean and the cod, Where Lowells speak only to Cabots, And Cabots speak only to God.’ Screw ‘em.”

And she walked away.

When they got back to Diamond City, Ellie greeted them as they walked in, clearly concerned about a foray into Faneuil Hall. And Nick.

Arggh! You two….idiots. He can’t stop checking out your ass and she can’t stop worrying about you. Will the two of you just...DO IT...already!??!

Ellie smiled as Nick showed up with two arms, two legs and ten fingers and toes, and said, “So, how’d things go with Marty?”

Nick shook his head, “Not great.”

Ellie tsked and said, “Was he drunk?”

Nick replied, “Dead. Made it all the way through Faneuil Hall too. Went out like a champ.”

Ellie whistled, “No foolin’? Our Marty made it through Faneuil Hall. Didn’t think he had it in him.”

Nick said, “And he finally paid us off for taking care of his tab…” and he plopped the metal bars down.

Ellie smiled. “I’ll wait until after Myrna clocks out. Percy pays better.”

Then she said, “While you were out Vadim, came by…”

Nick, Piper, and Nora all groaned loudly, but Ellie persisted, “We have another case. Earl Sterling. Vadim noticed that Earl hasn't been into work for a few days.”

“I’m surprised Vadim notices that he has feet,” said Nora.

“Shush you,” said Ellie, “Vadim came into the office, half-drunk, with a sob story about how he and Earl went way back, and that he just can't believe that Earl would get snatched up by the boogeyman. And since you blew ‘The Boogeyman’ up, I’d say he’s right. Earl didn't have any enemies. Someone would have to notice you’re alive first. He didn’t exactly have the charisma to inspire any crimes of passion. It’s a mystery.”

Nick sighed, “Ok. We’ll go talk to Vadim.”

Nora said, “You talk Nick. I’m not getting sucked into anything ridiculous again.”

When they arrived at the Dugout Nick turned to Nora, “No one knew Earl better than these folks. Oughta ask around, see what people know.”

While Nick casually pumped Vadim, Nora went over to Scarlett.

“How are things with Travis?” she asked.

Scarlett smiled, and Nora said, “That well? Good for you two. Hey listen, did you work with Earl Sterling?”

Scarlett’s smile fell, but she looked sympathetic, not upset, “Oh yeah. Earl. Eh. I mean I know I
shouldn’t speak ill of the missing, but that guy needed to get out more. You’d think a bartender would be smooth. You know. Charming. Not Earl. He tried hard. Way too hard. The real sad thing? He thought it was his looks. Kept talking about getting a new face at the Mega Surgery. Wouldn't have helped,” she gave Nora a smile and said, “I gotta get back to serving drinks.”

Nora walked over to the tail end of Nick’s chat with Vadim, “…such a good bartender. Good friend. Oh, but terrible with women mind you. Bull in china shop with them. Forgot to drop off key when I hired you two. Here. I hope you find out what happened.”

“No fistfight plans, Vadim?” asked Nora.

“No, my friend. I am not doing that sort of thing now,” he said.

“Good,” said Nora. “Keep that up…”

The three went to Earl’s house just down First Base Way from the Dugout. Nick let them in with the key. He started in the bedroom, “I’ll start in here. Why don’t you check out the living room for clues. Must be some hint where that boy ran off to. It can’t be the Institute.”

He sounded thoughtful as Nora tossed the living room professionally. Well, semi-professionally. Professionally would have meant not leaving any trace she’d been there. She didn’t need to do that, therefore, she didn’t bother.

Nick was musing to himself, “So where’s that leave us? No known enemies. Wasn’t known for the great outdoors, so likely not Raiders or mutants. No, this all screams accident. Now what was Earl into that might have gotten him in that kind of trouble.”

Nora bent over, and picked up a scrap of paper and said, “A receipt from the Mega Surgery Center.”

Piper said, “Scarlett spoke about Earl getting a new face at Mega Surgery too. Wonder what Dr. Sun has to say about that?”

The three walked back out and around the corner to the Mega Surgery, and Nora walked up to James Sun, smiling, “Do you know anything about this receipt?”

Dr. Sun looked down and sighed, “Let me see…this is Doctor Crocker’s deplorable handwriting all right. Looks like Earl was one of his patients. The procedure noted here is mundane. Low-risk cosmetic work. Doctor Crocker never performed it, however, said Earl vanished before he paid.”

Piper said, “Where’s Doc Crocker now?”

Dr. Sun looked thoughtful, “Last time I saw him he had to get something out of the Surgery Cellar. Probably just had to wash up some needles, or move some storage around.”

Nora said to him, “I need to get into the cellar…”

“Why?”

Nick said, “We’re investigating a missing person, doctor. And we suspect the trail leads to your basement.”

Sun looked shocked and said, “Of course. If you think it will help,” and handed them the key.

Nora unlocked the trap door and she dropped in. When she went around the corner, she stopped cold. Crocker was in the process of dismembering a corpse.
“Oh, Earl. You’ve really been a handful you know? But I think we’re just about done. Our little mistake is about to be corrected,” Crocker looked up and started at Nora’s presence. “Oh! Naughty naughty, you’re not supposed to be down here. But that’s Ok, I can fix that. I can fix anything.”

Nora held out her hand placatingly, “Take it easy doc. Let’s talk. About Earl.”

Piper and Nick rounded the corner. Nora was vaguely sad to note that the scene, which in the past would have gagged Piper, had no audible effect on her.

Crocker reached out with one bloody hand, and said, “I didn’t mean to do it. You have to believe me. Doc Crocker is a brilliant surgeon. No one dies under his care. No one. They just walk away happy. Happy with my work. Happy with their new face. Not screaming. Not bleeding out on the floor. Earl…he just didn’t want to be happy. That must be it.”

Nora spoke in calming tones, “You killed a man doctor. You’re going to pay for it. Put the gun down and come with me.”

Piper said, from behind her, in the same calming tones, “Doc…be reasonable.”

Crocker looked down at Earl’s mutilated corpse, and sobbed, “…I did it, didn’t I? I killed a man. Oh god. There’s so much blood. So much blood all over me,” and he pulled out a syringe, “But I can fix…anything…” and he collapsed, dead.

Dr. Sun came around the corner too. He gasped, “What’s going on here. Is that Doc Crocker? What happened here?”

Nora sighed, “Doc Crocker killed Earl Sterling. I found out and he killed himself. Guess he couldn’t handle the guilt. “

Sun’s eyes widened, “Dr. Crocker killed Earl? The facial reconstruction…he must have gone through with it. That explains a lot more than I’m comfortable with. Dr. Crocker always cared about his reputation, but this…is inhuman.”

Nora shook her head, “You didn’t know. It’s not your fault.”

Piper breathed out softly, “He wouldn’t listen…”

Nora looked over, “I did my best, Thing.”

Piper nodded, “I know Blue.”

Nick said, “I guess we oughta give Ellie the news…”

The three of them climbed out the basement, leaving James Sun muttering to himself.

I hope Stanley is extra understanding tonight. Sun is going to need that.

When they got back to the agency, Ellie said, “So you find out where Earl ran off to?”

Piper automatically corrected Ellie, “Did you.”

Nora said, “Earl never went anywhere. Doc Crocker killed him during a botched surgery.”

Ellie shook her head, “Crocker killed Earl? Where’s the doc now? Rotting in a cell I hope.”

Nora said, “Crocker killed himself. Couldn’t handle the guilt.”
Ellie said, “Oh god. I’m sorry.”

Nora shrugged, “It happens.”

Nick said, “That it does. Listen, I know that you are the, umm…”

“Second ranking spy in the Commonwealth?” Nora said.

“Bit blunter than I’d have put it, but uhhh…”

“I’ll answer for Blue. She’d be proud to be your partner, Nick. As long as her wife gets all the exclusives. Just like the old days.”

Nora laughed and nodded, “What she said.”

Chapter End Notes

I...couldn't...help...it.

The title was just sitting there like a fastball smack over the middle of the plate. I'd say I'm sorry, but it would be a lie.

And the Three Musketeers are back together again...and in a beast of a chapter.

Several historical notes mostly validating that the Bethesda people did their homework too (Like the Mary Goodneighbor/Irma the Body stuff).

Faneuil Hall is of course a real tourist attraction in Boston (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faneuil_Hall) and actually is the Headquarters of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_and_Honorable_Artillery_Company_of_Massachusetts), as well as the site of a number of things, including Daniel Webster's Eulogy for John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who were probably the ur-example of 'frenemies', so much so that they died within hours of each other.

And Shem Drowne was a real person (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shem_Drowne) and before Noah Webster spelling really was much more a case of 'if it feels right do it', and afterwards is a big part of why Americans 'organize' while Brits 'organise', or Americans have 'neighbors' and Brits have 'neighbours'. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webster%27s_Dictionary)

Brits insistence that there is an extra syllable in 'Aluminum' that is in all other ways imperceptible to the outside observer, like a sasquatch, is however probably the result of brain damage rather than lexicography.

Regarding the Cabot House bit...I made a number of in or out decisions on 'quests' for the books based on whether they were appropriate for the look and feel. The Silver Shroud is a personal favorite of mine, but it just wasn't something I could make fit into the story I want to tell. Likewise, the Secret of Cabot House loses out until I want to create a Laundry Files Alt Universe Fanfic. But there's that building. And the Cabot's are a real family (hence the quote: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabot_family). So I gave Nora a little speech, and a cockroach joke.
Thanks to radios, and that Diamond City was no longer “under Opposition Control” owing to the fact that ‘The Opposition’ was now a radioactive pond along the Charles in Cambridge, Nora was able to start work for the CSIS without relocating. Frankly, what she really wanted to have happen was to slowly wean D and the rest of the CSIS from their insistence on actually living underground, and when Diamond City finally joined the CPG, relocate the Headquarters to her hometown.

Because of their past, the people of the CSIS nee Railroad verged on agoraphobics. Nora had successfully gotten them to stop hiding themselves from the whole Commonwealth. Everyone connected to the government of the CPG, and therefore by extension most people, knew that there was a thing called the Special Intelligence Service, settlements being relatively intimate places where everyone knew everyone else’s business.

They almost never knew its origins, and they didn’t know that D was still occasionally rescuing the odd synth out wandering around. And sometimes offering them a job. K1-98, now just ‘Jenny’, was a recent hire. Resourceful enough to escape the Institute without PATRIOT’s help, and resilient enough to stay out of their hands without the Railroad’s, she was tough and independent. Also sneaky. So when she came to visit Nora at her home, Nora had no idea why she would be there.

“DD Whisper? I’m Agent Canine.”

Nora stared for a second and began laughing. “Really?”

Jenny smirked, “I made it work for me. So as to why I’m here?”

Nora nodded and gestured for Agent Canine to continue, “Basically, D has me working on smoothing the transition of Diamond City from ‘Monster of the Commonwealth’ to ‘Jewel of the CPG’.”

“I figured Hancock bringing Goodneighbor in was the endgame,” Nora said.

Canine nodded, “It is. But there’s nice tidy predictable endgames, and there’s chaotic, pyrrhic, and baffling endgames. We want the former, and my mission has been to monitor the situation. And I’ve been hearing rumbles that a few of the Upper Stands folks in City Council are not 100% pleased about not being the big green monster anymore, and are taking steps.”

“How good is this intel?” Nora asked.

“‘A2’ grade. Straight from the mouth of one of the council members. He has a weakness for blondes,” Canine said.

“I wondered about the hair color,” Nora said, “But won’t he be upset when you drop him? When Diamond City joins, running a honey trap on the city council won’t be Ok anymore.”

“First thing, boss, get your mind out of the gutter. I said he has a weakness for blondes. I didn’t say I was humping him. He’s married. He just likes drinking, looking, and talking about the crap that bugs him. He’s actually kinda sweet,” Canine said.
"Technically, that’s still a honey trap, but I take your point, and no one says you have to stop having the occasional drink under those circumstances. Just make sure you don’t let it become a leak the other way, agent,” Nora admonished.

"Will do, boss. Now, getting back to what I was trying to tell you before you accused me of being a whore,” and she smiled to take a little of the sting away, “Apparently one of his friends, Councilman Mercer, is trying to build a war chest to influence other city councilmen to hold off joining.”

“How exactly does Mr. Moneybags plan on doing that?” Nora asked.


“Um, no?” said Nora.

Piper stuck her head round the corner, “Hey! Treasures of Jamaica Plain? Personally, I always worried it was some metaphorical crap. ‘The real treasure is you!’ Pfft.”

“Well this Diamond City Councilman isn’t planning on buying votes with metaphors, so no, I don’t think it’s metaphorical,” said Canine.

“I’m guessing you mean treasure IN Jamaica Plain. Just north of Quincy? Like getting in a time machine and going back to before the CPG pacified a huge swatch of the Commonwealth?” asked Nora.

“Like getting stuck outside the Diamond City gates and getting rescued by a hottie in a Vault Suit, Blue,” answered Piper.

Canine nodded. “I can’t go with you, because I have to stay here and do my best to undo what Councilman Mercer is trying to do. But I made arrangements.”

There was a knock on the door. Nora opened it. A Diamond City guard was standing there. “Yes, Deacon?” she said.

“Damnit. How’d you know?” he asked.

“Diamond City guards don’t wear sunglasses under their helmets. You have never been able to ditch the shades,” Nora said.

“Good one boss, I’ll have to remember that,” he said. “Anyway, Jamaica Plain, yeah?”

“Yeah. I figure we get some rest now. Head out in the morning. Stay in the guest room? If appearing as yourself isn’t too hard on you?” Nora said.

The next morning the three set out, almost straight south from Diamond City, headed for Jamaica Plain. By noon, two things had happened. Nora could make out Jamaica Plain in her scope, which let her know the place was crawling with ferals. And that a new radio signal had cropped up when they got south of Roxbury. It said, “This is an emergency broadcast signal from Vault 88. Authentication codeword IMPISH. Vault 88 emergency classification: unspecified integrity breach warning. Any available Vault-Tec personnel are required to respond under Emergency Protocol VT-76. This signal will repeat. Vault-Tec Pip-Boy signal received. Emergency broadcast ends.”

When they’d heard the broadcast and the location had auto-inserted itself on Nora’s Pip-Boy, Piper had looked at her and asked, “Are we going to check that out?”

Nora had nodded and said, “The odds are high that we’ll find a dead Vault. But it could be people
suffering from yet another inhuman Vault-Tec experiment. If there’s a chance, we need to help.”

But Jamaica Plain was literally in and on their way. And full of ferals. So Nora looked at Deacon, “We snipe, Piper picks up anything that homes in on us. Then we move in.”

The result was a pile of ferals at the Northwest end of Jamaica Plain, before the three of them began searching. In one of the buildings along the north edge there were two bodies, looking a lot like Raiders. One of them had a set of keys attached to a holotape, the other a note. Nora slotted the holotape, “Hey, Ken, it's Carl. You two still looking for a score? I got a lead for you. You know Sal? Ex-Gunner? She's after the Treasures of Jamaica Plain. Biggest haul in the Commonwealth, if you can get past the ghouls. I know you and Tanya have the skills. This could be big. You in?”

The key said, “Jam Pl Arch” on it. And the woman’s note read, “5/29/88: It's almost over. As soon as we get the treasure, I can finally do away with that damn woman and her leering looks at my Ken. Can't wait to wipe the smirk off that stupid bitch's face.”

Deacon said, “Sal is the merc Mercer hired. Looks like this is part of her team.”

Nora looked around, “Based on how many ferals there are around them, and how many we popped, I’m thinking we may not have a problem after all. But we need to be sure.”

They continued on and found yet another body in the main intersection in town. They also found about 15 ferals. It was exciting, but only Deacon was even scratched, and mainly because he just would not carry a sidearm for close-in work. After injecting Deacon with a Stimpack, they checked the body. He had a holotape log. His name had been Carl Everett, and he’d been hired by Sal to provide staff for her try at the Treasure.

At that exact moment, the ferals from the southeast side of the town decided to attack. This wave was easier to gun down, but Nora saw some more in a run down house that she decided were better killed than left to attack them from behind. Which was lucky because as they swept the rest of Jamaica Plain, Nora realized it would make a good Garrison.

*Even if I’m not the General, I’m still the Deputy Director of the Intelligence Service. And we AND The Minutemen need a facility for keeping an eye on those olive drab sphincters from the Gunners. I need a spot to keep an eye on Quincy. This is it.*

She looked around. The area was highly defensible, but she needed to clear the Church. She knocked out one of the windows and peeked in. Nothing. She turned to Deacon, “Give me a boost in.”

Once she was in, the ferals jumped her.

*Down, and close one, die...again, and now you. Eww. Headshot. Hey that wasn’t me. Piper is shooting. Ok. Last one. And...down.*

She turned and unchained the door. Like the chain had done any good for the man whose body was slumped in one of the rear pews. She pulled an ID card, reading “Alyssa Park” and another holotape. Another log. “Manifest said it was a type-V laser defense grid. Practically military grade. Whatever’s down there, the security’s the real deal. Should be easy enough to let the other’s in, the reactivate the system. Let the turrets deal with them. No need to get my hands dirty.”

*What a batch of sterling, trustworthy people. Time to check the Town Hall.*

When they got inside, again the ferals came, all but oozing from the smallest crannies, but really, no big deals. Less capable teams, could, and obviously HAD, gone down to the sheer numbers of
ghouls in the town, but Nora and her team were not typical wastelanders.

On the second floor they found the last of Sal’s team…Sal herself. Nora nodded at the corpse, and the scrap of paper and holotape found in its hand, “I wonder if she double-crossed herself. It’s about the only planned betrayal I haven’t seen yet.”

She slotted the holotape, “Damn it. Worthless bastards. Scattered like radroaches the moment they saw their first Ghoul. I've spent months prepping for this op. There's no way I'm backing out now. That treasure will be mine. Even if I have to dig it up with my own bare hands.”

Nora pointed at Sal, “Let this be a lesson. Never push a bad situation.”

“You do that all the time, Blue,” Piper observed.

Nora smiled, “Yeah. But I’m a trained professional, Thing…”

The scrap of paper held the mayor's terminal password. ‘Passw0rd’.

Nora just shook her head. First she opened the basement door with the key from the ‘Raider’ couple. After going through the basement area and a small meeting room she found the exhibit entrance. The DIA hadn’t been locked off that well. The hall leading inside was absolutely covered in laser tripswitches. When Nora used it, the Mayor’s ID card from the Church backstabber shut them down.

At this point Deacon gave a low whistle and said, “With this much security maybe there is something to this whole treasure hunt.”

The next step was a console outside the vault door. Entering Sal’s ‘Passw0rd’ produced a series of lights activating and the doors swinging slowly open.

*It looks like a bank vault…or more. I can’t see inside. Push back that door…*

Nora stood in the doorway, jaw dropped. Her eyes took everything in. She felt her friends crowding her. She stepped to one side. She started laughing. It bubbled up, not hysterical, but genuine. She thought of Mercer waiting to get the “Treasure” so he could sell it. She laughed even harder.

She heard Piper, “And now, the story of a lifetime, the fabled treasure of Jamaica Plain…oh.”

Deacon looked around, “All right, you got me you Jamaica Plains Bastards. You got me,” he said a smirk on his lips.

The entire vault, locked up like a BLACKLIST facility? It was a time capsule. There were knick knacks, and one could acknowledge a Revolutionary War era vase, but mainly…junk. Serious junk, plus the vase and a 2077 World Series Bat.

“I'll just take this,” said Nora, taking the vase and wrapping it in a dress, and chucking the bat to Deacon.

“Look at it this way, Thing,” Nora said, “It’s not metaphorical.”

Piper took a long look at her wife and then she, and Nora, began laughing, long silvery peals of pure amusement.

When they got to the surface she called the Castle to let them know there was a spot they might want to explore as a garrison. It was strange, but strangely liberating, to be making recommendations and not issuing orders.
Then Nora and her friends made their way stealthily south. The Vault seemed, by sheer chance, to be in a quarry. Full of Raiders.

*Mm-MMM. Raiders. My favorite!*

*And all lined up along the far wall of that quarry. Almost like…no. EXACTLY like a bunch of targets for killing.*

She turned to Deacon and pointed at the Raiders in the quarry and on the other wall. “Kill every last one of them.”

“Boss. You’ve gotten a little bloodthirsty about them lately….” he started.

“Did I tell you to torture them? No? Then you can assume I’m being merciful,” Nora said.

“If you don’t want to shoot them all Deacon, I’d be happy to use your rifle,” said Piper.

He just started pointing and shooting. “Sheesh. No sense of moderation, you two.”

“Nope,” said Piper, and before too long, any visible Raiders were dead, and Nora was pretty sure she saw a couple running off to the south.

As it turned out the Vault had been entombed beside the quarry. As the three of them eased down a partially collapsed passageway, they found three Raiders trying to break in. Nora gestured for Deacon to take the one across the Vault cavern. There were two Raiders right across a gantry from them, who Nora and Piper dropped simultaneously, and then as the final one turned and looked wildly about, Deacon took the opportunity to shoot him in the exact center of his chest, killing him instantly.

Nora then plugged in her Pip-Boy, and she heard, “What? You have a Pip-Boy? Wait. Are you Vault-Tec? Have you finally come to save me?”

Nora called, “I’m here to help.”

When the Vault finally opened, after screeching and generally setting Nora’s nerves on edge, the voice said, “First, you have to lift the security lockdown.”

Nora looked about. She could see the security office with windows overlooking the vestibule. It was a matter of moments to enter the office and shut down the alarm. After dispatching the feral there.

At that point, the three poked around the rest of the vestibule. They found a door, sealed and powered down. The voice said, “Yes. You must power up the Vault to open that door. Hurry. Hurry.”

The reactor room was on the other side from the security office, and when they opened the door, they found a feral ghoul, one of the bloated charred ones. Once that had been dispatched, they found that switching on power was relatively easy.

At that point they went back to the bulkhead door and pressed the ‘Open’ button. This time it hissed open. Inside was a slim ghoul woman in a Vault suit.

“Oh, thanks heaven…wait…you are not Vault-Tec. How do you have a Pip-Boy?” she asked.

Nora frowned and said, “I’m the only survivor of Vault 111. And you? Have you been in here since the war?”
The woman nodded proudly. “My name is Doctor Valery Barstow. I was to be the Overseer of Vault 88. I was appointed by Doctor Braun himself,” and now Dr. Barstow looked thoughtful, “Vault 111. Vault 111…Ah yes, the cry…” She fell silent.

“Oh, boy…” Piper said under her breath.

Nora just mildly asked Barstow, “Who was Doctor Braun?”

Barstow puffed up a little and said, “Doctor Stanislaus Braun was the head of the Societal Preservation Project and a brilliant man. He designed all the Vaults.”

Nora went on, “And you worked directly for him?”

Barstow nodded, “The work. It’s so elegant. It compels me. The work compels. We must begin, at long last…”

Nora asked one last time, “You enjoyed working for Braun, who designed the whole Vault Program?”

Barstow nodded enthusiastically. Nora raised her pistol and shot Barstow in the face four times and watched, impassively, as the 210 plus year old woman’s head blew apart and her corpse collapsed to the ground.

“What the hell?!” Deacon exclaimed.

Piper reached out and softly rubbed her wife’s back. “That was surprisingly restrained of you, Blue.”

Chapter End Notes

That is meant to be both a little shocking and totally unsurprising because while the sum total of the Vault-Tec Workshop line is blown away in a matter of seconds (like Janet Leigh in Psycho), I’ve only been foreshadowing this for 127 chapters.

Canine and CSIS are using what unclassified documents like FM 2-22.3 Human Intelligence Collector Operations say is a two piece system. The source is rated from A to E, with F for Insufficient history, and the Intel from 1 to 6 (from "Confirmed by Independent Sources" to "Validity cannot be determined"). So Canine is saying her source is Trustworthy, Authentic, and Competent, and the Intel is Logical, consistent with other relevant information, not confirmed. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligence_source_and_information_reliability)
After they left the Vault, Nora got on her radio. As the DD of the CSIS she could still call Vertibirds and she could call artillery. She called the latter, after making her way back around to the far side of the quarry.

She called all units in range to target the tunnel to the Vault. After the first volley, she could see the tunnel mouth had collapsed. She called another. Then after that, another. Then she nodded to herself and walked away without looking back.

Deacon caught up. “Want to talk about what happened back there, boss?”

Piper pulled him aside, “As long as I’ve known Blue, she’s wanted to hold SOMEone responsible for everything that’s happened.”

Deacon might have widened his eyes. No one would know for sure about the eyes, but he said, “Oh! And that woman worked directly for the guy who ran the program that made Vault 111…Ok, I get it. That was as close as she is ever likely to get.”

Piper nodded. “The odds that this Dr. Braun is still alive are low.”

Nora called over her shoulder, “But if he isn’t…and he probably isn’t…I hope he suffered. A lot.”

After they got completely clear of the quarry, Nora used her radio to call for a Vertibird.

When it landed they all piled aboard. As it lifted off looked off to her right from the co-pilot’s seat. Quincy lay over in that direction. Full of Gunners. The CPG was rapidly reaching the point that they could use artillery to harass the location continually.

Nora got on the intercom with the warrant officer flying the ‘bird. “Head for Diamond City please.”

As they flew north towards what was, Nora had to admit, home, she got on the radio for D. “I’m sending Deacon back with my report, but we need to encourage potential Diamond City opponents to head to Jamaica Plain.”

D called back, “Encourage. As in, tell them it’s a good idea.”

Nora called back, “Yes. Once Deacon reports, you’ll understand.”

When Nora arrived, before she did anything, she put a contact marker on Canine’s dead drop location.

Deacon left and Nora was quite far along in making bread crumb cod and asparagus when Canine arrived. Nora took one look at the synth, and added a filet to her dish headed for the oven.

“Cod, Canine. Traditional fish of our people. So prevalent we named a huge section of the state for it.”

Piper smiled, “And put a big wooden one in the statehouse.”

“Cape, Sacred, Aunt Nora’s Bread Crumb Crusted? All cod. I’ll make you some. Then we can
watch ‘Yikes! There’s Blood Everywhere’. It’s a great horror anthology movie,” Nora said.

Piper rolled her eyes, “Or we can watch the Second Reboot of the James Bond series…where they took him back to his grittier roots. He doesn’t always just press the big ‘I Win,” button at the end of every movie.”

Canine said, “I feel like I’m walking into a minefield here.”

The door opened and Ellie and Nick walked in. Piper turned and said, “Movie night after dinner Nick. What’s your poison?”

Nick looked thoughtful. “‘It’s a Wonderful Life’.”

Nora laughed, “God, you love Jimmy Stewart. You are insanely wholesome Nick.”

Ellie said, “‘To Have and Have Not.’”

Nora said, “You just want Ellie to have to watch Bogey be a villain. And a pitiful one at that.”

Canine…Jenny…suggested, “What about the 2056 version of ‘Foundation’?”

Nora looked impressed, “The version that won 6 Oscars? If I had it, Jenny…”

Jenny smiled, snapped a holotape into her fingers.

“Ohh! Sold!” said Nora.

“Blue?”

“I promise you’ll all love it…” Nora said. Jenny just smiled, and Nora said, “You are now my favorite agent.”

Jenny said, “What about Deacon?”

“Who?” Nora said. “If he produces a critically acclaimed adaptation for movie night? Fine. Otherwise, he can continue to infiltrate The Children of Atom. I want to see him disguise glowing in the dark.”

Two and a half hours later, Piper turned to Nora and said, “So basically we just watched an entire planet of Institute dominate their corner of the galaxy?”

“Wellll…” started Nora.

Canine cut in, “You haven’t see the two main sequels, ‘The Mule and the Foundations’, and ‘Foundation’s End’. All you see is ‘Science!’ triumphant. Especially that prick, Mallow. The next two show ‘Science!’ falling flat on its smug face. That’s why I like this series.”

Piper looked doubtful. But Canine said, “I have the other two. You tell me where and when.”

Nora said, “What else did you get out of the Institute with?”

Canine smiled, “The ‘Star Wars’ trilogy, where Luke Skytrader and his friends defeat the Communist Empire. Hmmm. The film adaptation of ‘Cthulhu Undercover’…”
Nora perked up, “The one where the intelligence bureaucracy of Britain and the US deals with the rise of the Lovecraftian Great Old Gods? I have never been happier I rescued someone. If I’d known you had all that, I never would have let you just walk out of Greenetech…”

“I was a big sci fi dork. As much as a synth could be. Hell, half of wanting to leave was so I could just watch the damn movies in peace!” said Jenny.

Nora smiled at Canine, “Well now we have an excuse to meet regularly. No one, least of all D, needs to know the cover is more like reality.”

Nick was smiling at the two of them, the synth with about 2 and a half years of life under her belt, and the 237 year old woman geek out over old movies, and said, “I also have a proposal for my partner.”

Nora’s ears perked up. “Yes?”

“We’ve been hired by Sheila Kowalski Newman. Her brother died recently, and she thinks his son is out there. We’re supposed to find Danny…her nephew.”

Nora and Piper simultaneously said, “I’m in.”

Piper looked at Nora, who said, “Of course we’ll find the boy and bring him to his family.”

Piper nodded in agreement. Nick said, “First thing tomorrow?”

Nora nodded.

When everyone had left and even Nat had gone to bed, raving about how cool it was to have new movies, Nora and Piper went to bed.

Once they were upstairs, Piper turned and looked at Nora. “Sweetie?”

Nora smiled and said, “Yes?”

“I’m ready to try again.”

Piper, after her episode right after Nuka-World, had been taking it slow. Nora, who’d been through something similar herself, had been extremely patient. Because she owed Piper. But mainly because she loved Piper more than anything in the world with the exception of Nat and Shaun.

“Oh. Really?”

Piper bit her lip and nodded, and said, “Maybe a bath?”

Nora nodded, and went up to draw the bath, while Piper went downstairs and got a bottle of wine. Unconsciously, Nora recreated the scene where Piper had tried to seduce her. There were candles in the bathroom and in the bedroom. And she’d laid out her ‘sexy’ lingerie. She planned to send Piper down to the bed, while she got dressed...to undress.

When Piper arrived at the tub with two glasses and an open bottle, she found Nora already naked in the tub, gesturing for her to climb in. Piper smiled, stripped, and lay back into her wife’s arms.

Nora whispered, “I love you, Thing. I’ve loved you since I met you.”

Piper smiled, laid back, turned her head to kiss Nora, then gasped as Nora’s fingers found some particularly sensitive spots. They did manage to not spill water, or the wine. And Piper was very
appreciative of what her wife looked like in her sexy underthings.

And most importantly? Piper had no nightmares. None. She woke up in exactly the position in which she and her wife had fallen asleep…Nora tucked back into Piper’s arms, holding one of Piper’s hands to her cheek.

The next morning, they went out with Nick to the waterfront, that being the last residence of Brian and Danny Kowalski, and started walking along. It was exactly pacified, but it wasn’t wild. There was enough traffic along the waterfront from Bunker Hill to the Castle to cut down on Ferals and Mirelurks. The damned Super-Mutants kept trying to occupy the Custom House. But they were easy enough to skirt.

Nora was still conflicted about killing Super-Mutants. On the one hand killing machines. On the other hand, potentially re-humanizable. So she compromised. She avoided them whenever possible and killed them with no remorse when avoiding them wasn’t feasible.

As they searched the waterfront, they first heard, then saw Danny. He was at the end of a pier, staring out into the wreckage and garbage in the shallows of Boston Harbor. He saw them and exclaimed, “There it is! I see it. Whoa. That was awesome!”

Nora kneeled down to look him in the eye, “You saw something out there?”

He turned to the three of them, eyes wide, and breathlessly said, “Did you see it? The big eye in the water?”

Nick said, “Slow down son, start from the beginning.”

Danny was waving his arms, and said, “There’s a sea monster in the harbor. I saw its big eye poke up out of the water and look around. Hey, do you thinks it’s dangerous? It hasn’t attacked anyone yet, but maybe it’s just waiting.”

Nora shook her head, visions of a Queen, or worse, in her head.

_We’ve got to get Danny out of here before we do anything else._

“And anything that big has got to be dangerous,” she said. Which had exactly the opposite of her hoped for effect. Which went to show that as a mother, she was the mother of a girl and a supremely rational boy. Because Danny’s reaction was something anyone who dealt with twelve year old boys would have expected, “Shit! Really? Think it wants to eat us? That would be so cool. Then you’d have to kill it and leave its guts all over the docks. That would be awesome. ‘Cause then I’d get to see a cool fight.”

Nora rolled her eyes, but Nick knelt down and said, “We’re here to take you to your aunt, Danny. You need to come with us now. I promise we’ll deal with the monster, but not until we bring you back…”

“Aw maaaaan.”

With Danny, their ability to skirt Super-Mutants was severely curtailed, so Nora radioed up a Vertibird, and Danny was partly mollified by getting a flight to Diamond City. When they’d delivered Danny to his Aunt Sheila, and Nick had received payment, and Nora had given Nick her share as well as his, Nora brought them all back to the house, where she pulled out the three Hazmat Suits they’d taken to the Institute.

She handed them out, “For the Harbor. Hopefully it isn’t a Queen.”
They all put the suits on and Nora took her Vertibird right back to the site where Danny had seen the ‘monster’. They made their way to the end of the dock and then slipped into the water, swimming quietly out to sea. The three of them didn’t run into a Mirelurk Queen.

They ran into a conning tower. Of a submarine. The bridge was just barely above water. It was about 3 hours before low tide. The conning tower would stick up maybe three feet at low tide, and be about 9 feet underwater at high tide.

They’d have to be economical with their time inside, or there’d be problems. Nothing that eight or so hours wouldn’t fix, but still. They got into the entry way and stripped off the Hazmat suits. The three of them drew pistols and went into the sub. And found themselves in the conn of a Chinese sub.

Nora recognized the simplified Pinyin pictographs. “Depth”, “Speed”, and so forth on the console nearest her. Then she jumped as a voice said, “You are not a threat…? Come in…” and he switched to Mandarin, “He ping,” the back to English, “Ahhh…peace?”

Nora looked at the speaker. He was a ghoul in a People’s Liberation Army Navy Captain’s uniform…a Hai Jun Shang Xiao. In turn he looked at Nora and his jaw dropped. He said, in Mandarin, “Deputy Third Undersecretary Huang Lien Mei. What on earth are you doing here? And how can you possibly look like that?”

Nora looked at him incredulously. Then she saw the plaque over the ghoul’s head. {SSBN Yangtze}.

“Captain Zhao Heng? You’re here?” she asked, in Mandarin.

“Blue,” said Piper, “What on earth is going on here?”

“Lien Mei? Who are these people? And how is it that you have managed to retain your considerable beauty?” Zhao asked.

Nora turned to Piper, and said, “There’s no easy way to say this. He’s an old boyfriend.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, god. Now I have to manually insert italics tags AND underline tags (to indicate speaking in Mandarin)? Oy!

Some notes on Easter Eggs I've left, though I suppose they're not really Easter Eggs if I just blurt them out. But since they lead to two recommendations for stories you should read? Totally going to.

First, I liked the idea of movie night and inviting Jenny to them. So I could do what I did: “Historical movie, historical movie, movie that doesn't exist, weirdly warped version of movie that DOES exist, another movie that doesn't exist.”

If you have no idea what the Foundation Trilogy (7 books and not counting anymore as Asimov is dead), you should at least read the first five, in order of publication; Foundation, Foundation and Empire, Second Foundation, Foundation's Edge, and Foundation and Earth. Isaac Asimov has a nice spare style. And of the three Grandmaster/fathers of SF, he is neither overfond of obscuratanism (Clarke) or
incest/racism/old man yells at cloudsism (Heinlein, most of which needs taking with a grain of salt and some of which needs burying...every family has an embarrassing uncle who says iffy shit from time time, and Heinlein is SF's Uncle Ned).

Then of course I couldn't resist recasting Star Wars as a story of triumph of capitalism over communism...

But "Cthulhu Undercover" actually refers to Charlie Stross's Laundry Series, which everyone reading this who hasn't read THAT? Drop my crap immediately and read HIM. He's a major spiritual father of this very work, and he has actually 'published' on AO3. A deleted bit (outtake?) from his most recent novel The Delirium Brief that he had to throw out when Brexit effed up his plans for that novel. Yes, a published, 'big name author' posted here, on this very archive. Search for user cstross. Also, stop reading MY crap and read his pure gold.

Finally when Jenny talks about being an artificial person who ran away in part or mostly because she just wanted to watch her movies in peace? The refers to Martha Wells Murderbot Series, starting with All Systems Red. Again...haven't read it? Dump this drivel and go read her.

One of the problems with this quest is that you wouldn't want to open a hatch that's under even six inches of ocean. And I know that oceans are subject to tides. Imagine my chagrin when I checked a tide table for Boston Harbor and found TWELVE FEET OF GOD DAMNED TIDE. So the sail of the Yangtze sticks up 3 feet at low tide and is 9 feet under at high tide and the hatch is above the seas for about 5 hours twice a day, per tide tables.

And as weird as it is for us to say it, the water going elements of Chinese Defense Forces really IS the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)....https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Liberation_Army_Navy
“Blue?”

“Lien Mei?”

“Good lord, will you both give me a sec? One moment, comrade, I must explain to my friends,” Nora said, switching back and forth between English and Mandarin.

Nora turned to Piper, “Somehow Heng, Captain Zhao, has become a ghoul, but I knew him from my time in Beijing.”

Piper nodded. “And your ‘boyfriend’?”

Nora looked a little guilty, “Yeah, about that. I needed an in with the Chinese Admiralty beyond my position…and Heng was….ahhh…very handsome.”

“I understood that…mostly. Thank you. And you remain as unblemished as a freshly plucked lotus. But what is an ‘in’? And how do you speak English so fluently? Is it two hundred years with the Americans? But how have you remained so beautiful while I have become…this?” and Zhao gestured at himself.

Nick leaned back with a smirk, “Nothing like the wife meeting an old flame for the definition of ‘awkward’.”

“You’re not helping, Nick!” Nora said, “And how do you speak Mandarin?”

Nick smiled wider, and said, “I don’t. But what he said is way more than, ‘Long time, no see,’ and Piper isn’t looking too thrilled with her wife at this moment.”

“Lien Mei, what is this Imperialist speaking of? Is this woman,” he gestured at Piper, “Your wife? There were rumors about you and Hua Jiao, but after her tragic stroke, her fiancé came forward with that lovely memorial for her that he had carved himself…”

“Blue, what on earth is this man talking about? He keeps speaking and speaking, and I have no idea what he’s saying,” Piper said.

“I…apologize, most humbly, madam. Do I understand correct? You are wife of Lien Mei?” Zhao asked.

“Who’s Lien Mei?” Piper asked irritably.

Nora raised her hand, “Me. Just hang on one sec, honey. Heng, you must understand, I never meant to hurt you but…I am actually an American. I was sent to get information, but mainly…to kill our enemies.”

She watched him carefully. He was still for a moment, and then began laughing, “Oh this is good joke,” he said in English, “The dedicated Lien Mei, an imperialist spy. What is real reason?”

Nick and Piper looked at him, then over at Nora. After a long pause, Piper said, “You know, it was never really real to me, what you did before the war, until this moment. You really WERE a spy.
You really DID kill people. You really did sleep with this guy for information.”

Zhao Heng listened, and said, “How can this be? It is true?”

Nora looked guilty and started her explanations with her wife, “Honey, up to now, you’ve known that I was married before we got married, and that I’d had lovers, and had used sex to get close to people in China…”

Piper interrupted, “But I didn’t expect to run into your exes, either.”

Nora shook her head, “I promise you I’m as shocked as you are,” and Zhao opened his mouth to speak and Nora looked over, “It was never my mission to kill you, Heng. But don’t you dare interrupt, or I might!”

Nora continued, “Sweetheart, I’ll admit, I liked Zhao Heng. He was nice. At a time when a lot of high ranking Chinese talked about equality of the sexes and practiced grotesque levels of chauvinism? He never treated me as a lesser person. He’s a nice guy, a nice ghoul, I guess now.”

Zhao was barely following the conversation, barely, but Piper gradually relaxed, and Zhao asked, “Lien Mei? This is your….wife?”

“Yes, she is, Heng. I am married to and in love with, a woman,” and she switched to English, “Who is wonderful.”

“Your pardon, madam,” and Heng bowed deeply to Piper, “I am pleased to meet the…woman…who has captured the heart of the…meinu…beautiful Lien Mei. She turned many heads in Beijing. You must be very proud.”

Piper first looked shocked then a bit ashamed. She said, “And I apologize for my suspicion. It is not every day that you meet a 240? 250? year old former boyfriend of your wife.”

“Ahh,” Zhao said, “251 years I am afraid. The years have not been as kind to me as to Lien Mei. But I do not know what is ‘boyfriend’.”

Nora smiled, “Nanpengyou.”

Zhao laughed gently, “Boyfriend? Is that all?”

Nora smiled sadly, “Would you prefer ‘espionage target’ Heng? I am afraid I really was a spy.” Nora broke off for a moment, “Hang on, I have to explain the facts of life to Heng. While I was never really in love, Heng? I was fond of you, and I meant what I said, if you understood. You were nice, and I appreciated you.”

Heng smiled, “I do…understand. I was famous…ahhh…submarine captain. Useful for even a Deputy Third Undersecretary to know.”

“Ok, wait. Hang on a sec. First how come you call him Zhao Heng, and but when you used his rank he was Captain Zhao and you keep calling him Heng?” Piper asked.

Nora opened her mouth but Nick got there first, “In China the order is surname first, given name or names, last. So when PAM told us that Nora was known as Huang Lien Mei, if it were said American style, she’d be Lien Mei Huang.”

“OK,” said Nora. “This is ridiculous. Introductions. Zhao Heng, or Heng Zhao as it were, this is my wife, Piper Wright,” and she gestured at Piper, and Heng bowed very low. Then Nora pointed at
Nick, “This is Nick Valentine, a detective.” And then she pointed at herself, “And I am Nora Erin Wright, the wife of Piper, and pleased to meet you with my real name for a change.”

Then she looked at Heng, “I was frozen, put in cryogenic stasis, just before the Great War, and was woken up late last year. And you flatter me, but that is why I appear young. By the calendar I am 237 years old, but by my body, I am only 27.”

“Ahh,” said Heng. “You have been most fortunate. I have been here on this stranded submarine for all this time.”

Nora nodded, “What happened?”

Heng looked chagrined, “The Yangtze struck a mine while we were launching our missiles. I…made it into the harbor, and ran the Yangtze…aground?”

Nora nodded, “‘Aground’, ”

Heng nodded, “Aground, to spare my crew. But then the…heart, the…What is the word for ‘reactor’?” and Nora said, “‘Reactor’, ” and Heng said, “Xie xie…the ‘reactor’ stopped working. I need parts to take the Yangtze to sea. So here I sat.”

“I am very sorry,” said Nora.

Heng smiled, “But now that you are here, I have idea. I need a piece to get Yangtze’s reactor running again.”

“Why not just come onto shore?” Nora asked.

“I…your pardon, ahhh…Ms. Wright and Mr. Valentine. I want to go home Lien Mei. You are home, but if you were stuck in China, even knowing that everyone you’d loved had died, barring a few exceptions,” and he nodded at Nora, “Wouldn’t you still want to go home and live among your people. If necessary, help rebuild?”

“Strange you should put it that way, Heng,” Nora said, “Because rebuilding is exactly what I’m doing now. I do understand. Were I you I would want to go home too. He would like to go home, Piper, Nick. I’m going to help him. It’s the least I can do given the things I did and had done, when he saw me last.”

“For what it’s worth Blue, I agree. And not only because I’d just as soon have your ex- all the way around the world from here,” Piper said.

Nick nodded, “I don’t even have strangely misplaced jealousy as a reason, and I agree.”

Piper stuck out her tongue, “Partly it’s that she keeps speaking Chinese with him and I don’t understand.”

Heng looked stricken, “It was not my intent, Ms. Wright. I am most embarrassed…”

Piper interrupted, “Pfft. Don’t worry about it. I’m getting over it. No sweat.”

Heng nodded, “I need a…thing…that make the other thing slow down…and…your pardon Madam Wright, but I must use Mandarin. I need a damned dampening coil sleeve for the reactor. There would have been one at the Mass Fusion reactor in central Boston.”

Nora made a face, “Would it have been attached to the beryllium agitator at the facility?”
Zhao Heng perked up, “You know of it?!?”

Nora shook her head, “I arranged to have it blown up. I’m sorry.”

“Even after 210 years you’re giving me bad news?” Zhao asked, but he smiled to take the sting out, “How about the one at Saugus Ironworks? The reactor that heated the forge?”

Nora laughed, “I seem to have missed blowing that one up.”

Heng said, “I’d send you to the Chelsea Reactor, but I actually tried to get that once, a hundred years ago. The reactor is destroyed. But I did find records. As well as wildlife threats such that it was clear I would die if I pressed any further inland.”

Nora nodded and turned to the other two. “Heng needs reactor dampers. There were some in Liberty Prime, but we know he blew up….because we blew him up…but Heng knows of another set, at Saugus Ironworks.”

“Blue…”

“I know. I’ve seen the reports out of the Slog…those ‘Forged’ maniacs. But we don’t have a lot of choice. Heng needs the damper, and frankly, wasting a group of Raiders whose main claim to fame is the number of burns they have themselves, let alone how many people they ‘feed to the forge’ is an idea whose time has clearly come.”

Nick nodded. “I’m sure General Garvey wouldn’t mind the Deputy Director of the CSIS taking a little look. And, if I know you, killing everything in your path.”

“What is the ‘CSIS’ Lien Mei?” asked Heng.

“You know my real name, Heng. And ‘CSIS’ means Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service. I’m still a spy,” Nora said.

Heng chuckled, “How like you. So the dedication, at least, was genuine. And I think Lien Mei is prettier than ‘Nora’, so I use the prettier name for the pretty lady.”

“You are a horrible flirt, Heng,” said Nora then she looked over at Piper then back to Heng, “Stop trying to hit on me right in front of my wife, you lecher.” Nora looked over at Piper, “I forgot to mention the part where he knew he was handsome. And somewhat acted as though he was god’s gift to women.”

Heng said, “Sadly, that is no longer the case.”

“Are you sure you won’t stay? I bet you could charm Daisy’s panties right off her,” said Piper.

“I do not know this ‘Daisy’, but I am tired Madame Wright. I want to go home,” Zhao Heng said.

And finally, Piper’s expression softened entirely. She smiled at him, “I and Nick and Lien Mei,” and she gave Nora an impish look, “Will help you.”

Chapter End Notes

So...much...back...and...forth...requiring underlining.
Also, if my work with various translation sites has lead me woefully astray as I'm sure it has, and there's a native Mandarin speaker who can correct crappy translations? Please let me know what some words should be...that goes for the next two chapters as well...
As they left the sub, in their Hazmat suits, and dropped into the sea, Piper said, “You know, I never thought about it, but hearing a native speaker calling you by your Chinese name? ‘Lien Mei’ is a pretty name, Blue.”

Nora made a face, “It’s the name I had when I did…”

Piper interrupted, “Remember when I tried jumping your bones before I was ready…after Nuka-World? And I had the nightmare? And you seemed like you knew it was going to happen? Hey! You really did think it was going to happen. That’s why you made it all about me and my fun that day, wasn’t it?” Piper shook her head, “Never mind. Anyway, I remember you kept touching me… and I realized in Group you had been trying to desensitize me.”

Nora said, “Just now figuring this out huh?”

Piper laughed, “You’re lucky dunking you does nothing at the moment, Lien Mei. So now, you get to hear your old, frankly pretty, Chinese name from time to time as well as Blue. Until you stop jumping.”

Nora rolled her eyes, but she knew there was no stopping Piper when she was like this. So she simply radioed a Vertibird to fly up to the Slog. When they’d landed, the three of them moved south until they could see Saugus Ironworks.

She called for all available artillery in range, which was The Slog, Greentop, County Crossing, and Taffington’s two batteries. Nora was in no mood to play fair, so she called for three volleys, followed by shifting the target about 100 meters south and pounding the snot out of the building’s roof as well.

Moving into the facility was easy. There were even some recognizable chunks of Raiders. Nora and Piper had become very immune to feeling bad about Raiders, dead or maimed. So the most either of them thought was, ‘I hope it hurt’.

Entering the facility was an experience. The heat, even in the vestibule, was like a physical force. Looking around, Nora could see three raiders. One facing her but not able to pick her out of all the junk in the place, and two walking away.

She targeted the one facing her first. Her shot took him in his neck and he collapsed. She shifted to the second closer Raider, who’d just started turning. She caught the Raider in her lower back, the shot paralyzing her. The final Raider had disappeared. Until he popped up in the area of the forge floor. Whereupon Piper put three rounds in him in less than two seconds. He fell instantly.

They listened carefully. They heard nothing over the hissing and other noises of a functional forge. They moved into the facility, they found that the Raiders had relied on more than just themselves for security. Nora saw, with horror, Piper break a trip wire, and yanked her back, just as a flamethower spouted into the spot where Piper had been. Her hand was reddened but not even blistered, as a result. As they went up to the second floor, the three of them found an office with a
terminal and a door to the other half of the plant.

Nora hacked the terminal easily and the door opened onto another floor. Where the heat went up even more, due to two enormous smelters that were actually filled with molten iron, at over 2,800 degrees. Convection encouraged Nora and her friends to get across the floor as fast as possible to get away from the two unspeakable heat sources.

By now, Nora and Piper had passed through ‘glow’ and stampeded straight to ‘sweating like pigs’, and Nick was experiencing buyer’s remorse over transferring to a basically human body. And the waves of heat coming off of both smelters were baking the Raider coming down the center of the shop floor, but she was still coming. Until Nora shot her.

There was a makeshift ramp up to the second floor offices, which were hot but not unreasonably so. Which was probably why there was a Raider sleeping up there.

*Just for a change it’s not a gift shop.*

Nora slit his throat. It had been the first time she’d had the knife out since killing Gloria. So he had the rare privilege of NOT dying from bleeding out from a neck wound. It did ooze, as the Carotid Artery was a big one, second only to the femoral, but his heart had seized up along with all his other muscles, voluntary and involuntary.


Moving on, without even waiting for the Raider to actually die, Nora was targeted by a turret. But as she was its target, and since she hid behind a desk, Nick easily used his enormous .44 Magnum to blow it to kingdom come.

At that point it was a case of strolling over to the main door to the ‘Primary Smelter and Reactor’.

The three of them stepped through the door, and discovered three things. First was the main smelter, about 20 feet away. Full of molten iron. Second, a Raider in makeshift power armor taunting a young man. The Raider was on a balcony above the smelter. The young man was standing to one side of the smelter, on Nora’s level, in front of someone gagged and tied up…and both of them were sweating profusely.

Third, a level of heat rolling off the smelter that was almost a physical presence. Nora was a fair distance away and it was already oppressively intolerable. She could only imagine what it felt like where the young man and the victim were standing. They’d arrived in mid-conversation.

The victim looked at Nora, Piper, and Nick, his eyes pleading, “They’re gonna kill me.”

*Not again. Not this time.*

The Boss looked at Nora, “Who the fuck are you, and why’d you cut your way through my guys?”

Nora looked up at the Boss, “Oh, were those your guys? I thought they were just trying to throw me a barbecue.”

The Boss laughed, “Ha! I like your style stranger. Been a while since anyone had the guts to talk to me like that. See Jake, here's someone who might actually be worth my time. Unlike you.”

Jake was looking up at the Raider Boss. Nora could make out two more Raiders to either side. The young man was almost begging, which Nora could have told him was a bad strategy, “But- but I brought everything you asked for.”
The Boss looked down and spat contemptuously, which popped and hissed as it hit the molten iron, “Stealing things from your family farm doesn't prove your strength boy. Though this wonderful sword you brought does put me in the mood to give you one last chance to prove your worth. Kill that prisoner and prove that you aren't completely useless.”

Jake looked up at him, “You said we'd be raiding outside of the Commonwealth. These people aren't even a threat to us!”

The Boss glared, “Prove to me that you can kill. It's him or you.”

Jake began muttering, “Oh god, what do I do, what do I do?”

The prisoner began pleading, “Please let me go!”

Nora slipped her finger inside the trigger guard of her rifle, and got ready to kneel.

She looked over at Jake, “Walk away Jake, you don't have to do this.”

Jake looked at Nora and her group, and said, “But if I don't they'll kill me,” just as the Boss said, “This is your final warning, Jake. Do it!”

Jake looked up and shook his head.

The Boss spat again, with the same pop and hiss of steam, “Last chance, Jake. If you don't kill the prisoner before I count to three it's over. One!”

The prisoner moaned, “Help…”

At that moment, Nora knelt and her rifle came up, as Piper who was on her left, shot at the Raider on their left, and Nick, on her right, shot that Raider. The Boss turned to come down the ramp, and as he did so, Nora sighted, and squeezed the trigger. Her first round ricocheted off his chest plate, but he staggered, and her next shot entered his right ear. He dropped, instantly.

Nora and her group waited a moment, and then a Raider emerged from the back, and began shooting. All three of them opened fire, dropping her immediately.

Jake was untying the victim, “I'm sorry. Let me get you out of here.”

The man stood up when Jake cut his bindings and moved away from the oppressive heat. He looked at Nora, Piper, and Nick, and said, “Thank you so much. I thought I was dead.”

Nora smiled and handed him some food, water, and stimpacks, plus about a hundred caps. Then she grabbed a pipe gun from one of the dead Raiders and gave it to the man.

After she’d done so, she gave him directions to head north to The Slog, and let them know what had happened. He nodded and left. Quickly, as if he couldn’t believe his good luck.

Jake watched all of this, then said, “Did my family send you?”

Nora shook her head, “No. We’re here for the dampening coils, actually.”

Jake looked surprised and said, “Oh! Ok, come on, follow me. The generator is just over this way.”

He led them to the back. Going past the main smelter verged on, but didn’t cross over into ‘painful’ but it was far from pleasant. When they got to the back, Jake pulled out a feeder tube in a slot, and said, “Slag needed those dampening coils to get the blast furnace running. You should be able to just
Nora wrapped her hands in thick rags, then put the coils in a separate leather satchel. The four of them left the room. When the door closed, as hot as the main plant was, it felt like air conditioning. The small group made their way back out of the facility and when they got outside, it actually felt cold for a while.

Jake turned to them and said, “Look, I should probably try to go home and make amends. I know I've got no right to ask... but I think if you're there to help explain, things with my Dad would go easier.” He handed Nora the sword that Slag had been waving around, and added, “I bet if you bring my Great Granddad's sword, he'll make it worth your while. He always tries to deal fair with people.”

Nora sighed, and nodded. Luckily, Finch Farm was just a twenty minute walk south from the Ironworks. It was about as far north of the Revere Satellite Station as Country Crossing had been south. When they arrived, a man came running out with a gun, “I told you Forged maniacs to...” he came up short when he saw Nora and her friends, but his face clouded back up when he saw Jake. “What the... Boy I told you that if you ever showed your face here again I'd-“

Jake said, “Papa, please. I- I know I screwed up pretty big.”

Jake’s Father said, “I don't care what you ‘know’. I told you-“

He was interrupted again, this time by a woman Nora presumed was his wife, and Jake’s mother, “Abraham Francis Finch, that is enough!”

Jake tried to speak, but she cut him off too, “Shut up Jake. If I hear anything out of either of you, you'll both be peeling tatoes for the next year. I have watched you two go at it for years and tried to let you sort it out for yourselves,” and she turned to Abraham, “Abraham, your son is a grown man and if you expect him to act like one then you'd better stop treating him like a child.”

As Piper whispered in Nora’s ear, “I like her,” Jake’s mom turned to him, and said, “Jake, your father and I have been out there and we know it can be dangerous. We just want to make sure you are prepared.”

Then she put her hands on her hips, and quite clearly and definitively closed the case, “There. It's over. And if I hear another word about it from either of you, so help me...”

Abraham looked over at the three, “She's right. I've been a fool. There's no way I can thank you enough. I think you should hang onto that sword. It'd put a smile on Granddad's face to know it was being used to help people.”

Nora shook her head, “We can’t take your family heirloom away, I insist. Besides,” and she held up her rifle, “They never get into sword range anyways.”

He laughed and Nora said, “But how come you never joined the CPG? You're practically surrounded,” and she pointed north at The Slog, and south to Country Crossing.

He looked baffled. She pointed at the Revere Satellite Station. “Surely you saw when we cleared that place out?”

He shook his head, “I thought it was Raiders, or worse, Gunners, tangling with them Super Mutants. We don’t get out much. Safer that way.”

Nora laughed and shook her head, “Well, the CPG is here,” and she radioed someone from The Slog.
to set up a trade caravan. “If you want to join, fine, otherwise there’s a Minuteman Garrison at Taffington Boathouse and CPG settlements at The Slog, County Crossing, Nordhagen, and Bunker Hill.”

Abraham looked surprised, “You got Bunker Hill to join?”

Nora nodded, “Yep. You’d be shocked at who’s a part.”

Piper interrupted, “Can I get an interview on how you feel about hearing about the new CPG and Minutemen?”

Abraham looked confused, “I guess so…,” and his wife came out saying, “If you’re gonna interview him, you gotta interview me. I’m Abigail Finch.”

Piper smiled and took the two of them off for an interview, while Nora called a Vertibird. After about twenty minutes, the Vertibird arrived and five minutes later Piper showed up, “You won’t believe the quote I got from Abraham when he realized that was OUR Vertibird!” she said, laughing.

“Did it involve words Cait taught Nat, that Nat is now teaching Shaun?” Nora asked.

“You bet your ass, Lien Mei!” Piper said, laughing.

Chapter End Notes

More evidence that for Piper and Nora the only good Raider is a dead Raider.
After the Vertibird arrived and they flew over the Yangtze, Nora realized the tide had covered the conning tower, and the bridge hatch wasn’t going to budge for about the next eight hours and even then that would mean swimming around in potentially Mirelurk infested waters at night, so they flew back to Diamond City to head back to the Yangtze at daybreak the next day.

When they got back, Nick called Ellie over to visit, while Piper had a field day with Nora. First she kept calling her Lien Mei, and when Ellie arrived, informed her of the Lien Mei issue. Nora was privately getting a little irritated with her wife when Piper went over the top and suggested Chinese food for dinner.

Nora, who had hidden from Piper that as far as Nora was concerned it had exceeded teasing a while back, simply growled, “You are an uncultured turtle’s egg, Piper!”

Piper who'd heard a stream of Mandarin, said, eloquently, “Huh?”

“I said you were an uncultured turtle’s egg. Do you have to make fun of me? Here, now I’m speaking Mandarin and you have no idea what I’m saying. I am so angry with you right now….” Nora was spitting out.

“She called you a turtle’s egg? I didn’t understand all of that, but I know ‘turtle’s egg’ is not good. Apologize to your wife.”

“You speak Mandarin? How?” Nora asked.

“There was a couple in Goodneighbor, where I grew up, who were descended from the Chinatown area south of the Common. Piper is not a ‘turtle’s egg’!”

“Blue?” Piper said.

Nora blushed and said, “I’m sorry Thing. Your needling was bothering me, but instead of saying anything, I used a dirty word for you…turtle’s egg.”

Piper looked confused, and looked over at Ellie, who put up her hands and said, “I only know she said something nasty, not exactly what it meant.”

Nora sighed, “Turtles are seen as sexually promiscuous in China. I called you turtle’s egg, which might be translated as ‘bastard’…illegitimate child…or in this context, ‘bitch’. I’m sorry Piper. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

Piper stood stock still and then started laughing, “I think it’s great. First, it’s one of the few times we’ve really pissed each other off…I hated all the Mandarin on the sub with Heng Zhao, and now I ticked you off teasing you. I think it’s a healthy sign. If we always agree and never fight it means one of us isn’t saying what she’s really thinking or tip toeing around the other. Second…turtle’s egg? You really are turning Chinese right in front of me…”

Nora laughed, “OK, deal. But whenever you call me Lien Mei get ready for a stream of Mandarin. And of course I’m turning Chinese. You keep making me bring up old habits.”
Then she raised a finger and came back 20 minutes later, with wild garlic and some soy sauce salvaged from a grocery and rice brought up via caravan from Old Virginny, and began making chicken and mushroom stir fry. Piper asked Nora what she was doing, and Nora smirked and said, “I’m making my foreign barbarian wife chicken and mushroom, because she’s a smart ass.”

Ellie just giggled at that. Shortly after that, Nora finished and served it up. “Foreigner is lucky the dedicated Lien Mei loves her.”

Nora then put on a display of Chinese manners, bossing Piper around when she committed a faux pas, becoming offended when Piper took the head seat, criticizing the “American” way she held her chopsticks, and generally rubbing her wife’s nose in Chinese cultural differences until Piper, laughing, said, “Ok Blue, Ok!! Uncle!”

“Invoking your ancestors won’t save you…Ok it will, but still,” and then Nora relented and they spent the rest of the meal enjoying a simple meal made by Nora, somewhat authentically.

When everyone had left and the kids were in bed, Piper led Nora up to bed, and got undressed, and then turned and undressed Nora and laid down by her and then said, “I really do apologize for teasing you. Now let me make it up to you.”

Nora said, “You don’t have to make up any---“ then she gasped and didn’t make coherent sounds for a while.

A little bit later, Piper leaned up over Nora, and Nora watched Piper’s body move delightfully. “Nora?” she started.

“Mm-hmm, babydoll?” Nora answered.

“What would I call you as my wife, what’s a Chinese endearment I could use?” Piper asked.

Nora thought for a second, and said, “Well there’s Lesbian Wifey and then there’s Lesbian Dearie.”

Piper listened and said, “Tongzhi Laopo and Tongzhi Chin? Why do both start with Tongzhi?”

Nora smiled, “Well, because Lesbian,” and she pronounced it clearly, “Is colloquial Mandarin for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’…it originally and still means ‘comrade’ as well.”

Then she smiled and also pronouncing the words clearly said, “Wifey is Mandarin for wife, but not formal. Like ‘wifey’ or a playful ‘better half’ sort of thing. While Dearie is more like ‘dearie’, or ‘babydoll’ or something similar. Condensed down from the formal Dear which can also mean ‘darling’, when used as a noun.”

“So I can call you Tongzhi Laopo, or Tongzhi Chin, or even Tongzhi Chinai De? Can I leave off the Tongzhi?” asked Piper.

Nora shrugged, “If you want. It’s not like the few people who know Mandarin around here won’t notice we both have tits, even though yours are nicer than mine.”

“I like yours just fine, Lien Mei,” Piper said, and proved it by kissing one, then she snuggled up. “We have an early morning getting your ex on the road. Let’s not keep him waiting.”

The next morning Nora radioed up a Vertibird. It still had to land outside the city.

That’ll change. Soon I think. Canine tells me we’re close.
They all flew out to the dock and since Nora could see that the Yangtze’s sail just barely broke the surface, the three clambered aboard and then stripped off the Hazmat suits and entered the conn. Captain Zhao was waiting.

“That took quite some time, my lovely lotus blossom. I was concerned that you had perished. What a tragedy that would have been…”

At this point Piper came forward and pointed her finger in Zhao Heng’s face, “Don’t think I can’t see what you’re up to. She is MY laopo, and you’d do well to remember that, you 255 year old…ghoulified…communist…Casanova! She is not common property. She is MINE.”

Zhao stared at her for a moment, and then laughed, “You are right, Madame Wright. I have been terribly…discourteous. I have been rude.”

“Fine. Now that my wife has had a chance to put your ‘girl in every port’ self in his place….we need to get started. I have the dampening coils.”

Zhao smiled, “Now we need additional fissile material.”

Nora rolled her eyes, “Uggg. Where are we going to get that?”

“Blue?” Piper started.

“Sorry, technical talk. We need fuel for the reactor,” Nora said.

Piper groaned, “Uggg. Where are we going to get that?”

Heng said sadly, “It is on the Yangtze. There was one…ahhh…damn…one of my strategic SLBMs failed to fire. It is still in its launch tube and the primary has more than enough fissile material to keep the Yangtze functioning for a decade. I apologize, Madame Wright. I do understand that it is rude to keep you out of the conversation, but I must convey complex ideas, and Lien Mei is a native…ahhh…I guess not so native but fluent speaker.”

Nora added, “There’s a nuclear missile aboard that never launched, and its warhead has enough material to run the reactor. But Heng seems bothered by something.”

Heng nodded. “It is true, my crew…my family is between us and the…ahh…nuclear room…not the reactor…the SLBM storage and maintenance compartment.”

Nora nodded, “The missile room.”

Heng nodded, “The crew is…like me…a ghoul…but dangerous..violent.”

Nora looked sadly at Heng as Piper said, “Blue, what’s ‘jiang shi’? Is it ghoul?”

Nora nodded, and then said to Heng, “I am terribly sorry that your crew has been affected but, surely you understand that once the radiation destroys their brains, there is no coming back?”

He smiled sadly, “I do understand, Lien Mei…no wait, you will always be Lien Mei to me…and I am asking my good friend, my companion Lien Mei, to do something I could never ask another person. Please give them peace. I cannot, yet it must happen.”

Nora nodded, “I will, Heng. I promise.”

He bowed, “Thank you.”
Nora turned, and said to Piper and Nick, “So we go down, through the reactor and then crew compartments, then to the missile compartment, find the remaining thermonuclear weapon and pull the primary. Bring it back here, and install it. And we kill every feral we find. Heng asked me for this favor. Make it quick if you can.”

They both nodded, and they went down several ladders, and ended up in the main pressure hull, looking at the reactor room. Heng said, “I will remain here, and prepare the reactor. Good luck.”

The three moved into the reactor where the shielding had apparently decayed over the last 200 years, or been cracked by the mine that beached the sub, and as Nora’s Geiger began crackling, they put the cumbersome Hazmat suits back on. In the tight passageways of the sub, it wasn’t ideal, but better than radiation sickness.

As they moved through the reactor and into the engineering office space, Nora gestured at a hatchway. “That leads to the missile room too, but I promised Heng to do this for him, so we go through the mess and then the bunking area. Kill them all.”

And they did. Three crewmen in the mess, one climbing out of the freezer. Then through the mess to the crew compartment. There were five spread through that area. There were additional skeletons… not everyone exposed to radiation ghoulfied, most simply died. Off of the crew compartment were two additional spaces, the master at arms compartment, and the infirmary, which yielded a fair amount of medical supplies.

“Going to give those to Heng?” asked Nick.

Nora smiled behind her face shield at Nick, “I know you’re going to be shocked, shocked to discover that Chinese Communism didn’t abolish human nature, but this is the enlisted infirmary. There was also an officer’s aid station forward and near officer’s compartments at the conn. I’m sure that’s where Heng has been taking care of himself.”

“You mean all that propaganda about the evil Chinese Communists wasn’t all bullshit?” Nick said, sarcastically.

“It was probably about as much bullshit as all the stuff about how great it was in the US…,” Nora said, “With plebeian food and resource riots, and military checkpoints in major cities. I know me and Nate had it lucky as a vet and his lawyer and spy wife in a suburb, with secure power and food. Doesn’t mean we didn’t take advantage…just that we didn’t lie to ourselves about how good we had it.”

She shook her head inside the helmet, “Doesn’t much matter if being on top meant spouting Marxist rhetoric while knifing rivals in the back or grubbing any money available while knifing rivals in the back, the people on top of each system were assholes. We need to try and avoid that in the Commonwealth.”

Nick smiled crookedly in his own helmet, “Planning on abolishing human nature are we?”

Piper interrupted, “Just make sure the press stays free and it’ll be fine.”

“That’s what one of my reporter buddies said back before…,” Nick started.

Nora interrupted, “It won’t hurt, but we should see what we can do to cut down on incentives for the corruption too.”

They checked the master at arms’ small arms compartment, which had a number of pistols and a few rifles, plus ammunition. Piper looked around, “Wasn’t this a warship?”
Nora laughed and said, “It was a ballistic missile sub. These are here to protect the launch codes. This thing ‘fought’ by launching thermonuclear weapons at cities, sweetie.”

They went down the next set of ladders and made their way through a laundry, and more crew compartments, dispatching another four of Zhao Heng’s old crew. Then in the missile room, a Glowing One attacked. All three of them fired over and over, as its radiation pulse barely made an impression on the Hazmat Suit shielding. When the Glowing One went down, it was easy to determine which of twenty tubes was still loaded.

Getting the inspection hatch open, and the missile shroud off took some time, as did extracting the primary of the warhead. At some point Piper, sweating in her suit as she executed another of Nora’s peremptory commands, asked, “How do you know this shit, Blue?”

Nora replied, “My last official target for BLACKLIST was a weapon designer. I hid a bomb in his prototype. You think that didn’t involve understanding how to disassemble these fucking things? While they’re not all identical, they are pretty similar. Because they all do the same thing, ride a missile or fall from a plane and blow big cities off the map.”

Finally, they had the warhead extracted and the explosives stripped away. The radiation was considerable even through the suit, so they didn’t linger, but hustled back to the reactor, which Zhao had already prepped. Nora carefully inserted her salvaged dampers, then settled the primary’s pit into the slot Zhao had modified for it.

Then all three of them left the reactor room proper, closed the safety hatch, and stepped into the reactor control room. Heng was checking readouts that only he or Nora could read, and only he understood, while Nora handed RadAway to Nick and Piper, as well as popping one herself. Finally Heng gave a satisfied grunt, and flipped a switch.

The Yangtze immediately began humming. Heng relaxed. “Was not sure my beautiful Yangtze hold together. But we did it. No difficulty I trust?”

Nora smiled, “No sweat. The radiation did give me super-powers though. X-ray vision. Love the leopard print g-string.”

“Over two centuries and two things still true; you are lovely lotus blossom, and you have awful sense of humor,” Heng said, and Piper burst into laughter.

“This is our final farewell, Huang Lien Mei. Nora Erin Wright. Be well,” then Heng looked at Piper, “Be happy. Build a family and have a beautiful future. Both of you.”

Piper surprised Nora, Heng and herself by kissing him on the cheek, and saying, “I hope you get home, Heng.”

Chapter End Notes

It's amazing what you find when you Google "Insults in Mandarin".
When they were halfway back to Diamond City the Vertibird banked hard left and almost reversed course, settling on a heading directly for The Castle.

Nora looked up and noticed two things, they’d reversed course and that the pilots in the Minutemen had gotten really good at coordinated banks. When the ‘bird landed on what was now a full-fledged landing pad that had been created with landfill and rubble, Nora realized she was standing right about exactly where the Mirelurk Queen had died 7 months and a lifetime ago.

When she’d alit, a Minuteman took her, and Nick and Piper up some stairs and into the West Bastion. What had been a simple chamber had been reconfigured into a security check while a reception area lay to the right. There was a nicely made, newly constructed door into what had been the armory. As Nora and her companions swept past, the receptionist stood up, and tried to stop Piper and Nick from going any further.

Before she could even draw breath, Nora heard D’s voice from inside her office, “The Deputy Director can clear anyone she damn well wants, and her wife and best friend were in Railroad Headquarters when we were on the run. Get out of their way!”

Nora, Piper, and Nick walked into D’s office. The first thing Nora noticed, was…

“Holy shit! It looks like M’s office from the films!” Piper exclaimed.

D looked rueful, “It seems you’re not the only Bond fan around here, Piper. I drew the line at accents, and that took work. Sit. Please.”

Nora sat, and said, “Ok, what gives? We just finished some really remarkably old business of mine and were headed home when we were diverted.”

D nodded. “My fault, I’m afraid. Canine was on the radio about an hour ago. The Diamond City Council this morning voted to join the CPG.”

Nora looked ecstatic, “Well that’s the, forgive the pun, ballgame. Why divert me, though?”

D shook her head, “The City Council wants to negotiate terms, including the basic structure of the CPG. And you, despite giving up your position as General, despite never actually holding a political office, and despite the fact that you’re the Deputy Director of the CSIS is none of their damned business, the second you walk through those gates, they will be all over you trying to get you to commit to things.”

“As both your boss, and I hope your friend, I couldn’t let you walk in without knowing that,” D finished.

“Jesus. I didn’t think it all the way through. You’re right and thank you,” Nora said, “I need to radio Codsworth and have he and Ellie take care of the kids. Because none of us can go back until the CPG has an official position. Which also means we need to have a Council meeting. It should include you, and if Canine can get loose, she needs to head for Sanctuary.”
Nora left, but on her way out the door she had another thought, and turned to the officious young man who’d tried to stop her from entering and said, “You get on the radio, and you tell John Hancock to get ready, cause I’m picking him up in 20 minutes, just outside Goodneighbor’s gates. And I mean you personally. Now!”

And with that, the three of them left for the Vertibird pad. They boarded the Vertibird and gave the pilot instructions to head to Goodneighbor. When they landed, Hancock wasn’t there yet, so they waited a bit. In the distance they could hear the slapping, rattling noise of automatic gunfire. Nora shook her head. “This area is going take forever to pacify, let alone civilize. There’s just too god damned much territory, too many buildings, too much rubble. I love this city and I hate this city.”

Piper looked around and shrugged, “It’s home, Blue. Love it or hate it. It’s home.”

Nora looked over and said, “I know, Thing. Doesn’t mean I don’t look at the scale of the problem sometimes and wonder what the fuck I was thinking.”

Piper laughed, “All I ever tried to do is publish a paper, and I’m in the same boat. I’d be shocked if it weren’t worse for you.”

Nick pointed, “Here comes Hancock.”

John came strolling up. “You caught me in the shower. You owe me.”

Nora said, “I plan to pay up,” and she tilted her head towards the ‘bird, “Hop on. We’ll talk on the way.”

When everyone was settled and the Vertibird was climbing, as John watched the side of Mass Fusion sliding down his window, he said, “Ok, what’s so fucking important sister?”

“Diamond City is ready to join,” started Nora.

“But being the largest concentration of people and economic clout they have a few ‘notes’ they’d like the CPG to address, yeah?” John finished for her.

Nora nodded, and said, “We knew we’d have to make some decisions eventually. You and Marcy have the largest settlements, and I know that from time to time it drives her nuts that Somerville’s 20 people have exactly the same vote as her.”

John laughed, “Or me. I may be the one of the newest, but Goodneighbor is also arguably the largest.”

“We’re not talking your network of sharp dressed gangsters John, just the people who call Scollay Square home,” Nora said.

John laughed, “Ok, one of the largest, then.”

“But yes, you also have as much reason to be a dick as she does. We have to make the council more democratic. But at the same time the tiny little places have a right to worry too. Over a hundred years before the Great War the US added a layer…the Commonwealths. The idea being to aggregate the smaller population states into Commonwealths of roughly equal size, but they never really achieved that condition because they also tried to ensure some kind of geographic commonality,” Nora said.

She shook her head, “So we’re right back to the ‘state sovereignty’ versus democracy problem. And now, with Diamond City getting ready to join, we have no choice but to finally deal with it.”
Hancock leaned back, “So you need my help desperately, don’t you?”

Nora shook her head. “No. Of course not,” then she abruptly began nodding, “Oh fuck, yes. Yes, we do. John, tell me you have a rabbit to pull out of your hat. Some kind of blackmail material. Something.”

He laughed and shook his head, “Of course the second ranking spy in the Commonwealth thinks she can blackmail and manipulate her way to success. No wonder you keep falling flat on your face when you try to build anything.”

Nora looked at him, as they descended into Sanctuary Airfield, and he added, “You’re great at your part…breaking things so they can be put together right. You’re just not as good at the putting together part. But, hey…you have me now. There’s a reason Goodneighbor works, and it’s not because I blackmail opponents. It’s because I know how to find win-win deals.”

They left the aircraft and began walking, “So what’s the win-win? And how do we avoid the problem with regions of different sizes, and…” Nora said.

“Whoa sister, slow down. I just got here,” John said.

Nora subsided. “All right, but tomorrow everyone will be here. I suppose I ought to cancel D traveling. The last thing that the CPG needs is skullduggery at the start. I seem to be growing up, huh?”

John laughed and said, “Everyone does eventually sister. Wait! Bring D, or rather, have D bring PAM. We’ll need her. I don’t think we want her designing the government, but she can analyze potential pitfalls of things we suggest.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of that, John. Marcy’s right. You’re twisty, but just the right kind and amount,” Nora finished.

By the next day the various representatives had arrived and the meeting started. In addition, D was there as PAM’s caretaker, Piper was there to record the event and Nora was there because someone up there didn’t like her. Marcy opened the meeting with a brief synopsis of the problem, and the reps from Somerville and Nordhagen objected to any changes to the CPG Structure.

The rep from County Crossing said, without even looking up from his briefing papers, “I swear to god, Walter, if you claim to be objecting to changes to the CPG charter because it isn’t being done properly, and without admitting that Nordhagen is second only to Somerville in how small it is, I’ll not only throw you out the window, I’ll follow it with a damn anvil.”

Marcy raised her hands, “Look. We all know that the current structure is unstable, and was an emergency way of handling issues while we were trying to deal with the damned Institute. Well they’re gone, and it’s time to create an actual nation. First order of business before we even start, I propose that whatever form the government takes, we agree that it requires ratification of two thirds of all settlements to take force. With 17 settlements, that means we must have 11 settlements to form the Commonwealth of New England. Again.”

Marcy looked around, “Opposed?”

Nordhagen, Somerville, and Oberland Station raised their hands.

Marcy said, “Three opposed. Lady, gentlemen? You’re committed.”

“Point of order, we know how many oppose. I submit that until we know that 11 settlements agree
“Goddamnit Walter,” started the County Crossing rep.

Marcy shook her head, “No Hank. He actually has a point. Those in favor?”

Fourteen hands went up.

“And if we don’t want to join but it’s ratified anyway?” said the Somerville rep.

Kessler looked over, “First, there’s always force. Let’s be blunt, it’s always on the table. But I don’t think we’d need to use any. You’re awfully close to the Glowing Sea and Gunner Headquarters there. And others have similar threats. And of course, I can personally assure you, trade and commerce to the settlements would stop.”

“That’s blackmail!” the rep from Somerville exclaimed.

“Only if the rest of us agree to form the nation and you decide to be an intransigent asshole,” said John Hancock. “Look,” he went on, “It’s not like we’re going to run roughshod over the smaller settlements, because 11 settlements have to agree in the first place. You can assume that you’ll get a reach around. And I never liked being The Man, but if you guys push it, I’ll do it. Ask Nora Wright.”

Nora thought back to those first few days above ground, and the staring contest she’d had with John over a rapidly cooling corpse. She nodded.

John looked around. “So Nora outlined the problem and I’ve been thinking…I’ve read about the old US government and the two parts of the legislature. And three branches. And I’ve read other political theory books that survived the war. So let me tell you my thoughts.”

He started pacing as the others watched. “First, there were two chambers because of exactly what we face today. Small settlements don’t want to get steamrolled, and big ones don’t want eight tiny settlements with fewer people than the top one settlement to constantly override the concerns of most of the people with their own petty, in both senses of that word, wishes.”

He looked around the table and smiled, “And brothers and sisters, if you ever got ahold of history book you know that exactly that happened all the fucking time back when. So last night it’s going round and round in my head, and it occurs to me that the old US Senate’s two main problems were they constantly needed more than just majorities, and they could propose laws. So you had two competing power centers that always had to agree. One of which always had to have a super-majority. Recipe for disaster. Unless doing not a god damn thing was what you wanted.”

“So I’m up pacing around like a guy who just found out his girlfriends both found out about each other, and it hits me,” he whipped round, and said to the Somerville rep, “Quick and without thinking about it, why are you worried?”

The Somerville rep looked baffled and then said, “We don’t want to be forced to do something or accept a law that’s forced on us by a bunch of people who don’t share our concerns.”

Now John whirled and said to The Starlight Drive-In rep, “And you. Why don’t you want one settlement, one vote?”

The rep leaned back, “Because we don’t want the government led around by its nose to satisfy a tiny
number of people.’

John laughed. “That was exactly what I thought, brothers and sisters. So how about this? The equal representation chamber…whether we call it the Senate, or the Council, or the damn House of Horrors…has one and only one function. To say no. If half plus one of that chamber say no to something, it doesn’t happen. They can’t propose laws or do anything of the sort. Just agree or oppose.”

Kessler said, “What about something that most people want, but 9 tiny settlements say no to?”

“We have an override. Say, two thirds of the common chamber. Hey we can call that the Commons, like the Brits did. Which is appropriate.”

“Why,” said Marcy.

“Because there’s no executive either. No president. Back when they did the US Constitution some of the people writing it back then talked about having no executive, and they were argued down by people worried about what other countries would think about a country with no ‘king analog’. I say fuck the other countries,” John said.

“So who runs the government?” asked Walter.

“A prime minister appointed by the Commons. Look, I thought about this a lot. One thing we know from what BoS records Nora got from the Prydwen, was that pre-war government was not responsive to the people. And I think a lot of that was because the folks in the old US stopped thinking of the government as them.”

John was really getting warmed up now. He clearly cared way more than he let on about a government working. In Goodneighbor it was hits of Jet, but making sure of being in touch with ‘folks’ was important to him. ‘Of the people, for the people’ was more than just a cynical cover, even if the ghoul dandy was awfully cynical.

He wasn’t even seeing the council as he paced. “It was right there in the document…’We, The People’. But somewhere in there the morons stopped thinking of the government as their collective will, as fucked up as it might be from time to time, and started thinking of government as ‘them’ every time a few malcontents didn’t get their way. And I think I know why.”

He came back to himself. “Because there was a ‘President’. It was easy for the legislators to pretend that when something unpopular got done it was because ‘they’ did it, with the Presidency fought over as the way to manage ‘they’ and get the spoils, while pretending it wasn’t really their responsibility. Parliamentary systems didn’t have that problem. They had their own issues, but not that one. Being able to force elections helped too. When you’re elected to a term of no more than 4 years, but it could only be a couple weeks before there was another election? Couldn’t take the people for granted.”

“I suppose you would eliminate courts too, John,” observed Kessler acerbically.

“Oh hell no,” he exclaimed, “And not just because Nora would kill me. No, there has to be a Supreme Court. Members appointed by the PM. Responsible for judging Commonwealth laws.”

He looked around the room, “Because as much as you assholes think I rule Goodneighbor by force? I don’t. I do it by being the impartial court. There’s a lot of folks in Goodneighbor that’d just settle everything with gunplay, if they didn’t think it just works better to go along to get along. Because I don’t play favorites. That’s a court.”
Marcy had been scribbling notes. She looked up and said to Piper, “Check me on my summation.”

Then she said, “Two branches, Legislative and Judicial. Executive functions handled by a Prime Minister and her cabinet, who will run the bureaucracy. Two chambers, Commons that can propose laws and taxes and is elected to represent the people directly and in proportion to population, and a Senate or Council, appointed by Settlements with each Settlement equally represented with only the power to withhold consent?”

Piper gave Marcy a ‘thumbs up’. John said, “Where did I say ‘bureaucracy’? I didn’t say that.”

Marcy smiled, “Oh, John. There’s going to be a bureaucracy. You get humans together in a large enough group and you either get fistfights or bureaucracy. I prefer paperwork to contusions. Anything else?”

“I was toying with direct representation as well. If 1,000 people vote for you, you have 1,000 proxies. It’d get rid of the problem where a district is 55 to 45 all the time, and almost half the people in that district are never represented and more importantly, feel that they are never represented. If you vote by proxies, you know your guy is YOUR guy. Or gal,” he said as Piper gave him the evil eye.

Marcy looked up, at the Assaultron across the table from her. “PAM?”

“Various proposals similar to what John Hancock states have been proposed before, and this unit analyzes that taken together his proposal has a high degree of potential stability,” PAM stated. “If proportional representation avoids feelings of estrangement, as cited by John Hancock, the structure would indeed be meta-stable and able to handle shocks along multiple sociological axes.”

“How stable?” asked D, unable to restrain herself further.

“Assuming flexibility in updating the charter by a mechanism requiring super-majorities, but not excessive ones? Three times more sociologically stable than the former United States.”

Marcy looked around the table, “I’m NOT asking for ratification. Just in using this as a starting point. All those in favor of using this as the basis for negotiation with the Diamond City Council.”

The motion carried 15 to 1.

The County Crossing rep saw the vote, “Walter, god dammit! That is it. I’m talking with the Nordhagens.”

Chapter End Notes

I think this may be the single longest title I’ve come up with.

Also, with regard to the facts and figures listed here? 69% of all statistics are made up.

Interesting historical note, the US Constitution required 2/3s assent. Given how it treated slaves you’d think they have only required 3/5s, but they went for the more stringent "white people" standard.

https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-day/ratification.html

The last meaningful ratification was New Hampshire in 1788.
The last state to ratify was Rhode Island in 1790. They did so under threat of being treated as a foreign state by the others. Proving that Kessler was right. Force is always an option.

All of which is weird, because the REAL model for the Commonwealth of New England's government? The nation of OLD England. Not including the monarchy. The Council/Senate has functions much more akin to the House of Lords (minus amending laws) than the US system, and of course Hancock makes the parliamentary system obvious by calling it Commons.

The next day, after considerable wrangling about what should be done, with actual disputes, especially over three versus two branches and at least one semantic dispute as far as Nora knew…a particularly heated exchange over whether a Prime Minister and their cabinet was a de facto Executive, “No matter what rhetorical flourishes John Hancock puts on it,” or not.

But the most important thing, in Nora’s opinion, was that the whole CPG Council had been shaken out of the complacency that they didn’t actually have to form an actual government.

*Maybe I am a breaker rather than a builder. I actually think it's more important to get them out of the rut than what course they end up on in the end.*

A delegation including Marcy, John, Connie Abernathy, Kessler, and the delegate from Somerville traveled to Diamond City. John and Kessler represented the other Central Boston power players, Connie the rural Commonwealth, Marcy the larger Settlements, and Drew from Somerville the small ones.

And D had been 100% correct. The second Nora walked through the gate, reps from the City Council were accosting her, only to be brushed back by Nick and John Hancock. John, especially, was effective as both a rival city representative and as a potentially threatening ghoul. A couple times in the first ten minutes he started moaning low in his throat, and whatever officious jerk was trying to harass Nora would back off. Rapidly.

Nora quickly made arrangements for everyone to get put up at the Dugout, except John, who she invited to stay in her guest room. As the others dropped off their clothing and so forth, John said to Nora, “Thanks sister. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Nora smiled, “Well, I want to pick your brain more, but mostly to ask you what you meant when you said you’re weren’t surprised I kept falling on my face in my rebuilding?”


He gestured for Nora and Piper and Nick to sit. “So I read up on what you were doing, trying to manipulate the Institute into integrating. And I’m here to tell you, from the moment you started trying, you were doomed. Because there was nothing in it for the Institute people. Not anything they wanted. You were able to steal all that information, and you manipulated them into giving you even more information.”

He looked over, “And as long as that was your goal, you were fine. It’s when you tried to replace the government that you got into trouble and it’s why you need people like me and Marcy. ‘Government’s powers derive from the consent of the governed’. Do you know what that means, Nora?”

“That people give governments their power?” Nora said.

John shook his head, “No. It means that no government can survive the withholding of consent. It’s a subtle but meaningful difference. And you can’t manipulate consent. You can con someone into to agreeing with things that aren’t in their interest for a while, but eventually they’ll notice. And they’ll be pissed.”
He laughed, “If bruises are the price of throwing down with The Man, guillotines are the price to The Man of ignoring the people. What you were trying to do was impossible, sister.”

“So what should I have done?” Nora asked.

John laughed, “Blow the fucker up, sister. Blow the fucker up. That was always your only option. Hell, you brought out more people than I would have thought possible, so you must be pretty good at convincing people. But one on one. That’s your limit.”

He smiled at the two of them. He pointed at Nora, “You are great at planting the seeds, and she,” he pointed at Piper, “Can water them. But you two need other people for the harvest. Because ladies, you do not close the deal well.”

Nora really wanted to be offended. But he was right. She’d let the possibilities of what a Director could theoretically do overwhelm her sense of what a Director, especially her, could actually do. And in the end, it really didn’t make that much difference. She was really good at keeping her options open and having a back door for when things went sideways, so when she screwed up there was a Plan B. And C, and D, and so on. Up to and including Plan Blow the Fucker Up.

John Hancock was a master politician. She looked at him thoughtfully. He looked back with a beatifically neutral expression.

Ok. Time to pay him back AND forward.

“C’mon John,” she said. “You two as a well,” to Piper and Nick.

She opened the door and John was greeted with gasps, and one guard walking up, when Nora said, “Oh, shove off. The ghoul ban is about to get repealed. Or Diamond City can be cut off from the rest of the Commonwealth. Get used to it.”

She heard John snicker, and then go silent as she led the group to the visitor’s dugout, aka, the Cop Shop, Diamond City Security. She pushed open the door and led the group to the jail. Where the synth known as McDonough languished. He stood as Nora approached, but looked over her shoulder. “Come to gloat, Piper? Throw my ‘brother’ in my face?”

“Jesus, McDonough I knew you didn’t like me. I had no idea how obsessed you were with me…” Piper said.

Before anyone could go any farther, Nora said, “Why’d you arrange to have Hancock thrown out of Diamond City?”

“Why do you think? He could have blown my cover. He was showing signs of suspicion. He had to go,” McDonough sneered.

Nora raised her eyebrows and looked over at John. He leaned in and asked, “When did you take my brother?”

McDonough looked thoughtful, “Maybe four months before I got rid of you.”

Nora looked over at Hancock. He looked over at her and nodded once sharply.

They started to leave, and Piper turned back. “What’d I ever do to you McDonough? Long before I suspected you of being anything other than a politician, you had it in for me. Why?”

“You asked questions. I couldn’t have that. I had to get rid of you. But every time I tried to get rid of
you, you just dug in harder,” he replied.

“Oh, I could’ve told you that about Piper after five minutes, McDonough,” Nora said, “You really were shit at your job.”

The four left the dugout, and McDonough, behind. John said sadly, “So he was always dead. My beef was with the synth, not my brother. I mean he was a stiff, and a tool, but he wasn’t mean, just uptight. And then dead, probably.”

*He’s probably a Super-Mutant somewhere. But I’m not saying that.*

“I’m sorry John,” Nora said.

“Well, now I know, don’t I? And that was your point wasn’t it? That was you making it up to me, letting me know what really happened.”

Nora nodded. “You had a right.”

John chuckled sadly, “I’m gonna go get lit at the Dugout. Want to join me?”

Piper smiled at him, “A couple drinks. I’m not about to try and match your liver.”

“Can’t hang with a ghoul?” John taunted her.

“No,” Piper answered, “But I know I can’t hang with YOU.”

The pair of them were good and headed home first and gave Nat and Shaun a chance to say hi, and have dinner with them, then they went and had a couple with Hancock and the rest of the CPG reps. Then they went to bed.

The next day, the reps headed for the Mayor’s offices, where the groups were meeting, while Nora and Piper walked around the Market. Nora turned to Piper, “Where should we try them?”

“What?” Piper asked.

“The Raiders. Gage. Shank. The rest of the shitheads. They have to be tried,” Nora said.

“I honestly hadn’t thought about it, Blue. I always figured you’d prosecute though,” Piper said.

“Oh, hell no,” Nora said, “If I prosecute, I can’t be a witness. And you and I have to testify. We have to tell people how bad it gets when Raiders aren’t limited by anything.”

“Why are you asking now?” asked Piper.

“Because I’m looking around,” Nora said. “I want to do it here. In the middle of things, not way out on the edge.”

“We could probably manage something.”

Piper spent the rest of the day writing up what she’d seen a couple days prior. Nora spent it fixing up and cleaning and restocking foods, and generally being Piper’s housewife. And being nothing short of ecstatic about it.

At one point Piper looked up to find Nora in jeans and an apron, humming. “You know you’re the second to the top spy of the CPG. You’re Nick Valentine’s partner. Why are you here doing all this?”
Nora looked back at Piper and said, “Because being your wife is the thing that gives me more happiness than I’ve ever known. I do this because I love you, and I do this because when I look around at you typing, and knowing Shaun and Nat are at school, and I’m here puttering in the kitchen, I feel...complete.”

Piper stood up, and took Nora in her arms, “I love you, my laopo,” then she kissed Nora tenderly. Nora glanced over at the clock and saw that Shaun and Nat wouldn’t be home for another four hours, and she placed Piper’s hand on her breast, and giggled when Piper said, “Hubba hubba.”

Shaun and Nat barely beat John Hancock back to the house. When John walked in, he waved over to Codsworth. “I need you to fill a glass with whisky, this deep,” and he held his fingers about an inch apart.

Codsworth got a bottle and a tumbler, and filled the glass to Hancock’s specification, and then turned to him, tumbler in an outstretched manipulator. Hancock reached past the glass and took the bottle from Codsworth. “Thanks, Codsy.”

Nora and Piper watched. He took a huge swig. And let out a huge sigh.

“That bad?” Piper asked.

“Yeah,” he said, sighing heavily, “And no.”

“Ok…that requires some kind of explanation,” Nora said.

“They’re being total tools about it, but in the end they’ll join, and pretty much under the terms I outlined. But getting there,” John shook his head.

He looked over at the two women, “They’re gonna test every inch of my considerable patience. And they take my knives before every meeting.”

Nora asked, “Why is it going to take so long?”

John massaged his temples. “Because first we have to show them that their one-sided offers won’t get 11 votes, and then we have to show the Somerville rep why HIS ideas won’t get 11 votes, and let the Diamond City asshats see what we’re dealing with so the self-centered knobs get an idea of how much they can realistically get.”

He shook his head, “I’m going to have to propose the proportional representation idea, sometime day after tomorrow. Because these boneheads are smart enough to count noses and realize that gives them about 40% of the Commons right out of the box, but too fucking stupid to realize that Diamond City has like five factions, and Goodneighbor, Bunker Hill, and Sanctuary are way more unified than they are.”

He took another huge swig, “And we’re actually going have to let them make significant changes to courts. It’s gonna take all my dealmaking skills to keep them from trying to impose CPG laws about hookers, drugs, entertainment, and gambling on Goodneighbor.”

Piper looked unsympathetic. “So? You have to make an honest living. Cry me a river.”

John laughed, “People need a place to blow off steam. Unless you’re planning to institute Vertibird flights to New Vegas? You need them able to head for Goodneighbor to get wrecked and laid. We work really fucking hard at entertaining, Ms. Wright. Harder than it looks.” He took another huge swig.
“What’s New Vegas?” Piper asked.

John said, “Your wife downloaded the records from those brownshirts on the blimp. New Las Vegas. Sin City. Even before the war. Even more so now. Part of the New California Republic. And won’t that be fun?”

Piper said, “What?”

“I’ll be around when the Commonwealth of New England, or whatever we’re calling ourselves by then, bumps into whatever the hell the NCR is calling itself when the two groups meet. Probably somewhere east of the Mississippi,” he said, head rolling back.

He looked over at Nora. “I’ll make your proposal tomorrow. It’ll be good to scare them a little while offering a carrot at the same time.”

Piper said, “Wha-“

“Basing the CSIS here,” Nora said.

Hancock nodded, “It’ll be useful to remind them we can infiltrate at will because we have a huge group of spies, while at the same time offering to boost their economy by funneling all kinds of shady caps through here.”

“Let me know how it goes,” Nora said, “You know I’ve never been happier that you’re right John.”

“What?”

“How much I would suck at doing what you guys are doing. But want to hear something else?”

“Does it involve me, one man, three women and a vat of whipped cream?” Hancock asked.

“Not without a lot more notice than what you just gave me. No, I think we should hold the war crimes trials of the Raiders from Nuka-World here. It’s time everyone sees what the Minutemen did. And what those fuckers did.”

“And bring in even more caps. That might do it, Nora. Structuring government is one thing, but skimming caps off a gazillion lookie-lous and gawkers is forever.”

Chapter End Notes

I always felt like Hancock deserved more closure.

Also? Nora is a complex woman. I like her that way...
Three days later, Hancock remained optimistic. He also remained deeply in need of drinks. “They keep trying to find a way to take over the CPG.”

He took a swig of his latest and added, “On the first day they tried to get back to the way it was when the Institute was manipulating things for them. I thought Kessler was never going to stop laughing. The day before yesterday they tried de facto breaking up the CPG by replacing it with a shell run by Diamond City.”

“Who laughed themselves sick on that one?” Piper asked, still miffed she wasn’t in the room taking notes. She might have been right about McDonough, but Diamond City’s elite still didn’t trust her.

Hancock smiled, “Marcy Long. She laughed, pointed out a trap they’d laid in the structure of their offer, laughed some more, pointed out another trap, and so forth. It went on for an hour. Then she said if they weren’t serious she’d be perfectly happy to get back onto her aircraft, that Diamond City doesn’t have, reroute all the caravans that stop at Diamond City, and then redeploy the Minutemen in Hangman’s Alley to more useful CPG Garrisons. Then she told them to pull their heads out of their asses.”

“That’s when I laughed,” he said.

“And yesterday?” Nora asked.

“They tried to get rid of the Veto Chamber. When the Somerville guy threatened to tear the nuts off of Councilman Mercer for that suggestion, they fell back on suggesting a President, with a voting scheme that all but guaranteed he or she would be from Diamond City.”

He smiled, “So today, I suggested that we go with my original structure, and locate the capital of the Commonwealth at Goodneighbor.”

Piper and Nora started laughing. John looked hurt, “It is more centrally located than this place.”

Nora paused long enough to say, “If it’s central you want, go clean out the Corvega Plant. That’s right about in the middle.”

John laughed, “Yeah, I had a hard time keeping a straight face. Anyway, Marcy’s working on them all tonight at dinner, with me not there, and telling them that we could see our way to making Diamond City the capital if they accept our structure. For some reason that knob Mercer fell ill. Know anything about that?”

“Who me?” asked Nora.

“Yeah you, Deputy Director of Sneaky Ass Shit.”

“Councilman, I have no idea exactly how it happened, and if I did, I’d think you of all people would understand that you don’t want to know,” Nora answered.

Which was true. Nora did not know whether Canine had given Mercer the incredible shits via his drink or his food at lunch. But given how much of his personal fortune the man had pissed away
hiring people to try and get into the Jamaica Plain Vault, he could just as easily have gotten sick all on his lonesome.

*I can’t sneaky my way into building something. But I can sneaky the assholes out of the way of the people who can do the building.*

John laughed again, “Maybe you’re right. Anyway, I expect we’ll have an agreement tomorrow. Then the original 17 have to vote. We can do that as soon as we get an agreement.

They turned in early, but Shaun and Nat had managed to leak to Diamond City, by way of the school, what was up. By lunch the next day two things had happened. Nora had bought a LOT of very special ingredients, which she was prepping, including a large amount of refrigerated dough. And all of Diamond City was doing nothing but speculating. No business was getting conducted.

By 1PM, the word was back. Diamond City was joining the Commonwealth Provisional Government. That caused a buzz in the market as people, and merchants, and guards all speculated about What It Meant. They’d have pestered Nora and Piper except they were locked in the house listening to the radio.

Vertibirds carried the agreement to every settlement for review and votes.

*I remember when populations were too large to hold votes with no notice.*

When the settlements had had time to vote, results came over the radio. “No” took an early lead when Nordhagen, Oberland, and Sommerville all rejected the plan.

The next vote was Yes, from County Crossing.

Greentop and The Slog called in at almost the same moment. Apparently Diamond City’s Ghoul policy still rankled as Greentop voted Yes, and The Slog voted No.

The Vote stood at Yes 2, No 4. Nora looked at the count.

*We can only afford to lose one more.*

Nora reached over and took a drink from Hancock.

Then Egret Tours voted Yes, followed 15 minutes later by Sunshine Tidings.

The vote was now technically tied.

*The other way to look at it is No is two thirds of the way there, while Yes is only one third.*

Starlight Drive-In checked in. Yes.

Then Nora heard something that almost caused her glass to fall out of her hand.

Tenpines Bluff voted No.

*One more No and we’re sunk. One of the first settlements we added and they don’t want to be part of the CPG under these conditions. Dammit!*

Over the next hour, Nora’s stomach dropped every time the radio crackled; Abernathy voted Yes. Then Sanctuary voted Yes. Then Bunker Hill came on. They were a Yes.

The CIT’s Faculty meeting ended in Yes as well.
At about 5 PM, Spectacle Island came on, and reported that they’d voted Yes. At 5:05, Roger Warwick called and reported that they too had voted Yes.

Nora looked over at John. “John?”

“I’m sure they’ll go for it. Positive,” he answered. But he didn’t look positive.

At 5:20, the radio came to life again. There was what sounded like a riot in the background, and a voice came on and said, “Goodneighbor says…”

*I need to pee…*

“…Yes!! The Commonwealth is born!”

Everyone in the house began yelling. Shortly they heard yelling outside as well. Except Nora. At her moment of triumph she was felled by a nervous bladder.

Shortly they all went out to see how everyone was taking it. Even hardened Diamond City merchants had teared up. Piper and Nat fanned out to get reactions. Shaun just held his mother’s hand. “Mom? Are you happy?”

Nora leaned over and said, “I have never been happier except when you were born. You get to grow up in a nation. A safe place to grow and raise a family.”

Shaun smiled and hugged her. “I’m glad you’re my mom. And I’m glad for you. And us.”

Then Nora said, “Let’s head in. I have a celebration to feed.”

When she arrived Codsworth had already rolled the dough out, leaving Nora to prep the mushroom duxelles. She placed the 3 pints of mushroom out and chopped them fine, as well as a wild onion, 4 cloves of wild garlic, and a handful of thyme leaves. She tossed it in a pan, and sautéed it until it almost had a pastelike consistency. She set it aside and laid out thinly sliced smoked Molerat. By then her wife and daughter had returned and looked on.

“Saltimbocca?” asked Piper.

Nora shook her head, “Beef Wellington.”

Piper raised her eyebrows, “That’s new,” and she smiled.

Nora took the molerat and spread the duxelles, the mushrooms, on it. Then she took about 3 pounds of Brahmin tenderloin from Codsworth and seared it on all sides. The she laid the tenderloin down on the molerat/mushroom ‘carpet’. She carefully, using the kitchen towels, wrapped the beef in the slices with the duxelles inside, tucking everything like a savory burrito.

She put that in the fridge and preheated the oven to 425 by her treasured oven thermometer. While that was going on she snapped the ends off the asparagus brought in from Sanctuary. And laid it out for steaming. Then she went into the fridge and got the beef, and laid it, in its wrap, on the pastry, and wrapped it again, tucking the ends. Codsworth had lightly beaten two eggs, and she used that as a wash, to seal the pastry all over. It would also give the pastry a golden color.

While that baked, she made a red wine sauce from another onion, and some of the beef trimmings that Codsworth had saved when he trimmed the beef…she fried those together, added a bottle of red wine and then boiled that until reduced about halfway. Then she added some water, about 2 cups, mixing in 2 tablespoons flour. Then she boiled and simmered the mixture until slightly thickened.
She also steamed the 2 pounds of asparagus, and at 45 minutes, pulled the Beef Wellington and let it stand for 10 minutes while she served the asparagus and strained the sauce in to a dish.

The she carved the beef into 9 pieces, and set that on the table.

About then John, Marcy, Kessler, Drew, and Connie Abernathy arrived.

Nora gestured at the table, “Please sit,” and she and her family joined them.

Nora raised her glass, “A toast to the group that gave birth to a new nation,” and the Somerville rep said, “I want to apologize for what they…” and Nora smiled and said, “Don’t worry about it. Not your fault,” and they all clinked glasses, drank, and began eating.

John took one bite and looked at Nora, “Sister, if you knew how to do this why in hell didn’t we start with, ‘She’ll feed you this if you agree’? We could have saved ourselves four days.”

Piper said, “Flattering her cooking gets you anywhere, John. She married me.”

Nora laughed, and then Shaun said, “I was talking to Madison on the radio yesterday…”

“Oh?” Nora said.

He nodded. “She said it had been two years and I need to ‘size up’ according to her.”

Nora dropped her fork. “You’re not ten?”

He shook his head, “I never said I was. It’s been two years since I ‘woke up’ with ten years of Father’s memories. I’m twelve.”

Nat said, “I’ve been going easy on you because you’re four years younger than me. But you’re not? Oh, are you in for it now, bub. I’m going to stop going easy on you at chess.”

Shaun looked puzzled, “You’ve never won a game,” and he sounded so naïve Nora looked over at him. He looked out of the corner of his eye at his mom. Then he burst out laughing.

“And not ‘cause you’re going easy on me, loser!” he added, pumping his fist in the air.

Nat made to throw an asparagus spear at him and Piper whistled shrilly. “Flying vegetables is a week long penalty. Just so you know, young lady.”

Nat put it back down, “Yes, Piper.”

Piper then added, “But short sheeting his bed when he least expects is something the court will ignore at this time.”

Nat giggled and the rest of the table watched with smiles, except Marcy, who just looked sad.

Nora noticed and leaned over, and said, “You know if you and Jun want to try again, you could.”

Marcy looked over at Nora sadly. “No. Uterine cancer. I had a total hysterectomy 4 years ago. I’m afraid the ship has sailed.”

*There are some things I can’t fix.*

Nora then said, “Well, I guess you’ll have to settle for being the Mother of Your Country.”
“Why me? You’ve done more,” Marcy replied.

“That’s arguable, Marcy. And besides, you’re directly responsible, I just created the conditions. And I’m happy with what I am.”

“And that is?” asked Marcy.

“The Nosy, Busybody Aunt of My Country.”

Marcy thought over all the fix-ups she’d personally seen Nora arrange. “I guess you kind of are. That must make us sisters.”

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, in this timeline, there is NO WAY Neil Diamond penned a song with slightly icky implications about the then eleven year old Caroline Kennedy, but I used it for its links to Fenway, and as kind of a way to show we're approaching the Seventh Inning Stretch of the Trilogy....

The voting and the sudden shock that I had miscounted settlementss back in Chapter 22, because I forgot to count Sanctuary itself and all the rewriting I did was the worst back and forth I’ve had since those goddamned Railroad Freedom Trail indicators back in Agent of Change. No shit, I made a spreadsheet with the current population of each settlement that is part of the CNE and total representative tally as well as "their votes on key issues". Just so that crap never happens again. Seriously.

(Slightly non-traditional) Beef Wellington Recipe

Duxelles:
3 pints (1 1/2 pounds) white button mushrooms
2 shallots, peeled and roughly chopped
4 cloves garlic, peeled and roughly chopped
2 sprigs fresh thyme, leaves only
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Beef:
One 3-pound center cut beef tenderloin (filet mignon), trimmed
Extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
12 thin slices prosciutto
6 sprigs of fresh thyme, leaves only
Flour, for rolling out puff pastry
1 pound puff pastry, thawed if using frozen
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
1/2 teaspoon coarse sea salt

Sauce:
2 tbsp olive oil
Beef trimmings (ask the butcher to reserve these when trimming the fillet)
4 large shallots, peeled and sliced
Hefty amount of Penzey's Four Peppercorn Pepper coarse ground  
4 tablespoons flour  
1 thyme sprig  
1 bottle red wine  
2 cups beef stock

Shaun is rising above his upbringing and programming. Like you'd expect a person to.

And Marcy and Jun could have another baby...but she'd need an egg donor as well as host mother if the procedure took her ovaries (not automatic, but pretty common). I feel like that sorrow is such a defining characteristic of who they are, and crassly, they're peripheral enough, I didn't want to spend time talking about it. They can't have another, they're sad, and now Marcy sees the whole nation as her new child...You can dislike me for it, but you have to make editorial decisions.
The next day dawned. In many ways it was exactly like every day Nora had woken up in Diamond City for nearly 7 months. The merchants hawked their wares. The guards patrolled the market. Nora wandered around checking out the vendors.

But in other ways it was completely different. Nora found herself in a conversation with the blond fancying councilman, named Oliver Forsyth, about what needed to happen next. Nora told him about the trial she wanted to hold.

“Isn’t that going to take up a lot of room?” he asked.

Nora nodded, “Absolutely. And the CNE government would expect to defray some of the expenses, but in the end, I suspect that wherever we put that court will become the Supreme Court fairly quickly. Hell, I imagine the tribunals will become the first Justices.”

Oliver smiled, “Including you, huh?”

Nora looked shocked, “Oh, hell no. I have to be a witness, and I suspect, lawyer or no, the government would frown on the second in command of the Special Intelligence Service as a judge. Spooks are way too morally flexible.”

He in turn looked shocked, and began to stammer, Nora stuck out her hand and smiled, “Nora Wright. Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service. In fact councilman, I need to warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?” he asked.

“Look, I get that you may not actually be planning to sleep with Jenny. She tells me that she just has drinks and listens, but you need to know that she is one of mine. Now that you’re in the fold so to speak, any time you go out for drinks from now on is strictly social,” Nora said.

“But right now, I’d have to call you a security risk. You were my asset, and I want to be sure you don’t end up someone else’s,” Nora finished.

Oliver’s face fell, “I was an assignment? That’s all?”

“Yes. And no.” Nora smiled, “Jenny told me that you were sweet and she liked you. And I can tell you she really does. But before the pair of you wind up a damned security risk, you OR her, I’m telling you, get your act together. Decide to keep seeing Jenny as a friend? Fine by me. Leave your wife for Jenny? Fine by me. Cut Jenny off entirely? Also fine by me.”

Nora’s face went completely deadpan, “But if you two start bumping uglies and you don’t break it off with the missus, the pair of you become security risks, and then you become my problem.” She stared right into Oliver’s eyes, “Don’t become my problem.”

He gulped and nodded. Nora smiled widely, and pointed up at the left field bleachers, above the quasi-slum in which Kellogg had laired once upon a time. “See up there? I’d like to put CSIS headquarters up there. Have to knock down some slum buildings, but what the hell, no real loss, right?”
And I destroy any sign that Kellogg ever lived, now that Mary and Sarah are gone. Fitting, I think.

He nodded convulsively. Nora looked over and took pity. “Oliver? I’m really not fucking with you. I’m done delivering the warning, and I don’t play games. ‘Talking to’ is over.”

She looked over at him and smiled, “You’re going to have to get better at this part of the job, if you want to keep doing this.”

“Wha—…What do you mean?” Oliver asked.

“Being a mover and shaker in a national government,” Nora turned and looked at him straight on, “From now on, playtime is over. We’re going to grow and keep growing. This is the start of something neither of us will live to see completed, but I want to make the whole continent indissoluble.”

She smiled at him, “You know I’m from before the war? I was an English major at BU. I loved all literature, but poetry was a personal love. Ever heard of ‘Leaves of Grass’?” and he shook his head. She looked sad, “No? Ah well. Maybe we’ll find a copy someday. Dig it up in a computer record somewhere. Walt Whitman. One of America’s greatest poets. Maybe Ginsburg is better, but not by much.”

She looked at him and began to recite from memory,

“Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
    With the love of comrades,
    With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,
    By the love of comrades,
    By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.”

He just looked at her, jaw dropped. She smiled, “It might seem strange to you that one of the main spies in the Commonwealth is a sentimentalist, but it’s true. I do want to plant companionship as thick as trees. I want a nation, councilman. I’m here bending your ear not because I want to deliver a threat but because I want to extend an invitation. Help us. Be one of us. Make us inseparable, with our arms about each other’s necks.”

He looked at her, a genuine smile growing on his face. She punched his shoulder and smiled back, “But if you decide to act on your attraction to Jenny, break up with your wife first.”

He said, “How do you know I’m seriously attracted to her?”

“Men and women can be friends. Absolutely. But I know your wife doesn’t know about Jenny, and no man does that unless he wants to keep his options open. And I can tell after five minutes with you that you’re basically a decent man.”

She smiled sadly at him, “Whatever you decide, you be gentle with Jenny. She likes you.”
He looked thoughtful. “I will. That is the one thing I can absolutely promise you.”

*Security risk managed.*

A week later, Oliver Forsyth was leading the delegation signing the papers joining Diamond City to the CNE. A month after that, his divorce from his wife was final. He and Jenny began seeing each other almost as soon as the ink was dry.

But before any of that had happened, Nora and a score of craftsmen broke “ground” on the CSIS Headquarters in the Third Base Bleachers at Fenway Park. Construction was scary quick, so much so Nora was constantly testing her weight on the floors.

And D was disgusted to note that her office trappings were not hard to transfer from The Castle to her office in Diamond City. Nora’s sole contribution was to note that in the movies there was a red light that came on to let you know it wasn’t safe to enter…that something classified was being discussed. D’s reaction was to suggest that Nora do something anatomically impossible. Rectal sphincters simply did not have THAT much give.

The framers, John Hancock among them, settled on 100 voter proxies per rep. That gave Diamond City 20 Reps, Sanctuary mustered up 7, Goodneighbor 8, and Bunker Hill 3, and the rest of them managed a total of 19 among the remaining 14 settlements, with Sommerville sharing reps with Egret Tours, and Nordhagen sharing them with County Crossing. A total of 57 Representatives and 18 Councilmembers. For the moment. Nuka-World would likely join, and Finch Farm was likely as well, although they were likely to end up as part of County Crossing as well.

Which was important, because they needed a Prime Minister to appoint the three person ‘War’ Crimes tribunal. Grass wasn’t growing under Gage only because he was in a hole so dark, they had to ship light in, and it took two days to arrive.

When the elections were over the real wrangling started. The first position was easy, Marcy Long became the first Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of New England. John Hancock found himself, much to his consternation, Minister for Justice. Ronnie Shaw had decided to retire shortly after Nora left, found herself drafted to run as a Rep in Sanctuary, and then was shocked when she was appointed Minister for Defense. Oliver Forsyth found himself appointed Minster of Foreign Affairs. And Kessler was picked for Minster for the Treasury.

Ronnie was amused to find that she was higher ranked even than the Generals that she’d served. She was doubly amused when she found out that the CSIS reported to the PM through Defense, and thus that she was not only Nora’s boss, but Nora’s Boss’s Boss.

Hancock was not amused at all…if there was a ‘The Man’-ier position than ‘In charge of Police and Courts” it would be hard to think of one. He spent two full days drunk and in denial. It was only when he was picked up by the Diamond City guards from the floor of the Dugout Inn and taken to an office to be fed coffee and some greasy food rather than shoved in the drunk tank that he allowed that there might be something to the gig.

Once he’d sobered up, he and Marcy began looking through people who might make good judges. Eventually they settled on three.

One was Brian Virgil, because while he was a scientist he had enough of a sense of right and wrong to break with the Institute at a time when that break likely meant his demise. Another was Evelyn Tenpines. First because she was thoughtful, slow to act without cause, and open-minded. And, second, because the group wanted to show the settlements that hadn’t voted to ratify that they were in fact part of the Commonwealth too.
Finally, they picked the Chief Tribunal, likely to end up first Chief Justice. Marcy and John went round and round on that one. In the end John won. They picked Irma, from the Memory Den, Irma Amari as it turned out. Nick Valentine laughed gently when he heard and said, “It seems the Minister of Justice has an eye for talent.”

Ellie swatted him, actually pretty seriously. Nick cringed and said, “Hey! I meant that she’s actually got just the right temperament and a surprisingly strong sense of right and wrong.”

“Hmmmpf!” was Ellie’s response, and if cold shoulders were actually cold, she’d have been very useful for the rest of that hot July day.

As they walked out to watch the construction of the court, and meet with a missing person client, Eustace Hawthorne, Nick said to Nora, “What’s up with Ellie? Do you know?”

Nora looked over, “Jesus Christ, Nick. Are you seriously asking me that question? Really?”

Nick looked over, “What do you mean?”

“God damn, Nick, when it comes to that woman you are blind,” Nora said. They arrived at their Upper Stands client, “Now we’re here, let’s put on the professional faces.”

Eustace greeted them at the door. She smiled at Nora, “You’re that nice Piper’s new wife yes? Such a sweet girl. Very attentive.”

Nora was puzzled until she thought back, way back to when she first learned Piper’s name from an article in the paper. Eustace had been the old lady who remembered the Broken Mask incident and told Piper the story. She smiled, and said, “Yes I am. And I like her too.”

Eustace reached up and patted Nora’s cheek. Nick cleared his throat. “We’re here about a missing person…your message to Ellie said they’d just recently disappeared?”

Eustace said, “Yes, yes, my Johnnie. He just disappeared yesterday.”

Nick got out his notebook and cleared his throat, “Ah…I have to say up front that the fee is 100 caps a day, plus expenses, ma’am.”

Eustace just waved her hand and said, “Money is no object where my Johnnie is concerned. I just want him found.”

Nora said, very sympathetically, “What does Johnnie look like? Where did you see him last?”

Eustace thought a bit and said, “Oh dearie, he has the loveliest orange fur. A tabby pattern, with just the most darling white bib.”

Nora said, “Orange…fur?” as she looked around the room. It was, of course, covered in cats. They’d noticed that right away. It just hadn’t occurred to either of them…

Nick said, mildly, “So Johnnie is one of your cats, is he ma’am?”

She nodded, “Of course.”

Nora said, “Where did you see Johnnie last?”

Eustace pointed over in the kitchen. “I was making dinner. That lovely Piper’s wife…wait that’s you! It’s a very good recipe, dearie… had an article about making fish recently and they were all around me, and when I was done Johnnie was gone!”
Nora opened Eustace’s refrigerator and was immensely relieved to find only a truly remarkable amount of milk and meat. Nick was questioning Eustace further mostly because he wasn’t sure she wasn’t senile. Nora figured her for slightly forgetful, but if she remembered what was going on, Nora was pretty sure Eustace really did want to hire them to find a cat that had gone missing.

The problem these days is that most wastelanders think of ‘cat’ as a pointier rabbit as far as food sources go. And Nick pretty obviously never had a pet. So they don’t really understand them.

There is no way a cat would have left the area if Eustace was working with cod fillets. Which was my last recipe in the paper. Soooo…

Nora began to open cupboard doors. They all had latches holding them closed. And on the second door, an orange streak shot out between her legs. Nora turned around, “Found him!”

Eustace was ecstatic. She insisted on paying Nick a hundred caps for his trouble.

Nora leaned over and looked in the cabinet. She stood up, and said, “You might want to go buy all the Abraxo Myrna’s got.”

Then she smiled at Eustace, “Next time just let me or Piper know. We’ll help you find the cat.”

Eustace smiled and said, “Nonsense. I have money, and if I want to hire a detective, I’ll be happy to do so.”

Nick tipped his fedora and said, “It’s not often I can close a missing person case happily, let alone so quickly.”

As they left, Nick turned to Nora, “Now will you tell me what’s up with Ellie.”

“I would, Nick, but I’m afraid you’d go selectively deaf, to match the selective blindness.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Nora? Nora?!”

Chapter End Notes

Getting that verse properly indented was MADDENING. I'm a writer not a damned coder! (Jim!)

That tally of Councilmembers vs Representatives? That's when I finally gave the hell up and built the spreadsheet. There's another tab as well, outlining each of the garrison's broken up by how many of Cait's Own there are at the location and how many temporary militia are there (on a rotating basis). For example, The Castle has a permanent garrison of 100 of Cait's Own, and 50 Militia on temporary duty training, etc., for a total (on short notice) of 150 troops (plus support slice). The Total strength of Cait's Own is 420...a modern battalion or slightly above the usual actual strength of a Civil War Regiment (1000 at muster, less desertions, illness, allowed to go home, wounded and invalided out, and dead). We'll consider them a regiment in concept then. Not yet at full strength.

Also, I got to Minister of Justice, and I started casting about. And I heard this little voice.
A ghoul voice. And that voice said, "Don't you fucking dare!" So I drafted his ass. Fuck you, John. Nora can tell me what to do, but all I have to do is toss you some jet and a couple bisexual nymphomaniac gymnasts (male and female) and you're bought off.
Trials and Tribulations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After they got back, Ellie had thawed somewhat. Slightly. The fact that Nick had managed to make 100 caps in about an hour went a long way to mollifying her.

Still…

I’m going to have to smack him around at some point. He’s not taking a hint, and Ellie is getting pretty fucking unsubtle about it too.

No time like the present.

“Hey, Nick, come catch a bowl of noodles with me?” Nora said.

Nick shook his head, “Nah. Not hungry.”

Nora rolled her eyes, “Drink? Dugout?”

Nick shook his head.

“God dammit Nick, walk with me,” Nora finally ordered.

Nick looked shocked, while Ellie looked unsurprised. He grabbed his hat and followed Nora out. She began walking back to her house, “You wanted to know what was up, right?”

He nodded, “Yes. I mean we’re more secure since you came on…hell since you came around. More people means more cases. So why’s she more ticked off at me sometimes?”

“Yes,” Nora nodded, “That may be part of it. She’s feeling more secure.”

They were crossing the market headed for Nora and Piper’s place. “What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“Well, Maslow’s hierarchy. When you are pretty sure you have food, and shelter taken care of you start thinking about other needs. Like love.”

Nora was opening the door as she was speaking with him, and he replied, “What do you mean?”

Piper cried out from inside, “Ellie is in love with you, you colossal jackass!”

He stopped, half in and half out. Nora rolled her eyes and shoved him in. “That’s a little blunter than I would have gone with, but I kinda see Piper’s point. We’ve been watching the two of you since I met you. You like her, she likes you. You have this brand new body with all the accessories, so you don’t even have that excuse, so what gives?”

“I’m not really a person, Nora. She deserves…,” he started.

“What you think she does or doesn’t deserve is immaterial,” Nora interrupted, “It’s fairly obvious that even you’ve noticed what it is she wants.”

Nora stared him down, “And I’ve caught you watching her too. The only person I ever caught
looking at an ass that hard other than you watching Ellie’s was Piper checking out mine,” and Piper called “Hey!” but Nora went on, “And she married me.”

Nora continued relentlessly, “And I’ve watched you do more than leer at her. I’ve watched you with her Nick. You’re in love with her too.”

He looked miserable, “Nora. I’m a broken thing. You gave me this body. Thanks. But it doesn’t change anything. You joked about the Blue Fairy once? But I’m not and never have been, a real boy.”

He looked over with bleak eyes, “She deserves better. You’re right. I am in love with her. And because I love her, I am not going to have anything to do with her that way. She will always deserve better than me.”

Nora waved her hands over her head and looked at the ceiling, “Jesus fucking Christ, you god damned Galahad. You’re so ‘noble’ you make my teeth ache.”

Piper was up and standing over Nick, “Did it occur to you, you self-sacrificing knight errant, that your secretary doesn’t care? She wanted you when you were broken down old Gen 2. Now you can give her what she needs as well as wants. Why are you being this way?”

“She deserves better,” Nick said. He stood. “Now if you ladies will excuse me…” and he rushed from the house.

Nora looked at Piper, and Piper looked back. “Fuuuuucckkk!!” yelled Nora.

“I agree entirely, Blue. This is fucking idiotic.”

“Thing, it would have to get about three orders of magnitude better just to reach ‘fucking idiotic’,” Nora said.

About an hour later, Ellie walked in. Her eyes were red. She looked at Nora, “I can’t take it.”

Piper ran over and wrapped Ellie in her arms, and sat her on the couch. Ellie sniffled, “When he came back Nick asked me if I was in love with him. I admitted it, and he started in with this whole ‘You deserve better,’ thing. I told him I didn’t want better, I wanted him. He kept turning me down. Finally I threw a file at his head and left. And here I am.”

Nora sighed, “First, Ellie, I am going to make it my mission to pull Nick’s head out of his ass,” and Ellie giggled through her tears, “But in the meantime, maybe you should sleep in the guest room. Remind the big dummy how much he misses you.”

Ellie laughed, “And maybe get a good night’s sleep too.”

Piper nodded, “I know what you mean,” and she gave Nora a significant look.

Nora said, “Ellie? Are you sure you want Nick and only Nick?”

Ellie looked at Nora and Piper miserably and burst into a new round of tears.

Piper said, “I think we can take that as a yes, Blue.”

Nora nodded. “Ellie, I will fix this. I will not rest until Nick admits it. Now let’s get ready for the kids to come home and get food going. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Ellie looked up, puzzled. Piper said, “The first Raider Trial. The Commonwealth and the Very
Ellie nodded, “I’d forgotten. For some reason.”

Nora nodded, “I wanted to catch the ‘opening arguments’ such as they are, at a minimum. I’ve deliberately laid off. The Commonwealth can make its own legal procedure. It doesn’t need a 237 year old fossil making it operate a certain way if it doesn’t make sense. And of course we need to be ready as witnesses.”

The three women plus Shaun and Nat spent a pleasant evening, and Ellie thanked Nora and Piper sincerely for giving her a place to stay while she and Nick found a ‘New Normal’. The next morning Shaun and Nat went with Nora, Piper, and Ellie to the opening statements. Mr. Zwicky had decided that witnessing history was slightly more important that studying history, today.

The courtroom was packed, but the prosecutor, an ex-Minuteman named Allison O’Brien who’d decided she wanted to be a lawyer after having talked to Nora about it, waved Nora over and offered her and her family, plus Ellie, front row seats. The defense attorney was Danny Sullivan. He’d decided to get out of the guard business when it had almost gotten him killed.

Danny had lost the game of Rock/Paper/Scissors to Allison and had gotten stuck with Defense. It was the one thing Nora had insisted on…everyone gets represented, if they want it. Danny didn’t look thrilled but he did look ready to go.

When Brian, Evelyn, and Irma filed in, no one stood. Nora made to get up, and then looked around.

I feel uncomfortable, but based on how arrogant some judges were before the war, maybe this is better. They’re supposed to be working for US. Might as well act like they do…

The three sat, and then guards, half Diamond City and half Minutemen, escorted Porter Gage in. He’d been stripped of anything metal, including his eye patch. He’d been caught filing it down to make a weapon a couple of weeks earlier.

Danny stood up and walked over and the court went silent as Gage said, “Who the fuck is this?”

Irma leaned forward and said, “He is your lawyer, Gage. Unless you want to represent yourself.”

“Of course I’m going to take care of myself. Always have, always will. Besides, I don’t trust this snotnose to actually help me. I don’t expect anything other than a firing squad. I don’t get what all this shit is about, anyways,” and he ran down, glaring around the room. Until he saw Nora and her family.

He glared at her with his one good eye, as Irma said, “Final chance. Do you accept Mr. Sullivan or no?”

He focused back on Irma, “Fuck him. No.”

Danny, with an enormous look of relief, couldn’t get out from behind the desk fast enough. He was behind the railing like a shot. Irma gave Gage a cold look, “You may take your place, Mr. Gage.”

“Huh?” he looked at her.

“Behind the table, Mr. Gage. The prosecution gives their opening statement first,” Brian said.

Allison stood up. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it. I’m going to have to tell you things, and show you things, and bring in witnesses to tell you things that will nauseate you. Not because you didn’t know
Raiders do that sort of thing, but because nobody has been stuck in such,” and she looked ill, “Intimate contact with them for so long without dying.”

She looked over at Gage, “And while the defendant is not one of the gang leaders, we intend to show that he was the motivating force behind the Raider takeover of Nuka-World. And because of that directly, and personally, responsible for every maiming, every kidnapping, every murder, every rape, every torture conducted during the two years he and his sick, twisted sociopathic and psychopathic compatriots were in charge of that place.”

Allison turned and addressed the court, “I will bring numerous witnesses, including a doctor who surrendered to the Raiders rather than see her settlement slaughtered and who was targeted by the leader, Colter, because she had once shown him mercy. Her settlement was slaughtered anyway. I will bring forward prominent and well known and trusted Diamond City residents, Nora and Piper Wright who will be able to personally and directly testify to atrocities committed in their presence during the week that they were trapped, undercover in Nuka-World while the Raiders thought they were fellow travelers.”

She looked over at Nora apologetically, “I will show you what the Raiders forced Nora Wright to do, in order to survive and escape and organize an invasion to eliminate the threat once and for all.”

She looked over at Piper, sadly, and said, “And I will show how unnaturally cruel one of the Raider leaders was to someone who was her own daughter, Piper Wright.”

“And I will show records of interrogations of Mason, and of a former Diamond City socialite, Lizzie Wyath,” and there were gasps and muffled curses at that name, “Both former Raider leaders in different factions, that the primary impetus for seizing Nuka-World lay in the hands of Porter Gage.”

“In the end,” she said, “You will have no choice but to find him guilty. And to hang him by the neck until dead.”

Irma nodded as Allison sat down. She turned to Gage. “Mr. Gage. Your opening statement please.”

He stood up. He looked around and glared at Nora, “Fuck you,” and he looked around, “All of you. You live in your settlements, like sheep. Baaa! You can’t keep us from taking what’s yours, you don’t deserve to have it. You want to hold me responsible for Nuka-World?”

He spat on the floor. A guard stepped toward him, but Irma raised her hand and shook her head ever so slightly. “You want to know who’s ‘responsible’ for Nuka-World? You fuckers are. You sit there in your settlements, just asking to be taken.”

He mimed a collar, “You know you weak assholes are happier as slaves. Takes away any need to look after yourselves. You want to execute me? Fine by me. I don’t want to live in a world where the sheep are in charge.” He started right at Nora, “So try to kill me, if you think you’re hard enough, fuckers.”

He sat back down, belligerently.

Irma looked at Allison, and said, “If the prosecution would present its case please.”

Allison nodded. “While I would prefer to bring in witnesses directly, I must place the following into evidence. They are records of interviews conducted by Agent Deacon of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service. Because of security concerns, Agent Deacon cannot appear in open court, but she or he can be made available to any Justice who so desires, in private.”

He’d kill himself before appearing as himself in a place as public as this. So there’s that too.
“In the first case, the leader of the Raider faction known as the “Pack”, Mason, is still in too delicate a condition to be moved from Sanctuary Hospital where he has been since his nearly fatal wounding the day Nora Wright brought his group of Raiders out to be ambushed. In the second case, Lizzie Wyath is both too dangerous to be allowed out of high security incarceration, and there is a real risk that she would be assassinated by certain members of prominent Upper Stands families…the Blacks and the Wyaths both having disowned Lizzie, Mags, and William when their cruelty became embarrassing for them.”

A woman in the audience yelled, “That’s a damn lie!” whereupon Arturo Rodriguez said, “No it isn’t, and I have your bribe money to cover up what Mags tried to do to Nina that says otherwise you bitch.”

Irma pounded her gavel, “That’s enough. Sit down both of you.”

Allison outlined Mason’s testimony about being contacted by Colter, who had informed him that his new lieutenant, Gage, had brought up the idea of taking over Nuka-World for Raiders. To create a “Raider Kingdom” in central Massachusetts. Based on what Mason said, the entire notion of taking over Nuka-World was Gage’s brainchild, and he had worked tirelessly to form the three gangs into a fighting force strong enough to take the park.

Lizzie Wyath’s testimony consisted of recollections of his selling Mags and William on the money they’d make, and Lizzie on the experiments she’d be able to conduct on some of the slaves so that they would cooperate with the Pack and the Disciples. That her imagination would be the limit of the things she could do.

Gage at least tried to claim that the depositions were tortured out of them, whereupon Allison replied, “I plan to Question Deputy Director Wright about the ability of Agent Deacon to make other’s believe he or she is one of them. Believe me, neither Mason nor Ms. Wyath had any idea they were being interrogated.”

The court allowed the evidence, and the prosecution called Nora. She took the stand, and swore to tell the truth, and then she sat.

Allison looked at her, “For the record, please sate your name, all aliases, and your relevant positions.”

Nora smiled, knowing that she would never again work undercover. She really would, for the rest of time, be Nick’s partner and D’s second in command, but she could not be Agent Whisper, or JADE SUN. From this moment forward, the Commonwealth would know who walked among them.

“My name is Nora Erin McAllister Wright. I am the Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service, the Intelligence Agency for the government of what is now the Commonwealth of New England. I was Agent Whisper of the CSIS, the General of the Minutemen,” and she was watching Gage as she listed all the ways in which he’d been hosed from the moment he’d invited her in, “and I was JADE SUN of the BLACKLIST Black Ops program before the Great War, and I was known as Huang Lien Mei, to many people from China, some of whom are closer than you would think.”

“Is that all?” asked Allison.

Nora shook her head, “Before my marriage to Piper Louise Wright on Jan 31, 2287, I was Nora Erin McAllister Greene, and before my marriage to Nathaniel Eric Greene on Nov 4, 2076 I was simply Nora Erin McAllister. Other than that, there were a few cover identities for various training exercises but nothing significant.”
She was watching Gage. His face kept falling. He wasn’t stupid. It was dawning on him exactly who
he’d picked to replace Colter.

She looked at Allison, “I have been an agent for the last 5 years, in various capacities. I have been a
spy, and an agent provocateur. But mainly, I have been an assassin. I killed people for my country…
countries I suppose. And I thank you, because today that ends. This moment,” and she looked at the
court, rapt in her testimony, “Marks the most significant change in my life since the moment when
the US Government recruited me. I will be the second in command of the spy network for our
country…but I will never again be able to act as a spy. And I cannot tell you how happy that makes
me.”

Allison was looking at her. She knew the outline of Nora’s answer, but it had been significantly
more powerful than she’d expected, as you could hear a pin drop in the courtroom. “Ummm…yes.
Thank you, Ms. Wright…”

“Mrs. Wright please,” corrected Nora.

Allison looked at Nora, “Excuse me, but what difference does it make?”

Nora smiled, “In most cases absolutely none, and frankly usually you should say ‘Ms.’ by default.
But in my case, I have never been happier to be ‘Mrs.’ than I’ve been as Piper’s wife. So I tend to
insist on being Mrs. Wright,” and Nora smiled at Allison.

Allison smiled back, a tad uncertainly, and said, “Very well, Mrs. Wright. Can you speak to Agent
Deacon’s abilities?”

Nora smiled, “I have never met an operative who more enthusiastically manages his identities. She
sheds skins with more facility than a snake. It is never the same person twice, and usually you have
no idea that they’re around. If she interrogates you, you usually have no idea that he’s been there.
I’ve read accounts from Agent Deacon about their interrogations. I have no doubts whatsoever of
the validity of the reports. But thankfully you don’t actually have to take my word for it. CSIS records,”
and Nora flopped a pile of files on the bench, “Corroborate both of Agent Deacon’s interrogations.”

Allison led Nora through a long series of questions, establishing what had been going on in Nuka-
World, and her impressions, as well as her professional assessment of the threat the Raiders had
posed, due to having scoured everything nearby.

Then Allison led Nora through the events of the night Nisha had cornered her, and Nora had
executed the slave. By the time Nora had finished the account, you could have heard a pin drop.
Allison ended with, “I believe you’ve been exonerated of this crime?”

Nora nodded, “By the CPG Council…I don’t one hundred percent agree…”

Allison interrupted, “I merely wish to establish that your testimony is given freely and without
threat.”

Nora nodded. Allison finished up with Nora’s account of the final party. When Nora finished,
Allison turned and said, “The defense may cross-examine.”

Gage looked confused, until Virgil said, “You can ask her questions.”

Gage looked surprised, and asked Nora, “Why?”

“Why what?” Nora asked.
“Why turn on us... on me?” Gage asked.

Nora laughed, “Because you are monsters. I would know. I’ve had to be a monster. But now I don’t, so I’m not. Not anymore.”

“What about that poison? Wasn’t that monstrous? I heard stories.”

“What poison?”

“The one you used on Nisha. You know what I mean,” Gage said.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about Gage.”

Gage looked disgusted. He sat back down, and as he did the court called for a lunch break.

Nora got up and as she went back to Piper, she leaned over to speak with Gage. Quietly, so no one else heard, she said, “It was a neurotoxin. Seized every muscle. It was a horrible death. It can be introduced in food or drink, too.”

Nora stood up straight. “Enjoy lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Nora and Piper are done with subtle.

I decided that the people of the Commonwealth of New England’s idea of "Court" is inflected by Holotape thrillers.

And here you have the tally from Nuka-World. Dead: Nisha/Gloria, Savoy, Dixie, Mags and William Black. Alive and available for trial: Mason (just barely), Lizzie Wyath, Shank, Katelyn, numerous unnamed Disciples, Pack, and Operators. And Porter fucking Gage.

Not mentioned: RedEye (killed because some Minutemen had listened to the radio while waiting and he was summarily shot for "Crimes against Melody"), Fritsch (left alive but sure to be in BIG trouble for building the Gauntlet)
When the court reconvened Allison stood up and looked over at Piper, her eyebrows up. Piper took a deep breath and then she nodded once.

“The prosecution calls Piper Wright.”

Piper stood up and walked over to the stand. She sat down and swore to tell the truth. Allison looked at her kindly, “Tell us, in your own words, what you found when you and your wife arrived in Nuka-World.”

Piper started, “The first thing we found was what turned out to be Porter Gage, who used an intercom to tell us that if we survived a sadistic death trap, he might have an offer for us…”

Piper outlined their first encounters, and at Allison’s prompting spoke of her mother. She spoke of their first meeting. And she spoke about each subsequent meeting.

Gage had apparently seen some court holotapes too, because he objected. “Her mother is dead. The other bitch killed her. If she were on trial, I might see a point.”

Allison looked at Irma, “I intend to show the kind of horrors perpetrated by Raiders enabled by Porter Gage, and thus partially his responsibility. As well as his direct participation in at least one crime.”

Allison turned to Piper, “Ms. Wright, please tell us what you saw the night before you left Nuka-World.”

Piper sat very still. Then she began speaking, as if from a great distance.

“I had gone to get another drink for me and Nora. My mother cornered me.”

Piper went on, “She took me to a building off the main square. It was tiled and I believe that it had been a public restroom before the war.”

Allison nodded, and said, “I know this is hard, but what did you see and hear there?”

Piper gulped, “Inside the women’s section there were six women. They were all being raped. The Raiders had knives and most of the women were tied up. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, I mean you hear about what some Raiders do, but…”

Piper’s eyes refocused and she looked directly at Irma, “You don’t really understand until you’re standing in a bathroom and no matter where you look, no matter where your head turns, you see another woman being beaten and raped. Knives held to throats.”
“Then my mother turned me around and told me to help her against Nora, or she’d have me put into that room. I could hear men being raped in the men’s side. Then she told me I could be a ‘good girl’ or…”

“Or?” asked Allison.

Piper shook her head, “Nora arrived then. I never saw, ‘Or’. But the men in the room had knives. I think I know what was going to happen next.”

Allison looked ill. She knew what had happened, and she’d gone over it with Piper, but she still looked stricken to hear all of it laid out, piece by sickening piece.

Piper went on, “Then Nora took me away. She found him,” and she pointed out Porter Gage, “And told him to make sure the slaves got back alive. He wanted to know why she was bothering. I remember her making up a reason that he’d believe, and then she threatened my mother. I’m pretty sure if Nora hadn’t managed to make her threat believable by telling mother that the other two gangs would be pissed if anything happened, both of us would have been in that room before morning.”

She looked directly at the judges, “And we wouldn’t have lived to see dawn.”

Allison said, “Thank you Ms. Wright. No more questions.”

Evelyn looked up at Porter Gage. “You may question the witness. But we will be watching you. If I, if any of us, believe your questions are not meant to elicit facts, your questions will be finished. Do we make ourselves clear?”

Gage nodded. He walked over to Piper, then looked at Nora, as he said, “I wish we had put you in that room, you cunt…”

The gavel banged, and the bailiff yanked Gage back onto the floor and sat on him as Nora rushed over to Piper. Piper shook her head as she waved Nora off, then stepped over to Gage, and looking over the bailiff’s shoulder, watched Gage’s face as she kicked him in the balls.

The gavel banged, and Irma said, “That will be enough. You get one kick only, Piper.”

Piper nodded, “I made it count, Irma. He’ll need medical attention. Although as far as I care, you don’t exactly have to rush.”

The court was in an uproar. Irma surveyed the scene and checked the time, and called a recess until the next morning. Piper, Nora, and Ellie left as Dr. Sun was arriving to check on Gage’s testicles.

“I hope I crushed ‘em, doc,” Piper called as she left.

He looked back at her, “I hope you did too. Either way, I seem to have overlooked painkillers. Oops.” He didn’t look upset.

The three went back to Nora and Piper’s. Nick had already arrived. When he saw Ellie he froze, but she said, “You dope. Go ahead.”

Nick rushed forward and held Piper. Nora could hear Ellie muttering, “Just a fucking robot my ass. Of course he’s human…”

Piper disentangled herself. She took a deep breath as Preston and Marie arrived. Before Marie could even get out, “I am so very sorry, ma chere...,” Danse and Meredith arrived as well.
Nora took a big step back as their friends, who’d been there for Nora so very often, arrived en masse for Piper.

Nat and Shaun had been turned loose by Mr. Zwicky as well. Nat came over, “Is Piper Ok, mom?”

Nora looked over and saw Piper looking around in surprise, as it dawned on her that at this moment she was no longer “Piper Wright, Pariah Publisher of Newspaper,” but “Piper Wright, Woman with Many Close and Caring Friends,” and had been for some time.

Nora looked down at Nat, “I think maybe Piper is going to be better than Ok, Nat.”

Everyone there was practically competing to comfort Piper, and Danse and Meredith were turning it into an impromptu Group session. Eventually Piper burst into tears as they all spoke, and said, “I can’t believe you’re all here. For me!”

And of all people it was Danse, who Nora and Piper had held in such contempt when they first met, who said, “Of course we’re here, Piper. You’re our friend. We care about you, and what that woman put you through was horrible. Nothing would have stopped any of us from coming for you.”

Piper looked over at Nora, who nodded at her wife. Piper broke down utterly. Blubbering away, “ugly crying” as Nora’s mother had called it so long ago. But when she was done, and had blown her nose, and wiped her eyes, there was something in her expression that Nora hadn’t seen before. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’re all here,” she said. “And if I were Nora, I’d be cooking something amazing right about now. But I’m me, so what I’m going to do is take you all to Power Noodles and we’re going to make it a party.”

And as they all went out and practically took over Takahashi’s Noodle Stand and got steaming bowls of ramen and cold beers, Nora caught Piper’s eye. Piper’s eyes were glowing, and she mouthed, “I can’t believe it,” at Nora, who mouthed, “You better believe it,” back. And when several Diamond City Guards came over and congratulated her on her accurate and powerful kicking ability, Piper’s rehabilitation in her home town was basically complete.

*Sometimes the best things can come in shitty packages.*

At one point, Nora caught Nick checking out Ellie’s behind as she got another beer from Takahashi and Nora got an idea. Nora leaned over to Ellie and whispered, “Nick keeps checking out your ass. You know that right?”

Ellie looked over, eyes wide, “No.”

Nora nodded. “I’m going to keep working on him rationally, but you might just help me out and take advantage of his interest. Just a suggestion.”

Ellie smiled, walked over to Nick, and said, “You know we have to talk at some point, Nick. We work together. I’m still your secretary, right?”

He nodded and Ellie said, “Good,” and then very deliberately and slowly walked away to hand a beer to Piper. Nora smirked as Nick’s eyes followed her the whole way.

Piper and friends remained for some time at the noodle stand. And there wasn’t a dry eye, when Nora proposed a toast, “To absent friends. Especially Cait. Who would have kicked that fucker five more times just for Piper. No matter what Irma said.”

Piper laughed and raised her own beer. As did everyone else. They weren’t out too late, as they
wanted to be there bright and early to see how good a job Piper had done on Gage.

The next morning, Nora and Piper were on the prosecution’s side. In addition, Mackenzie Bridgeman, the doctor who was now the ‘mayor’ of Nuka-World was there. She looked worlds better than when they’d seen her last, as they were leaving Nuka-World. To be fair, so did Piper.

She was dressed in clean clothes, and the callouses from her collar had all but disappeared. She looked happy to see them. While they waited, she came over. “I’m glad to run into you. I wanted to invite you to visit Nuka-World,” she said.

Piper shuddered and Mackenzie said, “That’s exactly what we’re trying to get around. We got the power up and running…had to clear out a batch of ferals…and turned the Galactic Zone robots loose cleaning the place up. But after two years, people are…reluctant.”

She looked at the two of them, “I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you could visit and talk about what you see, or don’t see, that would help. A lot.”

Nora looked at Piper. Piper looked sour, but eventually she nodded. Nora said, “Ok, Doc. After the trial.”

At that moment Porter Gage walked, or hobbled, in. Piper looked at him, hard and mean. Sun was with him, and he mouthed to Piper, “Squashed one.”

You could have heard a pin drop when Piper started laughing. When Gage sat down painfully, she had finally subsided. Barely.

When the judges entered, and had sat down, Irma banged the gavel. Allison called Mackenzie to the stand. When she’d been sworn in, Allison questioned her about how she’d ended up in Nuka-World.

She looked sad. “I used to live in a settlement, Sturbridge, west of Nuka-World. Colter’s old gang hit it four, five years go. It was tough fight and it went on for a while. There were wounded, theirs and ours, stuck in between.”

“Well, I was a young, idealistic doctor, so I called for a truce on the condition that I’d help their wounded as well as ours,” Mackenzie said, “And I did save a lot of lives that day. Including Colter’s. But when he took over Nuka-World, he came for me. Said his gangs would leave Sturbridge alone if I went with him. And he kept his promise. For two whole months.”

She looked disgusted. “They’d been going through slaves at a high rate of speed. Believe it or not, they used to be even worse than what it was like when Nora and Piper arrived. Every day a couple slaves would die from gunshot wounds…Raiders using them as stands for ‘target practice’, when they weren’t just shooting them outright for the fun of it. Pushing slaves out among the Bloodworms while they bet on how long the poor bastards would live.”

She looked down, “And because of me, they knew that Sturbridge was an easy target. They swept everyone up, men, women….children.”

Allison let that hang for a few moments. Then she asked, “What kind of injuries did you treat among slaves?”

Mackenzie shook her head, “Gunshots, stab wounds, slash wounds, soft tissue trauma, genital mutilation, illness, dehydration, starvation, and you name it. If it came from either malice or neglect you can be sure I treated it.”

Allison said, “No further questions.”
Irma said, “Mr. Gage you may remain seated for your questions, as you are injured,” and Piper snickered at that, but when Irma went on to say, “But if there’s another outburst like yesterday, I will let Ms. Wright have another crack at you,” Piper let out a loud barking, “Hah!”

Gage just shook his head. Something…or someone…had taken the starch out of him. Allison stood, “I’m done your honor.”

Gage just shook his head when Irma called for the defense.

Irma banged her gavel. “Closing statements, please.”

Allison stood, “This is the first of many trials we will conduct. But in the end they have one common thread. Mr. Gage and his cohorts feel that the only law they need to follow is whatever they feel like. They feel no pity or remorse, as you have seen. They have decided that we are all sheep, because we don’t just take what we want.”

“They are nihilists, where they aren’t sociopaths, and sociopaths where they aren’t psychopaths. They are irreconcilable with civilization. They are violent and dangerous. And this man led them, while manipulating figureheads from the shadows. If the horror that was Nuka-World had an architect, it was this man. I’m done. I wish to god I could be done with it all, but honestly, we have to try every one of these people.”

Irma looked at Gage. “Mr. Gage?”

He shook his head and mumbled something. Irma said, “I couldn’t hear that.”

“I said, get it over with. We all know how this ends. So just get on with it, you sanctimonious pussies.”

Irma looked him over, “You might want to find a better insult, Mr. Gage. Pussies are tough and flexible, and pass entire tiny humans through them, and through it all they give immense amounts of pleasure. Find something else to imply weakness.”

Then all the judges stood up and left to deliberate.

Within the hour they were back. After they sat, Irma banged her gavel and said, “The defendant will rise.”

Gage got painfully to his feet. Irma looked at him, “You have been charged with multiple counts of murder; conspiracy to commit murder; accessory before, during, and after the fact for rape, murder, theft, torture, slavery, and assault; human trafficking; and premeditated mass murder; as well as additional lesser crimes too numerous to list.”

She looked at him levelly, “This court finds you guilty on every count. You are hereby sentenced to be taken from this place immediately, and at dawn you are to be brought from the place of your confinement and hanged by the neck until dead. May god have mercy on your soul, for the good folk of the Commonwealth of New England surely would not, were it up to them.”

Her gavel banged, once. And then the judges got up, and filed out, while the bailiff escorted Gage as he painfully hobbled out of the court.

It would be poetic to state that Nora and Piper slept like babies, but they didn’t. Both of them tossed and turned. The next morning, they both insisted that Nat and Shaun remain home. To their credit, neither of the children looked too eager to go.
The pair walked out to the scaffold, and waited a few minutes. The crowd went silent as Gage was escorted from the Diamond City Jail to the noose. He climbed painfully up the steps. One of the guards tried to slip a bag over his head, but he shook it off. Then the noose was placed around his neck and tightened. He was not given any last words. Instead, as dawn broke, the executioner opened the trap door, and Gage fell about two feet.

His eyes bulged, and his face slowly blackened as he kicked and struggled, his bound hands grasping futilely. The two women watched impassively as he choked, and his struggles grew ever more feeble until his leg gave a last quiver and went still.

“Rot in hell,” Piper said, under her breath.

Nora put her arm around Piper as they turned and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Lest this turn into Law and Order: Commonwealth, that's the first of many trials, but the only one to be covered. As I was playing Nuka-World it dawned on me that Colter wasn't really responsible for Nuka-World. The affably evil Porter Gage was the true monster of that place.

Just because you didn't see the Raiders rape and torture the slaves, where the hell do you think all that gore in the Disciples camp came from? Were you at all curious about where the bones, the extremely human bones, in the Yao-Guai cage in the Pack Backstage came from? Did you read Mengele...Lizzie Wyath's terminal?

Porter Gage was in fact the true architect of that, and he was even clever enough to get other people to front for him, so that he could feign lack of responsibility. I only hung him because I forgot I could have used Brahmin for drawing and quartering until this very moment. I only eased off on his death scene because I don't want to traumatize anyone.

I just don't "get" anyone that wants to play "evil".

But Piper gets to realize something. They're not there for Nora. Not this time.
After a week, they began to fall into a pleasant routine. Piper wrote and published her paper. And the people that had once criticized her complimented her on her stories. Some of the time. She didn’t always tell them what they wanted to hear, but she did her best to let them know what they needed to hear, and they had finally seen it—the trial of Porter Gage, and the subsequent and ongoing trials, had shown them the threat that could touch them, even inside the Wall.

Nat and Shaun attended school every day, and Nat continued to write more stories for the Publick Occurrences. And miraculously, the red ink on her copy shrank and shrank as she and her sister began to work as a team more and more. Shaun continued to tinker. He did have a fascination with how things worked.

Ellie was living with them, but every day she got up and went to work. Where she was systematically torturing Nick. Ellie, having decided to admit to herself what it was she wanted, was willing to use any means, fair or foul, to get what she wanted. As it turned out, she had a rare talent for dropping things. Then bending over and picking them up. It was a good thing Nick was a synth and didn’t actually have to sleep.

And Nora was happily pouring over reports and reading about the various successes and failures of the CSIS. If you drew a line from Fort Hagen in the west to The Castle in the east, then north of that line, with the exception of deep downtown Boston, was pacified to civilized. South of that line was another story, but even then it was becoming obvious that it was a matter of time.

After another week, Nora could almost see what life would become. And it was good. She and her wife had jobs that were important, and they were both making a difference. They had friends. They had a happy home, and the support of many friends, both inside and outside of Diamond City. By this time, she was unsurprised to learn from Agent Canine, during a movie night, that Oliver had left his wife. And that Jenny had admitted to herself that she’d fallen for him.

Nora had smiled at her and said, “Welcome to why honey traps were always a two edged sword. But I am truly happy for you. I’m glad we got there before the Courser could get to you.” Jenny agreed. Fervently.

August was beginning, and it was hot, sticky and unpleasant when Mackenzie’s renewed invitation arrived. It simply said, “We’re ready for visitors. Bring friends. Ones who’ll talk.”

Nora sighed and said, “Piper, I’m afraid we owe her this one.”

Piper made a face, but agreed. Ellie looked over Nora’s shoulder, and said, “I can be talkative.”

Nora looked up in surprise, and then the gears began to turn. She nodded. “Ok, guys. We leave day after tomorrow.”

Nat and Shaun were unreasonably excited and it infected everyone. Even Piper looked like she was forgetting the last time she’d been there. When the day after the invite dawned, Piper and Nora, and Ellie led Nat and Shaun over to the Vertibird pad that had been built in the right center bleachers, out past Sheng Kowalski’s shed.

When they got there, Ellie was surprised to find Nick there waiting. Nick was surprised to see Ellie
walking up. Nora took one look and said, “I wanted to bring another couple with me and Piper. I thought you two could enjoy an actual vacation.”

Nick began hemming, but Nora cut him off, “The missing people will still be missing when we get back…and I’m covering any lost revenue. So get on the damn ‘bird.”

They all climbed on, with their bags. As it turned out, Nick had brought his gun. Because at this point in his life he felt naked without it. Piper kept hers as well, given what had happened last time. And Nora had her pistol…because, if she was being honest with herself, it was practically a piece of her now.

The Vertibird flew to the Transit Station. Mackenzie had asked them to come as if they were ‘typical’ Commonwealth visitors. Nora agreed, but she’d kept her radio, and instructed the ‘bird to do a flyby of Nuka-World in a half hour.

Old betrayals died hard.

The Transit Center still had a semi-collapsed parking structure, but the trash was gone. Which carried through to the cleaned and polished station. It looked almost as good as it had in 2076. There was a smiling trader there, who escorted them onto the train, and activated it. After 15 minutes, the train shot into daylight, just as it had the last time. And here the similarities ended.

As the old narration played, Nora and Piper could see lights on rides, and the Ferris wheel in Kiddie Kingdom turning. The entire park had been cleaned as far as they could see.

*There must be a hell of a trash pile somewhere…*

Nick and Ellie looked out, rapt. Ellie had snuck her hand into Nick’s. And Nat and Shaun were staring in the distance at the Galactic Zone, which was winking and glimmering even in daylight.

As the monorail pulled into the station, it was clear that the ‘bots had worked tirelessly. All remnants of the Gauntlet were gone. In its place the pedestrian bridge over the parking lot had been rebuilt and the six of them crossed it, and came down the stairs in front of Nuka-Town. Where Mackenzie and Shelbie greeted them.

Mackenzie said, “Welcome to the New Nuka-World. You may have noticed, now that power is on, we’ve turned this into more than a trading center for Western Mass. We’ve gone through the parks…well, the ‘bots did…and refurbished them. We’re back up over 50% restored. Including the Nuka-Galaxy coaster ride. And the Fizztop Grille is back to being a restaurant,” and she smiled at Nora. She gestured at one of the buildings to one side of the Market. “That’s our first hotel.”

Nora smiled at Mackenzie, “It hardly seems the same place…”

“That was kind of the point,” said Shelbie.

All of them filed over to the new hotel, where Piper and Nora got a room, adjoining Nat and Shaun’s. At first Shelbie tried to put Ellie and Nick in the same room. At his rushed insistence, they got separate rooms. Nora had small side talk with Mackenzie, and they made sure that Nick and Ellie’s rooms were adjoining as well.

Then Mackenzie took them to dinner, in the Fizztop Grille. It was quite good. Mackenzie smiled as they looked around. “Yes, you wouldn’t believe the trash heap out by the ruins of Bradburton. It was three solid weeks of throwing crap out before we started getting anywhere.”

Nora smiled at that. Apparently she’d been thinking very loudly. “So,” Nora said, “You’re actually
looking to be an amusement park again.”

Mackenzie laughed, “Based on some of the stuff we’re finding? Better than before. For one thing, we’re insisting on safety standards.”

Nora nodded and they finished their meal. Nora and Piper were exhausted. Despite how pleasant it was, and even if they hadn’t been sure they were going back into hell, they hadn’t been sure they weren’t either. They’d turned out to have expended a great deal of emotional energy worrying.

On their first day, Nora insisted, and Piper backed her up, about going to Safari Adventure first. As they walked along, they found the walkways cleared, and the central island in the Nuka River had a Minuteman station. They checked in and found that it had been a couple weeks since anything untoward had wandered into the parks. They did recommend that the group keeps some guns, for now. Apparently the cave crickets were fond of hunting the edges of the park.

When they arrived at Safari Adventure they found the park cleaned up. And all the cages repaired. There was even some wildlife inside. The six of them went to the right, and soon found themselves at the Primate House. Which was open, with Gorillas roaming, and Cito in the middle. He smiled hugely when he saw Nora and Piper.

“Friends! You have come back. Cito happy to see you.”

Nick said under his breath, “What was he raised by, apes?”

Piper elbowed him, “Yes! Now be nice.”

Cito stopped, “You have brought new friends to Cito?”

Nora nodded, “This is Piper’s and my son and daughter, Shaun and Nat.”

Cito looked at them gravely and said, “You are small people. I will tell family to be nice.” And he turned and chuffed at the troop. Several chuffed back, then one came and touched Shaun’s face, and then stepped back.

Cito smiled, “That is very good. Family like your family.”

Then Nora point to Nick and Ellie, “These are our friends, Nick Valentine and Ellie Perkins.”

Cito smiled at them too. Then he said, “You want to see new park. First friends were loud, not so nice. But then loud noises came. Cito and family stayed hidden. When we came out people were much nicer. Said that they came from you. Then more people came and asked if metal men could fix Cito home. Cito not know why not, so Cito said fine. New home nice. Lit up. People tell Cito they hope to make Cito home ‘a-trac-shun’. Cito not know this word, but Cito like meeting new friends. Show them park. Cito show friends. Cito capture Monster.”

Nora jumped and Cito laughed, “No more Monster come. This last Monster, Cito think. Monster in cage. Come. See.”

When they got to the large carnivore section, Nora could see that the robots had thoroughly fixed the cages. And when the Gatorclaw came out, Nick and Ellie looked at Nora impressed. “Those things look worse than Deathclaws,” Nick said.

Nora nodded, “Until you know the trick.”

Nat said, “Trick?”
Nora nodded at her daughter, “Yep. They open their mouth when they’re surprised or threatened. Just like an alligator. Instead of having to get through a thick hide to kill them? You just shoot ‘em in the mouth. Easy peasy.”

Piper said, “Or have Cito with you,” she looked over at the huge man, “Nora and I saw him dodge a Gatorclaw charge and break its leg with one swing of his sledgehammer.”

Cito smiled. And then they spent the rest of the morning seeing the changes he’d made. He was proud and the kids had a great time.

Then after lunch at noon they went to Kiddie Kingdom. Piper had a great time. Nora had a semi-great time. They rode the Ferris wheel and the Rocketship ride. And that was fine. But then Piper narrated the entire trip through the refurbished funhouse. She didn’t exactly spare Nora when she talked about Nora’s bizarre terror of the Hypno Halls.

After they went through, Nora was pretty sure Nat had indulged her mother by claiming nausea at them as well, but she was grateful that her daughter loved her enough to at least try and yank her sister’s chain for teasing Nora. All in all it had been a first rate first day.

When they returned to Nuka-Town and the hotel, Ellie insisted that she and Nick take the other four out for dinner. They settled on a small place that had just opened that was run by a woman who Piper recognized. Piper looked stricken but the woman came over, and thanked her. And Nora. Quietly she informed them that she’d been one of the six, and that she was pretty sure Nora’s intervention had saved her life.

She tried to give them their meal free of charge, but the group insisted on paying. Though Piper did offer to show her Power Noodles if she ever got to Diamond City. Nora looked on in amusement as the woman, named Ellen, reacted to stories of Diamond City the way people from Iowa had reacted to stories of New York, or Los Angeles, back before the war.

When Ellie made Nick pick up the check, Nora stifled a smile.

*I’ve seen a lot of people use the method of simply assuming assent to get their way. The more she acts like they’re already a couple on holiday, the easier it’ll be to bring Nick around.*

The next day they went to the Galactic Zone. The traders hadn’t bothered to refurbish the Battlezone, but they did have the robots repairing each other and making more using the facility there. However, Nora had to appreciate the…modifications…made to Vault-Tec: Among the Stars. The narration cataloged all the ways that Vault-Tec had messed with people’s lives, up to and including the very exhibit they were touring. The exhibit was fun AND educational. And it ended with, “Imagine the future, without Vault-Tec. Because they’re awful.”

Nora and Piper didn’t stop laughing for ten minutes. Every time they would slow down, one of them would say something like, “See this entirely fake mock-up of living areas that no one would ever have access to,” or, “Thanks to Vault-Tec’s cutting edge research, you could expect to be cut open by experimental knives,” and the gales of laughter would start over.

Then they went to the Nuka-Galaxy ride. Because it had been totally enclosed it actually turned out to be pretty easy to repair and get back into shape, since all the pieces were in there somewhere. And because it was a lower speed ride the safety margins were high. The six of them rode the ride and by the time they reached the ‘battlefield’ Nora looked back and caught Ellie kissing Nick. Rather aggressively too.

*About damn time.*
While Nora spent the rest of the ride congratulating herself, by the time they reached debarkation, neither Ellie or Nick were showing any signs of all the necking that had just occurred. Nevertheless Nora decided to double down and got ahold of Mackenzie, and arranged for the door between Ellie and Nick’s rooms to ‘malfunction’.

The next morning Ellie looked radiant and Nick somewhat puzzled.

_It’s a setup Nick. I set you up. I will continue to._

Their last day, they visited Dry Rock Gulch and World of Refreshment. The only major ride in Dry Rock Gulch, Mad Mulligan’s Mine, remained torn up, although the robots were well on their way to repairing it fully. But Nora got to look on indulgently as first Shaun, then Nat, and then Piper, who’d been far too worried to enjoy herself last time, gunned down One-Eyed Ike, with Piper setting the record, beating even Nora’s time.

The kids enjoyed the key hunt, even if it was still mostly broken. But World of Refreshment took the cake. Piper was highly resistant. Nora simply said, “Everyone does World of Refreshment. You have to.”

“All, I wanted to poke my eardrums out. You were right,” Piper complained.

Nora smiled, “And we can’t deny that to Ellie and Nick, or Nat and Shaun. All must experience the horror.”

As they rode the boats through the ride, while Piper rolled her eyes so extensively that you could actually hear her do so, there were two developments. One was that Ellie had broken Nick down enough that she could kiss him openly. The second was when Piper looked out over the bottle facility.

“All, shit, they’re making Nuka-Cola. They’re making new Nuka-Cola!” she exclaimed.

When they got out, Piper went running up to Mackenzie. “You sneaky…”

Mackenzie smiled. “We didn’t want to leave everything to chance, Piper.”

Nora smiled, “Making new Nuka-Cola will put this place on the map. As long as you don’t devalue caps…”

Mackenzie said, “That’d be why we need to work with Kessler and Marcy Long. We have a little something to justify joining. And a way to help fund new expansion.”

“Not to mention instantly becoming the fourth largest settlement in the Commonwealth,” Nora said.

Mackenzie shook her head, “That’s less important. We need to resettle Western Mass. The gangs scoured everything as far west as Springfield, as far north as Vermont, and south to Long Island Sound. That’s a lot of land just waiting on homesteading.”

Chapter End Notes

There's an entire GENRE of movies in the 50s about summer romances turning into something more serious. 90% of which starred Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello. Plus the 'reboot' version with Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta.
So yeah. Besides the trick isn't hooking them up. It's getting them to the chapel...

And keeping them from singing. I'm pretty sure Nick's singing voice is awful.

Also, think of the "Federal Reserve" quality, in this universe, of a SODA BOTTLING PLANT. Nuka-World is now a trading post, a tourist destination, and Ft. Knox.

Probably oughta put some more Minutemen in there...or use it as a plot hook...

And oh yeah, the agent falling for the target is one of the reasons honey traps are not beloved of the Company or MI6/SIS. Or any Western Agency that actually has to mind potential blowback. KGB and it's successor GRU probably is more willing to use high-risk, high-reward tactics (like use polonium and Novachuk as wetwork tools).
When they got back, Ellie remained living at Nora’s. “I’m not going to push him, Nora. Yes, on vacation and since he’s been back he’s acting sweet, but if I push too hard I worry. I feel like he’s just looking for a reason to go back to ‘you deserve better’. There’s something going on with him, something he refuses to talk about.”

Nora nodded as they sat watching Nat and Shaun work on homework, “It’s somehow related to his escape from and or discarding by The Institute. I’ve had my people trying to find records or information about him in the stuff I downloaded from the Institute, but unless we know how they filed the records, we either can’t find it or it doesn’t exist. It’s like trying to drink from a firehose. All I know is that whatever records were kept weren’t filed under any permutation of ‘Generation 2 Prototype’, ‘Self-Awareness Prototype’, or any version of ‘Nick Valentine’. “

Ellie nodded. Changing the subject, she asked, “When are you taking Shaun for sizing up?”

Nora laughed and said, “I prefer to call it a pre-scheduled growth-spurt. At least I can buy clothes ahead of time and know what size he’ll be.”

Ellie smiled and said, “I see your point. I grew up in Goodneighbor, and my mom always told me she thought that my growth-spurts were CAUSED by buying clothes.”

Nora said, “We’re headed up to Sanctuary early next week. I already have the clothes.”

Ellie asked, “How tall is he going to be?”

Nora answered, “Right now he’s 4’8” and 75 pounds, and when he comes back he’ll be 5’ and 90 pounds.”

“He’s catching up to Nat,” Ellie observed.

Piper cut in, “And don’t think Nat hasn’t noticed. I’m still trying to figure out if wants to use him as her personal servant, or is resentful. Mainly because I don’t think she’s made up her mind.”

Nora laughed, “I remember my brother. He was 14, I was 15, when he passed me in a growth spurt. I was 5’5” and 115 pounds and all of a sudden he was 5’7” and 140ish pounds. I had been bossing him around, demanding he do things for me because I was his ‘big’ sister. That ended quickly. I started having to literally look up at him, and it just kept getting worse. He ended up 6’3” and 230 pounds. My brother was huge.”

Ellie asked, “Do you know where he was on the day of the war?” before Piper could wave her off the topic.

Nora looked over at Piper, “It’s OK, Thing. I know exactly where he was, Ellie, because he was in Arlington Cemetery. He was killed when his company was overrun in 2075 outside Anchorage.”

Ellie looked crestfallen, “I’m sorry, that was thoughtless.”

“Ellie, neither of you can be thoughtless when you ask those questions. Either I can be a complete mystery to you, or you can ask questions about people who, if they weren’t already dead, like Eric,
were almost certainly killed on Oct 23rd. Piper and I have gone through a fair bit of my history once we both realized I had to tell her about dead people in order to talk about my family at all. What would you like to know?"

“Umm, were your parents alive at the time of the war?” she asked.

Nora nodded. “They lived in Concord, still in the house I grew up in. Nate and I were going to have Sunday dinner with them that weekend he was supposed to give his speech to the VFW.”

Nora looked over and gave Ellie a smile, “And to answer a question that neither of you ever asked, I did look in Concord and I did not find their bodies at my old house. They would have been skeletons really.”

She looked thoughtful as she continued, “So they could have survived and escaped, they could have been up in Manchester buying booze…dad liked to do that, as New Hampshire had much less sales tax than Mass…and were killed there, or stayed in that area. Or they could have been killed in the house and wild animals could have taken the bodies. It’s not like the house was secure after 210 years. The back wall was half missing for one thing.”

Nora gave them both a kind look, “I’ll never know, and that’s OK. There’s a version of me, the one with deep emotional contacts to the past, which died when Vault-Tec threw the switch on those cryopods. I’m a kind of a new version, with new attachments in the present…motherfucker!!”

Piper and Ellie looked shocked. At the suddenness of her outburst. They both knew Nora had a pottymouth. “What?” asked Piper.

Nora replied, “I just realized that I have something in common with Nick. And what he’s going through. And I have something to talk to him about. Ellie, can you make sure Nick is free to come with me when Shaun goes through his growth spurt? I have an evil idea.”

Ellie looked confused, but she nodded. Nora turned to her wife, “Thing, can you stay here? I need to work on Nick alone.”

Piper looked skeptical, but said, “If the lovely lotus blossom Lien Mei asks it, I must agree.”

Nora gave Piper a look. Piper looked back. Nora looked harder. Piper remained impassive, and when Nora all but stared her down, Piper said, without breaking eye contact, “Lien Mei is going to have to suck it up from time to time.”

“He lovely and dedicated Lien Mei may refer to your shameless self from time to time,” Nora said, then looked at Ellie, who’d either missed or not realized how dirty ‘bu laoyian’ was, or hadn’t caught it in the high speed spurt of Mandarin. Then she smiled and said, “Fine.”

The next day, Nick, Nora, and Shaun headed out. As they walked along the well-worn paths to Concord, Nora turned to Nick, “So, I had a moment of clarity yesterday.”

“Oh? Going to start keeping your share of our fees?” he asked.

“Nope. Gotta fatten you up for the kill, Nick. No, I realized that I was thinking of myself as different from the Nora who went to sleep in 2077. I’d go crazy, absolutely insane, if I remained deeply invested in the world before and how it all died. If I tried to remain emotionally connected? It would be the end of me.”
She looked over at Nick, “And that’s when it hit me. That’s you too. You have to think of yourself as someone other than Nick from before the war. And with you it was even easier...you were in a new body.”

Nick opened his mouth. Then he closed it. He looked thoughtful.

*This is why I like you Nick. You give everything a full hearing. It makes you a good detective.*

Eventually he said, “Does that mean you agree with me?”

Nora laughed, “Oh no, Nick. But it means I understand where you’re coming from...as long as you understand I’m not a synth with an imprinted personality and I still feel this way too sometimes,” and she gave him a hard look, “But I know better than to try and claim I’m not the same person.”

She looked over at him, “I get why you feel that way, but ultimately, even though all of us go through even major changes, we’re both ‘still the same person’, and ‘not the same person’.”

Nick looked confused, “What on earth do you mean?”

Nora thought for a moment. “I need you, seriously, to cut me some slack here, because I’m trying to put into words a thought, and not exactly a fully-formed one. What I mean is I can see, step by step, how the ‘me’ who is me made the changes to adapt to my life now, but at the same time, the me that is on this side is so different from the me who started that it feels like I’m talking about two different people.”

Nick nodded, “I can see, kind of, what you mean.”

Nora looked him over and said, “Add in a period of haziness, of uncertainty, and I can totally see how you’ve ended up where you are,” and she saw his expression and hastily said, “And you said you’d reserve judgement until you were sure. Are you really sure?”

Nora watched Nick go over the events of the last week, and he said, “No. No, I’m not sure.”

When they arrived in Concord, they asked around and found their way to the “Bioscience and Biophysiology” building. Madison Li was ready for them. All three of them walked into a waiting room.

Madison looked at Nora and Nick and said, “If I might make a suggestion?”

Nora nodded, and Madison went on, “When we transfer Shaun’s consciousness, his ‘self’ to the new body? The old body will be there, slack and inert.”

Madison looked over at Nora, “I believe that you would find it upsetting. This iteration in particular,” Madison looked at Shaun and smiled, “You spent so long and felt so much and went through so much to get your boy back? Even though he’d be right there in a new body, I feel like you might obsess over the old body.”

*And welcome to why I brought you, Nick. Not that Madison is wrong exactly. It would bug the shit out of me, but he needs to see my conflicted nature. My genuinely conflicted nature. Oh, Shaun!*

Nora gulped and nodded.

Shaun and Madison left the room and went to the transfer room. Nick sat next to Nora.

“This was the point wasn’t it, Nora?” he asked.
Nora turned to look at him, “What do you mean, Tin Man?”

“This moment right here, right now. Is the Shaun that comes back Shaun, or is it a copy? And if so, did you just kill your son? Or was he already dead? Was the Shaun in the Institute the only Shaun that will ever be? Who IS a person anyways?”

He turned and looked at her, “Am I the sum of my memories? And if, from the point of now, I can see but not fully understand each of the changes that has been made am I really me? Who or what am I anyway? Or you? Or Shaun?”

Nick looked at Nora, “Is The Ship of Theseus still The Ship of Theseus after every single piece has slowly been replaced? What about people? Each of us is a process, cells dying and being created. Are ‘you’ a collection of particular cells, or the process itself?”

Nora smiled, “NOW you’re getting it, Tin Man. And at the risk of ruining all the progress I’m made fixing you two up, does it matter to Ellie if the Ship of Theseus is a replica or the real thing?”

Nick looked over. His expression was troubled, “I know what I used to want to say. I know it didn’t make you or Ellie happy, and now I’m also not sure I’m right. If only I had a definitive connection to my past.”

Nora looked over, “What do you mean?”

“Everything prior to that trash heap is hazy. I’m sure part of that is the Institute programming making me forget how to get in, and as part of that cover up, trashing other closely associated pieces of my memory at the same time. Which argues for ‘I’m not Nick.’ But then…the ship. If the Ship of Theseus is the Ship of Theseus after gradual replacement of its pieces…and I feel like it is…then how does the speed of replacement factor in? Why does how fast pieces are replaced matter? Should it?” Nick looked pained.

“And yet again. How did I get here? What happened between when Nick Valentine, or I, went to the Institute for scanning and when I ‘woke up’ on that trash heap? Who am I, really?” Nick asked.

Nora said, “And?”

Nick looked at Nora, “Are you asking, ‘Will Nick be a dick and shove Ellie away again?’ No. But the real question is, is there anything to ‘them as a couple’ unless Nick figures this shit out? No. Again.”

“Nick, this isn’t fair. Do you know how many resources from CSIS I have trying to find your records from the stuff we pulled from my holotape and the records you and Preston got? It’s going to become obvious soon.”

Nick shrugged. “So let’s keep going. Who knows what might happen? I might die. The horse might die. The king might die. And the horse might learn to sing.”

Nora rolled her eyes, “That’s a stupid fucking joke.”

“What is, mom?” they heard Shaun say. He was taller. He was bigger, but slightly leaner, as a pre-teen.

Nora smiled, all thoughts of ‘Will I get my son back,’ chased away as she hugged him and buried her face in his hair. This was indisputably, her son. In every way. He even smelled like Shaun, which was hard to understand, because this version was only a few minutes old.
Nora smiled and said, “Nick was reciting the punch line of an old joke. A prisoner is about to be executed. Desperate, he turns to the king before the headsman can swing the axe, and says, ‘Your Majesty! If you spare my life, I will teach your horse to sing within a year.’ The king is amused and lets the prisoner live, but he says that if the prisoner fails, he will be back at the headsman’s block.”

Nora continued, “When he gets back to his cell, the prisoner tells his only friend in the prison what he’s agreed to. His friend says, ‘You’re crazy. There’s no way you can teach a horse to sing.’ And the prisoner says, ‘Ah, but you don’t understand. In a year…”

Shaun finished, “‘Who knows what might happen? I might die. The horse might die. The king might die. And the horse might learn to sing.’ I get it. And stranger things have happened.”

Nora looked over at Nick, who was thinking hard. “Yes. Much stranger things have happened.”

Chapter End Notes

I love this chapter because this is as close as I've gotten to a clear "thesis" statement about what I've been writing about. "Agent of Change" is called what it is because Nora was an agent, and she is a catalyst for changes; in the Commonwealth, for Piper, for Nick, for the Railroad, for synths; but also because she herself is continually undergoing her own changes.

And here she struggles to put what has been happening, and continues to happen to her, into words. Then Nick, a cop of surprising philosophical depth, brings up the story/thought experiment of "The Ship of Theseus".

First proposed by the Greek Philosopher Plutarch (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plutarch) who lived between CE 46 – CE 120, it is a story about the ship Theseus took to bring back the 14 Athenians who were to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Kept as a memorial, in Plutarch’s account, as pieces failed, they were replaced, until such time as there remained not a single actual component that had made the original voyage. The second component of the thought experiment as proposed by Thomas Hobbes complicates matters by supposing that some method of restoration is devised whereby all the discarded pieces of the ship are somehow restored to pristine condition and reassembled. Which ship is the ‘real’ ship of Theseus? And if you were to consider the first ship the ‘real’ ship until the second reconstituted ship was reassembled, and not thereafter, why? (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_Theseus) (The wiki article covers several possible answers from various branches of philosophy from Aristotle to Perdurantist...Four-Dimentionalist...modern philosophy of identity.)

New studies in Biology suggest that we constantly grow even new brain cells. So we are each of us a little Ship of Theseus sitting in our harbor, slowly shedding old worn pieces and replacing them with new ones. So who ARE you really? Which Nora is Nora? The one who made her way into China grimly determined to kill or betray anyone who got in the way of her personally getting back safely? Or the one who came out of the Vault filled with grief and rage? Or the one who now lives in Diamond City, happily, with her wife and family and with an entirely different relationship with her basic skill set? And thus, who IS Nick? Why?

I fucking LOVE this chapter...
When the three got back to Diamond City, and Nora went home, Ellie greeted her at the door, “We’ve got a new case. An old associate of Nick’s contacted us. Missing person case. Daughter’s gone.”

Nora sighed, “Ok. In the morning. We’ll go over the case in the morning at the office. I’m beat.”

The next morning, Nora, Piper, and Ellie went to the detective agency. When they got there, Nick was already in his seat checking the file. He smiled at Ellie, “You don’t have to throw this Ellie,” but he looked troubled as he added, “But who is Kenji?”

Ellie gently reminded Nick, “He was an associate on a case you had shortly after I started. Ran a boat. You needed him to be transport. Are you sure you don’t remember?”

“Sure, sure. It’s coming back now. What can we do for Kenji?” Nick asked.

“His daughter, Kasumi, has gone missing is all he knows. He and his wife live way up north past Salem,” Ellie said.

Nick shook his head, “It seems like the most interesting cases start with a nice long walk. Which is what we have.”

Nora nodded, “Yeah. We can start after we say bye to the kids and I let D know what’s up.”

After they made arrangements to be gone for a while, the three; Nora, Piper, and Nick, headed out and went first east to Bunker Hill, then north through County Crossing, Finch Farm, The Slog, then across past Salem and then to the Nakano’s home. Under normal circumstances one would say “farm” but the Nakano’s made their living from the sea.

There was a boat at the end of a pier in the small bay, and a large house with several outbuildings including a boathouse. As the three approached the house they heard a raised voice.

There was a man, shouting, “Damnit! Come in. I know you’re listening on the other end. Where is she? Where is my daughter?”

By then they were close enough to hear another voice, a woman’s, “Kenji please. You’ve been at this for hours. Stop. You need to sleep.”

Kenji replied, “She’s out there somewhere, Rei. Someone has her. They could be Raiders or Gunners or god knows who else.”

Nick opened the door, and as Kenji and Rei turned, he said, “Hope you don’t mind we let ourselves in.”

Kenji looked immensely relieved, “Nick. Thank god. You need to get to work right away. She could be hurt. She could be lost. She could be…”

Nick raised his hands, “Whoa whoa, slow down…uh…Kenji was it? Why don’t you go over the details with me and my partner here?”
Kenji looked up at Nora, and Nick pointing at her, “You brought a partner. Good. The more eyes the better,” he said.

Nora couldn’t help it. Something was…off. “So what’s the story with you and Nick?” she asked.

Kenji said, “Nick didn’t tell you? Ran with him on one of his cases a few years back. Searching for some sort of lost heirloom. He needed a boat. Things didn’t end well. We were double crossed by the client once we had what he was looking for. Still have some lead lodged in my hip.”

Nick nodded, “Uh…right. Yeah, it’s starting to come back to me…Sorry things ended so sour.”

_What the hell, Nick? Something is seriously…off. Is it something that happened when we transferred him? Is this my fault?_

While Nora was watching Nick, Kenji continued, “We got out. That’s all that matters. And now you can return the favor by finding my daughter.”

Nora looked around. Everything was neat. Well maintained. She looked back at Kenji and Rei, “We’re here to help. Tell us what happened.”

Kenji pointed at the transceiver on the table behind him, into which he’d so recently been shouting, “It’s all thanks to this damn radio.”

Ms. Nakano, Rei, stepped forward for the first time, “Our daughter Kasumi likes to fix things. The radio was her latest project.”

Kenji looked sour, “Until she made contact with some kidnapper who lured her away from us.”

Rei continued in a manner that made Nora think this wasn’t the first time round this track, for either of them, “Or maybe she left on her own. She’s not a child anymore. Our daughter is nineteen. She knows how to survive, and she’s capable. I…I think she left because she wanted her own life.”

Kenji shook his head, “No. She would have told us where she was going. She would have said…something. I know my daughter is in danger. I can feel it. Find her. Please.”

Nora looked at both of them, “Do you have any idea where she could have gone?”

Kenji said, “We know she took one of the boats, but that’s all.”

_Great. She could be almost anywhere on the Eastern Seaboard by now…_

What Nora said was, “We’ll find her. Don’t you worry.”

Kenji nodded, “Thank you. Her room is upstairs, if that helps. And if you have any more questions, just ask.”

Nick laid his hand on Kenji’s, “Don’t worry Kenji. We’ll get to the bottom of it. Just sit tight.”

The three of them stepped to one side, and Nick pointed up, “Let’s look around.”

Piper added, “Upstairs. Her room.”

They found a large collection of holotape logs, with titles like “Lamp”, or “TV”. And one called “Dreams”. When they slotted that one, they heard Kasumi’s voice, “Project log. Dreams. Recording what I can remember when I wake up. I keep having the same one. I'm in a white room. People are talking about me like I'm not there, or maybe they just don't care. And then there's this... I don't
know... Jolt. Like a spark of electricity to the back of my head. And then everyone turns to look at me. God... I hope I don't have it again tonight…”

Nora looked up at Nick. He shook his head. “Don’t look at me. I never had dreams. Still don’t.”

They went downstairs to question the Nakanos. First Nick and Nora pulled Kenji to one side.

He looked at them, “Did you have questions? About my daughter?”

Nora nodded, “Tell me more about this radio she was fixing.”

He shook his head ruefully, “I’ve tried to get the damn thing working over and over, but there’s nothing. I thought she just wanted to strip it for parts or build a toaster out of it, or something, like she usually does. Someone made contact with her, and then they took her. God, what kind of twisted psychopath has my daughter?”

Nora tried another tack, “You and your wife disagree on why your daughter left. You wife says she left on her own, but you say kidnappers.”

Kenji sighed, and said, “I know it was kidnappers. Kasumi is a smart girl, but she doesn’t know how horrible people can be. Not like me and Rei. Why would she just leave her family? With no explanation? Someone tricked her. Got her to leave the safety of home. Every minute we aren’t looking for my daughter, her life is in jeopardy.”

_Jeez, overprotective much?_

Kenji said, “She’s my little girl and she doesn’t know how dangerous the world can be. I never should have let her grandfather teach her how to fix these machines.”

“Her grandfather?” Nora asked.

He nodded, “Yes. Her grandfather had an ear for machines. Kasumi picked up the knack. He… passed away recently.”

Nora nodded, “I’ll be back soon,” then she went to find Rei in the kitchen, “You and your husband don’t seem to agree on why your daughter left.”

She sighed, “We both want to find her. The world out there isn’t a place where you want to be alone. But Kenji still sees her swaddled in diapers. He doesn’t see a young woman, with her own decisions to make. Maybe because it would be more frightening if she wasn’t tricked into leaving. That it was her choice and she didn’t want us to follow. Why?”

Nora looked into Rei’s eyes, “Why do you think she might have gone?”

Rei looked troubled, “My daughter is strong. Focused. Careful. That’s how I know she’s alive.” Then she shook her head, “But why leave without telling us? Maybe we…no…never mind…I don’t want to waste your time.”

_Ah HA._

“Every detail is important, Mrs. Nakano. Don’t hold back,” Nora pressed.

Rei heaved a deep sigh, “It’s just that we’ve been fighting a lot more. All of us, since Kasumi’s grandfather passed away. He was the only one who could really talk with her. Kenji and I don’t really understand machines, but those two could talk together for hours. She started staying in her
grandfather’s boathouse late into the night. I thought she was just trying to cope with the loss, but now I wonder what she was up to.”

Nick and Piper met Nora’s eyes over Rei’s head. Nick pointed his chin at the door. Nora thanked Rei, and the three of them went out.

“The boathouse,” Piper said, definitively.

Nick nodded in agreement and the three of them walked out to the boathouse. In it they found tools, half-finished projects…and a locked safe.

“Lien Mei?”

Nora looked at Piper, who shrugged and said, “Blue, ‘Lien Mei’ IS the person who picks locks.”

Nora glared for another moment then chuckled ruefully. “You’re not wrong. But I bet you wonder what I’m saying right now. My foreign barbarian wife should really get a new act.”

“Blue?”

“Wouldn’t you love to know, Piper,” Nora answered.

“Well, yeah,” she said.

“Tough,” said Nora.

At about that moment, the safe popped open. Nora really was that good. Inside was yet another holotape. Nora slotted it in her Pip-Boy, and they listened as Kasumi spoke, “Project log. Um...Myself. I never really thought about who or... what I am, but... God, where do I start? The radio. I was right about the range. I managed to get a signal. A strong signal, from up north. There’s a group of people there. They say they're all synths, synthetic people. Made by the Institute.”

Nora looked up at the group significantly, and the listened as Kasumi went on, “They're trying to build a place for their kind. Where they can be themselves and be accepted for what they are alongside human beings. It sounds wonderful, but... then they started asking about me. And some questions came up. Questions I don't have answers to. I mean... I've always felt... off... like I'm not really supposed to be here, but then there are things in my childhood that I can't remember, and I've been having strange dreams... I... I'm going to go. To meet with these synths. I... I have to know the truth about myself. They've told me to sail up north to a town called Far Harbor. I can make my way to them from there.”

“Well, shit,” Nora said.

Piper said, “On the bright side, we do have a target.”

Nick and Nora nodded, then they all went back to the main house. Nora approached Kenji and Rei together, and asked, “I think I know where Kasumi went. Have you heard of a place called Far Harbor?”

Kenji looked shocked. “She went that far up north? That explains why she took the boat... There’s no time to waste. You have to go after her.”

Nick started to nod, when Nora interrupted, “We’re not going off half-cocked. We’ll leave at first light tomorrow morning, when we’ve had time to get equipment and prepare.”
Kenji started to object but Rei said, “That makes sense,” then she looked at Nick, “Did you find out why she left detective? Who she was speaking to?”

Kenji tried to interrupt, “What does it matter?”

Rei just shushed him and said, “Because I know my daughter and if she didn’t tell us where she went the she had a reason. Don’t you want to know if she wants to be found?”

Kenji nodded, “You’re right. Detective, did you find any clues to why Kasumi left home?”

Nora nodded, “Your daughter made contact with a group of synths. She thinks she’s one of them.”

Rei looked outraged, “She’s not a synth. She’s our daughter. We raised her. I gave birth to her. She’s flesh and blood, not a synthetic.”

Nora shook her head. Now was not the time. “It doesn’t matter if your daughter is a synth, Mrs. Nakano. She’s still a person who needs help.”

Kenji said, “This is what I was afraid of, someone twisting my daughters mind.”

*I thought the problem was kidnappers. I think the problem is overprotective dad.*

Kenji kept talking, “You have to get to Far Harbor. Take my ship on the dock. It has a guidance system, A final gift from my father. And it’s built for distance. Use it tomorrow. I’ll program in the course.”

Piper asked, “What can we expect out there Kenji?”

He answered, “I only made the trip to Far Harbor once, when I was a boy. All I remember is that my father didn’t want to stay long. Something about the air being bad.”

Nora looked at both of them, “We’ll get to the bottom of this Kenji.”

Nick added, “I know it’ll be hard waiting for word, but try and carry on like normal. We’ll be back tomorrow, and then we’ll let you know as soon as we can.”

Then Nora left the house and she was on the radio. After 20 minutes a ‘bird was landing. Kenji and Rei’s eyes were wide as saucers. Nora looked back at them staring. She ran over as Nick and Piper climbed aboard.

“You didn’t just hire Valentine’s Detective Agency. I’m the Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service.”

She looked at both of them, “This is important enough the Commonwealth of New England government just got involved.”

She waved and climbed aboard the Vertibird.

Kenji and Rei watched them fly off, never looking away.

Chapter End Notes

95,000 words in and I finally start Far Harbor. All I have to do is get it all down (good
news, over Labor Day I finished transcribing the Nora playthrough).

Wordy is the only way to describe myself.

I have news when we get to the end of this book about a promise I've made myself...
When they arrived in Diamond City, Nora made a beeline for CSIS HQ, while Piper and Nick began getting supplies ready. When Nora arrived, she called a conference with PAM and D, and outlined what she’d learned about the synth colony.

D looked thoughtful, “With no Institute but with some Coursers still about although scattered, they’re not completely secure but they have a chance to emerge from the shadows. If they want. I’m more concerned about their methods.”

Nora nodded, “Caught that, did you? If this Kasumi is having dreams, it’s unlikely she’s a synth, unless nightmares suggesting an Institute origin were useful for some unholy reason. Synths don’t dream because they don’t need to. They don’t need sleep for the same reason.”

D nodded, “It’s at least possible they did exactly that. A huge colony of escaped synths would be the kind of thing the Institute would want, badly. So it’s not impossible.”

Nora nodded, “But unlikely.”

PAM interrupted, “There is a 35% chance that the Institute was so eager to infiltrate a rogue synth colony it would program a nightmare sequence.”


She turned to D, “So in addition to me traveling as Nick’s partner, I think I should visit in a more official capacity.”

D nodded, “Agree.”

Nora said, “As a result I need to draw a long range radio repeater and a directional antenna setup. Also, I may need some agents ready to go. We may need to set up a safehouse.”

“Done and done. Talk to Tom, and I’ll get Deacon going with a list of potential safe house minders,” D said.

Nora said, “It’s going to be weird going in without some kind of cover.”

D laughed, “Well if it makes you happy, you don’t have to announce you’re a spy. It’s just incidental to what you’re doing there.”

Nora nodded, “Strangely, it does make me feel better. I’ve never been naked before.”

D smiled at Nora, “You know all this, where we are right now,” and she waved her hand around her, “Is all you. The fact that I have more to do now than I ever did as leader of the Railroad, but I’m a respected citizen? All you. I thought I’d end my days in a hole in the ground, futilely trying to bring another oppressed person to freedom.”

D gave Nora’s shoulder a squeeze, “Instead I find myself with resources I never imagined, doing things that I can even, sometimes, talk about. Thank you, Nora. Now go and figure out what’s going on out there, and let us know so we can do the right thing.”
Nora then visited Tom and drew the radio and antenna kit. He also gave her several modified Stealth Boys, “I read up on some of your troubles, and I realized if I could extend the life on one of these puppies, you could avoid problems in the future.”

Nor nodded, and thanked him, then carried the load back home.

When Nora took her equipment inside, she found Piper laying out Hazmat Suits, and dropping a pile of Rad-X and RadAway on the bed. At Nora’s questioning look she said, “Bad air, Blue. Kenji’s dad said the air was bad.”

Nora nodded and kissed Piper and then packaged up her equipment in a duffel, along with ammo, grenades, and food. After winding up reduced to one last undamaged, un-blood-soaked outfit at Nuka-World, Nora brought a full week’s worth of rugged clothing whenever she was unsure how long she’d be gone.

Then she and Piper spent the evening with the kids. The slightly larger Shaun took very little getting used to…he really was indistinguishable from his earlier body after the first few hours. You forgot he hadn’t always been a tweenager quickly.

Nick and Ellie didn’t come over that night.

The next morning, before dawn, the three took a Vertibird back to the Nakano’s. When they’d arrived and offloaded equipment, and began carrying it to the pier, Kenji hurried out to help them stow items below the weather deck. He went over the controls and the autopilot with Nora, ensuring she and Piper knew how to pilot if needed.

As dawn was breaking there was nothing left to do, so Piper and Nick cast off the lines and Nora pressed the ‘Go’ button. The ship turned and, picking up speed, departed the small bay for the open ocean.

They took up a heading that ran up the coast, that assuming that they didn’t greatly deviate from their heading, would put them into the Maine seacoast about half way between Portland, Maine, and St. John, New Brunswick. The ship settled into a droning routine and Nora probed Nick with regard to Ellie.

“So, didn’t see you last night, Nick,” she started.

“That’s because Ellie and I were sleeping together,” he said.

Nora smiled, “You’re hoping to brush me back with that aren’t you? Guess again, Tin Man. Why call it ‘sleeping together’?”

Nick growled, “Maybe because I’m a damn gentleman?”

Nora smiled, “Maybe. But a gentleman would have said nothing.”

Piper cut in, “Nick, I get that you’re reluctant, but what I still don’t understand is why?”

Nick looked up, “Because not even I know how much of the Ship is original.”

Piper looked confused. Nora said, “The Ship of Theseus. Thought experiment,” and she outlined the terms of the replacement of parts of a Ship, piece by piece, until no original part remained.

Piper nodded, “I see your point Nick. So what’s it going to take?”
“If I knew what happened between the scanning and when I ‘woke up’ on that trash heap? That would go a long way,” Nick said. “Part of the problem is that there’s that gap.”

“But if the gap were filled in?” asked Piper.

Nick said, “I’d probably stay with her. Almost certainly. She pretty and she sasses me, and I feel comfortable around her, and I want to take care of her, and protect her, even while I want her to be independent of me…”

Nora held up a hand, “Nick, it sounds to me like you really ought to shorten that list to, ‘I love her.’”

Nick looked troubled, “But is the love real? Can I actually feel that? Or am I just programmed to think that?”

Nora said, “Am I? I have all kinds of hormones that make me act certain ways around Piper. It’s just that, taken together, we call it ‘love’. Whether it’s chemicals or computer code, you could make arguments for and against free will being meaningful. And after a BUNCH of dorm room bull sessions, I’ve come to the conclusion I don’t care what the mechanism is, free will is a thing that exists.”

“It’s getting harder to argue with you about that, I have to admit,” Nick said.

Nora looked at him sternly, “After everything you’ve put Ellie through, the second you make your choice? You OWE her. Right?”

Nick nodded, “Deal. Marty was way less pushy you know.”

Nora replied, “And a lot more drunk.”

The spent the rest of what turned out to be a eleven hour trip, chatting. Until it became obvious they were getting close to their destination. Nora looked at her Pip-Boy and started laughing. It was just before 5 as they finally came in view of a fog shrouded harbor. They cruised right past a sign that showed a Lobster waving a claw, and the name said ‘Far Harbor’. Mainly because the uprights and the lower horizontal of the ‘B’ had been rubbed out.

“Mount Desert Island?!?” Nora said.

“It doesn’t look like a desert to me,” said Piper, “Is that something in Chinese, Lien Mei?”

Nora stuck out her tongue, “No. It’s Maine. ‘BAR Harbor’. On an island called Mt. Desert Island. But they call it ‘Far Harbor’ now… I wonder if they even know?”

“Know what?” Piper asked.

“That this used to be a huge tourist destination back before the war. Place was a big deal. National Park. Mountain observatory. Pretty little harbors and marinas. Hiking trails,” Nora answered.

Piper looked over at the shore, through the fog, “Wrecked buildings with weird oval things on ‘em…”

Nora glance over, “Oh. Those. Lobster trap buoys. Like Mirelurks, possibly even one of the animals that mutated into Mirelurks, based on what I’ve seen.”

Piper looked over at Nora, “What did you do with the bouys? Throw it at a ‘lurk and run while it chopped that up?”
Nora smiled, “No. Lobsters were about this long,” she held her hands a foot apart, “and you cooked them alive.”

“Eww. Why?” Piper said, making a face.

“There’s a bacteria that lives in their flesh naturally. When they die, it grows rapidly. The only way to keep it from being a problem is cook it alive or REALLY freshly dead. Why do you think I have nothing to do with mirelurks as food?” Nora said.

Piper smiled, “Because they’re nasty?”

Nora laughed, “That too. But mostly? There isn’t a pot big enough and there aren’t big enough rubberbands.”

Piper looked puzzled again. Nora laughed, “Back when lobsters were pot sized, they’d put rubber bands on the claws. Honestly that was more to keep the lobsters from fighting each other in the live storage tanks in stores, really.”

“We seem to be arriving,” Nick interrupted.

The boat was pulling into a dock that connected to a pier with a cluster of buildings on it. There was a fog that gave the light, even in the afternoon, a liminal quality. And on the dock a man and a woman were arguing. At least the arm waving suggested it, and when the boat got close enough that they could be heard over the engines, it proved to be the case.

“Jesus, Ease up Allen. We’ve got visitors,” said the older woman.

The man, Allen, in a fatigue jacket and thick wool stocking cap, said, “Mainlanders ain’t nothing but trouble.”

Under her breath, Nora said, “I guess they don’t make a living off tourists anymore…”

The woman stepped into Allen’s personal space, “Put the damned gun down,” and then she turned to the three on the boat, “Are you lost? This is Far Harbor. We don’t get many visitors around here.”

Allen looked over her shoulder and scowled, “We don’t need no freeloaders or more ‘help’ mainlander. So you can get back in your boat and leave.”

*I don’t know exactly what the situation is here, but I’m still beginning to find this guy irritating.*

The woman looked over her shoulder, “Allen. This isn’t your dock. It belongs to the whole town, and that means strangers are welcome,” and then she turned back to Nora, Piper, and Nick, who’d gotten off the boat, “Sorry you caught us at a difficult time. But Allen’s got a good point, not all visitors have good intentions. So what’s your business here?”

Nick said, “A young woman from the Commonwealth named Kasumi may have passed through here. Her family hired me to find her.”

The woman said, “Some sort of detective huh? Well, she came through, all right.”

Suddenly, a bell began ringing. There was shouting, and Nora could hear people running along the dock.

A woman in the distance shouted, “Something’s coming through the Fog.”

The older woman pointed at Nora, Piper, and Nick and said, “You. Help us defend the town, and I’ll
answer any questions you have. Take a post at the top of the wall, near the main gate. The Hull never lets us down. Now follow me.”

And with that she ran along the dock and then up some stairs to the left. Nora and the others were immediately on her heels, and very shortly found themselves on a walkway cantilevered out over the gate. There were sections with no railings.

Allen was posted further along, on the far right side of the wall, while Nora and Piper were near the center and Nick took up position next to a woman in rubberized overalls.

Allen peered out into the gathering dark, and muttered, “What the hell?”

The Overall Woman called, “Eyes peeled, everyone.”

As Nora strained to see what everyone was so spun up about, four figures, two of them dragging a third in a two person carry. The leader, when the wall was in view, ran up. He cupped his hands to his mouth, and cried, “Open the gate. I’ve got wounded out here.”

The older woman looked at the overall woman and said, “Mariner?”

Overall Woman, Mariner, grimaced and said, “There’s no time. Look to the fog. They’re coming.”

There was a crump of a land mine going off, and then Nora could make out bipedal creatures that very much resembled giant salamanders, but with hugely distended heads and mouths. They came running, mouths grotesquely gaping. Allen yelled, “Gulpers!”

Makes sense, with a mouth like that.

The heads were enormous, so you couldn’t miss. The downside was that a sizable chunk of their enormous melons was dead space, and it usually took two or three shots to hit something immediately fatal. Head shots did stagger them though, so Nora kept it up, her rifle coughing. You couldn’t even hear Piper shooting for the screams and the booms of Nick’s .44, Allen’s assault rifle, and several shotguns going off.

Eventually the waves of creatures ended. The man at the gate resumed pounding and shouting.

Allen made to let them in, “It’s over.”

Mariner shook her head, “No. Eyes on the fog. Something’s coming.”

The older woman pointed at lights bobbing in the fog and yelled, “Anglers!!”

Nora looked through her scope. These ‘Anglers’ gave Bloodworms a run for the ‘ugly’ prize. But where Bloodworms were simply disgusting, Anglers were horrifying. They resembled nothing so much as an anglerfish’s head grafted onto an amphibian’s body possessing the rough proportions of a Lowland Gorilla.

Their front legs were considerably longer than their rear ones and gave their gait a curious rolling quality not unlike a gorilla or a chimpanzee. They were also deceptively fast. And damned hard to kill. When they all started shooting, it took multiple hits. It began to frustrate Nora that these things had relatively few weak spots. Even the eyes weren’t a guaranteed kill shot. You just had to fill the damn things with lead.

Finally, as she discovered late in the fight, they also spat venom. One hit her pants legs and there was no problem. It was when a blob struck her bare arm that she discovered that they stuff hurt about like
a bee sting. Over a wide area. And when she scraped it off, her left hand stung as well.

The pain was bearable but massively distracting so she shot a stimpack and almost immediately felt a cooling rush along her skin. Then she reengaged, while making sure to duck behind cover whenever one of the things reared back to spit.

*These things are super annoying. Mental note, steer clear whenever possible.*

Finally the last one went down.

Mariner stood up from where she’d been crouching. She knew about the venom spitting. Piper gave her a dirty look as she’d had a front seat to her wife’s stinging.

Mariner called out, “We’re clear.”

The older woman turned and shouted to the people inside ‘Far Harbor’, “All right. Well done all. Open the gate.”

Mariner looked out at the wall and as Nora approached, she looked over at her and spoke, “The Hull took a battering to be sure. But she wouldn’t be standing at all if it weren’t for you. They call me the Mariner. Shipwright, handyman, and the only one keeping the Harbor afloat. Well, besides Captain Avery.”

*Captain Avery must be the older woman we met.*

Nora looked at her, and said, “The town’s lucky you’re here.”

Mariner looked skeptical, as well she should, and said, “You blowing smoke up my sails? Bah. But there is… I don’t suppose you’d be willing to lend a hand? In order to do proper repairs, I need tools. Specialized tools. And they won’t be easy to come by.”

*We’re not here 15 minutes and they draft us to help defend the town and run errands. Mainers were always a breed apart, but these guys seem to have taken it to the next level.*

Although she rolled her eyes a little, Nora said, “I’ll help.”

Mariner said, deadpan, “Eagle’s Cove Tannery. Tools are certain to be there. Now git.”

Nora, Piper, and Nick ‘got’.

Chapter End Notes

Although the game doesn't let you call Vertibirds in Far Harbor, it does let you 'fast travel' and I like the ability to do that, so that antenna is how I'm going to set it up so Nora can communicate and maybe even return from time to time. It doesn't exactly break the limits I set for myself (no results you can't get in the game) though it dances up to the line.

Example: the Brotherhood airship battle is ALWAYS after the Institute battle, but the end result in the game is the same...a big radioactive crater and scorched metal at Boston Airport, so for dramatic purposes OK to mix the two.
You don't get to fly about Far Harbor (or if you do, NO ONE tell me I could have done before now), but the distance from Boston to Bar Harbor direct lines is 200 miles and any self-respecting aircraft can manage that. And since I believe Vertibirds are powered like the fusion powered cars the range would be effectively infinite. In FO 2 dialog apparently, the 'fuel' is combustable, but given how prone to the Ford Pinto effect cars are, that doesn't actually say ANYthing about Vertibird power sources. The airspeed of Bell UH-1 is about 120 mph, which would put Far Harbor an hour and a half away. A UH-60 would travel the distance would be traveled in about an hour and ten minutes at 170 mph. A V-22 Osprey, which would SEEM to be the proper model, would make the trip in about 40 minutes at 310mph. I opt for the middle speed.

The boat, Kenji's boat probably has a speed of about 20 miles per hour. They probably had to go a little out of their way to circle the Island, so make it 220 miles, 11 hours, starting at shortly before 6AM puts them in Far Harbor just before 5PM.
The trio went down the stairs and into ‘Far Harbor’ proper. Nora was having trouble not thinking of it as ‘Bar Harbor’ but then she and her family had visited in her Junior to Senior year in college summer. She had fondly remembered standing on this very dock. Visiting from the Cliff’s Edge Hotel.

She’d stood right…there…as her mom and dad had bought her and Eric a Lobster Roll and fries. And of course a Nuka-Cola. Tears came easily as she thought about it. Before even Nate and Shaun, her family, joking, laughing. Piper noticed.


“I’m just remembering. My family visited here before the war,” Nora replied.

“You and Nate?” asked Piper.

Nora shook her head, and as Piper and Nick listened, she…remembered, “My mom and dad brought us…me and Eric here…I was 20 and Eric was 19. I remember he was HUGE. He dwarfed everyone. We had Lobster Rolls over there,” and she pointed at a stand along the pier, “And we bought some T-shirts over there, and I remember Eric winning a bet with a local that he couldn’t lift a lobster trap one handed. Eric won.”

Nora looked up, and Piper was looking at her…

Piper smiled, “Just that you’ve talked about a lot, but not your time before…”

“Before the war?” Nora asked.

Nick shook his head, “Your time before you were a spy. Or married to Nate, or had Shaun. You’ve been talking more and more about yourself as a young woman. As a girl.”

Nora said, “So?”

Piper took her wife’s hand, “I think you’re having a breakthrough, Blue. I think…I think all the pieces of you, all the parts that have been changing and growing? They’re all coming together. Into my wife.”

Piper looked very proprietary at that moment and Nora laughed. She kissed Piper, and Piper said, “You’ve worn a lot of masks, but I think now? That’s all they are. Masks.”

Nick nodded, “You know who you are Nora. You might wear a mask, but I don’t think the mask is ever going to wear you. Not again.”

Nora looked over, “Fine. I’m all integrated and shit. We still have to heal you, Tin Man.”

Piper looked at Nora, wide-eyed, “What about me?”

Nora laughed, “I’m pretty sure you reached ‘Peak Piper’ when you kicked Porter Gage in the crotch so hard you crushed a ball.”
Piper smiled, “No. It was when Bert and his guys from Diamond City Security complimented me. That was the moment.”

Nora thought for a second and nodded. “I can see that, Thing.”

After they’d briefly looked around they went into an office, that had been a T-shirt emporium, which was now Avery’s office.

She greeted them, “And now you see what we’re up against. The Fog and the creatures it spits out have taken the whole Island from my people. But for your help when we needed it, we would have fallen.”

Nora looked at her, puzzled, “What’s ‘The Fog’?”

Avery looked thoughtful, “Where to begin. The fog’s radioactive right? But there are pockets of it, the Deep Fog, that are hard Fallout. And as deadly as that is, that’s only part of the problem. Things live in the fog. Thrive. You think what’s attacked the Harbor’s bad? There’s far worse further inland.”

Nora looked impressed, “If you managed to survive all that, you must be tough.”

Avery looked rueful, “Ornery, more like it…”

At that point Allen walked over to join the conversation, “I’m done cowering behind your damn ‘Hull’, Avery. Time you let me deal with the real problem. With the right people and my guns, I can end those Children of Atom cultists, for good.”

Nora felt Piper stiffen beside her, “The fog’s been here forever. The Children didn’t make it.”

Nora laid a hand on Piper’s arm, as Allen said, “Before the rad eaters came the fog was under control. They come and it all goes wrong. It’s time we do something.”

Avery looked over at Nora and her friends, “No need to burden the stranger with this nonsense.”

*Yeah. We’ll need to figure out what’s up, free of that guy’s clear bias…*

Nora said, “Can we get back to business?”

Avery looked apologetic, “Sorry for all that. You’re here for Kasumi right? She headed inland to the synth refuge, Acadia. But getting there will be dangerous. You’ll need a guide. Old Longfellow. No one knows the fog like him. But, word of warning. He’s a bit of an acquired taste.”

Nora nodded, “Thanks for the info.”

Avery nodded, and said, “Best place to look for Longfellow’s the bar, The Last Plank. And…please. Lend a hand around town if you’re able. Even if it’s slapped away, people like the Mariner and others need help. And let me say something you might not hear again: Thank you.”

Nora smiled as she headed for the bar, “So this was also a bar and restaurant, back when. Mostly restaurant. No tourist place wanted to limit how many people could walk in…”

When the door opened, Nora and friends heard a pop song from 2077 playing in the jukebox.

*Wow. I wonder how old that’s gotten, the same pop songs year after year, decade after decade, century after century. I should cut these guys some slack. Anyone would get cranky under those conditions.*
The bar was dingy and there was a bartender calling out that he was standing people free drinks.

That’s stupid, you fatalistic prick... Let’s be honest, whatever’s going to happen isn’t going to happen tomorrow.

There was man in the corner. He was in shadow.


Nora approached, and said, “Avery said you can get me to Acadia.”

The man said, “Captain Avery can say whatever she wants. Still, heard there was a scuffle out there, You get your hands dirty? Hmph. I’m done leading people to their deaths in the fog. Last fella couldn’t keep up. Didn’t last five minutes.”

Nora looked over, and laid her cards, such as they were on the table, “Some parents are worried about their daughter. She went to Acadia, and I need to find her.”

Longfellow leaned back, and said, “If someone’s headed for Acadia, there’s always a story. Yours worth dying over?”

He raised his eyebrows. Nora looked at him levelly, “Trust me. I’ve done a whole lot worse for a whole lot less.”

He smiled, “Clever are you? I can get you to Acadia, but you’ve got to listen to me. Go where I say. When I say it. Still won’t be easy. Stock up on necessities, Rad-X and the like. Then the real work can begin.”

Nora nodded, “Already done, old man. Let’s go.”

Longfellow grabbed his rifle and nodded. “All right then.”

As they left the bar, he pointed out the gate, “Acadia’s above the fog line, on the mountain. It’s a bit of a hike.”

As they left Far Harbor and headed right, Nora noted that there were strange mechanisms, like small street lamps, but the glow wasn’t enough to light anything up. She realized that the devices had been there the whole time during the fight, but she’d never had time to really notice them.

Longfellow gestured along the highway, “We need to move through the main drag. Old mountain trail is where we’re headed,” then he chuckled as Nora’s Pip-Boy began clicking, “Fog ain’t like nothing you see in the Commonwealth. Mainlanders think a dose of RadAways all you need.” He chuckled again, then froze.

He pointed down at a bootprint in the soft sandy loam on the said of the highway, “Tracks. Fresh ones. Trappers ahead. When the bullets start flying, find cover. Keep your head down if you want to live.”

He began moving forward at a crouch, but Nora wasn’t waiting. She scanned a small set of makeshift structures attached to a convenience store up ahead. She could make out two guys. They didn’t dress like raiders, exactly, but had that ‘look’ about them. She jerked her head forward and as Piper and Nick fanned out to either side and as Longfellow messed about sneaking along, she laid her sights on the first ‘Trapper’ in the road ahead, and from about 100 yards away her shot tore his throat out and he went down, thrashing.
His struggles did exactly what Nora wanted and flushed out both the one in the small shack on the right side of the road, but also brought down the one who’d been lurking on the roof to the left. That one was making his way down a narrow walk when Nora’s next shot took him in his lower spine. He fell, and as it dawned on the last one that he was dangerously exposed, she shot him in the middle of his forehead.

She waited for ten seconds with every sense alert for the scrape of metal on metal or the scuff of a boot. There was nothing. So she stood up and then they moved forward to Longfellow, who was looking at Nora in admiration, “You’re not half bad in a scrap. Figured I’d have to take care of the lot of ’em. Might just make a proper Far Harborwoman out of you. See, the fog can do a number on you. Get you all turned around. Does something to your brain. Trappers were mean to begin with, but now…” he shook his head. They moved on.

About a mile out of town, he turned left at a National Park Service Kiosk. The sign read “Acadia National Park”. They began walking up a narrow road. Or it might have been a wide paved hiking path. Longfellow looked back, “Here’s the mountain trail. Stick with this and we’ll get to Acadia. Game trail crisscross the road so don’t be surprised if we got local wildlife to deal with.”

No sooner than he’d said that two wolves, glowing with sickly green patches on their flanks, charged them. Piper and Nick dropped them before Nora could sling her rifle, let alone draw her pistol. Longfellow just shrugged and moved on. After twenty minutes of climbing and walking, they all heard an ungodly, echoing moaning call. Longfellow froze. He turned and whispered, “Hear that? Crawler… They usually stick to the deep fog. Best steer clear.”

*Deal. That thing sounds like something I can do without running into…and I mess with Deathclaws on the regular.*

After a bit, Longfellow was satisfied, and they moved on. Longfellow sounded thoughtful as they moved higher and higher, “When I was a young lad, no higher than your knee? The whole island was covered in fog. The fog eventually roiled back. People resettled, but they got comfortable. Started taking things for granted. Folk got short memories. All this has happened before.”

Just then, they heard the sounds of a fight, thumps, and screeching. As they rounded a bend, they saw a few salamander things, fighting with a pair of Mirelurks by the shore of a pond. They waited until the wildlife had worn each other down, and the two remaining, bloodied salamander things went down to the teams guns quickly.

Longfellow spat, and kicked one, “Gulpers. Got a fondness for freshwater. A small gulper like the ones in these parts is a fair challenge. Now the big ones, they can grow to two, three times the size of a man. Good thing you don’t see too many of them around.”

Nora nodded as they continued on. Then they saw a figure in the fog ahead. As they got closer, Piper stiffened by Nora and whispered, “Child of Atom.”

The woman called harshly, “Stringing one more soul to their damnation, old man?”

Longfellow straightened and said, “Well what do we have here? Another rad worshipping lunatic, that’s what.”

The Child crossed her arms and looked down her nose at the old man in his peacoat, “Your barbs do not harm me. I am shielded by my faith.”

Longfellow grinned nastily, “How ’bout bullets? Faith shield ya from those too?”
“Time to kick it down a notch, at least until I get the lay of the land…”

“Let’s just settle down OK?” Nora said.

Longfellow shrugged, “You’re right. Waste of ammo.”

The Child looked Nora up and down, and said in a singsong cadence, “Do not sully this one with your blasphemy old man. You,” she pointed at Nora, “I suggest you go no further. Acadia is a nest of snakes. Beasts that subvert the will of Atom.”

On the other hand, she’s not exactly trying to win friends and influence people either.

Nora shook her head, “You do know you’re crazy right?”

The Child looked offended, “Watch yourself outsider. You walk through atoms kingdom now.”

Yeah, my Pip-Boy’s been telling me that for the last three miles.

Longfellow gave the Child a rude gesture, then turned, “If you’re done wasting time with the fanatic, let’s move on.”

After another five minutes, the fog was thinning, noticeably, and Nora’s Pip-Boy had gone quiet. Longfellow chuckled wryly, “Up ahead the air’s clean. No fog. Acadia’s not too far now.”

He was proved right when ten minutes later they emerged onto the summit, dominated by a huge observatory. Longfellow stopped and turned. “And we’ve arrived. Acadia’s already been watching us for a good spell. If you want to talk, just go inside. They’ll be waiting for you. You need my help again, you come see me. Got a cabin just outside of Far Harbor. Good place to tool up your gear, get some some rest. Get stinkin’ drunk. Just make sure if you’re bringing a bottle of something strong, there’s enough to share…”

Nora shook the old man’s hand. “I might take you up on that, old man.”

Longfellow nodded. “Whatever you do, when you get in there…don’t stare.”

Piper said, “What’s that supposed to mean.”

He didn’t answer, just laughed as he walked off.

Chapter End Notes

Running notes, and from personal experience, Lobster Rolls are something you have to do when you’re in New England. I’m lucky that my job takes me to Maine 3 or 4 times a year...one of the two major manufacturing plants is in Rockland, Maine. So I know Lobster Roll. A true Lobster Roll should NOT be on artisanal bread. What you need for a proper lobster roll is a Wonder Bread Center Split hot dog roll lightly buttered and toasted. There are two places that make awesome Lobster Roll...one is a little stand, Red's Eats in Wiscasset, Maine, just before you cross the bridge headed north. Good luck parking! It's been featured on the Food Channel, I believe Anthony Bourdain visited. It's an attraction is what I'm saying.

The other was (I have no idea if it's still there 30 years later) a tiny little hole in the wall
diner in Gloucester, Mass, just down the road from the Gorton's plant. For the entire rest of my life I will think fondly of that Lobster Roll, with a side of shoestring French Fires. Jesus Christ, I want a freaking Lobster Roll right now...
Nora looked up the stairs at the firedoor into the observatory. The three of them climbed the stairs, and looked about. Just like the last time she’d been to this place, when she was 20, Nora could see everything from up here. This time the Island was shrouded in that ‘Fog’, but she could see trees and structures that emerged from the mist.

She could barely make out the town of Bar Harbor, below them and northeast. Sighing at what the world had lost when it went insane, she pushed open the door and the three of them went in. Longfellow’s words about the place meant that they didn’t go in with their guns drawn.

Instead, as they stepped through the door, further down the hall they could see the base of the observatory’s large reflector telescope. Around the base were masses of computer and sensing equipment. As they walked forward, they saw a man in a lab coat fussing over a piece of equipment in a cradle.

They froze, however, when the ‘equipment’ stood up and said, in a mild tone, “Thank you Faraday, that is much better.”

Piper whispered, “That voice is…familiar.”

The three approached what they had thought was a pile of computer equipment, and to be honest, still looked like a pile of computer equipment…with legs, arms, and a head. There were memory tubes, and external modules stuck all over…it…connected with loops of ribbon wire.

It turned and in that mild tone said, “You know when I first climbed this mountain, above the fog, I thought to myself, now here is a metaphor worth taking in. You’ve entered a place of clarity. Understanding. Peace. While you’re here in Acadia, synth kind welcomes you as long as you welcome us.”

It…he…smiled and said, “Welcome, I am DiMA.”

Piper took everything in, and spoke for all of them when she asked, “What…are you?”

The synth gave another mild smile and said, “Told you. The old synth on the mountain. I know the plastic skin and tubes on the back can be…unsettling. But I want you to look past that. Tell me why you’re here and I’ll try to help.”

Nora looked at DiMA, and said, “We came here looking for Kasumi Nakano.”

DiMA gestured and said, “Really? I’m impressed. Few would brave the kind of journey that you’ve had for the sake of someone else. Kasumi is here. She’s safe and unharmed and you’re free to see her if you like. Before you do, tell me: do you think Kasumi is a synth?”

And at that point, Nick could no longer contain himself, “We’re not answering any more questions until you play straight with us. Just who the hell are you anyway? There’s only one kind of synth with that face and a mind of his own, and I only see him when I look in a mirror. Well, when I USED to look in a mirror.”

As Nick spoke, DiMA’s eyes widen as he cocked his head, “Nick?? It…it can’t be you…”
What the actual fuck?

Nora was staring at the two synths, one a Gen 3, looking exactly like Humphrey Bogart, speaking with the voice of Nick Valentine, and the other, looking like the old Gen 2 Nick Valentine had taken off all his clothes and then fallen backwards into a tub of random computer parts. Piper, too, had been shocked speechless. Nick had not been shocked speechless, however, and his eyes flashed with anger and confusion.

Nick said, “Don’t give me that. What are you trying to pull? I’ve never seen you before in my life!”

DiMA was reading out imploringly, “Please. If you’re willing to give me a chance, I can explain.”

Nora turned to him, and asked, “Is this a joke? Do you really know Nick?”

DiMA said, “Let me tell you what I know, and you can judge for yourself. We were prototypes, Nick. The first synths capable of independent thinking and judgement.”

Nick, suspicious, merely said, “Keep talking…”

DiMA went on, “One of the Institutes Experiments, had to do with how our brains could process personality. If we could handle individualized feelings and behaviors.”

DiMA looked…reflective, “I was allowed to develop mine based on experience. But with you they wanted to try transferring an entire personality into you. It took several attempts before the personality imprint worked. I saw you wake up not knowing who or what you were so many times.”

Nora was watching Nick out of the corner of her eye, and she saw Nick flinch at that.

He can see it too. Now how's he gonna take it? And how will DiMA serve it?

DiMA looked stricken, “I couldn’t let them do that to you anymore. We were the only two prototypes they made. I literally saw myself in you. You were my brother, Nick. I helped you escape the Institute. We left together.”

Nick shook his head, “If I were your brother, I’d remember.”

DiMA shook his head, “That’s where you’d be wrong. This happened over a century ago. There’s only so much memory that can fit into the prototype brains we have.”

Nick stared back, “I’ve heard enough,” and he turned to Nora, “I think you and I need to talk about this. Maybe not now though.”

Nora said, “We’ll talk later. This is a lot to take in.”

DiMA looked at Nick earnestly, “Nick. I don’t need you to believe me, I’m just glad to see you again. Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be here.” Then he turned to address all of them, “Now about Young Kasumi. It’s important you understand why she’s here. I asked you before if you think she’s really a synth, If you could indulge me with an answer…”

Nora shook her head, “Who or what she is, isn’t important.”

DiMA shook his head, “But it is. It’s everything. Imagine looking at your hands and having to wonder: was I born with these, or were they manufactured. None of us take this transition lightly. She’s facing the possibility of her entire life having been a lie.”

DiMA went on after a pause, “That someone stripped the identity from her, and made her into
something she isn’t. I want you to understand that before you see her. She has a chance to live here as a synth. Not hiding. Not pretending to be something else.”

*Presuming she IS a synth.*

Nick looked at Nora, “One more question if you’ll indulge me. You’re here for Kasumi, but I suspect there could be another reason you came to us. Tell me, are you a synth?”

*Oh, for the love of god. He has a ‘mission’ and everything is going to be stuffed into that framework, logic be damned.*

Nora smiled, and said, “I’m a human being, not a synth.”

DiMA watched her carefully, “Are you sure? I don’t mean to question you but what’s the first memory you have?”

Nora looked thoughtful, “I think I was about three. We’d gone to see daddy’s parents in South Hadley. They had a small farm there. I remember playing with rabbits and I remember that Grandma made fresh asparagus straight from the field. I told everyone it tasted ‘green’. I thought daddy was going to explode, then the whole table started laughing.”

DiMA looked strangely disappointed, but he said, “Acadia is open to you, feel free to walk the grounds. Introduce yourself to my cofounders, Faraday and Chase. Kasumi is usually working down below, whenever you wish to see her. Is there anything else you’d like to discuss before you leave?”

*Yeah. What’s this bizarre fetish you have to assume everyone is a synth? You seem benign, but damn, Kasumi might just be a confused girl upset about losing her Grandpa, and you’re yanking her from her family because of a misguided assumption you have about synths.*

Nora condensed that to, “What’s your story?”

DiMA said, “I came to this island over a century ago hiding from the Institute. But after my escape felt sufficiently secure, I was left with nothing. No programmed task, no false memories. I spent a year in a cave. Just sitting. One day it finally occurred that maybe I could decide for myself what to do. Who I was. I’ve been doing that ever since.”

Nora looked at him seriously, “You should know, the Institute’s been destroyed.”


Nora said, “I led a combined group from the Railroad and the Commonwealth Minutemen into the Institute, by infiltrating them and turning their own tech against them.”

Piper added, “As for why? Because they would not leave us alone. Somehow, our just existing was seen as a threat. So they set out to take over the upper world one body snatched and replaced at a time. When they learned that we were on to them because of Nora, they struck first.”

Nick finished, “We planted an atomic bomb in their power plant. And we detonated it. There’s a radioactive crater where the first CIT was.”

DiMA took that all in, “But that also means that the technology that make the synths is lost. Our origins have been buried. Not to mention the loss of human life,” he sounded stricken, “Sorry, I’m not going to judge the actions of someone who’s wiped out a great evil. You have our gratitude.”
“You weren’t listening,” Nick said. “I said that we blew up the first CIT. We evacuated almost everyone, and there were more than a few Railroad Agents and Minutemen who died holding off Coursers and Gen 2s long enough for that to happen. There’s a new CIT, in Concord, and they’ve started building new synths…so that couples where one or more of them are synthetic themselves can have babies.”

“We don’t need your understanding or your forgiveness, DiMA, but you’re right. Everyone here owes my wife their gratitude,” Piper said, “Because she sacrificed far more than you could ever understand. For you and yours, and their freedom and for their right to life throughout the Commonwealth.”

Nora laid her hand on Piper’s arm and while she was smiling she was shaking her head ever so slightly.

DiMA simply listened, and said, “I apologize. I have much to think about. In the meantime, please feel free to go anywhere in Acadia.”

Piper looked barely mollified, but the three took their leave and went back and found the stairs down. Before they left, they heard the doctor speak with DiMA.

“I’m concerned about the ongoing rate of memory degradation, DiMA. Your prototype brain was never designed to store or access this amount of data.”

“Dearest Faraday. Relax…all will be fine.”

Faraday said, “We’re beginning to run out of additional storage devices. That last shipment…well, anyway, you’re going to need access to larger memory cores soon. I was having a hard enough time keeping up with repairs before all this nonsense with the Atom lunatics.”

They heard DiMA replying as then went round the corner, “They’re nothing you need to be concerned about.”

The last thing they heard, faintly, was Faraday’s plaintive plea, “It’s not them. I’m concerned about you, DiMA. You can’t solve the worlds problems, certainly not all at once.”


That first part could have been for our consumption, but that last piece can’t have been. So he’s well-meaning. Doesn’t mean he can’t be wrong.

When they got to the basement, Nora turned to Nick, “Is he really your brother?”

Nick looked troubled, “If he is it’s news to me. Just because we’re from the same assembly line does that make us family?”

Nora asked, “Is it really possible that you don’t remember any of this?”

Nick said, “You mean between the Institute failsafes, the beatings I’ve taken over the years and plain old age? Or are you buying his whole ‘There’s only so much room up there,’ story?”

Nora looked at her friend, “Yeah Nick, I think I do. Or are you telling me that you really remember Kenji Nakano? Really?”

Nick started to nod, but then he stopped. “To be honest, no. Not even a little.”

Nora nodded, “Yeah, you picked up his story and ran with it awfully easily.”
Piper cut in, “Like you do that a lot. What would Ellie say about your memory, if we were to ask?”

Nick looked cross, “She’d tell you she has to remind me of things.”

“Thought so,” said Nora. “But right now, there’s something more important going down. We have an obligation. To your other partner. That you forgot,” but Nora had a smile on her face as she said it.

Chapter End Notes

And now as was intimated, and as I've heavy handedly foreshadowed, he has made his appearance. I get the Doylist explanation of why DiMA glosses over the "Ding Ding, the Witch is Dead," moment regarding The Institute (that there's only so much you want the plot of the DLC to depend on Main Quest completion). But that just means that I need a Watsonian reason. And I have one.

On a side note, the game does have some fun with the whole "What's the first thing you remember?" line. But in reality, this Nora remembers far more and since it doesn't change the course of the plot (any more than pulling out Haylen, or leaving Glory alive does) Nora gets her moment to stuff DiMA and his "Are you sure you're not a synth," speech. Also, South Hadley is actually known for its asparagus. So much so it ought to have a sign saying, "The funny smelling pee capital of the US". And the "tastes green" bit is from something my brother said about asparagus when he was six or seven.
The Limits of Trust

They all walked down the basement corridor, to a room directly below the Observatory. There was a great deal of mechanical equipment, some of which was hooked up to the equipment a few stories up via direct linkages, most of which had been disconnected, and some of which looked as if it had been added later.

In the midst of all the greasy, humming clanking mass there was a young woman in great stained coveralls, waist deep in...something. She heard footsteps, but simply reached out and with her hand waving, said, “I need a 3/8’s socket, with an extender, please.”

“How?” said Piper.

“I don’t have all day,” the woman said, waving impatiently behind herself, “It’s over in that toolkit. Hurry it up. I’m not in here because grease is good for my complexion, damnit.”

Nora looked around and put the ratchet together for the woman, and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” and the hand went into the guts of whatever it was. Nora called over the sound of a ratchet being used, “Kasumi Nakano?”

“Yeah that’s my name. I’m in the middle of something,” the woman said.

Nick said, “Your parents sent me. They want you to come home.”

There was a thump deep inside, then muffled cursing before Kasumi pulled her head out. Her face was open and friendly. But right at that moment, it was open, friendly, and saddened.

She said, “They...they did what? You came all this way for me? Look my mom and dad...I mean those people that were taking care of me. They wouldn’t want me back. If they knew the truth.”

Nora shook her head, “Kasumi, listen to me, you’re not a synth.”

Kasumi said, “Believe me, I’ve thought about that. How you can never really know. But it answers so many questions. I thought if I just left it would be easier for them. How would that conversation have gone anyway? ‘I’ve been lying to you all this time. Your real daughter is dead and I replaced her.’”

Kasumi brushed away a tear as Nora said urgently, “You haven’t replaced anyone. Kenji and Rei are still your parents.”

Kasumi looked at Nora, “I really wish that were true. If I wasn’t a synth, things would be so much simpler. Acadia isn’t what I thought it was. There’s more going on here than just the refuge.”

Nora tried one last time, “Kasumi. You’re NOT a synth. Synths don’t dream. They don’t need to.”

Kasumi looked up in shock, “But Jule dreams. Or she has a recurrent memory...”

“Kasumi, I’m a synth,” Nick said, “Not only don’t I dream, I don’t have to sleep. You could know for sure you’re human in way less than 3 days. Just try to stay awake.”
Nora nodded, “DiMA has turned into such an evangelist he’s convincing people who aren’t synths that they might be. I think he’s well-intentioned but…”

Kasumi nodded, “I’ve thought of leaving. But regardless of who I am, I can’t leave until I’ve gotten to the bottom of whatever’s going on here. I’ve been running long enough.”

Nora said, “If something’s going on, then I can help. Just tell me what’s happening.”

Kasumi shook her head, “I don’t know how you could…wait…,” and she stood stock still. Then she went on, increasingly excited, “Of course you can help. You find things. Track down answers. That’s what you do right? That’s why you all came after me? What if I told you that there’s a secret? A big secret. Here on this island. Something way more important than one lost girl.”

*She could be right. And if she really won’t go home until this is solved, I kind of have to solve it anyway.*

Nora just nodded, “All right, I’m listening.”

Kasumi looked relieved, “Ok, where to begin. You saw all those computers that DiMA’s hooked up to right? They hold his memories, or offload data from his brain. Or maybe some combination of both. Faraday asked me to do some repairs for him. And I got curious. There’s like a century of life experiences in there.”

_Not ‘like’ a century. Over a century._

Piper said, “You don’t have to use simile for the actual thing.”

Kasumi looked at Piper for a second and shrugged, then resumed, “And that’s when I see it. Data models DiMA has been working on. One was the Fog taking over Far Harbor. Another was a nuclear detonation on the Island. Plus death counts. What if DiMA is so open and welcoming because he’s actually hiding something from us? A plan to wipe out the rest of the Island?”

*Whoa. Ok, this does require looking into. But not as a spy. A detective.*

Nora said, “I’ll help if I can, but that’s not much to go on.”

Kasumi nodded, “I know. I’ve been working on that, but I haven’t had much luck. I keep seeing DiMA, Faraday, and Chase, head into the laboratory at the end of the hall there,” she pointed back the way they’d come, “They come out later looking like they’ve been arguing. There’s actually a storage space right next to there. It’d be a perfect spot to eavesdrop but it’s been locked up.”

She finished, “I’ve also tried breaking into Faraday’s terminal, since he and DiMA are so close, but the security on it is crazy.”

*Well, that sounds promising.*

Nora smiled, and said, “Step aside and let the master hacker show you how it’s done.”

Kasumi shrugged, “If you’re sure. Good luck. Once you have something, let me know.”

Nora nodded, and they all went up to the first floor. DiMA and Faraday were tinkering with, well, more DiMA in the form of computer banks. A woman, in a tattered Courser’s Uniform leaned on a railing in the Observatory, and smiled as Faraday fussed over DiMA like a mother hen.

Nick posted himself at the door to the main computer room as Piper and Nora slunk in. There were
banks everywhere, and a tinted window into the observatory. Piper kept watch on the three in the main room as Nora began hacking.

Shortly, Nora began swearing. When Piper touched her shoulder, she lowered her voice, but continued the stream of expletives under her breath. Piper knew it was impressive security, because Nora really started mixing and matching the vulgarian parts of speech. When Nora had reached, ‘syphilitic ferret balls,’ Piper started worrying that maybe this one was too much, but shortly after that, Nora gave a satisfied grunt and began downloading data to a holotape.

She looked up at Piper, made the thumbs up and the two slunk off. They picked up Nick, and headed back to Kasumi. Before they got there, Nora stopped and made the other two read Faraday’s pertinent journal entry.

[Things are bad. Far Harbor and the Children of Atom are at the brink of warring with each other, and we’re caught in the middle. It’s the Fog Condensers. We just wanted to protect those people from being wiped out by the Fog, but the Children of Atom think that’s an affront to their god. They want the Fog to spread all over the island, specifically Far Harbor. And the people of Far Harbor hate them right back. They blame the Children of Atom for spreading the Fog, even though that’s scientifically unlikely.

If Confessor Martin was still in charge of the Children of Atom, we might have better chances. DiMA and the old Confessor go way back. Martin was the one that found DiMA in the old submarine base, and when Acadia was founded, it was DiMA who gifted Martin and his followers with the base to serve as their new home. They renamed the base "The Nucleus" and we were originally excited to be working together, making the island a safer place for everyone.

But now Confessor Martin has disappeared, and High Confessor Tektus has taken charge. He’s a dangerous megalomaniac who wants to destroy Far Harbor at all costs, and he’s been threatening us to help him.

Worse, DiMA left behind his original memory banks in The Nucleus when he left to found Acadia. He blames himself for his lack of judgment, but he’s too hard on himself. The Children of Atom were our friends back when Martin was in charge, and those memory banks would have been difficult to transport. DiMA had plenty of reason to believe they would be safe locked behind the prewar defenses that Martin promised to never tamper with.

DiMA has been on this island more than a century. Anything could be in those memory banks. If the Children of Atom find a way to access all that data, they could find something that would threaten the whole island.

We’re running out of time. I’ve convinced DiMA that we need to send someone to get his memories back. Interfacing with DiMA’s offloaded data won’t be easy for someone else, so we’re working on a computer program together. The program includes a set of instructions that DiMA is going to make to help our agent once they’re inside the simulation. It’ll also need tools to hack through the internal security protocols that the memory banks have.

I think we should send Chase, but DiMA thinks that’s too risky. The Children of Atom know her, and if she’s spotted, then it’s war. We need to send someone else, if possible, but who?]

Nora turned away, brought Piper and Nick with her to the basement, and outlined what she’d found. Then she said, “And I downloaded the interface adapter too.”

When they found Kasumi, Nora gave her the good slash bad news, “Turns out DiMA’s earliest memories are in the hands of the Children of Atom. He’s afraid of what they’re going to find.”
Kasumi looked relieved, “So those are what the death projections were about? It wasn’t DiMA planning to destroy the island. He’s worried the Children of Atom will?”

Then she had another thought, “Or is he still hiding something? What could be in those memories that he would leave them behind? Is there something in them that’s…dangerous? Do you have a way in? Into his memories I mean. Assuming you can get past the Children of Atom of course.”

Nora nodded, “I have a program that DiMA and Faraday wrote. It’s supposed to help me access the memory banks.”

Kasumi looked interested in spite of herself, “Really. How would that work? When I was up taking as peek at the computers he has here, DiMA was hooked up to his chair. I was just tapping in. I wonder if you’ll need to you know, connect to the old banks, the way he does. Some kind of connection between your head and the computer. I’ll bet that’s it. And then Faraday’s program would be translating DiMA’s thoughts and data. Helping you through any security guarding it. I’m sorry. I’m making assumptions. It just well, a little exciting. You’ll let me know what you find. I’ll keep an eye on things in here.”

Nora said, “I have to figure out what’s going on in Far Harbor first. The Children have a real hate on for them, and I need to be sure they’re OK.”

“But the data,” started Kasumi.

“Was there last month and will be there next month. I’m betting anything the Children of Atom do won’t be that subtle. If I have to, I can be in here with a full company of troops in a couple hours,” Nora said. She went on, “All of ‘em in less than a day.”

Kasumi looked puzzled, “But the boat ride is…”

Again Nora interrupted, “If I get DiMA to let me site my antenna up here, and I bet he will, I can call the Minutemen. We’re only about 200 miles from Boston. Vertibirds can make that trip in way less than two hours. Which is another argument for going back to the Harbor. We didn’t exactly schlep all the crap from the boat up here to start.”

Kasumi nodded, “Ok.”

When they finished with Kasumi, they went up to chat with DiMA. He looked genuinely happy to see them. When he and Nick finished exchanging neutral pleasantries, Nora got down to business.

She asked, “Down in Far Harbor, I’ve got a directional antenna and a high power radio set for contacting the Commonwealth. Since the Institute isn’t a threat anymore, can I please set it up here for contacting my people back at Diamond City?”

DiMA nodded, “That makes sense. Mt. Desert is the highest point of a hundred miles or more, and you’d have a clear line of sight all the way home. By all means. In fact, you can hook everything into our wind power grid instead of worrying about batteries.”

Nick nodded. “Thanks DiMA.”

“I’m happy to help, brother,” DiMA said.

Nick said, “I think I’d like to keep it ‘Nick’ and ‘DiMA’ for now. But thanks, and…uh…I’ll let you know if that changes.”

DiMA smiled and nodded.
As they left the building, Nora turned, “Hey Valentine…,”


Nora thought seriously, “Honestly? I don’t know what to think, Nick. Maybe. And maybe it matters.”

Nick said, “Yeah…guess that makes two of us. I spent a long time wondering if the Institute had many other prototypes. If I was just a failure, or they gave up, or just plain got bored.”

He shrugged, “I always thought I was just more of their discarded trash. Never thought of the possibility that someone wanted me out. Helped me escape. There’s gotta be some kind of proof out there. What really happened between me and DiMA. I’d appreciate it if we could keep an eye out.”

Nora nodded, “Of course Nick. We’ll find something.”

Nick smiled, “Thanks. I know we don’t have much to go on. Just keep me in mind if you find something that might give us some answers.”

Piper said, “And hope that your reunion with a long lost relative doesn’t end the way Nora’s did. Or mine.”

Chapter End Notes

There are so many ways to tell if someone is a synth, that I feel like it's total crap to say, "You'll never know". It's more like, "If you refuse to try to test, you'll never know."

More ways in which DiMA's obsession requires some sort of in game explanation. It should by now, be obvious what that explanation is...

I also like using Kasumi's sense of duty as a way to keep the group in the DLC. Nuka-World was always a little bit of an issue. Boston is about 50 miles from Worcester and there are NO impassable mountains in between. There's rolling hills. The actual answer to the problem of "trapped in Nuka-World" is "walk east for two, two and a half days". It requires a massive suspension of disbelief to square the in game, "it's a zone issue" with some sort of narrative but it had to be done. This works better as a mechanism.

Also, this chapter is where all the research I did about the cruising speed of a UH-1, UH-60, and V-22 paid off. In one line about getting a company of Minutemen in less than two hours.

(I'd be remiss if I didn't credit Dave Barack of the Grrl Power webcomic for "syphilitic ferret balls".)
Murder By Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was getting dark, but they had just come up the road so they chanced heading back down. Which paid off, because a couple hours later they were heading into the Last Plank, and renting a pair of rooms.

Nick pointed out that as a synth he didn’t need sleep. Nora allowed as to how that was true but since, first, the people here didn’t know that, and second, they were massively suspicious of strangers to start with, it didn’t make much sense to get them even more paranoid.

Nick shrugged and went into his room and laid down. Nora stripped down to panties and a t-shirt and snuggled back into Piper, as she’d done so many times this past few months, while thinking how scandalized her parents would be knowing their daughter was in a lesbian relationship. There was an upside, however faint, to the end of the world. But Nora would have traded any of it to be scandalizing her parents at this moment. But as she dozed, she realized something that made her snap awake.

What she’s been idly imagining was her parents here with her now. In 2288, as Piper’s wife. She smiled sadly, as she thought of her family so long gone, and then scooted her butt back into Piper, who mumbled sleepily and held Nora more tightly. Nora smiled and fell asleep.

The next morning they ate, eggs with a side order of surly courtesy of Far Harbormen and -women who were less than thrilled about the ‘mainlanders’ in their midst. When they want out onto the pier to go to the boat and begin the long, painful, fully-loaded slog up the mountain, they found Avery arguing with a Mr. Handy…or rather given the voice, a Ms. Nanny.

The Ms. Nanny was exclaiming in rather haughty tones, “This is ridiculous. You’re in charge here. You can’t just ignore a crime…”

Avery interrupted, “I’ll repeat. There are no ‘police’ in Far Harbor.”

The Ms. Nanny audibly ‘Harrumpfed,’ and then one of her eyestalks focused on Nick and his group. She turned to focus two of three eyes on them and said, “Ahh. You there. Are you the detectives I’ve heard about?”

Nick said, “I don’t know if we’re the detectives you heard about, but we are detectives.”

The Ms. Nanny positively clapped her manipulators together, “Oh wonderful. I wasn’t sure how I was ever going to find you. I haven’t been able to find the local police force, the louts. I don’t want to start a panic, but well, we may have a murder on our hands, and we need an outside set of eyes.”

A murder? Did a bunch of bots come upon a 210 year old skeleton?

Piper asked, “Where did the crime take place?”

When the Ms. Nanny answered, Nora’s ears perked up, “At the Cliff’s Edge Hotel, just north of town. Will you help us solve this heinous crime?”

Nora said, “Who’s the victim?”
The Ms. Nanny said, reluctantly, “Well, we want to keep this out of the tabloids, but it’s Ezra Parker, the financier of the hotel. Please you must help us. Every moment we wait our residents are at risk.”

Yep. We’ll get there, find the long dead skeleton of Ezra Parker, who I’ll admit was a creepy dick back in 2070, and ‘solve’ the crime by accusing another long dead resident, carting off a skeleton for ‘arrest’ and call it a day. If it’s worth our while that is.

Nora asked again, “Who are your employers?”

The Ms. Nanny said, “I shouldn’t say out here in the open, but my employers are quite wealthy. As are the other patrons of the hotel. Will you help us? There may be a murderer still at large.”

Nick opened his mouth and Nora covered it, quickly. She said, “Depends. How did you plan to pay?”

The Ms. Nanny said, “Why, I expect that the hotel and the guests shall compensate you most handsomely.”

Nora smiled, “Are there other robots than just you there?”


Nora pointed back up the pier, “Our boat is full of gear we need taken up to Acadia Observatory. When we solve your crime, you come and take it up there for us.”

The Ms. Nanny sounded ecstatic. “Does that mean you’re willing to help?”

Nora took her hand away from Nick’s mouth and aside from giving her the side-eye, he simply replied, “We’re on the case.”

“Splendid, I shall lead you to the Hotel immediately.”

“One moment,” said Nora, then turned to Avery, “We’ll go take care of this bit of business, then you and I need to talk about the Children, mayor.”

“Captain,” replied Avery. At Nora’s puzzled look she added, “The leader of Far Harbor is called ‘Captain’ not ‘Mayor’.”

Nora nodded, “That’s why Mariner called you that. I thought it was because you captained a boat. But this makes sense, actually. See you soon, Captain.”

The three joined the Ms. Nanny who was waiting impatiently, outside the gate. As they joined her, as Nora expected, she turned and took off down the main highway. This time they went past the National Park Entrance. Nora began looking up, remembering her father driving the family up to the main entrance of the hotel, which had been quite luxurious.

Shortly after passing the National Park Entrance the Ms. Nanny turned left and went up the hotel’s winding driveway, and Nora and company followed her. The hotel looked…damaged but not destroyed. Compared to the last time it was in woeful disrepair. One of the reasons Nora liked traveling with Nick was that he understood what things were supposed to look like. To Piper this probably looked pretty good. Compared to the building that a 20 year old Nora McAllister entering her final year at BU and with several law school acceptances in her pocket saw in 2070, though, this place was a dump.

The Ms. Nanny paused outside the main lobby. “I wish we still had the staff to keep up this area of
the hotel. It’s in quite a state of disrepair,” then she turned and fixed all three eyes on the small group, “I should warn you, some of the other hotel guests are a bit...hmmm...rowdy.”

She turned back and raised a manipulator with a saw blade, “I was forced to defend myself when a few became a bit... handsy, shall we say? The registered patrons are in a more exclusive area of the hotel though, and do not associate with this sort of rabble. Shall we be off?”

Piper said, “What do you mean the other patrons are rowdy?”

The Ms. Nanny said, “I had not been in this part of the hotel for some time. Perhaps there is some sort of sporting event that has them agitated. Several of them tried to grab me and well...their clothing was certainly not suitable for polite company.”

The ‘bot moved into the lobby.

We are so finding Ezra Parker’s 210 year old skeleton. Who shall I pin the crime of decomposition on?

The mystery of ‘handsy’ patrons was solved quickly when several feral ghouls emerged from rubble, behind couches, and just generally emerged from nooks and crannies. There commenced what Nora increasingly thought of as ‘The Ritual of Entering Another Pre-War Ruin’ complete with baptism via irradiated ghoul blood.

I wonder if John would be flattered or offended at that thought. Probably whichever got him more caps, power, or influence. Within limits. He likes to present as ‘amoral’ and it would be better described as ruthlessly pragmatic in the service of higher goals.

The Ms. Nanny tossed off over her shoulder, “We must get to the security elevator. Follow me.”

There followed a route that might be best described as the reverse of the Traveling Salesman problem. That was a route optimization problem. This one seemed designed to do two things. First, it took Nora past several places that reminded her of her vacation so long ago, with her brother and parents. Second, it seemed to be designed to walk them past every damned feral in the hotel.

First they went up two flights. And were attacked by ferals. Then they walked into the fine dining area. Nora remembered getting dressed in a long backless gown that made her feel sophisticated. It probably contributed to her realization that the main owner, Ezra Parker, was a bit of a creeper, given that he pretty obviously did more than merely mentally undress her the one time she caught him staring.

As she was remembering both the wonderful dinner and the creeping, they were attacked by ferals.

They went up onto the garden balcony. And were attacked by ferals.

Then they went out onto the sweeping stair to the upstairs lounge. And were attacked by ferals.

Then they went up the sweeping stair to the upstairs lounge. And were attacked by ferals.

Then they went out onto the garden balcony. And were attacked by ferals.

Then they entered the North wing by way of a guest room. When they emerged into hall, they were...you get the point.

Down a set of stairs. Yep, again. Then down a circular set of stairs that Nora had never been on, despite the obvious luxury. Where the inevitable happened. Several times. Finally they arrived at a non-descript elevator. The Ms. Nanny punched in a code. The doors opened and everyone entered.

The trip down was lengthy.

When the doors opened, it looked like a simple service hallway. Assuming service hallways terminated in a Vault-Tec gantry and Vault Door painted with an enormous 118. The Ms. Nanny said, “You need to speak to Maxwell. Go ahead and activate the control panel there.”

Nora slotted her Pip-Boy remote actuator, then gave the large square button a satisfying thump. And
with an unholy screech, the enormous blast door was removed from the opening and rolled to one side. And the entry gantry emerged and mated with the stairs.

Nora climbed the stairs cautiously, but when she peered inside, there was a standard Vault entryway. With a Mr. Handy floating at the end of the ramp. There were Protectrons everywhere as well.

*Plenty of robotic 'grunt' to move our crap. Take me to your corpse, garçon.*

Nora and company strode forward to greet the Mr. Handy. As they approached the robot, he said, “Greetings at welcome to Vault 118. Your home away from home, underground. I am Maxwell, the Concierge. Are you the detective we sent for?”

Nick nodded, “Yes we’re the detectives. Partners.”

Maxwell said, “Oh thank goodness. Just let me open the door for you,” he turned and gestured at the main pressure hatch, which opened to reveal not prestressed concrete, but beautiful mahogany paneling. There was an enormous water fountain at the central intersection. He turned to them and said, “It’s about time the police sent someone out to investigate. We have many important residents and they are very worried.”

Nora said, “We’re private detectives. I hope that won’t be a problem. Also, your Ms. Nanny is aware of our fee.”

Maxwell said, “Yes, Pearl advised me of your requirements. That seems most satisfactory.”

Nick said, “What happened? Who died?”

Maxwell said, “It’s Mr. Parker, the primary owner and financier of the hotel. This is just a disaster,” and at that another Mr. Handy approached Maxwell and blurted a burst of digital communication at him.

Nora looked over at Nick and he shrugged and said, “Don’t look at me. Ever since you tried to prove a point by installing me in wetware, I can’t follow that kind of thing anymore.”

Maxwell settled the issue, “They’re at the crime scene again? Don’t they realize they’re going to disturb the evidence? You’d better come with me, detectives.”

*Something’s not right. Who could be at the ‘crime scene’?*

Maxwell jetted forward into a large theater style room, clearly designed as a central gathering point for dinners, entertainment…murders. There were two barrel bodied robots, with octopoid manipulators in the place of arms, and a tread chassis in place of legs, standing either side of third, which was on its side. On the robots, where a head went, there was a clear dome, with a human brain suspended in a straw colored gel, and one ocular portal, organic or synthetic wasn’t clear. Except for the one on it’s…his?…side. That one’s dome was cracked and all the straw colored gel had run out.

The one on the ground was ‘wearing’ a single blue striped tie. One of the other two had a paint spattered apron on. The last one, was wearing what could only be an ascot.

Before anyone could speak or act the ascot robot said, “What the hell do you think you’re doing? This is a crime scene!”

The apron clad one said, “Do you not see it? The glory of the thing? The artistry?”
Ascot said, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Ascot was oozing so much charisma, even as a bot, that Nora had no trouble seeing him as a leading man. He even sounded like one. In fact…she could almost put her finger on it…

Maxwell raised a manipulator, “Excuse me…”

Apron said, “Ezra, you have outdone yourself. Oh, this is your finest work. There is more emotion in your death than most have in their entire lives.”

Ascot said, “Our friend is dead Mr Avida. Have you no respect?”

Apron said, “I’m just saying that at least he had the decency to make a spectacle of it! There’s nothing worse than a boring death!”

Maxwell tried again, “Please if I may…”

Ascot said, “What is it with you? You’re sick.”

Maxwell actually increased his volume, “If I could just have your attention. I’m sorry for shouting, but the detective has arrived and shall begin the investigation forthwith. Please return to your rooms, until the detective has examined the crime scene and had a chance to come speak with you.”

The two ‘bots spun about on their central axes and left for opposite wings. Nora looked at Nick, then at what she recognized from old DIA briefing files as a ‘Robobrain’. Officially, they used Chimpanzee brains in the gel. A cursory examination of the endangered status of chimps versus the prison population of the US gave that story the lie. It was fairly obvious to Nora where the brains really came from.

Nora stuck her tongue into her cheek and then sighed and looked at Maxwell. “This is the victim.”

“Yes,” confirmed Maxwell.

“Which is the brain of Ezra Parker, placed into this Robobrain chassis?” continued Nora.

“Yes,” Maxwell said again.

“Who was killed when his dome was cracked and the life supporting fluid drained away.”

“Yes,” said Maxwell.

“Which means that what we have here is an actual murder of an actual, if somewhat unconventional, person,” said Nora.

“Yes, of course,” said Maxwell.

“Which in turn means that we have an actual murder to solve,” finished Nora.

“That is what we’ve been saying since you arrived, detective,” said Maxwell.

“Fuck me,” said Nora.

Chapter End Notes
There was a great comedy murder mystery movie, involving Truman Capote (!) back in the 70s that absolutely metafictionally deconstructed both literary and movie mysteries. Including, as I see from the Wikipedia link (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_by_Death) a David Niven/Maggie Smith as a parody of Dashiell Hammett's Nick and Nora (I am absolutely NOT making this shit up) Charles series starting with The Thin Man. And Peter Falk, showing that he could both parody Sam Spade (ANOTHER link) AND Lt. Columbo in one role in one movie.

So, yeah, ONE of the chapters covering the Vault 118 Murders was gonna be called this come hell or high water.

Also, I *really* enjoyed hanging Nora out to dry about how clever she thought she was being...
Nora wasn’t a homicide detective. But Nick was and she looked at him. He kneeled and looked at a wet stain around Ezra Parker’s cracked dome. She saw him notice a tread mark in the goo discoloring the carpet and look along its headings. Then he noticed another tread mark about 8 feet away. And another. Moving off to the right side of the Vault as reckoned from the entrance.

At one of the doors from the right wing, she saw a bat on the ground while Nick was looking for tread marks. She tapped Nick on his shoulder and pointed at the bat. While he carefully examined it before even touching it, Nora looked over at Piper, “You could chip in anytime, Thing.”

Piper smiled and shook her head, “I’m the reporter Blue. I’m taking notes. See?”

Nora shook her head, “Wang ba dan.”

Piper laughed, “Yeah I get it, Lien Mei. I’m a turtle’s egg.”

Nora started laughing. Piper smirked back and said, “See? Desensitized.”

Nora stuck her tongue out then turned back just as Nick grabbed the bat. Nora gasped, and said, “Nick!”

“What?” he said, “Should I perhaps check it for prints? Of the identical mass-produced gripping claws they all have?”

Nora laughed, “Ok. You got me, Tin Man. I’ve spent 10 months bitching about people thinking spying is like the movies and the minute I get a chance, I do the same thing for police procedurals. Guilty.”

He smiled and then the three went back to Maxwell.

Nick showed Maxwell the bat, and the robot exclaimed, “Oh no. That’s the bat from Mr. McKinney’s movie. You don’t think he could be involved do you? I can’t imagine him doing such a thing.”

Nick just said a non-committal, “Hmmm,” while Piper said, “It’s that Ascot robot’s bat. He did it?”

Nora shook her head, “It’s a little suspicious that that bat was left lying there. All it tells us is that we think it was used, and it was McKinney’s bat. Not who was swinging it,” then she turned to Maxwell, “Are all the residents in Robobrains now?”

Maxwell said, “Yes. Back before the war, the residents decided the best way to wait it out, if anything did happen, was to put their brains into a robotic chassis.”

“Where on earth did they get that idea?” asked Piper.

“I believe that it was Bert Riggs’ idea,” said Maxwell, “Dr. Riggs I should say. He worked for General Atomics on their Robobrain project, and when the bombs fell he pointed out that a Robobrain was infinitely better suited to wait out the radiation and to ’survive’ when they did emerge.”
Nick pointed at the Robobrain, “Tell me about the victim.”

Maxwell said, “Mr. Ezra Pound was the primary owner and financier of the hotel. He had vast experience managing venture projects across the world. It was his idea to have our premier clients become investors in the Vault section of the hotel. He worked with Vault-Tec to have this built to their every specification.”

*Every specification huh? Wonder what the hidden weenie was?*

Nick nodded, and said, “We should interview the residents. With the Vault having been basically sealed, one of them must have done it. A robot might commit a murder, but it wouldn’t cover it up. So it’s one of the residents.”

“OK, Nick, you’re the boss. I thought this would be a case of pointing at a skeleton and saying ‘He did it,’ but now we actually have to solve this.”

Nick nodded, “Good thing I was homicide. Let’s start on that side,” and he pointed to the said they’d found the bat on, “Just because we found the bat there, doesn’t mean the murderer lives over there, but it’s a starting point.”

The three went to that side and while the first door was an unoccupied lab, full of robotic equipment, the second door they tried had the Ascot Robot McKinney, speaking to one with a sun hat on. The sun hat robot had a female voice. She was saying, “…why’d you do it huh? He deserved better than that.”

Ascot said, “You think I’m stupid? I saw the way he looked at you. You gonna tell me that’s nothin’?”

Sun Hat, or based on her voice, Femme Fatale, said, “It wasn’t like that. We were friends. He helped me out of tight spot or two is all.”

The two robots appeared not to have noticed them, as they continued, “I couldn’t stand by like some pasty faced Percy while he Put the moves on my best girl,” said Ascot.

Nora leaned over to Piper’s ear and said, “Which implies he has a batch of other, lesser, girls lying around…”

Femme said, “But now the law is on out tail. What are we gonna do?”

Ascot said, “Come away with me. Let’s leave this dark hole of a city behind. We can be in Buenos Aires by tomorrow.”

*Huh? You couldn’t be in Buenos Aires by a month from tomorrow…*

Femme said, “Oh! I want to believe you…but they’ll never let us go.”

Ascot gestured and said, “Then we’ll make our stand here. I’ve got a gun for each of us.”

Nora stiffened, but relaxed at Femme’s next statement, “No! No no no no! The line is ‘Then we’ll make our stand here. Two lovers, together, with a bullet for each of them.’”

Ascot put a claw to his dome and said, “God why can’t I ever get that line. Forget it, I can’t do this right now.”

Femme said, “Ugh. Fine! I’m going to the beach.”
Then she rolled off, right between Piper and Nick. They watched her go.

The ‘beach’?

Ascot turned to Nick, “Hello detective. How can I help? Did you have questions about the case?”

Nick said, “These apartments are quite close to the murder scene. Did you see or hear anything before Mr. Parker’s…ahhh…body was found.”

Ascot immediately said, “It’s obviously Santiago. He keeps returning to the scene of the crime.”

Nick asked, “But did you actually see anything? Or is that your opinion?”

Ascot said, “Isn’t it obvious? Why else would he keep returning to the scene of the crime?”

Nick said, wryly, “You’d be surprised. Moving along, I have to tell you that I found your baseball bat at the crime scene, where it matches the damage to Mr. Parker’s…dome. Care to explain how it got there?”

Ascot rather monomaniacally came back, “Someone is clearly trying to frame me for the murder. Probably Santiago.”

Nick nodded, and said, “Very well. I may be back later if I have further questions.”

Ascot waved impatiently.

The three left Ascot and Femme’s room, and found that the next suite was Mr. Parker’s. After some poking around they found literally nothing that might provide a clue as to motive. Heading over to the left wing, the first occupied set of rooms they found was the residence, fortuitously enough, of Apron, aka Santiago Avida.

When the three walked in, He turned to them and said, “Well well, if it isn’t the long arm of the law…Tell me are you a devotee of the arts? Does that cruel muse call you to her entrapping bosom?”

Nick shrugged but Nora stepped forward and said, “I always found Chinese Operas especially compelling. I found Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy or Zhi qu wei hushan compelling, but of course I would find the ballet Red Detachment of Women or Hongse niangzi jun the most meaningful and fascinating.”

Santiago remained motionless and silent for several beats more than anyone other than Nora found comfortable, then he said, “Come with me;” and he rolled over to a piece of expressionist art, “Tell me, what does this piece say to you?”

Nora looked it up and down. There were numerous jagged clashes of color. She said, “The subject is disordered, angry…on the verge of changes out of its control.”

Santiago said, “Yes…This was the last piece I did in a series of portraits of Gilda. Number 1378. The reality of the subject is distorted as the ego attempts to exert itself,” and then he rolled over to a painting of mushroom clouds. Or maybe trees. Possibly deformed penises. He asked, “What does this one say to you?”

_Nora said, “I’m sure as fuck not going with penises._

Nora said, “It’s the Great War. Coming from all sides, no up, no down, only chaos. Forever.”

Santiago waved a manipulator carelessly, and said, “Art shapes the world and is shaped in return.”
He went up the stairs, his treads navigating them easily. He settled in front of a fluffy kitten, playing with a ball of yarn. He asked, “And what of this one? And be honest. Art without honesty is just politics.”

Nora thought for a second, “It’s cute. I guess. Some people like that sort of thing.”

Santiago sounded disgusted, “More than you would imagine. Truth be told this my best selling piece. I did the series under a pseudonym of course. The series has made more money than all my other work and I did it on a lark.”

Nick slid into the conversation gracefully, “Did you see or hear anything before untoward prior to Mr. Parker’s death?”

Santiago became excited, “The person you should be looking for is Juliana Riggs. That philistine wouldn’t know art from excrement. She and Ezra had a rather dramatic fight recently. You could hear her banshee screeches all across the hotel.”

Nora’s ears perked up, and Nick said, “What were they arguing about?”

Santiago turned away, as he said, “I don’t know. I was painting at the time. Though I bet Gilda heard them. You should talk with her.”

When they left his studio, the three looked left. There was a set of showers at the end of the hallway. Piper looked at Nora and Nick, and said, “Beach?”

Nora shrugged and nodded, and they went to end of the hall. By the time they got there they could hear waves lapping. The signs indicated women to the right and men to the left and without even thinking about it, Nora and Piper went right and Nick went left. The emerged at a short hallway to a sandy beach. Artificial full spectrum light flooded the area, and artificial waves lapped the beach.

*What conceivable earthly use could a bunch of Robobrains have for a damn beach?*

Femme, or Gilda, was rolling about on the beach. They approached and she turned directly to Nora.

“If it isn’t the brave detective,” she said, “I haven’t seen somebody with a body like that in far, far too long.”

Nora felt Piper stiffen next to her.

*I wouldn’t worry sweetie. I’m pretty loyal. Besides, those claws look like they’d…hurt.*

Nora said, “Thanks, I suppose. We had some questions about the case,” and she turned to Nick.

Nick said, “Apparently Juliana and Ezra had a huge argument. Did you happen to hear any of it?”

Gilda fanned herself in the alleged ‘heat’ and said, “Oh yes. I haven’t seen a woman go off like that since Theresa Dubois fired her costume designer;‘ and Gilda giggled, before continuing, “She’d apparently gone to the Overseer’s office to check on the state of things, and found it in horrible disrepair. It sounds like she found something that really set her off, but I couldn’t hear that part.”

Nick tipped his cap and thanked Gilda, who then turned to Nora, “Anytime you want to come back for more ‘interviews’ cutie, you do that.”

*If death glares were literal instead of metaphorical, there would have been two murders to deal with. But Piper standing triumphantly over a pile of cinders that had been Gilda would have probably*
made solving it easy.

“Let’s check the Overseer’s Office, Thing,” said Nora, unwilling to chance the spontaneous generation of mutant death eye beams in her wife.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to vary the dialog a little, and give each of the Three Musketeers parts of the dialog...but I wanted Nora to do the "pretentious arts" part specifically because I wanted to cite some of the 'Eight Model Plays' of Revolutionary Opera (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_opera). Because they're intrinsically so very "Cultural Revolution" and that period which was actually quite short, but looms large in the view both inside and outside of China.

Also, I swear I had no idea Piper would start getting this jealous and possessive.
The three left the beach and went up the conveniently placed stairs in Santiago’s studio. He was deeply engrossed in a painting. There was an awful lot of red in it, and Nora could guess the subject. Out the door and onto a balcony, and across the way she could see the Oversee’s Office. They walked around the perimeter of the main central room. The balcony ran around three sides, but was cunningly disguised from below by lighting.

When they got to the far side they found the door locked. Nora knelt to pick the lock when Nick said, “Wait!” and then went down a set of stairs on this side. He was back in minutes holding a key. “From Ezra Parker’s room. I saw it there when we were in there earlier.”

Nick tried the key, and it worked. The door slid up and they entered and went up yet another set of stairs. The office at the top was classic ‘oversee’ styling. With the addition of a skeleton. There was a 10mm pistol on the floor next to his right side, and the left side of his skull was missing, while there was a neat, compact hole on the right side.

“Three guesses what happened here and the first two don’t count,” said Piper.

Nora nodded, but pointed out that why was somewhat important. The skeleton was slumped in front of a terminal and Nora hacked it easily.

“Rats,” said Piper under her breath.

“What?” asked Nora.

Piper laughed, “You’re more fun when you swear worse than a sailor, honey.”

Nora smiled, “Yeah. I know.”

The terminal coughed up its secrets easily. The first step was to see how Vault-Tec planned to dick over the residents. That was easily found in the [Operations Protocol] section of the terminal, the second and third entries.

From the [Preferential Treatment] entry:

[Test Group A: Ultra Elite: This subject group, not to number more than 10, shall have their every desire tended to by robotic staff, to the extent that is possible. They are considered to be above all legal restrictions when interacting with Test Group B. Test Group B: Working Class: This subject group, should begin numbering 300 and shall be restricted to the second wing of the vault. Measures should be taken to ensure that living conditions are uncomfortable and cramped. Food and other rations are to be extremely limited and any breach of rules are to be judged by Test Group A and enacted by robotic staff members.]

That was followed by [Staff Duties and Security]:

[Due for the potential for extreme social interactions, Vault-Tec staff shall be restricted to the Overseer and key research members. All other security, services and maintenance positions shall be filled by robotic staff to ensure safety and test compliance.]
‘Extreme social interactions’? Ya fucking THINK?!? Why in hell would a creeper like Parker volunteer to be First Motherfucker Up Against the Wall When the Revolution Comes?

The answers to that came over the three entries from the Overseer’s Log, and his audio recording.

From the three entries, first being [Change of testing parameters: This is... completely unheard of. One of the subjects from Testing Group A is apparently a researcher for General Atomics on some sort of advanced robotics program. He and his wife have convinced the other members of Group A that, with the international situation becoming tense once again, their best chance to outlast the war is to have their brains inserted into these robots. And they're doing this voluntarily! It's absolutely insane! I've tried to convince my superiors that this will completely discount the test results, but they seemed more intrigued by the idea than appalled.]

That’s Vault-Tec for you…

Next, [The door wouldn't open: We received the Activation Notice from Vault-Tec to begin the test, despite the second wing still being incomplete. However, when I attempted to trigger the recruitment protocol for Test Group B, the system informed me that I had been locked out. Someone from Test Group A seems to have overridden the system to prevent the admittance of the local population of the island. They've been pounding on the door for days and there is nothing I can do.]

My, I wonder who that could have been?

Then, [I can't take this: Oh god. It's been weeks now, and I realized today that I've become the test subject. Instead of testing the social interactions between the locals and this group of rich assholes, it's just me trapped in here with them. They're going to live for ever, and I have to deal with them for the rest of my life. I can't take it.]

Poor little…nah. Fuck him.

Finally, Nora popped the audiotape, slotted it in her Pip-Boy and they all listened, “Progress on construction of the second wing of the Vault has completely stalled. Once the premiere area of the vault had been completed, funding seems to have been cut off. My supervisors have informed me that they haven't received payments from Mr. Parker, and Vault-Tec won't pay out of pocket to continue construction. I've repeatedly approached Ezra about the finances, but he keeps telling me that Mrs. Riggs hasn't transferred the funds. However, when I asked her, Julianna said that she had just given Ezra extra for the gold paint in the rooms. I've hired an investigator to look for signs of embezzlement in a few weeks.”

Ezra was lucky the bombs interrupted. On the other hand, Vault-Tec. I’d root for injuries at that point.

Nora looked at Nick. Nick looked back. Piper said what they were all thinking, “Well that’s motive, isn’t it?”

“As motives go it’s not bad,” said Nick.

“It’s not that good either,” said Nora. “I could see being pissed, but seriously, what use does anyone here, in a fucking Robobrain body, have for money?”

Piper said, “I see your point Blue. But I can say that the Upper Stand assholes? Never satisfied. It’s like having enough stops being the point and who’s ahead starts being really important.”

“Either way, time to have a little chat with Mrs. Riggs,” said Nick.
Nora and Piper nodded, and they went down the stairs, past Maxwell, who called after them, “Are you making progress Detectives?”

Nick waved as they walked away, then they went to the remaining living area door. Unsurprisingly, it led to the Riggs’ residence. When they arrived they immediately heard a female voice saying, “Hello Mr. Whiskers. Who’s a pretty kitty?”

They came around the corner and found a Robobran with a surgical mask across is voder vent, and another wearing a polka dot bowtie. Bowtie spoke in a querulous male voice, so Nora tagged him as Dr. Bert Riggs, which made Surgical Mask, Juliana Riggs. At any rate Bert said, “Juliana. Mr Whiskers died last month. This is Scruffy, remember?”

Juliana said, “Of course. Silly me.”

Bert rolled forward, manipulator up, “Just let me have a look at the neural interface and I’m sure I can clear that up…”

Juliana backed away, and Nora swore she could hear panic in her voder, “No! No, it’s not that. I’ve just caught another cold. Probably something got in when they sent that Pearl out.”

Bert slumped, “Oh god not this again. Last month you were convinced you had the measles.”

Juliana waved her manipulators, “You’re not a doctor, what would you even know about it? Besides I think it might be malaria.”

Bert raised a manipulator, “First of all, I am a doctor.”

Juliana interrupted, “But not a real doctor. Robotics is not a medical degree.”

Bert continued as though she had not even spoken, “Secondly, I’ve told you time and time again, you can’t get sick in the suit. It’s not physically possible.”

Juliana huffed, “I know when I’m getting sick Bert. Why don’t you wander off to your lab.”

Bert rolled past them, and left the suite as the three made their way through piles of personal possessions to Juliana.

Juliana turned to Nick, “Hello detective. Did you have questions?”

Nick said, “I heard you had a big fight with Ezra. Care to explain?”

Juliana waved dismissively, “It wasn’t that big a deal. He wanted more money to play for repairs of the hotel. I wasn’t feeling well that day and lashed out at the poor man. I really should have listened to him more.”

_Hardly the kind of characterization Santiago would call ‘banshee shrieking’._

Nora said, “There’s evidence Ezra was embezzling from you and the other investors.”

Juliana once again dismissed everything, “I really don’t believe that. Mr. Parker wouldn’t do such a thing, I’m sure.”

Nick nodded, “Very well, Mrs. Riggs, we’ll be back if we have more questions.”

As they left, Nora said to the other two, “The only person we haven’t interviewed is…”
Piper finished, “Bert Riggs. Want to bet that lab we found in the other wing is his lab?”

Nick smiled, “No bet, Piper.”

And that was exactly where they found him, standing in the middle of the lab, with a probe to a circuit as he mumbled to himself. When he noticed that they’d walked in, he turned and said hello.

Piper said, “Tell me about yourself.”

Bert stammered, “Oh well, I’m a scientist. I’m not sure what else to say really.”

Piper smiled kindly at him. If he’d been human, Nora could easily see him blushing as Piper gently extracted the information she was after. She said, “Tell me about your research.”

He stammered, “I was one of the leads on the team that created the first Robobrains. The precursors to our model. Most people don’t find it that interesting. I’d rather not bore you.”

Piper shook her head, “No, no. I’d like to hear more about your research.”

He acted surprised, when he said, “Oh? No one here really wants to talk about it. Functionally this model is more or less the same as the previous versions I worked on but without the neural inhibitor and reconditioning. The voice modulator seems to have some minor issues interfacing with the neural matrix, which can add some moodiness. But that’s easily solved with some minor tune ups.”

Piper nodded, and gestured, “So you have a voice modulator. Tell me more about that.”

Bert said, “Thats what allows us to recreate our original voices. They can mimic any human voice actually.”

At that, Nora and Nick looked at each other, eyebrows up. Bert continued, “I’ve speculated for some time that the issues we had with our…um…recruited subjects are due to the brain attempting to preserve a sense of self. Maintaining our original voices helps reinforce the neural network, sort of like playing music for an Alzheimer’s patient.”

Recruited, my ass.

Nora stepped in, “Have you noticed Juliana acting strangely lately?”

Bert stammered, then said, “Well I’m probably just being paranoid, but she’s been so much more pleasant lately. I mean it’s been nice but also a bit unnerving. Most people don’t really understand us, but I always appreciated how she could take charge of a situation. It’s what allowed me to focus on our research. I’m worried something may have happened to her. She doesn’t seem like the same person.”

Piper asked, “What do you mean, Juliana’s not the same person?”

Bert said, with finality, and as though finally getting it off his chest was a huge relief, “My wife has always been a harsh woman. I don’t know who that is in my room, but it is not my wife.”

Nick said, “Wait here, Dr. Riggs. We’ll get this straightened out.”

Nick said, after they’d left the lab, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I dunno,” said Nora, “Are you thinking that the only indication we have that Juliana is Juliana is her mask and her voice and the only evidence that Ezra Parker’s body is Ezra Parker’s body is his tie on the robot? Because if so, yes.”
“Exactly,” said Nick.

“Wait, what,” said Piper, “I don’t…oh. Oh!!”

When they’d gotten to the Riggs’ quarters, Nora had loosened her pistol in her shoulder holster, Nick had pushed aside his holster’s back strap, and Piper had her hand in her coat pocket. When they walked in, Juliana said, “Hello again detective. Did you have questions about the heinous murder?”

Nick said, “I think you’re the real murderer.”

Juliana laughed, “That’s just silly detective. Why would I want to kill Mr. Parker?”

Piper said, “Give it up! We know your secret Julianna. Or should I say…Ezra!”

Juliana said, “Well, detectives, that’s quite the claim.”

Then Ezra continued, “It’s a shame really. I thought I could keep the ruse going a little longer. Ah well. Had to end eventually I suppose. But this doesn’t have to end in more violence, detective. Just walk away. I’ll leave and you can tell them I escaped.”

Nora shook her head, “Not a chance. Your murder spree stops here.”

Ezra said, raising his claws, “Then let us end this.”

Nora’s pistol had cleared her holster before Ezra had said, “…this.” She was shooting as the final echoes of his voice were still bouncing off walls, and every time she pulled the trigger a 10mm bullet whined off Ezra’s clear dome.

When Nick’s .44 got involved cracks appeared immediately and before he’d half emptied his pistol, there was a large hole in Ezra’s dome, that Nora took advantage of to put two smaller, lighter 10mm slugs directly into the brain of Ezra Parker.

The Robobrain spasmed, and went still. He dropped a small briefcase, filled with pre-war money. Even though caps were the currency of the land, pre-war greenbacks still carried a lot of value in commerce.

Nora stepped away from the body.

_No choice. He gave us no choice._

Nick pointed his chin at the door. The three departed, and made their way back to Maxwell, where Nora couldn’t resist the urge for drama. She said, “I found the killer,” and she paused as everyone looked at her, “It was Ezra. He killed Julianna and took her place to cover his tracks.”

Maxwell sounded shocked, “My word! I never would have thought Mr. Parker was capable of something like this. What happened when you confronted him?”

Nick shook his head, “We killed him. He left us no choice.”

The concierge said, “Very well, detective. We will begin immediately transferring your equipment from your boat to the observatory, but please accept this as a bonus for uncovering such a heinous plot. I don’t think we could have done it without you,” and he handed Nick a bundle of pre-war currency.

Nora smiled. “Thanks. I doubt that Parker could have could have continued impersonating Mrs. Riggs much longer.”
Maxwell, shook his head, “Such a tragedy. Poor Dr. Riggs. Nevertheless, thank you detectives.”

Nick said, “Give our condolences to him.”

Yeah, although really, if he hadn’t had this harebrained scheme to put you all in Robobrains, Parker wouldn’t have even had a chance to pretend to be someone he wasn’t.

Chapter End Notes

This is the place where I discovered it is actually possible to fall asleep at the keyboard, kinda, and keep writing. It had been a long day, and I really wanted to finish this chapter. So I'm basically dozing and typing and I got to the end and found that somehow my subconscious had decided to refer to Ezra Parker as Peter Parker.

I've slowed it down a little since then. I apologize for that part. Also, I'm now into the final segment, the actual Children of Atom Chapters, and while I want to get to the 'rewards for our heroes' chapters, it is a little bittersweet.
Oddjobs For the Knight Errant

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they finally left the hotel, having provided the robot porters with strict instructions, Nora pointed west, downslope from the Hotel after consulting her Pip-Boy. “Echo Lake Lumber is over there. We should pick up those tools while we’re over here.”

“Blue, are we really running errands for those folks?”

“Piper, you saw the things that came out of the Fog. Trappers are bad enough, but damn, those things are a whole new level of awful. And anything we can do to shore up the wall has to help,” Nora said.

Piper smiled at Nora, “Alright. First time I’ve ever had to be talked into doing the right thing.” Then she looked serious, “I just. Something gives me the willies about this place. There’s something awful here. I kinda want to get this stuff for DiMA, figure out the link to Nick and get back on our boat.”

Nora hugged Piper. “I’m sorry the place bugs you. It’s just, for the first time in my life I’m truly not hiding anything. And those folks are in trouble. I can go over a couple miles and pick up a set of power tools and help save them? No brainier.”

Nick nodded, “I get it,” he looked thoughtful, “You know, I remember when everything was, ‘Find Kellogg’, then, ‘Get into the Institute’, then ‘Get my son out, ten or sixty’.”

Nick looked over, “And I saw you just barely, barely make it back to a new normal, and then you two went to Nuka-World. I saw what it cost you. You two still don’t talk about everything that happened there. I’m a good enough cop to know what that means.” Nick pointed back the way they’d come, “So if my best friends on the planet want to stop and go questing to do good? I will be there. Always. Whether it’s slaying a monster or finding some tools.”

Piper looked at the two of them, “Well, don’t look at me. I’m not going to let my nervousness get in the way.”

They made their way downslope, directly. In the old days that would have been ridiculous and they would have had to make their way around on roads, but the vegetation was thinned enough that dead reckoning straight to the tanner on Eagle Cove was feasible.

Which let them check out the tannery thorough Nora’s scope. She looked for a while and then grunted, “Yep. Definitely ferals. Firing,” and she opened fire.

A large number of feral ghouls emerged as she began killing them. After a five minute period where no further ghouls came out, she slung her rifle, and drew her pistol and the three of them finished by going around the entire exterior, gunning down all the stragglers that hadn’t come out in the main rush.

Then they entered the office entrance on the north side of the building. From there, the three cleared an office with two ferals, a storage floor with another two and then down a ramp. It smelled musty. When the they went around the corner, there was a glow.

Piper swore softly under her breath, and they eased around a corner. Nora signaled the other two and on three they fired. The first three bullets didn’t kill it. The next three, fired almost immediately, did.
Then a last feral rose up, and went down almost as rapidly.

The tools were in a marked duffel, with a Pelman’s Power Tools logo. Nora grabbled the duffel and slung it over her shoulder. Then the three left from the basement fire exit. When they got to the top of the stairs a pudgy man cam running up, excitedly.

He said, “I been casing those ghouls for weeks. Waiting for an opening. And you dive in and chopitty chop chop and bangity bang bang and the whole lot of ‘em. Dead. You even know what you got there? A premier set of Pelman’s Power Tools.”

Piper said, “Have there.”

The man looked at her, puzzled. Nora threw him an anvil when she said, “I remember commercials for Pelman’s. Expensive but top of the line.”

The man looked flummoxed, “What the hell’s a commercial? Never mind. Mariner didn’t send you, did she? God damn Mitch and his big mouth. No matter what she’s offering, it’s nothing. Serious builders would give an arm for those tools. I’ll pay you 2000 caps right now. Deal?”

Nora smiled, “Pass. On the arm or the caps.”

The man looked pissed, “I ain’t hanging around forever. Walk away and you’ll regret it.”

Piper said, “We highly doubt it.”

Nora waved the man off and this time the three walked around on the main highway. Maine Three. After about three hours, Far Harbor was in view. And they’d learned that the highways were, mostly, free of threats. One or two Super Mutants trying to set an ambush on a bridge, but other than that, nothing much.

The nice thing about Super Mutants from Nora’s point of view was that they were too stupid to shut up. Which made them comically easy to get the jump on. A pair of them, in the middle of a bridge arguing about where to stand to get the ‘bleeders’ was like taking candy from a baby. An enormous green baby, with anger management issues.

When they got back, Mariner was making her dinner in a shack by the gate. She saw them walk up, “You been to the tannery? You find my tools?”

Nora nodded, and handed them over, “Here you go.”

Mariner nodded once sharply, “A fair bit of luck running into you. Here’s your reward, well earned. And now to work on the hull.”

Nora tried to turn down the money. She had more than enough, and the folks here needed everything they had. She might as well have been talking to a wall. She turned away and found herself all but running into Captain Avery.

Avery looked her over and said, “I’ll be straight with you. It’s never easy to ask anyone on this island for help, much less a stranger. But I’ve got a responsibility to these people and I have a job for you if you’re up for it. Besides, I know you’re tougher than you look.”

Nora nodded, and said, “Ok. What exactly do you need help with?”

Avery looked relieved and she said, “We get our drinking water from a purifier not far outside of town. We had a bad storm not long before you got here And it must have damaged the fog
condensers that protect the road to the purifier. I sent Howard Dunbar out to fix them.”

Avery looked guilty, “He was out there when the Gulpers and Anglers hit us, and I’m afraid they may have gotten him too. I was hoping you could have a look. If the worst happened, maybe you could those fog condensers back online. If you’re up to it just head south out of town. It’s paying work of course. I wouldn’t ask a stranger to stick her neck out on our behalf unless I was willing to pay a fair share for it.”

“I don’t need the money, Avery.”

“That’s too bad. You aren’t gonna be able to help anyone here if you won’t let us pay our debts,” Avery said.

Nora shook her head and then laughed and said, “Fine. What exactly are these fog condensers? How do they work?”

Avery looked thoughtful, “Well I’m no engineer, but the way it was explained to me, each fog condenser pulls in the air around it then condenses it into liquid. The point being the fog doesn’t get past them. They make a barrier than protects the town. No fog means all the nasty things living in it stay in it. They don’t venture out too often. The fog’s their home, I guess.”

Avery finished, “The fog condenser’s eat up a lot of power, but we’ve got a wind farm that takes care of that. As long as the turbines stay charged we stay safe.”

Piper said, over Nora’s shoulder, “All right, we’ll head out.”

The Captain looked massively relieved, “Good. Our water supply won’t last much longer.”

Avery gave Nora a hand drawn map to the condensers, and Nora found Howard quickly, at the first marked condenser. He was dead. The two ‘lurks with him weren’t, at first. Nora pointed that the corpses of the Mirelurks shortly after that and said, “Lobsters, just a foot long though.”

Piper looked at them and shuddered. “No thanks.”

Nick said, “It always looked to me like eating a bug. I could do without it, too.”

“You never went to a lobster boil?” Nora asked.

Nick shook his head. Nora looked sad, “Well it looks like you never will. No one makes a pot that big. And besides, imagine trying to throw one of these bad boys in alive.”

Piper shouldered Howard’s satchel full of parts. “Where to next Blue?”

Nora pointed up slope to the main road. She led them quickly and directly to the next one. They found that one was a matter of cleaning a contact, which Nick did easily. The next, a bit further up the road, was a matter of replacing some pipes and a bearing. Again Nick.

“Doesn’t anyone else speak ‘old machine’ too?” he complained.

“No one does it better than you, Tin Man,” said Nora.

When they got to third and final condenser, right next to the water purifiers for Far Harbor, Nora and Piper didn’t get to just watch. When Nick went to check that last condenser, a pair of ‘lurks came out of the reeds. Piper and Nora opened fire immediately. Because that had been their job all along.

When the last Mirelurk went down and Nick got the condenser running, they looked over the
purifiers. They too would need work, but the three did not have parts for that, so they returned to report to Avery.

When they arrived, Nora said, “Those fog condensers are back online, but someone needs to repair the purifiers.”

Avery nodded. “I’ll get someone on it right away. While you were gone, Mariner came looking for you.”

Nora nodded and turned away, but before she could leave, Avery pressed a bag of caps into her hand. Then Nora found Mariner. She was sitting looking out along the pier, and as Nora walked up, she stood up and said, “Those tools you found are a joy to work with. It gave me this idea…a cargo freighter foundered ages ago to the south. With a bit of arc welding and a lot of elbow grease the hull could be reinforced to be sturdy. Fierce. Best to do it soon, before…well, soon.”

Nora looked puzzled, “Why does it need to be soon?”

Mariner had an unreadable expression on her face as she said, “I…That’s not a matter for you to ask. Just …the Hull needs fixing.”

Nora couldn’t let it go, for some reason. There was a sixth sense telling her to keep digging, so she pressed again, “C’mon. I’m one of the few people that helps out around here. So why the time pressure?”


Mariner’s shoulders slumped, “Hard to get that out. When…I take the long walk, I can’t count on anyone else keeping the hull in good repair. So it’s best to get her ready before then.”

I was all set to write these folks off as all hopelessly selfish. And now, she’s here using her last weeks to try and ensure a bunch of people who won’t help her live after she’s gone.

Nora looked over at her wife and best friend. And they’d all been together so long that they didn’t need to say anything. The slight twist to Piper’s lips, and the faintest lift of Nick’s right eyebrow spoke volumes. They were going to do anything this woman needed.

Nora reached out and gripped Mariner’s shoulder, “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. If there’s any way I can help…”

Mariner shook her head, “I…I’ve shed my fill of tears over this.”

Then she straightened and went on more briskly, “But we’ve got business to be about. The ship’s the MS Azalea. Expect Trappers. Mean ones… Once you mop the decks with them, I’ll send my crew over. Best of luck.”

Nora sketched a brief salute and they left. It was getting on towards dark so they rented rooms in the Last Plank again, and the next morning they set out, headed south. After about an hour’s hike they found themselves in a small copse of trees, looking over the hulk of a pre-war freighter. Trappers had made their home there, and they had a guard station at the prow, a bunker made of shipping containers at the midship, and a shanty complex ashore that guarded the makeshift gangway they’d created.

Nora brought out her rifle and began killing. First the guard in the prow, closest to her, went down instantly to a headshot. The guard at midship, stuck his head out of a hatch and he was killed. By then there was a general sense that bad things were happening but without any consensus of where
the bad things were coming from.

This is my favorite part. When they all run around, and before they even have an idea of where I am.

Two more Trappers came out of the shanty and began looking around. Nora shot one, and the other looked around and pointed in the group’s general direction, before Nora killed him. By then, she could hear a commotion from inside the hull, and one Trapper stuck his head over a shack railing long enough for Nora to get a bead on his head and shoot him too.

She waited, both eyes open and scanning for movement, when a Trapper, in Power Armor, came out of the bridge hatchway. She swung left and sighted on him rapidly and began shooting. Two of her four rounds hit in his head and his arms flung out and he slowly toppled with a crash.

At that point Nora and her friends moved forward to the shack and then scuttled across the jury-rigged gangway. They could hear some movement from inside, so Nora led them through into the bridge, where there was a stair down into another set of wooden shanties, this time built up inside a massive gutted steel hull. As she peered down she saw the shocked face of a Trapper peering up.

Her rifle was already up, and she reflexively emptied her magazine from the hip. He went down dead, and she slung the rifle, quickly, and drew her pistol as Piper and Nick passed her going down. She followed them and then heard a boom and two quick coughs as another Trapper went down to Piper and Nick.

The last three were a matter of Cat and Mouse inside the shanty that ended rapidly. When they were finished, the three went back topside and made the hike back to Mariner. In passing they made their way past a bog, with an Angler in it. This time it was Piper who got hit with the venom. She went down instantly, writhing in pain, where Nora scraped it off her. Piper’s face was red and strained, and Nora first injected her wife, then herself, and again felt the cooling rush from the stimpack as it soothed the outraged nerve endings.

By the time she’d finished Nick had blown holes in that Angler you could have flung a Chryslus through. Nora and Piper caught their breath, as the whole thing had really been like a bee sting, a big one, and they needed a moment. When the pain had subsided they moved on.

When they reached the Hull, they found Mariner outside using the tools they’d gotten her.

Nick walked over, “The MS Azalea is good to go…”

Mariner looked over at all of them and said, “I’ll send a work crew over.”

She lowered her voice and went on, as all three leaned in, “Listen, I haven’t told anyone except the doc about my condition. If your offer of help is still open I could use some advice. I’m thinking of casting off when the hull is done. Slip out in the middle of the night. But as much as these ingrates drive me to distraction….For the life of me, I don’t know why I told you in the first place.”

Because as much as you all pretend to be utterly independent, that’s a lie. And you want to make human contact, because everyone does. Stop pretending to be someone you’re not…

Nora said, in the same low tones, “Your friends would want to help you. Spend time with you before the end.”

Mariner laughed, and said, “You don’t know my ‘friends’ very well. But you’ve been of help. I won’t forget it. Off with you now. I’ve work to do.”

You can pretend all you want, but you’re not actually that much a rugged individualist, Mariner.
But the three left, headed for Acadia. And the equipment that Maxwell’s robots had taken up the mountain.

Chapter End Notes

I'll apologize ahead of time for what may be a spotty posting schedule. I'm traveling for work and trying to make my word count target at the same time. I may not succeed. But I'll do my best.

This section of Far Harbor always felt like someone somewhere read too many stories about New England Handymen (perhaps Clifford Simak's "The Big Front Yard") and just RAN with it. So since Nora is really trying hard to be classically 'good', I though stringing them all together made sense.
By the time Nora had reached the peak, she was tired and cross. And there was still the directional antenna to erect. It was a simple arrangement that placed a single pole in the middle of a wire hooked to a radio. By stringing the wire in a line, Nora ensured that a strong ‘lobe’ of RF energy projected south and slightly east.

While an omni, an omnidirectional antenna, wouldn’t have been an issue from a security standpoint, Nora needed an antenna that would reach back to the Commonwealth and D and the CSIS. Not to mention The Castle and its complement of Vertibirds. Nora consulted her Pip-Boy, using it as a directional compass, ordering Nick and Piper left and right until she was happy. Then she had them each stake their ends down.

Then she hooked the high powered, i.e., long-range, radio repeater to the antenna. She hooked that up to an omnidirectional antenna, to reach Nora’s small portable unit, and to the power grid at Acadia. She activated the repeater, and then keyed her radio mike for a contact check.

As she’d hoped, PAM came back immediately. Nora then hooked her Pip-Boy to the radio and sent her reports up to now back in a shortish digital burst to PAM. D came up on the radio after a bit.

“Interesting situation,” she said.

“Isn’t it though,” said Nora.

“For what it’s worth, I agree with you. DiMA isn’t a threat except insofar as he seems to not have any sense of proportion. Keep an eye on him, but if you decide it makes sense reach out to him, do so. You’re on the spot, and you know more about what’s going on than I do.”

Nora said, “Makes sense. But do me a favor. Send a Vertibird with a CSIS or highly discreet Minuteman pilot up here. You have the coordinates. I need a ride. The place is super-unpleasant and moving from place to place in a ‘bird is looking REALLY attractive.”

Nora could hear D’s chuckle as she said, “Makes sense. I’ll send one of Cait’s Own that we’ve been using. She’s good.”

Nora smiled, “Thanks, D. You’re a peach,” and she signed off.

Then she went into Acadia. The three went into the main observatory, where DiMA greeted Nick, “It’s good to see you again, brother.”

Nick winced, and said, “Prefer we just keep it ‘Nick’ and ‘DiMA’ for now.”

DiMA nodded, “Of course.”

At that point Nora found Faraday, who said, “I need your help. You may have noticed that I’ve had to make some…modifications to DiMA. It’s a never ending struggle to get the equipment needed. There was a shipment of storage drives…there was an accident. I know it’s not really your job but, it would really help if you could retrieve the hardware.”

Nora nodded, “Of course.”
Faraday relaxed, “Oh thank god. Here are the coordinates,” and loaded them into Nora’s Pip-Boy.

Nora looked at her map, and saw that the boat had docked at Southwest Harbor, one of the other marina and harbor combinations on Mt. Desert Island. To kill some time Nora went to visit with some of the synths living at Acadia. Most of them could be found just below the Observatory level proper. That was where she ran into an exceptionally surly synth named Dejen, who seemed to be the unofficial armorer, and Cog, a much more affable synth, who had some kind of general store setup.

Nora tried asking both, but only Cog responded to, a question about why. As in, “Why, if so few non-residents visit, do you maintain these ’stores’?”

Cog smiled and shrugged, “DiMA seems to think that one of these days there’ll be a point. In the meantime, we buy and sell stuff that others find…It’s a way of keeping an economy going here, for when…”

“When what?” Nick asked.

“Free trade starts between Far Harbor and here,” Cog finished.

Nora shrugged. Based on what I’ve seen that lot of crusty old bastards would sooner eat their own livers. But DiMA seems to be more optimistic than me.

Nora turned to leave as Piper and Nick quizzed Cog and ran into a woman, with red rimmed eyes. The woman looked Nora up and down, and said, “New girl right? Because I don’t recognize you,” and she grimaced. There was a wild note to her voice, “Look, I’m not anybody worth talking to…my head is killing me. Now’s not a good time.”

Wow…

“What’s wrong?” Nora asked.

The woman gave a manic little laugh, “We’re doing this anyway, after I said I don’t want to talk? God. Fine. You try having somebody botch a mind wipe on you and see how it feels? Then get back to me, Ok?”

“You had a mind wipe?”

“You’re a synth on the run, you go to someone, get a new face, and they wipe your mind so the Institute can’t find you. Only somebody screwed mine up so here I am. Now just please leave me alone.”

I should check with Amari. Maybe with the CIT working on her we can fix her.

“What’s your name?” Nora asked.

The woman shook her head, “I said…”

Nora interrupted, “All you have to do is tell me your name and I’ll leave you alone.”

The woman glared at Nora, but from behind, she heard Cog say, “Her name is Jule. I apologize. She’s having one of her bad days.”

Nora looked over, “That’s Ok. I get it. I’d be pissed too, if I were her. Look, thanks, but I…ahhh…”
have a call to make.”

Nora went out to her new setup and got into the radio. She requested that Dr. Amari check her records for a synth named Jule. Or at least with the resulting name of Jule. And she gave the description as well.

While she was calling back to CSIS HQ, her Vertibird called, to confirm coordinates, “All I can see is the observatory and some mountain above the clouds.”

Nora laughed then replied, “That would be it, yes.”

In just a few minutes, the ‘bird was flaring in for a landing. As the dust kicked up, Nora and her friends saw Chase staring at the ‘bird thoughtfully. Nora waved and climbed aboard. As she did so, she called up her Pip-Boy display and linked it to the Vertibird, giving the pilot, named Charlie, a heading and distance to Southwest Harbor. Charlie whistled, “Ok. Let’s see how Tom’s ground sensing radar works, huh?”

They flew over the fog until they had reached Southwest Harbor, then slowed and descended into the fog. Once in, and not dealing with reflected sunlight off the tops, visibility was down to about three quarters of a mile, but the pilot had slowed to where that was sufficient. At the target site there was a beached, wrecked boat. There was a factory of sorts, for Vim! Pop if the signs were to be believed, to the west on the other side of the inlet. On the east side, on the cliff above the boat were the buildings of Southwest Harbor.

As they orbited the wreck site looking for a good place to put down, a missile whooshed past the nose of the ‘bird, from the top of the Vim! Factory. Charlie banked, then kicked the rudder hard to turn, and get the nose on target quickly. There was a Super-Mutant atop the factory, armed with a missile launcher. That he was reloading.

Charlie cut loose with her nose machine guns, as Nick leapt for the door minigun. He’d barely clipped himself in, when she kicked the rudder again, and unmasked Nick’s firing position. The mutant had thrown itself down, and Nick pressed the firing stud. At 4 to 1, tracers ripped out, allowing Nick to adjust his aim, and Charlie, showing ice cold nerves, held the ‘bird steady while he ‘walked’ the tracers into missile boy.

When that mutant had literally disappeared in a red mist, another one leapt out firing. Nick swung right and opened up on him. In moments that target, too, was down. Then Charlie resumed orbiting, but keeping Nick’s gun oriented on Southwest Harbor, orbiting counterclockwise.

Which meant that when several presumably suicidal Trappers opened up with pipe rifles, or combat rifles, Nick saw them, and gunned them down before more than a couple rounds had hit the airframe. Eventually Charlie and Nora found a spot just north of the wreck along a lightly wider section of pebbled beach.

Nora hopped out, covered by Nick, and walked over to the boat, where she found two large, mountable hard drives. There was also a chest, with a fiendishly difficult lock. The only way Nora would be able to ‘pick’ this was with a small chunk of C-4. Or she could find the key. Nora grabbed the two pieces of hardware, and placed them on the deck of the vertibird, and climbed aboard, clipping her headset into the intercom, “Ok, back to Acadia.”

Charlie acknowledged and then said, “When I get there, I’ll need a little time to check the aircraft, Ok?”

Nora said, “I’m sorry about all that. Go ahead and check what you need.”
The flight was exceptionally short. Almost any hop on Mt. Desert was likely to spend as much time getting up and getting down as actually going between point A and point B. When they landed, the three hopped out, with Nora carrying the drives. Charlie hopped out, and opened up the cargo compartment, which proved to be full of spares, and an aluminum tape patching kit.

Nora made for the observatory, where she was met at the door by Chase, a synth in a tattered Courser’s Uniform. “What is that,” she said, pointing at the Vertibird.

Nora looked over and made a great show of shock, “Why, I…I believe that’s an aircraft. My heavens!”

Chase looked disgusted, “You know what I mean,” she said.

Nora turned serious, “That is one of a number of aircraft that the Commonwealth of New England government took from the Brotherhood of Steel. At about the same time as we eradicated the Institute.”

Nora looked at Chase, “While you were living up here doing nothing but looking down, literally, on the Railroad, and the synths who were wiping their memories to remain safe? We were figuring out how to get in, and then to strike back. They forced our hand and we had to destroy the facility. But we rescued most of the non-complicit scientists. And now we’re making a real nation in Boston. I’m one of the officials of that government and that,” and she pointed at the ‘bird, “Is MY ride.”

Charlie waved up from the ‘bird, “Ma’am? Dr. Amari is available…”

Nora turned to Chase, “So you have a talk with DiMA. Report what that is, and who I am. Shit is about to get real.”

Nora jogged back down the stairs. She sat in the co-pilot’s seat with a set of headsets and called Dr. Amari.

Amari said, with no preamble, “I have no records whatsoever of a Jule, matching that description or otherwise.”

“Is it possible that you simply missed the records?” Nora asked.

“If I pretended that it was impossible, I’d be full of shit. But importantly, when you do a mind wipe it either works or it doesn’t,” Amari said, “There’s a two stage process, and the only possible complication with the memory lounger equipment is ‘brain death’…strictly speaking a ‘tabula rasa’ state with no possibility of memory formation. What you’ve described has never happened. I suppose it could if you didn’t have the right equipment, and or didn’t know what you were doing. Or both. But me? I say this without ego. No.”

Chapter End Notes

Many of the “side-quests” in Far Harbor better fit the meta-narrative I wanted to have for the last half of book three, so there are a bit more of them here.

Having said that, if I felt it detracted from the overall more realistic thrust of making a believable narrative for the books I axed it without mercy.
The Road Paved With Good Intentions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nora sat in the cockpit for a few moments, thinking. Then she got out and headed back up the observatory. When she walked in, she was met immediately by Faraday. He walked up, concerned, and he opened his mouth but Nora got there first. “I’ve got those storage drives you asked for,” she said.

He looked confused, “Oh…that’s great. Thank you…uh…just the two? Really? Somehow I thought there were three…”

Nora said, “I did notice a locked chest that I couldn’t open. Maybe the last one was in there-do you have the key?”

Faraday looked confused for a second, “Key? Chest? I’m afraid I don’t know,” he hesitated and went on more rapidly, “You know what? This is fine. Just these two is fine. So, um, DiMA would like to speak with you.”

Nora nodded, handed the drives to Faraday, and as they walked down the hall to DiMA, said, “DiMA looks like he’s had a lot of work done.”

Faraday nodded, “Well, that’s certainly an understatement. Between the two of us we’ve made so many modifications…He was just a prototype. Never built for this. It took a lot to overcome the limitations of his original design and expand his memory. It really is remarkable isn’t it? He’s overcome so much, he’s become so much more than he once was. And all he thinks of is others.”

Yes it did. And I think he does. But the one thing he never thinks is of are the questions, ‘Am I really right? Am I making a mistake?’

When they arrived, DiMA stood up out of his cradle. First he said, “Hello Nick, how are you?”

Nick said deadpan, “I’m fine, but I imagine you have questions for my friend.”

DiMA chuckled. “I’m afraid I do.” He turned to Nora, “You came under false pretenses.”

Nora shook her head, “I’m afraid that is where you’re wrong. I was hired to find Kasumi Nakano by her parents. I told you the truth. I just left some stuff out.”

“Some would call that a lie by omission,” DiMA said.


DiMA smiled gently, and said, “Very well. What is the entire reason you are here?”

“I’m here to find and if necessary rescue Kasumi Nakano,” said Nora. The she raised a finger, “In addition, I am on a mission to make contact with a group of dissident synths, examine them and if, in my opinion as the Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Special Intelligence Service, there is merit in them, to offer them some sort of linkage with the CNE, up to and including proposing membership…statehood if you will.”

DiMA looked surprised. Nora shook her head, “You knew that we destroyed the Institute. You
knew that we’d formed a new CIT. Why does it surprise you that there’s more to us than a group of random settlements?”

DiMA smiled, “Because I didn’t properly think through what your arrival meant. Until you flew away and then back.”

Nora said, “Do you know that that is the first time you’ve admitted to fallibility? That is a very good sign.”

DiMA laughed softly, “I seem to find myself at a loss.”

Nora shook her head, “Don’t worry about it. If I hadn’t reached the basic conclusion that I probably didn’t need to blow the top of the mountain off, or sweep in here with a regiment of Minutemen, I never would’ve called the Vertibird up here. I’d like to leave it based outside your building, though, if that would be Ok with you.”

Nora went on, “The Institute is gone, but there are still Coursers about. Some of them have proven hostile. You’re much, much safer than you were, but that is NOT the same as ‘totally secure’. Honestly, I think it would be worth your while just to reach out to the CIT. Faraday is strongly hinting that he’s reaching the limit of what he can do with you. We put Nick into a Gen 3. We could do the same with you, if you’d like.”

DiMA shook his head, but added, “But better memory and repairs might be nice.”

Nora nodded, “Think about it. In the meantime could you call Chase off?”

DiMA nodded, “As long as you’ve been completely honest with me.”

Nora held up Faraday’s Holotape, “I stole this from you.”

DiMA smiled, “We were pretty certain that someone had accessed that. We had been working our way to being desperate enough to send Chase. Perhaps you could go where it would be an act of war for us to?”

Nora nodded, “That’s my plan, eventually. I have some loose ends to tie up, here and at Far Harbor first. Because if things go badly with the Children I may have to leave suddenly. Or go to war myself.”

DiMA nodded. “I agree, Director Wright. The memories have been there for decades. Even under Tektus, and even assuming there’s something there for him to use, nothing is likely to happen without considerable warning.”

Nora looked over, “You don’t have any idea what’s in there?” she asked.

DiMA shook his head, and looked troubled, “Whatever it is, I chose to completely eradicate every minuscule fragment. I literally have no idea.”

Nora nodded, “Hold tight. I have a couple things to do, and then I and Piper and Nick will head to the Children.”

DiMA nodded and Nora headed down to check on Jule. She couldn’t find Jule, but Cog found Nora instead and came over to speak with her and her friends.

He said, “Hey you got a second? Word is you were asked to go check out some boat for Faraday. Storage drives or something. Ok, I need you to come with me for a minute. We’re gonna go have a
chat with Jule, and if I know her, she’s hiding out,” he turned and headed for a back hallway, where they found Jule, staring into the distance. Cog said, “Hey there kiddo. Need you to tell our friend here what you told me.”

Jule looked at Cog, and with real anger said, “What the fuck, Cog? That was between us.”

Cog shook his head, “Skip it, Ok? She’s here to help. Promise.”

Jule looked like she was going to punch Cog for a second, then her shoulders sank and she said, “Fine. I don’t see the point….”

She turned to Nora and said, “All right look, you know my heads messed up, right? Brains scrambled or whatever. I keep having these dreams, I guess, they’re sorta like dreams but it’s more like they’re real.”

Jule gave that manic laugh again, as she said, “There’s…god this is stupid…there’s this boat…and it’s on fire…And I hear screaming…I think it’s me screaming…but I can’t be sure. And…and that’s it.”

Nora, Piper, and Nick watched the performance with pity. This woman was messed up. And Nora was beginning to suspect what had really happened. But before she started running around pointing fingers, she wanted to be sure.

*What would have happened if I jumped to conclusions back in the Vault and didn’t talk to Bert Riggs? That hidden identity would never have come to light. Get all the data. Then speak.*

Nora said, gently, “What do you think it means?”

Jule shrugged angrily, “Fuck if I know. I thought it was one more thing that got screwed up when I had my head wiped, but…Ok, I know this sounds ridiculous, but I found this key.”

Jule produced a key from her pocket and handed it to Nora, “I had it…somewhere. It’s fuzzy but I swear it’s connected. It means something, and Cog says he knows what, and he says you know too. So just take it and…you know…fix it.”

Nora nodded as she pocketed it, “I’ll do my best Jule.”

As the three walked out of the complex, Cog sidled up to them, “So…you see why I wanted you to know about this right? That boat Faraday wanted you to find, it’s connected right? Got to be. Please tell me you’re gonna go check it out.”

Nora looked over, “Why do you care? What’s your play here?”

Cog stopped and spoke earnestly, urgently, “Jule is a good kid. She had some messed up stuff happen to her…and if there’s a way to sort it out then she deserves it. Come on, don’t make me get sentimental about it. Are you going to look into it?”

“You’re already on my way, Cog,” said Nora.

Cog nodded, “Thanks. I mean it. Just…if anything turns up, you come tell me. Not Jules. Ok? You and I can sort it out.”

*Jesus. Everyone in this stupid complex wants to control everything.*

When she got to the Vertibird, Charlie was just finishing putting the finishing touches on a patch job.
Nora walked up and asked, “She good to go? We need to head back to the boat.”

“What’d you do, leave the stove on?” asked Charlie.

Nora just gave her a look. Charlie sighed, “Ok. Hop in, and we’ll get up and in the air.”

When the Vertibird was airborne, Nora looked out over the fog, and straight down to the barely made out ground.

*I love flying. And I am just perversely happy that we managed to salvage these.*

This time, there was no excitement as they flew straight to the small strand and Nora hopped out. Piper and Nick never even left the ‘bird, as Nora unlocked the chest with Jule’s key and pulled a third drive and a note out. She jogged back to the aircraft and they were airborne, even before Nora’d finished buckling in.

She looked at the note and whistled, then handed it to Nick and Piper.

*Well, now I know I’m right. The question now is why.*

Nick handed the note back, and Nora glanced at it again. “Never should have let Faraday talk me into this. If only I could resist that sweet face of his. ‘It’s easy, just steer the boat and you’ll be fine,’ he says. I swear, if anything happens... He says he can fix me up if something goes wrong. Supposed to make me feel better, but actually makes me more nervous. What can he do in that lab of his? He's very secretive, won't even let me look at the terminal…”

*The terminal is the key. Not in the computer room. In his sub-basement lab.*

When they landed, Nora and her friends climbed out and made a beeline for the sub-basement. Faraday didn’t even have a chance to look up, and Cog was in his little corner. Nora looked into the computer in the lab, where she read through several entries regarding more or less routine medical surgeries. Until she hit one…

[Subject V5 brought in after incident on island]

Severe trauma to head and upper torso; cognitive functions impaired. All functionality restored.

Personal Note:
I still struggle with the decisions made. Victoria was almost beyond helping. But what was done... I wonder if it was fair. Objectively, there was no choice, she’d suffered so much damage that the equivalent of a mind-wipe was absolutely necessary. But this can't just be a dispassionate, impartial decision. This was our friend, and we wiped her without her consent. Now she's someone else, and she doesn't even know.
We'll do your best to look after Jule, of course...
We owe her that much.]

*And there it is. Faraday was obsessed with keeping DiMA operating, so he enlisted a woman he knew he could manipulate into doing what he wanted, regardless of whether she was qualified. And then the worst happened. But she was so damaged that he felt he had to wipe her memory.*

*And Cog is so obsessed with what’s going on behind the scenes he doesn’t even think Jule has a right to know what happened to her. ‘For her own good’ of course.*

Nora went up the stairs and handed Faraday the this drive, “Here you go.”
Faraday looked from the drive to Nora’s face and said, “I'm not even going to complain that you’ve been snooping around in terminals, all right? I know how this looks. You have to understand, we did the best we could.”

Nora looked at him, “Let me guess: you had no other choice.”

Faraday shook his head, “Oh no, there's always a choice. But the other option was to let her die. And it's always so easy to look back and judge.”

He looked at Nora, eyes begging her to understand, “The boat crashed, she was beyond injured. We did what we could, but the only way to get her past the trauma was to try a wipe. Every time she came to after we repaired her body, she just started screaming until we put her back under.”

He went on, “I don't have Institute-level technology here. There were complications. And now... Well, now she's Jule. She's broken, but she's alive.”

Nora looked him, “If you weren’t all so damned sure only you can be trusted, you would have known that Dr. Amari at the Memory Den does mind surgery. But you’re all so sure the Railroad was wrong, and you had a holy mission.”

Nora shook her head. “From now on, for fuck’s sake, reach out.”

Nora, Piper, and Nick left Faraday without another word. When they found Cog he took one look and his face fell, “You found something didn’t you? All right spill it, what’s going on?”

Piper said, “There was an accident. Emergency surgery was the only way to save her.”

Cog looked at them, “They did reconstruction surgery on her? Without getting her consent? All right look…this is a real shit show but telling Jules…it doesn’t do her any good. Just hand over the note you found and and let’s call it a day.”

Nora shook her head, “You want to just keep this a secret?”

Cog looked around and spoke urgently, “Of course I do. No one benefit’s if this comes out. Is it screwed up? Yes, absolutely. It’s nuts that they’d do this to one of us. But the damage is already done. Tell Jule, and not only will it crush her, it could ruin this whole little fake utopia everyone has going. So screw it, we pretend this never happened. Are you with me?”

Do I have the right to tell her? Do I have the right NOT to tell her? No. She has a right to know what happened, and why this is happening to her.

“Jule deserves to know the truth.”

Cog shook his head, hard, “Oh bullshit. She deserves a chance to be happy, and this will do the exact opposite. Come on, hand it over and let’s forget this ever happened.”

Nora shook her head and Cog said, “Shit. This is not what I wanted…Ok, fine. Tell her, see what happens. Live with that guilt.”

Nora turned away and found Jule, sleeping on her pad. She was whimpering in her sleep. She shook Jule awake and said, “Jule, I need to talk with you.”

Jule sat up, and said, “Oh. Shit. This is about that key, isn’t it? And the boat. You found something, didn’t you? What is it?”
Nora looked at the young woman and sighed. She hoped Jule took her up on her upcoming offer, “You were in an accident. You would have died if Faraday hadn’t done extensive surgery on you.”

Jule shook her head, “No… That’s…”

Then she stood up, and said, “You know on some level I fucking knew it. I knew that these people who call themselves my friends, tell me they want to help… They did this to me! And who the hell gives them the right to decide that I don’t get to be me anymore? I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want any of this. God, this place is no different from any other. You just get screwed no matter what. Well I’m done. I quit. I’m outta here.”

Nora grabbed Jules arm, and said, “Jule, there’s a doctor in the Commonwealth who might be able to help you. She can’t make you Victoria again, but she could take away the pain, and the mood swings, and the memories. She can help you. I promise.”

Jule looked at her wildly for a second and then nodded.

The four of them walked out of the Observatory, and as they turned to walk down the steps to the Vertibird, Jule turned away and began sprinting. Straight at the cliff to the west of the building.

Nora screamed and Nick began running after Jule. Neither did any good, as Jule flung herself off the hundred foot cliff. Nick stopped at the edge and looked down, then away. Nora closed her eyes then made herself go look.

The poor woman’s body lay at the bottom of the cliff like a broken doll.

Nora turned and walked back into the observatory. She walked up to Faraday.

She looked right at him and said, “Well, now every single one of us has failed Jule. You were right, Faraday. You and Cog were right, and I was wrong.”

Chapter End Notes

Although I never have something happen that can't happen in the game, I will from time to time run them together (like the Brotherhood and the Institute attacking at the same time) as long as the result is something that you can head canon in the game. Jule actually goes around a hidden shack on the side of Acadia. But for all intents and purposes she's gone.

Also, like Cait's death, this is something that I wish I didn't have to do, but in order for Nora to understand that sometimes doing the right thing can feel an awful lot like doing the WRONG thing, and therefore doing the right thing later on, this had to happen, and it HAD to be Nora's fault.

Finally, trying to write while traveling is... not fun. Even if the three chapters are pretty good if I say so myself.
Nora walked out of the building and looked up at the sky, mentally, and occasionally vocally, kicking herself.

Piper came up and slid her arm around Nora. “Blue, I’m sorry. But it wasn’t just you. Nick and I thought the same as you, that Jule deserved to know the truth.”

Piper turned Nora and looked into her eyes, “And maybe we were wrong, or maybe there was no way to fix it once the accident happened. But either way, it’s not just on you. It’s on me and it’s on Nick. And Cog for insisting that we look into all the strange stuff that was making him suspicious. And on Faraday for convincing Victoria to do something she probably had no business doing. And on DiMA for being so secretive and, ‘I know best,’ about everyone.”

Piper looked down, “I don’t know.”

Nora thought for a moment and said, “I do. From now on, I’m going to do my best to fix things from where I find myself. It might piss you off, Thing, but sometimes I need to use situational ethics. I didn’t in this case because I’ve been so damned amoral in the past, doing what felt right seemed wrong.”

Nick and Piper tried to interrupt, but Nora shook her head. “It doesn’t mean I go back to being JADE SUN of BLACKLIST. But it does mean that I admit that sometimes the shitty thing is the thing that needs doing. I’m just sorry that poor woman had to suffer because I so overreacted to my past that I revealed something one moment’s fucking thought would have told me was best left unsaid. Cog was right, at least at the end there.”

Piper looked like she wanted to argue, but she shut her mouth as she realized that the truth had not made Jule free. Not the whole truth. It had made her dead.

Piper said, “Let’s go down to Far Harbor, see if they’re OK, and maybe get drunk at the Last Plank. Then in the morning, head over to the, I can’t believe I’m saying this, Children of Atom.”

Nora nodded and the three went down the hill, while Charlie continued working on the Vertibird. Now that the urgency was gone, there was a lot left for her to do on her aircraft.

After the walk down through the Fog, their day just kept getting better. They walked up to the gate just as a dispute between Allen Lee and Captain Avery came to a head. Allen was holding a gun on a Child of Atom, on her knees in front of the gate. Avery was across from him, arguing with him vehemently.

She was saying, “If we kill any more of the Children of Atom there could be war, Allen. Just stop this.”

Allen gestured at the captive, “This ain’t some innocent, Avery, this is a damned saboteur. Those condensers down by the fresh water? The storm didn’t take ‘em out. She did. Machete Mike spotted her.”

Captain Avery leaned back shocked, “I…but the Children…”
The captive looked up at Avery with hate and defiance, as Allen pressed on, “Like I been saying. The Children are out to kill us all. This here saboteur meant to cut us off from food and water. Punishment is pretty clear, Captain.”

Avery looked at the woman. From the Child of Atom’s demeanor, it was clear that she’d done it and she felt no remorse.

Avery nodded, “Do what you must.”

Allen’s rifle barked once in single shot mode, and the Child toppled to one side, her head ruined.

“Now will you listen to sense? The Children have to be wiped off the Island,” said Allen.

Avery shook her head in disgust. As she turned away she said, “You’ve had your blood today Allen. I can’t stomach any more of it. All of you. Show’s over. Go home.”

Can’t fault either of them. Avery’s trying to stop a bloodbath, and Allen’s afraid of what the Children will do…and under the new management that has DiMA’s group spooked, who’s to say he’s wrong?

The three passed through the gates, where they were intercepted by Mariner. She came up and greeted them. Nora couldn’t be sure, but Mariner did seem a little frailer. Maybe. The other woman smiled, and said, “Mainlander. I got one last idea. Crazier than a box of Radroaches, but that hasn’t stopped you before. Hull’s got plenty of stopping power now, but if a Mirelurk Queen went for a frontal assault…,” and Mariner trailed off.

Nora shook her head, “I’m not sure anything’s stopping a Queen on a rampage.”

Mariner nodded, “Might be right, that, but I had an idea. Thicker walls can beat the mass, velocity, and force issue, but the bigger problem is acid.”

Mariner went on, “Only thing I’ve ever survive a Queen’s acid are other Mirelurks. The Mirelurks on our island have carapaces that are extra tough. So you gather up a bunch of them, and lug them back here. Then I’ll reinforce the town as best I’m able.”

Nora shook her head, “Far Harbor really owes you for all this.”

Mariner smiled a little cynically, “Yes and no. It’s my dock people are squatting on. So I got a personal stake in this.”

Nora laughed, and said, “We’re grabbing a drink at the Last Plank. Want to join us?”

Mariner thought for a moment, then nodded. All four of them went into the bar, where Nora and the rest took over a table and waved the waitress over. When the first round arrived, Mariner raised a glass to them and thanked Nora, Piper, and Nick for all their help. Which did not go unnoticed in the bar.

There were a few dirty slash guilty looks aimed their way.

But the most important development that evening was that Dr. Teddy Wright sidled up to Nora’s table and said, “You are a curious specimen. Despite our ‘friendly’ town doing its best to chase you out, you keep helping us ingrates all the same. I got to ask, why do you keep at it?”

Nora shrugged. The real reason was; that she’d been an almost nihilistic, self-centered spy during the Sino-American War, jolted out of her world view by the murder of a child by her own hand, and then changed by the birth of a son, the end of the world, the loss of her son, her emergence into a world more nihilistic than she could even dream of being on her worst day in Beijing, the finding of
a loving wife, the discovery of her son, the loss of her son again, the recovery of her son again, and been through harrowing time with her wife’s frankly evil mother; she condensed all that to, “You’re good people in some dire straits. Figured you could use a hand.”

Teddy gave a half smile as he said, “Heh. You running for office? If that’s the truth, we don’t deserve you.”

Teddy pulled up a fifth chair, “Most folk here are set in their ways. Makes no difference how hard you try to get in good with ’em. Heck, it took my family three generations ‘fore the Daltons sell us a heel of bread. But there’s a way….a downright insane way mind you….that you can turn even the most stubborn fool around.”

Mariner sat back, clearly shocked, “Doc Teddy, you can’t possibly be talking about The Captain’s Dance.”

Doc nodded, and turning to the other three said, “In olden times, leaders were chosen by something called ’The Captain’s Dance’. Legends say the toughest, meanest, and outright craziest hopefuls would chum the waters and lure out the worst the island could throw at them. Once the would-be Captain killed the Mirelurk Queen, or Fog Crawler or what have you, they’d invite the whole island to feast off the bounty. You do this, you won’t be made captain, but you’ll earn respect. Everyone’s respect.”

Mariner said, “You won’t earn respect, you’ll be dead.”

Nora looked at both of them, “If we do this, and succeed, and then later come to the people here with some proposal, will it increase the chance that you stiff-necked bastards will actually listen?”

Mariner asked, “Do you have something specific in mind?”

Nora shook her head, “Not really. More like a suspicion that things could wind up in a place where I might need to get folks here to do something, or more likely NOT do something, quickly and spending a week talking you into or out of a course of action might not be possible.”

Mariner said, “Mainlander, you are plainly crazy. To do The Captain’s Dance on the off chance that it might come in handy?”

Teddy said, “Mariner, you know the folk here and how stubborn they are. What makes you think it’s an ‘off’ chance?”

Mariner nodded, “Fair point. You’re still crazy, but I must admit, to see a Captain’s Dance in my life? But better you than me.”

Nora, “Ok. We’re in.”

Teddy nodded, “There’s an old Mirelurk feeding grounds near Emmet’s Causeway, a treacherous stretch along the coast. Go there and throw any kind of meat you got in the water. All that blood and viscera is sure to attract attention. And then wait. I’ll make sure you have a witness or two. Prove to the rest of these clods that you belong.”

They then called for another bottle and got pleasantly toasted that night. In the morning, they went out and began making their way around the Island, taking Maine 3 to Maine 102, and then 102 to the Causeway. When they arrived about 4 hours later, the area was a nasty boggy mess.

The three of them moved very cautiously out into the marsh. When they got to a likely looking spot, Nora handed both Nick and Piper a pair of Stealth Boys. “We have to do this thing, we don’t have to
be idiotic about it.”

Then Nora reached into a waterproof, oiled sack, and pulled out a disgusting wad of offal and looked at the other two, “Ready?”

They both nodded so Nora chucked the stuff out into the marsh. Then wiped her hand on the marsh grass, and got ready to fire her rifle. Nothing happened for about 15 seconds, then the water about 50 yards away erupted to her south, as a Mirelurk emerged. His pincers were up, and Piper shortled as he showed her his belly.

Nora made a point of shooting it in its face, more of a sense cluster associated with mouthparts, but then that in theory described Nora’s face as well. As it went down, they heard splashes from behind, and they whirled to find a Mirelurk maybe 40 yards out and closing. Nora was able to get it as she heard Nick’s pistol boom as he dropped another one to the south.

There was a pause while Nora tried to decide if the Mirelurk bodies themselves would constitute a draw. Apparently Mirelurks were not cannibalistic. Which made sense, as a mechanism to encourage running towards something that had killed a bunch of your friends was contra-survival at best. Unless you were a honeybee, and even then, it wasn’t good for the bee running towards trouble. Just the hive.

Nora swore, as she’d hoped she was done with the nasty. Instead, she reached in again, and once again tossed the ick out into the water. She rinsed her hand off this time, and got ready, just as a lobster type Mirelurk popped up. They were a tad larger and meaner than the crab types, but compensated for it by having weaker and segmented chitinous plates.

When that worthy went down, a Mirelurk King popped up about 30 yards away and before it could launch a sonic attack its soft flesh was ripped apart by a fusillade of 7.62mm, 10mm, and .44 caliber bullets. Again there was long pause. But this time, evolution was working with them instead of against them. Having started in with mating fodder, the small group drew in the Queen. As Nora watched the bow wave come at them from the north she told the others to switch on a Stealth Boy.

She activated her own, and then waited for the Queen to emerge, which she did, about 60 yards out. 60 yards is a hard pistol shot unless your target is the broad side of a barn. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof, which well described a Mirelurk Queen. Nick and Piper just started pumping in rounds which was all well and good. Nora used her rifle to target the acid ducts, just as she had the Queen in Nuka-World, first the left, then the right. When she was satisfied that it couldn’t shoot them with acid, she shifted to its ‘face’, as Piper and Nick continued to pummel it in general.

After less than a minute, then Queen succumbed. Nora was getting used to these things…the key being ‘disable the acid ducts’.

At that point several Harbormen and women emerged from hiding to take the body away. Nora used her knife to sever carapaces from all the Mirelurks she’d killed that day, and hoped it would be enough for Mariner’s project, as well as satisfying ‘The Captain’s Dance’ requirements. She bundled up the carapaces and looked at them sourly.

Those things are going to severely suck to carry back to Far Harbor. Or I could just call Charlie. Better call Chuck.

While she cracked herself up, she was shocked when she called Charlie ‘Chuck’ and the pilot responded that that was what her close friends called her. Piper just lost it at Nora’s expression. Nora chalked it up to stress. Piper must be laughing in relief. No way her wife was so cruel as to find Nora’s surprise that amusing.
When Chuck found them, they loaded the carapaces onto the ‘bird, then climbed aboard. Nora had decided that she’d go for a revelation to the residents. There was no need to hide that she was a mover and a shaker in the Commonwealth. There were two possible outcomes, fawning—which she reckoned was something she didn’t need to worry about from the Harborpeople—or dismissive, which either The Captain’s Dance had dealt with, or hadn’t. If it hadn’t nothing she did was going to add or detract at this point.

So the Vertibird clattered in to a landing outside the gate of Far Harbor, and as Nora pulled the bundle of shells out, the locals gathered to gawk. Until Teddy shouted, “Everyone. Everyone. Times are hard but this here feast is proof that we can turn things around. Now I know that mainlanders have been responsible for all manner of harm. But this one is special. This one did the Captain’s Dance.”

The gawking at her method of transport turned into amazed silence. In the gap, Nora heard a man say clearly, “It’s true. I saw it.”

Teddy said, “So in my book, she’s not a mainlander anymore. She’s one of us.”

There was a round of cheering at that, and the Far Harbor men and women circled round congratulating her. As the press of people surrounding her gradually lessened, Teddy came over. Nora looked at him in gratitude, “Seriously, thanks Teddy.”

Teddy smiled, “If these knuckleheads don’t trust you now, well fuck ’em right?”

Chapter End Notes

Now I'm just amusing and dating myself with Chapter Titles...
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajpau5QYtYs

And Nora's little speech to Teddy is her entire character arc in a nutshell...minus one last development.
Nora gradually made her way out of the crowd, and found Mariner. The other woman kicked the pile of carapaces, and said, “Cutting carapaces is a dirty job.”

Nora laughed as she said, “You’re telling me.”

Piper cut in, “But we got a ton of ‘em.”

Mariner smiled at the two of them together. There was something in her expression. But she said, “That you did. Finally it’s done. Everything that can we welded, duct taped, or super glued to the damn dock’s all there. Will be soon.”

She looked up at nothing in particular. Or everything. Then she said, “It might be time…for some big decisions. Hell. Not used to talking about any of this. The whole Island’s falling apart. So many dead from the fog, the crabs, or whatever.”

She looked back at the three, “And I just keep wondering how many good weeks I have left. Three? Four? Two?”

Piper said, “You should treasure every minute. Leave it all on the table.”

Mariner looked sad for the first time. 

*We’ve done what she wanted, but now…*

*Now she’s got nothing left. No more goals.*

Mariner shook her head, “It’s hard. Things that used to bring me joy? Taste like ash. I remember the way things were. Before the news, I was powerful close to throwing them all off the dock.”

Then she smiled, terribly sadly, “But afterward…there weren’t no point in defending my land. Let ‘em come I guess. And now, watching them all squabble instead of lending a hand, hell, a single finger to help. Don’t they realize that all this bickering for just a little bit more is a waste of breath?”

Nick cut in, “Isn’t there some way we could make things better?”

Mariner nodded, “Figured I’d bequeath my land to everyone. I think we’ve lived alone on this island for long enough. With some common land maybe a real community could be formed. Even if they have to be drug into it.”

Nora laughed, “When times get tough a community should come together. Even if it’s kicking and screaming, and holding its breath until its face turns blue.”

Mariner gave a short and explosive laugh, then she looked over at Avery’s home, “I used to think the Captain was an idealistic fool. But on this side of the road…”

She took Nora’s hand, then Piper’s, and then Nick’s, “After I get the carapaces installed, there’s one last thing I want to do. You’ve been a real friend through all this. If you’re willing to see it through to the end…”
They all nodded, and Mariner said, “Tomorrow. Talk tomorrow.”

So the three went back and moved around the Captain’s Feast, while Mariner arranged the work parties to attach the shells to the Hull.

The next day dawned. Quite a while later, so did Nora, Piper, and Nick.

They rolled out of bed, and left the Last Plank in search of Mariner. They found her supervising the final touches. The shells had been cunningly laid over the most sensitive spots on the wall. Between that and the hull metal elsewhere, it was true. Far Harbor was as secure as The Mariner could make it. And soon enough everyone would know why.

Mariner perked up as they walked up, “Harbor’s safe as it’s going to get… but you ever get a gnawing in your belly to do something crazy? But reason and sense keep steering you clear?”

Nora nodded, but said, “If you abandon your common sense it rarely turns out well.”

Mariner tilted her head to concede the point, while maintaining, “That’s good advice but I don’t think I can take it. You’re the only mainlander I’d ever tell of this, so hear me out.”

She looked to either side and her voice dropped, “The Red Death. May have heard of it. The big monster beneath the waves. Only strikes if the fog is thick. People think it’s some drunken sailor’s tale, but no one goes sailing when the fog is thick. In their bones they know there’s something out there.”

Nora raised her hands and said, “For whatever’s its worth, I believe you. “

Mariner looked strangely relieved. Nora, and Piper and Nick’s approval meant more than she was really ready to admit. She said, “Thank you. With my business done here, and knowing someone like yourself, I seek to end this unholy terror. Dozens of boats have been claimed over the years by it. I mean to hunt this Red Death. Are you in with me?”

Piper stepped forward, “Always, Mariner. Count us in.”

Mariner looked them over and smiled a grim smile, “Bring whatever weapons of death and mass destruction that you got. Meet by the docks—you’ll take your boat and I’ll take mine. This trip will test our mettle more than anything.”

Nora nodded, “I’ll need a bit to get my things together, so meet at first light on the dock tomorrow?”

Mariner nodded, and Nora clasped Mariner’s hand and they split up. As they were leaving, Nora was already on the radio to Charlie.

“I need my Sturges-Special Missile Launcher. And a Fat Man…no wait, skip the Fat Man. These creatures like charging in close too much. Bring a bunch of guided missiles for the launcher, and a crate of plasma grenades. Two 5mm Miniguns for Nick and Piper,” and as Piper opened her mouth to object, “Also, another batch of the CSIS special Stealth Boys. And three full sets of T-60 Power Armor, please,” she called up to her pilot.

Shortly thereafter, there was a call on the radio. It turned out Danse had gotten word of what Nora was asking for, and had…questions.

“What on earth are you up to up there, ma’am?” he asked.

“First, it’s not ‘ma’am’ any more, and second, something called ‘The Red Death’. I’m assuming that
it’ll be worse than a Mirelurk Queen or a Deathclaw,” Nora replied.

His voice sounded exasperated and concerned, even over the radio and a repeater, “Ok, then, ‘Nora’. Want me to bring some troops?”

Nora thought, then she said, “Not yet. The woman we’re with wants this to be her victory. If we get in too deep, we’ll break contact and sail off, and then I’ll call you, promise.”

“If you can. Danse, out.”

That evening, Charlie landed and the three of them got into their armor to unload all the weaponry, then stowed it next to Mariner’s home. At that point all four of them went for a meal at The Last Plank. Which was where Captain Avery found them.

She walked up, and said, “Mariner…please. I’ve heard about this expedition of yours. We need you around here. Please don’t do this.”

Mariner sat back and said, “I thought you didn’t believe captain. Well, the mainlander does. And together we’re going to put an end to it.”

Avery looked over at Nora, “Mainlander. If the Red Death’s real…we can’t afford to lose both of you.”

Nora shook her head, “With all I’ve seen and faced, the Red Death doesn’t scare me.”

Avery shook her head, “On your head be it. Don’t say you haven’t been warned.”

The next morning Nora, Piper, and Nick all suited up. Then Nora began clipping ammo reloads to her back and legs, and grenades to quick release points on her arms. Nick did the same. Piper just took ammo drums for the minigun she was carrying. Then they all clumped out to the boat.

“If you fall out,” Nora said, “Don’t panic. You’ll sink to the bottom. Just head directly west at all times. You’ll hit land eventually.”

Piper laughed, and Nora said, “I’m serious.”

Piper stopped laughing. About then the radio crackled on the boat, “You read me, Mainlander? I’ve plotted a safe course for your boat. Don’t tamper with it. The shoals near where we’re headed can easily capsize a boat of your size.”

After 15 minutes of cruising, the radio crackled again, “Not much further Mainlander. When Aunty Stacy told others of her brush with the Red Death they laughed at her. Then two weeks after, a full fishing boat never came back. From the beach they saw the glow on the horizon. I’ve been looking to end the reign of the Red Death terror my whole life.”

The small islet that Nora presumed was their target came into view, and Mariner called, “Wrecks, all around it. There! You see it, right?”

Nora did, a red glow against the rocks. Mariner made her final call, “Meet you there.”

As their boat slowed and made for an open spot for them to debark, Nora got her missile launcher up and ready, and the other two put ammo drums in their miniguns. As the boat slowed to a stop, Nora was out and moving, in a whine of servos.

She came jogging, impressively loudly, up to Mariner, who was standing, looking at the rocks, slack
jewed. Nora swung her launcher up, and saw a red glow. There was nothing in the viewfinder though.

“What the…,” she heard Piper say.

She looked around. She couldn’t understand… and then she did. The Red Death was a foot tall, with glowing red eyes.

*So, how in hell did it... oh! The eyes. It would seem like a signal or boats would think they’re further out that they really are, and then they hit the rocks. Sink. This always happened in thick Fog.*

Mariner was gobsmacked, “It can’t be. That? That’s the Red Death?”

Nora occasionally did things that, in hindsight, she wasn’t proud of. This was one of those times, “Think we can handle it? We can always call in the Marines…”

Mariner looked up at Nora in her armor in disgust, “Oh, ha ha. What do we say to all the folk back home? I meant this to be my last great adventure. Instead if we tell the folk back home, I’ll be a laughing stock…”

Nora said, “Maybe we embellish it a little…,” there was a long pause, “Ok, a lot. Make it the stuff of legends.”

Mariner shook her head, “I have little stomach for it, but it’s better than the alternative.”

Nora said, “We still have to kill it. It may not be conventionally lethal, but in a Fog, those glowing eyes have drawn a lot of people to their doom.”

Mariner walked up to the tiny crab… or rather, normal sized crustacean in a world full of freakshows, and shot it. It collapsed and, quite literally, the light in its eyes went out.

Mariner turned and wearily made her way back to her boat. Nora, Piper, and Nick, safed their weaponry, then climbed aboard theirs, and pressed the button for Far Harbor again. While they traveled back, they climbed out of the armor, taking the FCs with them, and stowed the heavy ordnance below decks, then locked it up. Nora trusted the Far Harbor people not to steal for a profit. Allen deciding to use the equipment to attack the Children of Atom on the other hand…

As they made their way along the dock, they heard cheering, and someone called, “They’re here. They’re back!”

Mariner joined them from her own boat and they walked up into the crowd. Someone shouted, “Did you find it? Did you end the scourge of the seas?”

Mariner started. She was not a natural storyteller, thankfully, so her somewhat guilty demeanor just seemed to be part of her usual ‘style’. She said, “So…uh… we set sail. It was a terrible fight.”

*Hah! She’s being precisely and 100% truthful. Maybe she’s better at this than I thought. God, she’d have been a great witness. “She told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, your honor. Is it her fault that English is so loaded with ambiguities?”*

Another member of the crowd asked eagerly, “So you killed it?”

Mariner nodded, “Oh yes, we did at that. It was… quite a sight.”

Nora was laughing internally.
Oh, it was quite a sight indeed!

Then, unexpectedly, she teared up.

I could’ve been happy to be friends with this woman for years and years.

Someone in the crowd called to the others, “Did you hear they did it? The Red Death is no more.” Someone else caught Mariner’s attention, “Did it take long? My gran figured it’d take a mini nuke direct to the eye.”

Mariner threaded her way through that as well, “That…would’ve worked. But we made do.”

Nora was laughing silently, and crying the same way. She felt Piper’s hand slip into hers and give her a squeeze.

People in the crowd were speaking, one over the other. “The seas are ours again. We can fish in peace.”

Then someone asked, “Tell me, are you injured Mariner? Are you OK?”

Mariner answered, “No…we managed to get through unscathed.”

Captain Avery, who’d stood at the edge of the crowd, called, “Thank god, I thought for sure you were headed for your graves…”

Mariner nodded and eventually made her way out of the crowd, and she and Nora met outside Mariner’s house. Mariner came up to Nora who was still smiling even as her tears streaked her cheeks. Mariner looked puzzled, “Seems like the end of the road. Every time we’ve talked you’ve given me a lot to think about. Might be time to come clean. Tell the others about my condition. But after the lies it makes the decision even harder.”

“Mariner…,” started Nora, “Sorry. What’s your real name?”

Mariner thought and said, “Everyone just calls me Mariner.”

Nora shook her head, tears starting again, “I’m not everybody. What’s your real name?”

Mariner looked like she was reaching way back, “Abigail Jonas.”

Nora smiled through the tears, “Abigail. You never lied, not once. I watched you. You were totally truthful.”

Abigail said, “Felt like lies.”

“I know. But they weren’t. You let them tell the story to themselves. And that’s Ok. I…,” Nora looked off in the distance. “Are you sure? About your disease? I have to admit, having just met you, I’m not ready to let a new friend go.”

Abigail nodded, “I’m sure. That’s why that was meant to be a final gesture while I still had the strength, I mean at the end of it all, what’s worth doing in your final days? What’s worth leaving behind?”

“Maybe a seaway where a false signal doesn’t shine in the Fog luring people onto treacherous shoals. Abigail, it’s not your fault that a real danger got turned into a legend. But we did end a real danger. Because of you. Because you were brave. Did you really need to be? No. But you didn’t
know that. NO one did.”

Abigail said, “No matter what happens, you’ve been a true friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Someone at Bethesda is a Poe fan too (and no, I don't mean Dameron, you philistines).

In one of those moments that writing these books has given me, I realized what Nora says at the end IS true...just because it wasn't an epic boss fight, doesn't mean you and Mariner weren't brave. Because you didn't know.
The three went back to the boat, and got back in the armor, and gathered up all the high powered ordnance and headed back up the mountain. When they got there, they stockpiled everything in what was becoming the CNE Embassy. Being defined as one pilot, a Vertibird, a radio and antenna, and now, three empty suits of Power Armor, and a pile of heavy weapons.

*On the one hand, available weapons tend to wind up getting used. On the other, if I get into a situation where I need them I probably won’t have time to get them back.*

When she got done, she went up to Acadia. DiMA greeted first Nick then the rest of them. “I have been thinking about your offer. I would like to take you up on it, but…”

“But? What’s holding you up?” asked Nora.

“False pretenses,” DiMA replied.

“Look, I told you I never lied to you…,” Nora started.

“Not yours,” said DiMA, “Mine.”

“What? What false pretenses?”

DiMA looked pained, “I don’t know, and that’s the point. Until I get those memories back, and discover what it was I was so dedicated to not remembering, I don’t think I could in good conscience apply to join the CNE.”

Nora shook her head, “I already agreed to go get them, DiMA.”

“I know. This is what I mean. Until I know what it is I’ve forgotten even I suspect my motives. I’m not trying to give you more reasons to do what you’ve already agreed to. I’m trying to explain why I need to wait,” he said.

Nick interrupted, “I understand your point DiMA. For what it’s worth, I agree.”

Nora looked at them both and said, “All right. I know when I’m beat. We should head out soon.”

DiMA gave Nora the coordinates of the “Nucleus” as the Children called their home. Then he gave them some advice.

“The Nucleus is an old Ballistic Missile Submarine base. There’s a sub there, rusted into the structure. But radiation levels are unusually high. And you won’t likely endear yourself to them by wearing Power Armor or Hazmat suits. You’re going to need a lot of Rad-X and RadAway,” he said.

Nora nodded, “We stockpiled a batch before we came here. We were warned the Island had ‘bad air’, and these days that tends to mean radioactive air.”

Nick smiled gently, “Still, I’d feel better if you got some more from Faraday.”

Piper smiled, and said, “We’d be grateful DiMA. Thank you.”
When they arrived at Faraday’s lab, he looked guilty, “I’m terribly sorry about what happened…”

Nora shook her head, “It’s me who should be sorry, Faraday. Every instinct I had said to keep it secret. But my instincts make me do such shitty things from time to time, that I’m as likely to do something bad by listening to my instincts as I am by ignoring them.”

She shook her head, “I’m just so terribly sorry that Victoria, or Jule, had to suffer because I made the wrong call.”

He said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

Nora said, “Yes and no. In terms of fault? You, me, Cog. Remove any one of us, and Jule is still alive. Or dead but not a suicide. But I’m the most responsible. I had the last clear chance.”

Faraday shook his head, “Let’s just all agree we should have done better. Anyway, I have several bottles of Rad-X and RadAway here for you.”

“Thanks Faraday,” said Nora.

“Just try to not to be obvious about taking them. The Children think of irradiation as a sacrament. It’d be like going to a Christian service and spitting out the communion wine,” Faraday said.

Piper said, “We know. Or I do.”

“What?”

Piper smiled and said, “I am a fully-fledged Acolyte of Atom, thanks to a last minute inspiration that got me out of an execution.”

Faraday looked hopeful, “That does change things. The odds that you will get in peacefully, and get to the memories successfully just went way up.”

“Here’s hoping,” said Nick.

They took their leave and began the trek to the Nucleus. Step one was getting off the mountain. They could have left the way they came up, but that would take them hours out of their way. Taking the Vertibird was probably as bad an idea as showing up in Power Armor. So they went down Mt. Desert by the back trail, the one that went down the south side. Barely a dirt path, and meandered and switched back and forth as it descended.

Nora, Piper, and Nick moved cautiously. Trappers and Super Mutants were reported on that side of the mountain. So of course what they ran into was a Yao Guai shortly before they got to the main road for Southwest Harbor. The mutated bear was as surprised by them as they were by it, but because they saw each other at about 50 yards, and they had guns and he had teeth and claws, the resulting fusillade of gunfire was one sided, and the bear went down about 20 yards away from them.

Despite the fact that their activities there had eradicated a bunch of trappers, there was always the possibility that others had moved in, so they moved extra cautiously as they approached Southwest Harbor. Luck was with them, however, and nothing came out to play.

Then they moved north and shortly saw a low bog land between them and the Nucleus. Nora consulted her map and sighed. “It’s either cross here and eat some rads from the water, or go all the way round the cove, and eat a bunch of rads from the Fog.”
“Yeah, but…oh nevermind. I just want to go on record as saying that crossing a brackish salt marsh
was not on my list of things to do today,” said Piper.

“Me either, but it’s that or spend the night in the Fog,” said Nick.

“Pass, thanks,” said Piper.

And here commences the less fun part of all this.

The three made their way across, wending their way along between hammocks of marsh grass, and
managing to not get more than thigh deep, thanks to low tide. When they arrived on the same
peninsula as the Nucleus, they began sneaking in earnest.

Better to get the lay of the land before we just stroll up.

It was probably good they did so. As they came over a ridgeline, they were looking down into a
small level spot in front of an access doorway. Based on their location as reported by Nora’s map,
and the incredibly large submarine pen doors on the far side of the level spot, this was the entrance to
the Nucleus.

There were three people with strange looking rifles wearing what Nora recognized as Marine Assault
Armor and two people in ‘standard’ Child of Atom robes. The three armor clad people weren’t
pointing their rifles at the two Children, but they weren’t exactly not pointing them either.

“Blue, I’d wait and see what’s up here. We don’t know what’s going on, and my experiences with
the Children have never been…pleasant…for all that DiMA trusted their former High Confessor,”
Piper said.

One of the two Children, the male, began pleading, “Richter, please, you can’t do this, we’ve been
loyal…”

One of the Assault Armor-clad men said, “It’s Grand Zealot to you. And your dedication has come
into doubt. You need to prove your faith. One of you may return to the fold. The other…will return
to Atom.”

Nora felt Piper stiffen, “They have a Grand Zealot? The Children only appoint one for holy wars.
And ‘Returning to Atom’ means…”

Nora shushed Piper, as the man raised his hands, begging, “Richter, this is insane…You can’t expect
us to-“

At the word ‘Richter’ the woman pulled what to Nora looked like a plain Gamma Gun, one of the
Microwave projectors so beloved of the Children. Without hesitation she spun and shot the man,
who crumpled immediately, with a last groan as he died.

She turned to ‘Grand Zealot Richter’, and asked, “Will there be anything else?”

Richter smiled and his expression was one that chilled Nora’s blood, “That’ll be all sister.”

The woman walked into the Nucleus, “Thank you, Grand Zealot.”

Piper whispered to Nick and Nora, “If they have a Grand Zealot it means that they consider
themselves in danger of schism or feel themselves to be under a threat.”

Nick nodded, “And given where they keep going it’s not hard to figure out who? Question is, what
do we do about it.”

Nora said, firmly, “We play along. Remember Abigail’s artful truth telling. Let’s try and stay in that
region. Plausibly deniable. Outright lies if we have to get out, though, and…”

Piper said, “When you give the sign…”

Nora interrupted, “No sweetheart. When YOU give the sign. You know these folks best. You’re the
one who’s best situated to tell us when and if we need to run.”

Piper looked shocked. Nora said, “I don’t have all the answers, and it’s all our butts on the line. And
we should absolutely take our cues from whoever knows best. And you know them best.”

Piper gulped and nodded. “Ok, then,” she said, “We can’t get in to retrieve DiMA’s memories
without talking with them. And I get the feeling there’s always a guard.”

Nora smiled, “It does have that kind of look doesn’t it?”

The three made their way around to the front entrance and then walked through a wooden arch to
enter the flat area in front of the entrance.

I will not think about the Ok Corral. Fort Apache. The last stand of Butch and Sundance.

When they stepped into the open courtyard, Richter looked over at them. His gun wasn’t pointed at
them. Once again, it wasn’t exactly not pointed at them either. He said, “You three. What are you
doing here? Did Far Harbor send you?”

Piper stepped forward and said, “Be at peace, Grand Zealot. We are not from that town. We come
from the Commonwealth. I am from the Charlestown chapter. High Confessor Marjorie would send
her compliments.”

Richter looked impressed, “Hmmm. Quite the journey. So explain to me what you’re doing here.”

Piper said, “The Children fare poorly in the Commonwealth and would like to have a safe place to
escape the godless. By Atom’s will I have come here with my friends and family to examine your
home. I could take back my account, and if they know what they want, my chapter could come
here.”

Richter looked impressed at Piper’s dedication, “All are welcome in the Nucleus. I myself traveled
here from the Commonwealth, after a life among godless mercenaries. Does Marjorie still have her
lovely red hair?”

Piper shook her head, “Her hair is grey now, but before that her hair was brown…as I’m sure you
knew.”

Richter nodded, “That I did, Sister. But let us cast aside suspicion, and welcome. Come and bask in
his holy glow inside. I believe the High Confessor is wrapping up his sermon. You should go inside
and make yourself known to him. Glory to Atom.”

Piper said, “Glory to Atom, Brother, Grand Zealot.”

And with her wife’s masterful bluff, Nora and Nick entered the Nucleus.

Chapter End Notes
A couple notes here:

First, while the exact movie "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid" might not have gotten made, but I could see what was substantially it getting made, even in this universe, so let's call it a point of harmonic convergence across the multiverse (although maybe this version avoids the inexplicable Burt Bachrach interlude).

Second, as I got here and I played through, I was feeling stuck...the whole "Mother of the Fog" part didn't fit for the same reason that the Secret of Cabot House didn't. And yet, I HAD to get the group into the Nucleus. And then Piper tapped me on the shoulder and cleared her throat. To her credit, she didn't (exactly) call me an idiot.
When they got inside, they needed to take a few moments to let their eyes adjust to the dimness. They heard an orotund and superficially compelling voice out of the dimness. As their eyes finally adjusted, they were in a long hallway, with dim glowing bulbs ahead of them. The ‘Voice’ was saying, “They are doomed, brothers and sisters, and they know it.”

They walked along the hallway and found themselves in a cavernous chamber. There was a submarine perched on a dry dock cradle to their right, and from on the sail, a man in a Child of Atom robe and outlandish headdress was addressing a crowd that was surrounding him on all sides in shanties along the far wall and on the other side of the sub.

The drydock was empty of water, so the gangplank to the sub was suspended 30 feet about the floor of the cavern. The man in the headdress, High Confessor Tektus, Nora presumed, went on, “The people of Far Harbor need only peer out their windows, to look upon the face of Atom himself given form in holy fog.”

The man began gesturing, “Yet no matter how inevitable Atom’s reign in this land may be, they deny it! Scoff at us behind their condensers, kill our missionaries, slay those who only wish to bring them the Light! No longer.”

*He reminds me of something. If only I could put my finger on it…*

Tektus continued whipping up his followers, “After years of skulking in the shadows, like whipped dogs, our purpose is clear. And I know that the key to our victory lies within the Nucleus itself. We will claim the secrets hidden away by that accursed robot and with them, we will wipe Far Harbor from the island!”

*Hitler. He looks like old footage of Hitler at rallies. The gestures, the cadence.*

Tektus’ rant concluded, with an exhortation to genocide, “Atom's Veil will roll down its streets, holy Fog cleansing the land of their heresy! And when we are finally granted Division, it will be as heroes! A new day dawns, brothers and sisters! Glory to Atom!”

And the chamber rang out, “Glory to Atom!”

“Oh boy,” said Piper in a low voice. “They’re not fooling around, honey.”

“No, it didn’t sound like it,” said Nora.

They carefully crossed the gangplank as Tektus entered the submarine, so they followed him inside. At the bottom of the ladder down from the bridge, they found themselves in a throne room of sorts. Tektus was there, flanked by two of the assault armor clad Children, Zealots.

Tektus smiled, and said, “I’d heard whispers of a messengers from afar. Welcome brother, sisters. How does it feel to walk upon Atom’s most holy ground?”

Without waiting for an answer, his voice turned harsh, “I have a question for you. You’ve been to Far Harbor, yes? Seen its barriers against Atom’s holy Fog. Its citizens blasphemous refusal to vacate what is clearly his domain. What would you do with such a place?”
Nora felt Piper stiffen beside her subtly.

*I’m being tested, I think…*

Nora opened her mouth, “Far-“

Piper interrupted, “Far Harbor is a den of iniquity and it must be brought into Division.”

Nora covered her shock with an abrupt nod.

Tektus smiled in a manner that was most unpleasant, “Precisely. The only way to deal with an infection, cleanse the wound and cauterize the flesh. “

He stood up and began pacing, “For years my predecessor begged for peace, while Far Harbor fortified their bastion of heresy. We tried to help them. To bring them to Atom’s light, Many of our brethren died for it. But now that I am High Confessor, that time is over.”

Tektus stopped and glared. At them, at Far Harbor, at nothing in particular, who could tell? “All Atom’s foes, whether in Far Harbor cowering behind their condensers, or that ancient robot hiding away his memories within our very home…they will come to recognize Atom as the sole master of the Island. But it is only through unity that we can succeed. Atom requires devotion of all his children. Embrace that and you will do well here. Now was there anything you required?”

*Great. The killings are so that he can purge any merciful instincts from his flock.*

Nora asked, “What happened to the confessor before you?”

Tektus said, “Martin? No one knows. One night he was sleeping in his quarters in the vessel, and the next morning he’d simply vanished. The other zealots and I organized a party to try and find him to no avail. I wouldn’t be shocked to find he took up in Far Harbor, or fled to the south.”

Tektus looked genuinely sorrowful, “His dedication to Atom had become…questionable. He’d done nothing when Far Harbor executed one of our missionaries so I dare say that it’s best he fled.”

*I can’t tell if he’s lying. Maybe he’s one of those psychopaths that genuinely believes what he’s saying while he’s saying it. But the timing is awfully suspect.*

Nick asked, “What happened to our missionary?”

Tektus looked wrathful, “A foul atrocity. Our good brother Andrews decided to brave the Fog and attempt to bring Atom’s Glow to that ghastly town…and remind the heathens of their trespasses. From what I hear, he’d barely spoken a word before they cut him down in cold blood. For nothing more than his devotion. Beasts.”

*I’ve seen Allen’s act, and I can’t say this part is wrong, but frankly the only person on either side of this that actually wants peace is Avery…*

Nora stepped forward, “I’d like to help the family. Is there anything I could do?”

Tektus gazed at Nora, and gave her a genuine smile, “Eager. There is a member of our little community that I’ve suspected for some time now. My own inquiries have proven…fruitless. But your relative newness, will likely make it easier for you to sniff out the truth. I would have you investigate this person. Should you find any proof of heresy or disloyalty you’re to bring it to me. Show you can be trusted and you’ll be rewarded. Here is the person in question,” he handed Nor a slip of paper, “Leave no stone unturned.”
Tektus turned and walked away to his chambers. They were obviously dismissed. Nora glanced at the slip of paper she’d been handed. It simply said, “Sister Aubert.”

Nora turned to one of the Zealots, “Where can I find Sister Aubert?”

The Zealot sniffed and said, “In Atom’s Temple. The Reactor.”

Nora nodded. She headed down and to midships. As they approached the reactor, her Pip-Boy began chattering. She handed Piper and Nick several Rad-X each, then popped a few herself. They continued to where a woman was lubing up a bearing on the lower reactor deck.

She looked over her shoulder, “If you’re looking for the crypt you took a wrong turn. It’s my job to take care of this place. You touch anything I’m taking the limb.”

“Sister Aubert?” Piper asked.

The woman nodded, and Piper went on, “You said it was your job to take care of this place?”

Aubert smiled mirthlessly, “The Vessel, yes. One of the most powerful sources of Glow on an Island full of it. My job to make sure it’s looked after. You get in the way of that you answer to Atom. But first you’ll answer to me. Atom gets what’s left.”


Nora said, “Why build a crypt in a sub? Don’t you have an entire base?”

Aubert shook her head, “Keeps our fallen brethren near his glow. Near their family. Only spot a Child should spend eternity. A true honor…denied to too many,” and that last was delivered with personal animosity.

*Hmmmm. Something there. Heresy? And if so, how do I handle it. Because turning her over to that… maniac upstairs is not happening.*

Nora asked, “Why would someone be denied a place in the crypt?”

Aubert scoffed, then said, “You’ve been out there right? This place is dangerous. Take a wrong turn in the Fog? Sorry brother, lost to the family. Wander too close to the wrong settlement? Lost to the family. Atom help you if you look at Tektus the wrong way.”

*Ah HA!*

Nick spoke up, “You don’t like Tektus, huh?”

Aubert shook her head, “Who wouldn’t? Man’s a damned…,” then she stopped herself. “That is, I-I like Tektus just fine. But…I think you should go.”

*We should look into this.*

The three left and asked around the sub, to find where Sister Aubert slept. They were directed to a small cubby.

When they got there, Nora professionally searched Aubert’s small spare area. Tucked under her mattress was a note.

“My dear Aubert,
You worry too much. Even if the High Confessor is still having trouble getting over my past closeness with Martin, Richter is a friend. If there was a problem, the Grand Zealot would tell me.

That said, I think you and I should continue using our footlocker in the storage room to share messages. You know how gossip spreads in this place. I wouldn't want you getting drawn into any undue intrigue.

And in case yours has wandered off again, I've hidden the spare key behind a bench in entryway locker room. Just in case.

Counting the moments until we're together,

Edgar”

Oh, boy.

They went all the way out and walked over to the entryway. Along the way, they saw a gaunt, fanatical Child kneeling, and rocking, an unending stream of barely audible prayers on his lips.

I wonder what that story is? Later. One dumpster fire at a time.

After a brief search of the lockers, Nick turned up the key hidden behind a changing bench. When they returned to The Vessel, and found the storage room, they did, in fact find the footlocker the key opened. Among other items was a letter, posthumous, from Aubert to Edgar.

“Edgar,

Grand Zealot says it was an accident. You wandered off alone and he couldn't get to you in time. Couldn't bring you back...

He's lying.

I know because you'd never do something that foolish. None of them will ever admit to it, but this was Tektus. He had you killed 'cause he's terrified of Martin. Because Tektus KNOWS Martin was the only one worthy of running this family.

Atom above, I need you, Edgar. You'd tell me what to do right now. What keeps coming to mind... I know is a bad idea.

Until we're together again,

Aubert”

Well, crap. Can I convince her to run? Probably not...

The trio made their way to Tektus’ chamber. The High Confessor was many things; fanatic, homicidal, dangerous. But he was faithful. They found him kneeling in front of a personal shrine.

Nora cleared her throat and he rose and turned to them. Nora said, “I wanted to talk to you about Sister Aubert.”

He nodded, “Hmm. Yes. Tell me, what did you find?”

Nora looked into his eyes and lied with every ounce of skill she possessed, “I looked into her, but it seems Sister Aubert is loyal. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

He looked mildly surprised, but thankfully, not dubious, “Really? Hmm. I must say I’m surprised. Well, none the less you’ve lifted a weight from my shoulders. Your service to Atom will not soon be
forgotten.”
“Thank you, High Confessor,” said Piper, “Glory to Atom!”
“Glory to Atom, my children.”

Chapter End Notes

Getting closer. And it should clock in between 150,000 and 160,000 words, depending on how JRR Tolkien/Peter Jackson I want to get on 'multiple endings'.

But this is "that guy" coming by with "The End Is Nigh" on a sign. They're in the Nucleus. This is the last act of the last act.
They made their way out of the sub and found themselves face to face with Grand Zealot Richter. After a brief moment wondering what they’d done to reveal themselves…was it Aubert?...he smiled and said, “Ah, there you are. Have a job for you.”

Well that’s considerably better than ‘Die, Heretic!’ Which is what I was half-expecting.

“I’m ready to serve, Grand Zealot,” Nora said.

He nodded as though he expected no less. “There is a woman. One of our own, or was…Sister Gwyneth. She has given herself over to something dark.”

The Grand Zealot looked, troubled, which surely had to be indigestion or something similar. He said, “The Confessor ordered Zealot Theil to track her down, but the heretic eluded her. Now, Gwyneth has begun profaning Holy Sites with her mad ravings openly flouting the word of Atom. The High Confessor wants her found. And executed.”

Again with the pained look. Surely he hasn’t grown a conscience. Doesn’t matter. Nobody’s getting executed here. By my hand or anyone else’s.

Nora merely nodded, “I’ll find her Grand Zealot.”

He nodded again, “Good. Speak to Zealot Theil,” and he pointed further down the drydock, “She should be able to point you to Gwyneth’s trail. Bring Atom’s Judgement to the heretic. Now go.”

They went.

They moved further along the dock, and into the shanty complex at that end. They went up to a woman dressed in the usual Zealot garb, and asked, “Zealot Theil?”

“Glory to Atom, Sister,” said the woman.

Nora said, “The Grand Zealot sent us. Tell me what you can about Sister Gwyneth.”

Zealot Theil had a pained look on her face. Unlike Richter, her words quickly made it clear that the only thing that upset her was her inability to find and kill Gwyneth. She began explaining, “Very well. As I’m sure Grand Zealot Richter told you, Gwyneth was once a devoted member of our order.”

Theil looked reflective, “Though prone to strange moods, she was well liked by many. The Grand Zealot in particular had a fondness for her…at least until she turned her back on Holy Atom.”

Theil’s expression grew stern, “It was my duty to find her, but Gwyneth was always clever. I’m ashamed to admit I failed.”

Piper said, “We’ll find her.”

Theil said, “Then by Atom’s grace I hope you succeed where I did not. You should begin by search the Holy Sites. Perhaps you’ll find some clue where I did not.”
“Which Holy Sites and where are they, Zealot?” asked Nora.

Theil stepped over to enter coordinates in Nora’s Pip-Boy. “Here and here, Sister. Go with Atom.”

“ Glory to Atom,” they all chorused. They were learning.

As they began making their way back to the entrance they ran into another Zealot. He stepped in front of them, “You're the new convert. You happen to see Brother Devin? Sickly guy praying off by himself?”

Nick shrugged, “Who?”

The Zealot said, “Brother Devin. Skinny guy near the entrance to the bay, starting to look like a ghoul with hair. You can't miss him. See, Brother Devin, he's been on a fast. A long one. No food. Only irradiated water. Waiting for a sign from Atom.”

The Zealot leaned in close and his voice dropped, “Most folks would say that's real admirable, giving yourself to Atom like that. What do you think?”

Nora sized up the Zealot and took a chance, “Sounds nuts to me.”

The Zealot leaned back and smiled, “Atom above, someone else. Look, me and Devin, we weren't born with Atom's Blessing like everyone else around here. Rads, they hurt us. Now Devin thinks fasting and refusing meds till he dies is going to get Atom to grant him some kind of revelation or something.”

He leaned back in, “I've tried talking to him, but he won't listen to me anymore and everyone else in this place thinks what he's doing is a brilliant idea. I know we don't know each other, but if you could convince him to quit, I'd owe you. What do ya say? Talk to him for me?”

Nora nodded, “I'll see what I can do…uhh…”

“Ware, Zealot Ware,” the man said.

Nick said, “No offense, friend, but you don’t much act like a Zealot.”

The man gave a cynical smile, “Most of the Children, they aren’t handy with weapons,” and Ware gestured at his rifle, “I am. Don’t get me wrong, I believe in Atom’s Mercy…but, uhhh…I believe in ‘mercy’ and not just the kind Richter talks about.”

Ware stood a bit straighter and spoke a tad louder, “But since I have the skills, Atom sees fit to place me in this position.”

Nick gave Ware an understanding look, and Piper finished with, “Glory to Atom, Brother.”

Ware nodded, and they made their way to Devin, who was the man they’d briefly noticed mumbling prayers by the sub’s gangway. He was mumbling, “Holy Atom. From this spot I-- I-is that you? Oh holy... oh. I-I'm sorry, Sister. I thought you were... never mind. Did you need something?”

Nora, concerned now, said, “You don't look so good.”

Devin began rocking, “Guess I have been here a while. But Atom came to me. And I must do as He commands.”

Piper asked, “What did Atom command, Brother?”
Devin continued rocking, “That I need only wait for my saving grace. Jet has been my crutch for many years. One day, I was in the woods, polluting myself, when a figure strode from the sky before me. A verdant stag, wreathed in holy Glow. It commanded me to return to the Nucleus, to leave behind my iniquities and give myself fully to Atom.”

Devin stopped rocking and looked up at Nora, “For my dedication, Atom would send another messenger, who would free me from my shackles once and for all. That, Sister, is why I must wait.”

*Oh for- Well, how can I get this guy to knock it off?* *Wait...no. That’d never work. Would it?*

Nora stood up straight, smiled broadly, and said, “I have good news! I am Atom's messenger and I have come to free you from your shackles!”

The Nora reached out and lightly tapped Devin on his forehead, “There. Now, uh, let's just keep this between us, okay?”

Devin’s eyes grew wide, “You’re the-- you're the messenger! The shackles... are gone? They are, aren't they? Oh thank you! Thank you, your Brilliance! And don't fear, messenger. I will keep your secret. Oh, Atom above, thank you.”


Devin creakily hobbled off, and Nora turned. Piper was looking at her that way again.

“I love you, Blue, you know that?”

“You hardly ever tell me that, Thing,” Nora said laughing.

As they left The Nucleus, however, Nora was back to muttering under her breath.

Nick finally gave up and asked, “Ok, now what's bugging you, Nora?”

“Fanatics, Nick,” Nora answered. “We’re surrounded by them.”

Piper gave a bitter laugh, “What’d you expect from the Children of Atom, Blue?”

Nora shook her head, hard. “I’m not just talking about The Children, Thing. I mean DiMA. Making the whole world fit in his ‘synth empowerment’ mold. And Faraday, sacrificing the woman he clearly loved to get a couple more temporary fixes for DiMA’s memory issues. I mean Richter sending us out to terminate HIS girlfriend. I mean Devin all but killing himself because while he found something to help him with one self-destructive addiction by substituting one that seems to be just as dangerous.”

She turned and looked back at The Nucleus, “And yes, that ur-maniac Tektus is the worst of them all. Hell so far only Avery, and later Abigail in Far Harbor and that inappropriately labeled ‘Zealot’ Ware, don’t go around refusing to see reality.”

Piper nodded along. But Nick said, “So what do we do about it?”

Nora shook her head, “I don’t know, Nick. I don’t know. I just hope that DiMA proves marginally less doctrinaire than Father was. I’m already certain he’s less dangerous than Nisha. Once, just fucking once, I want a happy ending. Is that too fucking much to ask?”

Nora checked her Pip-Boy. She was approaching the first ‘Holy Site’. Which became obvious as her Pip-Boy began clicking, enthusiastically. There were a number a of Children of Atom designs
everywhere. And incongruously, part of a banner, saying ‘TAK STAT’. It was part of a larger graffito saying, “Take leave of Atom! States change! Nothing consumes all!” On the back of the banner was part of a set of directions, but just literally the middle of every line and not enough make out where they would lead the three.

After they stepped away from the radioactive waste, Nora showed the banner fragments to her wife and partner. Nick raised his eyebrows, and looking his most Bogie, said, “Maybe Theil couldn’t find Gwyneth because she stayed away from the ‘blasphemy’, so she never figured out what Gwyneth was up to.”

Piper nodded, “Makes sense to me, Nickie.”

Nora just shook her head, and led them to the next site. There the banner read ‘WAKE ION’. This time those pieces were embedded in a sign saying “Must wake from slumber! Believe in nothing! No elements nor ions.” When they put the banner together, on the back were directions to the nearby ‘Kawaketak Station’. Nora led the there and they found one semi-intact cabin. Inside was what had been a hidey hole for Gwyneth. There was a mattress, and food, and a holotape. Nora slotted it, and a woman’s voice spoke.

“It's done. The messages are posted. I-I know it could mean my life, but the Children must know. I was paging through a pre-war tome when I saw it. The atom. A tiny speck of matter surrounded by endless depths. A vast emptiness that dwells within us all. It only reaffirmed what I’d felt all this time. The truth the Confessor wanted no one to hear. The lie that is Atom. It's not real! We aren't all infinite worlds. Just empty space. Dead. Cold. That we are Nothing. Confessor won't be pleased by my messages, but I'm not afraid. I'm going to start moving things to the old church by the west access road, in case... in case they decide to join me. I-I just hope I'm not too late to save them from Atom's lies.”

Nora began swearing, “Fanatics. Every goddamned one of them. She see’s an old diagram of an atom, and decides to worship ‘Nothing’ instead of just realizing that her original doctrine is messed up.”

Nora began waving her arms, “So instead of just moving on, she replaces one fanaticism with another. This island…”

Piper stopped Nora, mid-rant, “…is full of angry wolves. Bad doggie!” as she began shooting.

Nora shook her head but she began shooting. When they had dispatched the small pack, the three made their way downslope to the small church.

But before they got there a huge form loomed in the mist. It emitted an unearthly noise. Nora whispered, “Fog Crawler,” to the other two. The she sighted on her target. Before she even started shooting, Piper heard Nora begin to swear, steadily, as though she were hacking a particularly difficult lock.

Nora was pumping out rounds, as was Nick, as was Piper. The Fog Crawler was huge, with an angular head and beak made for killing, and a long segmented body that was, apparently, utterly devoid of vital spots. Nora put two full magazines into it, Piper three, and Nick went through two speed-loaders for his revolver.

When the Crawler fluted its last cry, Nora walked up, and began shouting. “Shrimp?!? Fucking shrimp?!? This,” and she kicked the corpse, “Should be boiled and stuck a glass with fucking cocktail sauce, not trying to kill,” kick, “Me,” kick, “Dead!” Kick, kick, kick.
Nora looked up at the sky, “This whole fucking Island can BITE! MY! ASS!!”

Piper watched Nora with first horror, and then, bizarrely, mirth. When her wife reached, “ASS!” Piper couldn’t hold back. She began giggling, then laughing, uncontrollably. Nora looked over at Piper, and then she too began laughing. They two women held each other as gales of laughter consumed them.

Nick watched them for a few moments, and then said, shaking his head, “I knew dames were trouble, but you two…”

This just caused the two women to laugh even harder.

When they’d managed to collect themselves they all moved on, though Nick gave them some suspicious looks from time to time. When they reached the Church, they could hear a woman, Gwyneth based on the voice, saying, “The Children of Atom have allowed themselves to be deceived. And I must show them the truth.”

By that time Nora, Piper, and Nick had entered the Church. The woman whirled and barked, “Stop. This is a sacred place. Why have you come here? Are you seeking the truth of Nothing?”

*I can hear the capital letters. They all talk in capital letters around here.*

Nick stepped up while Nora was woolgathering, and said, “The Children of Atom want you dead. You need to stop defiling their holy sites.”

Gwyneth shook her head, “I can’t. I have a duty greater than myself, one that is worth any sacrifice. The Children of Atom have been deceived by Martin, by Tektus! It’s false gospel, all of it. What they don’t want you to know is that Atom is but a tiny mote in the vastness of Nothing. Nothing is the true nature of existence! I have seen it with my own eyes, a Void so vast and empty like a night sky without stars. I know it is difficult to accept, but you must, and so must the others. They deserve to know the Truth.”

Nora said, “Will all of you just stop speaking in exclamation points and capital letters? You’re making my head hurt, the lot of you.”

At Gwyneth’s quizzical look Piper stepped in and said, “You’re not thinking clearly and if you don’t stop, these delusions are going to get you killed. You can’t go on like this, Gwyneth.”

Gwyneth chopped the air with her hand, “Do you think I wanted this? To leave my family behind? But now…,” her voice ran down, and then almost as if for the first time, “Now I’ve gone too far.”

Nora’s refocused in her task finally, and said, “If you stay here you’re as good as dead. You need to leave this island and never come back.”

Gwyneth considered it for a moment, and for one horrified second Nora thought she’d reject the offer, but then she said, “Hm…there is wisdom in your words. If I cannot save the Children of Atom from their blindness, perhaps I can spread the word elsewhere.”

Gwyneth became thoughtful, “Yes…Nothing’s will becomes clear to me now. I must spread the word to all who would hear, no matter how far the journey. You should tell Richter and the others that I am dead. I can’t risk them following me. Thank you for opening my eyes to that which I could not see, stranger.”

The woman left, headed for Far Harbor. Hopefully she’d get though the port…just to be sure, Nora radioed Charlie to get down to the Harbor and make sure they knew Gwyneth was decidedly not one
of the Children, before Allen did something regrettable.

They made their way back to The Nucleus and found Richter. Nora presented herself, and said, “Sister Gwyneth won’t be troubling you any longer.”

_Not exactly incorrect. Let them tell themselves the lie._

Richter nodded once, sharply, “She brought it on herself. Won’t ask you for any details…doesn’t really matter to me. You’ve done well, and more importantly, proved your devotion and loyalty. Atom smiles on you today, Sister.”

_That church was practically on your damn doorstep, and the clues were easy enough to follow. As hunters you guys make excellent Religious Fanatics._

**Chapter End Notes**

Good news! I built up a largish buffer over the weekend, finishing 4 chapters and getting a good start on the fifth.

And that Fifth Chapter and on, is content from after the “end” of the game. I'm now tying up some loose ends, leaving others deliberately loose, and bringing it all to an (I hope) satisfying conclusion. Probably posting the final chapter (or chapters) on Saturday, October 13th. Even if I end up posting two or three? They won't be waiting on further content, so why not?

Nora’s reaction is autobiographical, in a way. The Far Harbor DLC's bestiary drove me nuts. I didn't kick a Fog Crawler corpse...but if I could've I totally would've, I promise you.

And always worry about people who talk in Capital Letters and Exclamation Points! You know who they are.
Let Us Never Speak of This Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

With any luck, that fanatic trusts me now. Let’s see if I can get in to the memories by just asking.

Nora led the others into The Vessel. They made their way through the conn/throne room, to Tektus’ chambers. They found him praying, as they usually did. Nora spoke, “High Confessor?”

Deliberately, Tektus straightened and stood, and then turned to regard Nora, Piper, and Nick. He spoke mildly, which only raised Nora’s misgivings almost to the sticking point. She very nearly said, “Nothing,” and left. Instead, she said, “High Confessor, those memories you’ve been wanting to access? I-I believe I’ve found a way to unlock them.”

Tektus eyes widened, but in Nora’s judgement with eagerness rather than surprise or, worse, incredulity. He smiled, and spoke, “You have? Atom above, child. I can only imagine what you had to do to lay hands on such information. But understand that you are to bring anything you find directly to me. I will send word that you are not to be impeded. And be careful. Too many of our brethren have fallen already trying unlock the secrets of that accursed machine.”

He raised his hand in benediction, “Now go do what you must. Glory to Atom.”

“Glory to Atom,” they all dutifully chorused. Even Nick was getting the hang of not irritating the dangerously fanatic people more than absolutely necessary.

As they left, Piper said to Nick, “You have any idea where we’re headed?”

Nick nodded at the far end of the sub bay where there was a metal staircase up to a door. “If that isn’t it, I’ll eat my hat,” then he smiled, “Or at least come back down here and ask for directions.”

Nora looked up at the door. Nick was right. The odds that that was the main door were high. The three walked off the sub, nodding to Richter. Nora said, “Tektus has instructed me to retrieve the vile robots records. Is that,” and she pointed at the door, “The command center?”

Richter nodded, then when they turned to leave, before they could go, he said, “It is highly dangerous. Be careful sisters, brother.”

They all nodded, and Piper thanked him, and then they climbed the stairs. The guard, a heavily tattooed Child turned to stop them. But her rifle remained on her shoulder, and the whole thing did not have the feel of prohibition.

“Caution sisters, brother. Last Child who tried to claim the secrets within roused they Guardians of the base. So unless you’ve been tasked by the High Confessor, I’d steer clear of the command center.”

I never liked tattoos, but she’s ridiculous. It’s looks like someone caught her asleep, and scribbled a mustache on her. Who says to themselves, ‘My god prefers for me to look like the victim of a practical joke’?

Piper said, “The High Confessor sent us. We are tasked with glorious tidings.”

Miss Practical Joke 2288 said, “Ah, you’re the brave souls. They said you’d be coming. Take care
within. Atom can only protect against so much.”

They nodded, and then opened the door and stepped inside. The first thing they noticed was the faint sounds of an alarm. It grew louder as they walked down the corridor, until they turned a corner. There was long hallway, with laser triggers sliding up and down on rails.

That wasn’t the important part. The important part was the six laser turrets the hall. There was no way to take all six down before the three of them were killed or badly wounded. The laser tripwires were moving. In theory you could maneuver in such a way as to avoid setting off the turrets. The hall was supposed to be guarded and this was supposed to be part of a genuinely impenetrable security system. It was a command center for ballistic missile submarines.

Even without human guards, we can’t take the risk. One scrap of coattail in the wrong place and all six turrets slaughter us, pinned in the open. And until they activate they’re functionally invulnerable. At least since I left the Fat Men with the Minutemen. And if I could bring Minutemen in without causing suspicion, I’d just bring twelve and let them double team each turret.

So it’s deactivate. One at a time, with Nick and Piper ready to shoot, useless as it would be. At least they’ll recover the body.

Why am I doing this again? Oh yeah, because Nick deserves to know the truth about DiMA.

So, the terminal is of course on the far side. So time to pull out the old playbook.

Laser tripwires (Page 34): Cannot just be ‘cut’. But they have a weakness. They sense when the beam bounce back is too early, or happens at all. Because the triggers can malfunction, or beams can go out of alignment and return no signal in case of mirror systems instead, on early signal return ONLY they will generate an activation signal. They will not send when they are destroyed.

Laser tripwire deactivation (Page 35): Ensure that at no time is the beam occluded in any way. You must approach the switch from the side with no possibility of getting in front of the sensor. With a rock or pistol butt deliver sharp, shearing force to the sensor head. You must ensure total separation of the head on initial strike.

So. Hit it really hard from the side. Ok. Here goes nothing.

Nora turned to Piper and Nick and said, “Get ready to start shooting turrets if I screw this up.”

Piper grabbed Nora’s face and delivered a firm kiss. “Don’t screw up, Blue.”

Nora nodded, then grabbed a chunk of concrete. Her pistol was a light affair, that would be lighter still with no magazine. And she had less than no intention of swinging a loaded pistol around with the ‘Oh Shit’ end pointed back at her, whether there was or wasn’t a round in the chamber.

She took a deep breath and smacked the sensor. It ‘crack!’-ed and fell to the floor. Nora moved methodically down the hallway, vandalizing the facility, while Nick and Piper aimed their pistols at turrets. Eventually she was finished.

When they’d finished, Nick said, “I thought I was going to have a heart failure when I saw what you were going to do. But it worked.”

Nora nodded, “By the book, Tin Man. Actually and literally ‘by the book’.”

“You know best, partner,” Nick said.
“And don’t forget that,” said Nora.

The three moved into the facility. Past the hall of turrets, there was a Combat Mr. Handy, Sergeant Gutsy’s the army had called them. Then a series of Protectrons. The final one was covered by a turret, but that was still easily handled by them, as the Protectron was its usual slow moving self, and there was only the one turret.

There was a brief moment of excitement when an Assaultron attacked, but luckily all three of them watched it activate chameleon circuits and without consulting each other, simply filled the hallway with bullets. Which did the trick.

The security door to the computer banks was guarded by a Protectron and two turrets, but despite the laser bolt that grazed Nora, they easily destroyed the turrets while the Protectron was still getting going, then quickly shifted to it as soon as the second turret had blown up.

They looked into the facility. There was a huge set of computer banks immediately behind a console with a bizarre arrangement that looked like nothing so much as a big hair dryer. There was terminal built into the console. Nora tried logging in, but all it told her was that it needed main power.

Nora looked around and found a bayonet switch at the back of the room holding all the computer banks. When she activated it, she heard a door slide open, and moments later, she heard an Assaultron start a search pattern. Then she heard shots. Nick’s hand cannon boomed, almost drowning out the soft pops of Piper’s pistol.

Nora rushed back the front and while she couldn’t see the Assaultron, mostly, she could see where Piper and Nick were aiming in general, and made out the sparks of ricochets and effective hits alike, so she too unloaded her pistol into the Assaultron.

Eventually it collapsed into parts.

Piper sidled up and kicked the pile experimentally. It never moved. Eventually all three holstered their pistols. Nora approached the console. The menu now offered a interface adapter option, and Nora slotted DiMA and Faraday’s holotape. She settled in under the ‘hair dryer’ and then she was no longer in the command center.

She was in an artificial world, with blocks and walls, and beams, and…she heard DiMA’s voice, as programmed into her holotape. He was explaining what was going on. She listened and then she sighed, virtually of course.

Several hours later, Nick and Piper were startled when the whirr of the cerebral transmitter being removed woke Piper out of a doze and Nick from a reverie. Nora sat up, her eyes refocusing. Nora looked at both of them. She raised a finger, “Not a single question. We’re never going to speak of this again.”

Piper started up, “What-”

Nora glared, “Not a single question, Thing. I mean it.”

Nick said, “It was that bad?”

Nora sighed, “No. It was goddamned tedious is what it was. Now that’s it. Never again.”

Nora stood up, and turned and retrieved a series of tapes from the console.
“So did we get what we need?” asked Piper.

“Kinda,” answered Nora.

“Kinda?” asked Piper.

“Listen for yourself, Thing,” said Nora.

She slotted the first tape. A mechanistic woman’s voice spoke, “Memory file identification: 0V-9AX0. Converted to audio transcription. Beginning playback.”

Then DiMA’s own voice came from the speakers, “Things are not going well with Far Harbor. Several of my people have been assaulted, spat at, interrogated for no reason. This is getting out of control, but there’s still a chance they can learn to trust us. We just need one of their own who's on our side. I can’t let anyone know what I’m about to do. I'll need to set up the equipment far away from Acadia. It'll double as a place to bury the evidence.”


Nick looked over at the two women, “‘Bury the evidence’ is never a good phrase.”

Piper nodded, but said, “On the other hand, we don’t actually know what he did, either.”

Nora said, “That’s one. Next.”

And she slotted the second tape. The woman’s voice came on again, “Memory file identification: 0J-2NN8. Converted to audio transcription. Beginning playback.”

As before, DiMA’s voice came next, “I'm offloading this memory. I cannot bear lying to Confessor Martin and his Children of Atom any longer. Better to just forget. I found it. The location of the launch key to fire the nuclear missile inside the submarine. Confessor Martin believes it can bring his people into Division. Destruction at the hands of an atomic blast. He struggles with how literal his interpretation of that precept should be. I can't risk him deciding to find the key and use it. His people were the first to... accept me for what I am. The thought of them being gone fills me with nothing but pain.”


Nora looked over, “Unlike DiMA, the thought of the Children being gone does not fill me with pain. But...”

Piper said, “Ware, Aubert, Devin, and many others.”

Nora nodded. “Just because Richter is a conformist and Tektus is a barely coherent maniac, doesn’t mean they should all go. Not without a lot better reason than, ‘Some of them really annoy me.’”

She went on, “But he has some explaining to do, because he was way less tender-hearted toward Far Harbor.”

She slotted the third tape, “Memory file identification: 0H-3X0P. Converted to audio transcription. Beginning playback.”

DiMA’s transcribed memory was next, “I've made a contingency plan in case Far Harbor discovers
the truth, or gives in to their xenophobia despite all my efforts. I've isolated the wind turbine powering Far Harbor's Fog Condensers. A kill switch command will leave them defenseless from the Fog and its creatures. But now that's it done, am I really capable of this? This…massacre, that I've engineered...I'm going to remove the command code from my memories. I'll bury a hardcopy if I need to use it, but I can't keep it close to me. It makes me sick…”

The woman said, “Additional location data appended. Coordinates to the Kill Switch Command Code and the Wind Farm Maintenance Building.”

Nora shook her head. “He didn’t like what he’d thought of, so he literally cut it out. But notice that he didn’t wipe out the records.”

Nick sounded upset, “If he is my brother, I figure I have a valid reason to give him a piece of my mind now.”

Nora said, “About that,” as she slotted the fourth and final tape.

The woman’s voice identified what they had, “Memory file identification: 0Z-7A4K. Converted to audio transcription. Beginning playback.”

Then, instead of DiMA, they all heard Nick’s voice. Including Nick, who listened, rapt. “Get away from me! What the hell are you?” asked Nick-in-the-Past.

DiMA said, “It's me! We escaped the Institute together. You're my brother!”

Nick-in-the-Past shouted, “I don't have a brother! The name's Nick Valentine, and no one in my family tree is a plastic-skinned freak!”

DiMA replied, “You're just confused, let me help…”

Then they heard grunting, scrapes, and Nick-in-the-Past said, “Stay away from me!”

They heard the unmistakable sound of a plastic fist striking a plastic face or side. More scrapes, and sounds of punching, and maybe kicking.

The DiMA cried, “I don't want to hurt you!”

But the sounds of the fight went on, until someone fell with a crash. Then there were the sounds of rapid, continual blows.

Finally they heard DiMA say, “Goodbye…brother…”

The woman’s voice said, “End playback.”

Nick had stood, fixed, as the final tape played.

He breathed out, “God…DiMA really did help me escape from the Institute. I wasn’t just tossed out with the garbage. I must’ve still been in a haze from one of the Institute’s experiments on me. Did I really attack him? Did he really knock the daylights out of me and leave me for dead? Dammit. Why can’t I remember?”

Nora laid a hand on his shoulder, “Take it easy, Nick. People forget things. Especially after something traumatic like what happened between you and DiMA.”

Nick sighed, “Yeah…yeah, you’re right…”
He straightened his shoulders, “Well I wanted proof DiMA and I had history and I got it. Now I just gotta figure out what to do. Should I give him a chance? Try to accept him as my brother? He might be the only other prototype synth that existed.”

Nora said, “I think you already know the right answer for you, Nick. You don’t need me to tell you what you truly want to do.”

Nick nodded, “Maybe next time we swing past Acadia, I’ll try to be a little nicer to the old synth. Make up for lost time…,” then he looked over at both Nora and Piper, “Thanks, by the way. I wouldn’t know the truth without you two,”

Chapter End Notes

So, the first couple times I did DiMA’s memories it was interesting. Then I discovered an Elianora mod to let you just download the damn things and I've never looked back. Should you do it once for the experience? Sure. But once is enough. If you're like me and replay certain games like Fallout a lot? Just no.
The Sins of Your Past Self

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was, thankfully, late at night when Nora came out of the computer interface so the three of them simply left. Even the Zealots were asleep. The one thing that the Children did was guard their facility as if it were a church and not an armed camp. They never even ran into anyone awake.

Outside, they traveled through the Foggy dark carefully and quietly, aided by the fact that the Gulpers were diurnal and there was very little wetland after they left the immediate vicinity of the Nucleus. They gave both angler weed, and the potential Anglers a wide berth, and they never even heard a peep from a Fog Crawler.

When they’d reached the ‘Fog Line’ on Mt. Desert on the way up to Acadia, Nora began waxing philosophic.

“Even the Trappers, perverse cannibals that some of them are, are more crazy than evil. Super Mutants are the way Father and the Institute, and the US Army before them all, made them. I just can’t muster it up to hate them the way I do Raiders. Or Gunners. Those fuckers had a choice, and they chose poorly.”

Nora waved back over her shoulder, “But even I can feel it. Longfellow was right. Spend enough time in that stuff and anyone would go crazy. And given how ornery the Far Harbormen are, they’re all one good hard shove into the Fog from being Trappers themselves. Putting them down doesn’t feel good, the way it does with Raiders. Just like a chore that you wish you didn’t have to do…but you do.”

Then she looked at Nick and Piper, “But Christ on a crutch, the damned creatures around here. If there’s one, main reason the Trappers are nuts and the Harbormen and women are tetchy, it’s the damn wildlife. If you ask me, we just get this last chore done, get Kasumi home and then let Marcy and Oliver negotiate this crew either joining the CNE or making a trade agreement.”

Nora shook her head, and then smiled a little sadly. “This place is no longer a tourist destination, that is for certain,” and she was looking into the distance, as if watching ghosts at play.

When they arrived at Acadia, they went into the facility and laid down for some sleep. When they awoke, mid-morning, they all filed up and Nick went to speak with DiMA. They’d agreed that they would not tell DiMA everything they’d found, until they were sure what the story was, but no matter what, DiMA deserved to know that his memories at issue were safe from revelation to the Children in general and Tektus in particular.

So it was that Nick went over to see DiMA, “So, DiMA. Look, I was hoping we could talk. I didn’t want to believe you at first, about us being brothers…”

DiMA interrupted in his gentle way, “You don’t have to apologize Nick. I know it must have been a shock.”

Nick shook his head, “Yeah, well, I still don’t feel proud of taking it as bad as I did. Maybe we can start over?”

DiMA gave Nick a genuine smile, “I’d like that. It’s been good to talk to you again, Nick.”
Then DiMA turned to Piper and Nora as well as Nick, and said, “I hope you don’t mind but I had Chase shadow you. In the event you had problems. She saw you entering and leaving the Nucleus.”

Nora nodded, “And I’m going to pretend that the only reason Chase was shadowing us was in case we needed help.”

DiMA opened his mouth, but Nora put up a hand, “I know that at least part of the reason was just that. As for any other part of her agenda? I’ll ask you no questions, and you’ll tell me no lies. But I will say that your memories are safe from the Children.”

DiMA said, “That is a relief. But they are my memories.”

Nick stepped forward, and started to talk, but Nora interrupted. “DiMA, first we’re going to look into what we found there. I won’t lie, depending on what we find, you may have some explaining to do.”

**But I’m not going to hit you with my suspicions on the day your brother finally acknowledges you. And iffy as everything is, I want to be sure before I declare you a monster. I’ve known monsters, and you just don’t act like one. But I have to sure it isn’t because you can so thoroughly forget ever being one.**

“But in the end, we’ll be back with what we find, and we will talk about everything we found. That I can promise you,” said Nora.

They were all holding their breath. If DiMA were the kind of being that could easily plot genocide, or ‘bury evidence’, they were about to be in a lot of trouble, and a fair bit of it from Chase alone. If on the other hand he’d truly been pushed into a corner about what it seemed he’d done, he was unlikely to immediately act against them.

DiMA sighed, and said, “I wish I could say that doesn’t make any sense, but I literally can’t remember. Maybe you are right. I’ll know soon enough,” he finished and then he smiled sadly.

**Entry the First in the column labeled “He does this stuff reluctantly”.**

Nora smiled and Nick shook…his brother’s hand. It took some adjustment to think that way, but just as Shaun was Nora’s son in a very real but unconventional way, so too was DiMA Nick’s brother. Then all three of them left to finally discover what skeleton lived in DiMA’s closet.

“What?” asked Nick.

“Absolutely nothing, Tin Man,” said Nora.

“No, really.”

“Ok,” Nora said, “Piper’s right. I really hope DiMA proves that third times a charm. I do not want for the family reunion to end the way mine did. Especially not the way Piper’s did.”

Nick looked thoughtful. “I hope so too, but I’m Ok if it turns out otherwise. I’ve been the Clockwork Dick of Diamond City for over a century,” he smiled a trifle cynically, “If you think I haven’t already seen it all, you’re not thinking.”

Piper reached out and squeezed Nick’s shoulder. “I’m with Blue, Nickie. Just this once could we maybe get a happy ending?”

Nora nodded, and by that point they’d reached Charlie, Chuck to her friends.
Nora gestured for her to start the Vertibird and called up the location from Memory File: 0H-3X0P. It was a small island off the northwest coast of Mt. Desert Island. Of everything they were about to do, this was the most absolutely straightforward.

It really was a matter of getting up into the air, flying west northwest for less than fifteen minutes and descending until they could make out the tiny islet. As luck would have it, there was enough of a clearing to land a Vertibird, so Nora and her friends didn’t have to jump out, then fell a bunch of trees with explosives. To name but one of the contingency plans.

Instead the bird landed, Nora walked over to the location in her Pip-Boy and began digging with a small shovel. The location was accurate, and the Pip-Boy navigation proved precise. The hole was only 6 inches off, and that was easily corrected when a low flat metal case, or rather half of one, was discovered in the hole.

The three widened the hole until the whole case was exposed, and then pulled it out. Inside was simple key card for insertion into a computer bank. Nora looked it over and then she placed it back into the case, and poured a bunch of oil on it, and lit it. The three, joined by Charlie who wandered over, watched it burn down to nothing but a charred smudge.

Nora nodded, satisfied, “That’s two.”

Nick looked puzzled, “No, that’s one.”

Piper laughed, “Really, Nickie? Of all people you forget what ‘one’ was?”

Nick blushed. Only Ellie had managed to make that happen up to this point.

“Ok, we’re burning up daylight,” said Nora. “Next stop, Harbor Grand Hotel.”

As they Vertibird ascended, Nora spoke on the intercom, “My family never had the money for the Harbor Grand. It was unbelievably glamorous. I’m sure it’s just a shadow of its former self, but I have to admit, I’m kinda excited to see it. We only drove past it back in 2070. I want to go in.”

So of course the first thing that happened as they approached was the Super Mutants occupying the place opened fire. Charlie swore and pulled for altitude. Nora had given her orders as Deputy Director that the most important thing for the CNE on the entire Island was the one fourteenth of all the aircraft possessed by the government.

One THIRTeenth. One is now a hanger queen slash real life model to see if we can recreate the things.

So they landed well away from the hotel, and made their way carefully down from the north. Which was was how Nora found herself looking through her scope at a truly ugly head on a mutant marching back and forth on the roof of the hotel.

So, that one is down. And true to form, the rest start running around proclaiming how powerful they are. And there’s one and his dog on the ground. And now the mutant is dead. Wow, the dog is moving fast. Not fast enough.

Here comes another guy in a room on the third floor. Whoops, he has a minigun. Which is proving typically accurate. Hmmm. Seems like they can’t shoot with no head. Who knew?

Two more coming from in back…and then there was one. And now…none. Wait. Anything? Anything? No? Very good.
Nora, Piper, and Nick moved to the main door. Upon entering they found themselves in a dusty, broken down lobby. There were sounds from the second floor balcony that indicated, clearly, that something was up there. And given who was outside, it didn’t take much guessing to figure out who was inside.

Nora and Piper went up the stairs quickly and silently, pistols out. To their right there was a Super Mutant just sitting, and behind them was an opening in the wall. Nora signaled Piper, and as she eased around the corner to look into the hole, Piper opened fire, dropping the Super Mutant with two shots.

As the balcony Super Mutant fell with a not inconsiderable thump, the Mutant Hound and Super Mutant ‘cooking’ looked up. Nora shot the Hound first, and it dropped with a pained yelp. The cook was actually rushing forward brandishing its ladle. But Nora had no illusions how much even that would hurt, swung by a seven foot tall Super Mutant, and fired reflexively.

It too fell immediately. The three went through the kitchen while making very certain not to look in the pot, and through two more holes in walls, until they found themselves in the hallway on the second floor, where Nick caught up with them.

“I checked the records,” he whispered. “The safe room is 207.”

Nick pointed straight ahead, “That one.”

They opened the door, and it was pretty easy to find a keypad next to a strangely robust bookcase. Nora keyed in the code, 485130, and the bookcase swung open revealing another room inside the room. Immediately in front of them was a female skeleton. It’s quite easy with full skeletons, particularly ones with intact ilia and femurs, to determine sex.

Also, she had been wearing a dress. While not 100% percent certain, it was the way to bet, since Nora was not and had never been a forensic anthropologist. What was certain was that she’d been shot. Part of her spine was missing.

And it had been a gunfight, as there was a pistol next to her right hand. And her assailant had been laying on the bed. Even 210 years later the sheets were stained brown with dried blood, and the figure in the uniform was clutching its belly, with another pistol by its side.

Nick took it in, and said, “The lady shot the guy, turned to leave, and he shot her. Then they both died in here.”

Nora picked up a holotape that was laying by the woman, and slotted it into her Pip-Boy. A man’s voice came out, “Franny, it's me. I'm at the Grand. In our old suite. 485130. That's the key to the safe room they installed in case of...in case of the bombs. Franny, I need you to come quick. I-I don't know when they'll be coming for me, so I prepped the boat in case we need to make a rapid exit. But I...I can't be a part of this. Nuclear war. I won't do it, and I'm not gonna let anyone else use my submarine to blow up the damn world. Please, Franny. I need you here. If this is the end, let's spend it together.”

One sane man. Not enough. And face it, I wasn’t even one of them. I got out and stuck my head in the sand. I probably couldn’t have done anything. But I’ll never know anything for certain, except this...I never tried to.

At least he did something.

They looked around the suite for the key. They didn’t find it. But they found a security recording in
the room’s terminal. Nora took the tape and slotted it in her Pip-Boy. Franny spoke first, “Hey! Hands where I can see them! Now, where is the key?”

A man’s voice replied, “Franny, put the gun down. What exactly do you think you're going to accomplish?”

Franny sounded smug, “My job. You're going to give me that key and I'm going to get paid.”

He shot back, “Paid? The world's over. Are you really—,” and he was cut off by a single gunshot. He began shouting, “AH! Ah! Ah!”

Franny said, “Scream all you want, Arnie. Everyone's been evacuated. It's just you and me.” Her voice sharpened further, “Now, focus. Where is the key?”

Arnie said, “Rot in hell…,” there was another single shot, “AH!”

Franny said, contemptuously, “We can do this all day, Arnie.”


Franny said, “Now was that so hard?” Then there were two more shots, and they heard the man gurgling.

She went on, “So long, Captain. Now, where the hell's the release for this do--,” and there were three shots, and a woman’s cry, and then a thud.

Arnie, gasping, said, “Sorry, Franny. You're stuck... with me.”

The tape ended. Nick gave both Piper and Nora an ‘I told you so,’ look.

Nora looked over the room. She shook her head and turned to leave.

Piper plucked at her sleeve. “Nora, sweetheart. What’s the matter?”

Nora turned and pointed at Franny. “That was me. She sold out to the Chinese, nobody else would want a launch key. So she was me, but for them, I would have been pursuing my stupid missions and killing anyone in my way. If not for that little girl.”

Nora held her temples, “And when I got back, did I try to do something? No. I just trapped a childhood friend into getting me pregnant, and tried to check out. And all I accomplished was creating a monster that terrorized the Commonwealth for decades.”

Piper grabbed Nora by the shoulders and spoke sharply, “No!” She shook Nora, and when Nora’s eyes finally focused on her wife. She went on, “We’ve been through this. Father’s crimes are his and his alone. As for before the war, what could you have done? Huh? Because as near as can tell from records about the Enclave you might, with a great deal of effort, have made enough of a nuisance of yourself to get executed. Turned into a Robobrain, maybe.”

Nora tried again, “I was a monster…”

Piper interrupted and she shocked Nora with what she said next. “Yes. You were. You killed a little girl, Nora. You think I didn’t fucking notice that? I lied my ass off back in Railroad headquarters. You know why?”

Nora’s eyes had gone wide, “What? Why?”
Piper looked right into Nora’s eyes, her own hazel boring into Nora’s dark brown, “Because you were trying to get better. I could see you changing right in front of me. And I loved you. I loved who I first thought you were. And then…then I loved who you wanted to be, for me. And for yourself. And I loved the woman who finished healing herself, and then turned to the world around her.”

“Nora, love, I know monsters. And now you know why. You were never like that, and what’s more, I could tell that you wanted to change. So I stuck around, and encouraged you every time you took another step towards being the kind of person who should have the kind of power you had.”

Piper looked at Nora, then over at Nick, then back to Nora, “You, my love, are the most important thing I’ve ever done.”

Nora began giggling at the double entendre, partly in shock. Piper rolled her eyes, “Your growth, and the part I and Nickie and Ellie, and most of all…”

Piper’s voice broke, “…most of all Cait. Cait, who showed you that you could come back from anything. Cait and what you did and what you helped her do? That was when I decided to marry you. Because you weren’t her,” and Piper pointed to Franny, “You. Were. Cait. You healed each other. And I will forever love and honor her and her memory, for as long as I live, for what SHE did for YOU.”

Piper looked at Nora, “And now, love, just stop. Stop. You are the sum of your experiences. As are we all. But you are also more than that. Cait saw to that. I love you, Nat loves you, Shaun loves you, Ellie loves you, even Nickie loves you. And Cait, Cait loved you. Do you think we loved a monster? Do you?”

Very quietly, Nora said, “No?”

Nick said, “You bet your ass no, Nora,” and he grabbed her in a huge hug.

Nora broke down crying. Sobbing as her wife and her best friend held her while she was wracked by great cleansing bursts. Eventually the sobbing became whimpering, and the whimpering sniffles. The Nora stepped away. Nick handed her a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

The three left the hotel and walked back to the Vertibird. Retrieving the key proved utterly anticlimactic.

Chapter End Notes

I love titles with more than one meaning. Guilty.

And this is Nora's last "Change". She's done the growing I wanted for her. She's still not perfect, but what she does from now on she does for good reasons as she sees them and to prevent worse. As opposed to taking the easiest way from Point A to Point Z...or deliberately doing the wrong thing for the right reasons because she doesn't trust herself.
They flew back to Acadia. It was becoming dark, and Nora wanted to be fresh for the retrieval of the last memory. When they arrived, they went first to DiMA, with the first three results.

Nick spoke first, “DiMA, got a question. Why do you call me Nick? Didn’t you know me before the personality imprint?”

DiMA looked quizzical, “We didn’t have names in the Institute. And after the personality experiments started, the only name you ever called yourself was Nick Valentine. If there’s another name you’d prefer I’d be happy to…”

Nora looked over at Nick significantly, but Nick just said, “No…no. I like the name. When you wear something for a long time, it kinda seeps into you, you know?”

DiMA smiled, “Of course.”

Nora came up and spoke seriously, “One of your memories was about a kill switch you installed to shut down power to Far Harbor and let the Fog take them. It’s all on this holotape.”

DiMA looked shocked and appalled, and said, “Let me see this.”

He slotted the tape in a port in his chest. He stood still for a moment. Apparently the tape was more than just an audiolog. It must have had a sort of sideband, as DiMA sounded horrified, “I remember. I was afraid Far Harbor might turn against us. See us as too different for their precious Island.”

He paced, “So I made a contingency plan. Mass murder. I hid the kill switch code because I couldn’t stomach the thought of actually using it. Then I hid the memory because I couldn’t even stand knowing I made it.”

He looked at his brother, and there was begging in his expression, “What have I done? If the Children of Atom ever got ahold of that code, they could destroy Far Harbor.”

Nora stepped in and said, “Relax, DiMA. Far Harbor is safe. I already destroyed the code.”

Nick said, “But you and I need to talk, brother. You made this plan. Why?”

“I told you. I was scared they’d lash out at Acadia, Nick,” said DiMA.

“Yeah, but why would that be bad?” asked Nick

“Because they’d destroy Acadia!”

“But why is that bad enough to commit genocide, DiMA?”

“Because we’re all the synths have…”

Nick said, “Is that really true? Really?”

DiMA looked at Nora and Piper, and Nick, and he said, “But that was before you told me that the Institute had been destroyed and reformed.”
“Does that really matter?” asked Nick.

“Of course it matters…No. No, that was an excuse I told myself, wasn’t it?”

Nick nodded, and DiMA said, “I’m not their only hope. I never was.”

Nick said, “Don’t be too hard on yourself,” and he paused and then as if realizing it for the first time for real, “Brother. You had a lot of guilt. I had a lot of anger. I made a life and so did you. But maybe it’s time for you to stop blaming yourself for what happened to me, and for me to stop blaming you implicitly for what I am.”

DiMA looked sad, but he smiled, “And what are you, brother?”

“I’m Nick Valentine, a Pre-War detective who found himself in this world and made the best of it,” he said.

Piper nodded, “And made the world, or at least Diamond City, a better place one case at a time.”

Nora said, “I think you have something important to do when we get back, don’t you, Detective Valentine?”

Nick looked over at his best friend, “I do, and if you’ll be the Best Woman…”

Nora smiled, and winked at DiMA, “I’m already the Best Woman, but I’ll lend myself, sure.”

DiMA looked puzzled. Piper said, “Your brother just realized that he’s getting married.”

DiMA looked surprised for maybe the second time since they’d met him. Then he said, “Does your brother get an invitation?”

Nick said, “As long as he stops deleting bits of himself instead of dealing with his feelings and actions? Sure. Tubes and all…brother.”

“But what I planned…” DiMA started.

Nick interrupted, “What’s important is that you’re trying to change. To be better,” he looked over at Nora and Piper, with Piper smiling and nodding at him, “But to truly do that, you can’t run around cutting out the bad things you did and just forget them.”

Nora stepped up, “DiMA, I would like to help. We need to talk, person to person, not synth to human or any other way. Soon. Helping you is a…debt…I owe.”

DiMA looked surprised and Nora went on, “But there’s more, I have a memory of yours about a nuclear launch key. You knew how to detonate the sub in the Nucleus all along.”

She handed DiMA Memory 0J-2NN8. He slotted it as well. “Give me a moment I need to… remember for myself.”

He stood still then he looked stricken, “So I chose to forget the launch key even existed. Poor Confessor Martin. Was I lying to him all that time?”

He went on, “The submarine is rusted into the dry dock. The only target those missiles are going to hit is the base itself, The Nucleus. Where the Children of Atom live. We have to keep that key out of the wrong hands. The Nucleus has innocents living there as well as the zealots who threaten Far Harbor.”
Piper said, “Way ahead of you DiMA. And we agree. We met both types of people there. But the important thing to remember is that WE met both. That key goes nowhere.”

DiMA took Piper’s hand in his, and said, “Thank you. Was there something else in my memories? Some way we can work towards peace?”

Piper shook her head. “You have to wait until tomorrow, DiMA. We’re going to the next spot then.”

DiMA nodded. “Thank you for this, all of you.”

And the three went to bed. Nick thought and Piper and Nora cuddled. It worked for the three of them. When they awoke, it was overcast and drizzling. It could have seemed ominous, but then the weather had been beautiful the day Nora had killed her son.

The three of them went out to the Vertibird, and Charlie, Charlotte, took off. They made their way quite quickly to the Vim! Pop Factory. There was no spot on the roof that was safe to approach within ten feet of, so they landed in the front parking area.

They hopped out and made their way to the front door. Inside was a lobby and then a huge atrium that was decorated as a courtyard. The far side was a false building front, with two stories. In the atrium, napping, were three Mutant Hounds. Nora signaled the other two. She’d take the left Hound, which was the furthest, Piper the middle, and Nick the right one. Piper gave the countdown. The three of them had been working together so long that both Nick and Piper knew the hand signals, so there was no miscommunication. Just two pops and a boom, and three dead Hounds.

As the three Hounds dropped, Nora caught movement in the second floor window overlooking the atrium, and she swung her rifle and swiftly put a round into the Mutant’s head, that being both the most vital spot she could see…as well as the only spot she could see.

As that one was falling, Nick’s gun barked twice, and another Mutant fell out of the first floor doorway into the atrium. When he had fallen, they waited. Nothing further attacked them. Eventually when they were satisfied that they’d gotten everyone in that section, they searched the area. They turned up several terminals, including the CEO’s, that told a story of a company desperately trying to succeed, and fend off a takeover attempt by John Caleb Bradburton and Nuka-Cola that showed that the reach of “Nuka-World Raiders” had been long indeed, in both time and space.

On the other hand, what in the hell is ‘the taste of Maine’? I have a lot of sympathy for the poor bastard who asked the marketing department if maybe they shouldn’t just puree a wet flannel shirt and a fiddlehead.

Then they entered the factory. Nora immediately thought of that damned Corvega factory. This too was a maze of break rooms and cryptic manufacturing and storage areas. And the place was loaded with Mutants. There was one in the break room they’d entered. Another came from their right further up in the factory. Nick had had to get that one, and the noise from his revolver ensured that the factory knew that unfriendlies were around.

So Nora led them down, to hopefully avoid the worst. Shortly they were ankle deep in what Piper colorfully referred to as ‘ick’. The ick produced Molerats, but not that many, and Piper and Nora easily handled them with pistols. They saw a ramp to a large shutter door, which very much looked like a loading dock.

There was a terminal and it really had only one active entry, [If you are reading this, you may not want to open these doors. I've locked Grun inside and he's not going to be happy when he gets out.]
So Nora loaded her rifle and Nick and Piper were ready.

*If I didn’t have to thoroughly search this damned place…*

The Behemoth was a nice touch. Nora didn’t actually remember the fight as a fight, just flashes of recollection. Piper and Nick shouting and shooting. At least one reload in her part. Aiming at its head and squeezing as fast as she could.

It went down.

*Score one for maximum violence, minimum time.*

They continued up a stairway across from the ramp, where two more Mutants attacked. They were a tad anti-climactic after Grun, but they did shout and boast. And die.

Then they were going through factory offices that they searched. Nora was becoming concerned that she had missed something somewhere when they reached the brewing vats, and a group of 5 Super Mutants. That fight was a deadly game of Hide and Seek. First the three of them killed the first three, in the vats. Then they scuttled across a walkway into a set of offices. There was a Mutant who was in actually in the offices, and he was surprised when he came rushing around a corner and ran into them. His surprise, and he himself, was short-lived.

The final Mutant, an 8 foot tall murder machine that barely managed to be less problematic than Grun himself, came from the back of the Vat room. They concentrated their fire on him, and frankly continued peppering his area anytime he sought cover. It took a while, but he went down.

The smell of cordite was thick in the area. Ammunition may have been smokeless since the 1880’s but it still stank acridly in close quarters. The ornery Mutant had come from the back of the room two levels down and that is where Nora began searching as soon as she could.

She was immediately rewarded by the discovery of an elevator. The three entered and pressed the button. As they descended, Nora thought.

*I’m reaching the end of searchable areas…what will be down here? What could DiMA have done in a SODA POP factory? Encouraged tooth decay?*

When the door slid open, there was no mistaking their target. A section of floor had been removed and the dirt beneath dug up. Nora, Piper, and Nick began digging and very shortly thereafter were rewarded by a thunk. Extending their dig outward they eventually outlined a six or so foot long structure, that when exposed proved to be a coffin.

When Nick pried the lid off, they found a skeleton. And a holotape.

*I really do not want to listen…*

Nora eventually sighed and slotted the tape. Immediately a woman’s voice said, “Is it...is it going to be painful?”

A voice, DiMA’s voice, said sorrowfully, “Yes...It's going to be like having everything you are ripped out and replaced with something else...Someone else.”

*Way to oversell the bad side DiMA. Amari made it clear that if you can remove and implant memories, no pain need be remembered.*

The woman then said, “I'm ready. I just... wish I could say goodbye to everyone.”
DiMA said, “No one else can know. This isn't just about infiltrating Far Harbor. It's about becoming the human that synths drawn here need to meet. Reasonable, willing to accept them as just another living thing. No greater or lesser than humanity itself. You'll be part of the bridge between our two worlds. That all vanishes the moment anyone discovers that it's been manufactured. That you're a synth.”

Nora’s ears perked up and as the tape played she kneeled and retrieved a locket from around the skeletal neck…there was a picture in it.

The woman said, “Did she have to die? The woman I'm replacing? God... She looks so peaceful lying there...”

DiMA answered, just as Nora and Piper recognized the picture in the locket.

He said, “Don't. Please. That blood is on my hands. Not yours…”

The picture was slightly younger Captain Avery.

“Oh boy,” said Piper.

Chapter End Notes

So this novel will be 160,000 words long. 161,200 in Scrivener, and 160,600 in Word, and 161,700 in Pages to name three platforms I use in my utterly unbelievable even to me workflow, and I have NO idea why the three numbers are so close yet different. And I, at least, am happy with the ending, including the Epilogue.

I think I'll put acknowledgements and other stuff in a MONSTER end note rather than an additional chapter.

And yes, that means I'm finished. Typos and polishing is ongoing but if I were a REAL novelist, I'd be packaging this up and sending it to my editor for them to do the voodoo that they do, so well. As it is, I'm chasing commas. Because I should brought before the ICC in the Hague for wanton cruelty to the common comma. Saturday, October the 13 will see the posting of the final chapter of both the novel "To Plant Companionship Thick As Trees" as well as the series "Agent of Change".
Nora led Piper and Nick back to the elevator, and found a side room leading out of the plant. The three went up a long side stair and emerged near the roof where they’d gunned down the missile launcher-toting Super Mutant days before.

They headed back down to ground level, but Nora decided to poke at terminal in a roof office before they left. She wasn’t really looking forward to confronting DiMA. What she found at least allowed the three to have a brief laugh. Nora looked at the entries on what turned out to be the R&D terminal, and snorted, then showed Nick and her wife.

[I really can't believe this. Marketing wants me to develop a new drink, but all they've given us to go on is "The Taste of Maine." I swear to god, Norman just thinks that if he can string a few words together things will just magically appear,] the first entry entitled ‘The Taste of Maine’, read, [What does it even mean!? Fine. They want the taste of Maine, then that's what we'll give them.]

Piper looked over, “So, Blue, what’s so funny?”

Deadpan, Nora flipped to the next entry. [After firing off a couple of angry letters, I decided to try to show them just how stupid this idea was. We took bottles of Vim classic and brewed it up with fiddleheads, lobster shells, and a couple other extracts and I was sure this was going to be absolutely disgusting,] and here Piper began snickering, [The thing is, it definitely taste kind of weird, but it's actually not as terrible as I thought. Maybe if we work on the flavor profile a bit... cloves or Aster extract... What the hell, we can try taste testing it. At least it will keep them off my back while I figure something else out.]

Nick said, “They couldn’t possibly have…”

Nora nodded her head, “They could.”

The next entry was titled, ‘So this is really happening’. It read, [I just got the label proofs from Mr. Reed. They are actually going forward with this crazy thing. Despite taste testers saying it has a ‘fishy’ taste, they seem to actually be liking it. The Aster extract seems to cover up the aromatics of the lobster... somehow. I really can't explain why anyone likes this thing. Apparently they are going to call it Captain's Blend. At least for now.]

Piper looked in her pocket. She pulled out a bottle labeled ‘Captain’s Blend’. She threw it off the roof. She threw it really far.

Nick laughed, “Thanks Nora. I needed that.”

Nora nodded, “I know. I’m mad too, but we need to hear him out. And make decisions rationally. This,” she gestured at the terminal, “Actually helps.”

The three finally made their way back down to the ground where Nora radioed Charlie to come pick them up at her coordinates. A very short while later, the Vertibird was landing and they all climbed in. The flight to Acadia was short. So short, Nora wasn’t sure if it was good that it was so short so she didn’t have time to think about what she had to do next, or if it was bad because she didn’t have time to come up with something better.

They touched down, and gripping the locket and the tape tightly, Nora led the other two in. As they walked up, DiMA said, “I hope you’ve some way to make peace between the Children of Atom and
Far Harbor.”

“Right at the moment the most likely method to do that is to tell both sides everything we’ve found out and let them attack Acadia,” said Nora.

Faraday gasped, and out of the corner of her eye Nora saw Chase straighten up. DiMA said, “What do you mean?”

Nora said, “Your memories led me to a grave site.”

Nick interrupted, “You killed Captain Avery and replaced her with a synth so you could control Far Harbor.”

DiMA looked shocked, “What?? That’s impossible! Let me see what you found.”

DiMA slotted both chips, and as he processed them at high speed and regained the memory on the sideband he looked utterly stricken. He said softly, and appalled, “I…I did it. I killed a woman from Far Harbor and replaced her. I stripped a synth’s identity from her and made her an agent.”

He sounded as if, were he organic, he’d be sobbing. Piper stepped in and gently asked, “Why did you do it, DiMA?”

Nora looked at Chase and Faraday as the question was asked. There were both shocked. Apalled.

*Ok, no guilty looks from either of them. Especially Faraday. This isn’t a ‘Jule Situation’.*

DiMA said, sadly, “I needed to calm Far Harbor. A moderate voice. An example of what humanity should be. How we could exist together as equals.”

He looked down, “But I couldn’t live with the memory of blood on my hands. A human and a synth are both gone because of me.”

Nora sighed, “Ok. Let’s be practical. How do we proceed from here?”

Piper gasped and Nick said, “You can’t be…”

Nora interrupted, “Yes. I fucking well can be serious.”

Nora looked at Piper and Nick and then waved in Faraday and Chase to be part of the conversation as well. “What will happen if we tell Far Harbor?”

Chase said, “The best we could hope for is that they execute DiMA and Avery. The likelihood is that they tear this place down.”

Nora looked over at Nick, “He’s your brother Nick. Your only link to your past. Are you willing to turn him over to the mob? Are you willing to see his head blown apart by Allen Lee, just like that woman? Hmm?”

“But he shouldn’t get away with…”

Piper interrupted, “Damnit! She’s right, Nickie. Should DiMA answer for that crime? Probably. Yes.” DiMA nodded at that bizarrely eager to do penance, but Piper went on, “But he’d be torn limb from limb. I, for one, am not willing to be part of that,” Piper looked over at Nora.

She said, pointing at Nora, “This is what you mean. Sometimes you have to take the least bad option.”
Nora nodded. Piper made fists and growled, “Rrrrgh! Fine! I say we do nothing about this.” But she turned to DiMA, “You make damn sure you EARN this.”

DiMA nodded. Nora and Piper looked over at Nick. Nick looked pained. He opened his mouth and started to speak, then he sighed, and said, “You’re right. When you’re right, you’re right. We have to focus on what has to be done now.”

DiMA said, “We have to keep this secret from Far Harbor. If they knew I had done this, they wouldn’t destroy just me, they’d come after Acadia. And then without us, the Fog Condensers will eventually fall into disrepair. Everyone will die.”

“That thought had crossed my mind,” said Nick.

DiMA looked unutterably sad as he spoke again, “I…I have an idea. There’s still a way we can bring peace. But the fact that I’ve replaced a human with a synth must remain hidden.”

Nora said, “We already agreed to that, DiMA. But no more ‘deleting’ things you don’t like about yourself.”

DiMA still looked sad, “Thank you…maybe the guilt will keep me focused.”

He took a deep breath and what he said next made Nora forget that he didn’t actually need to breathe, “As horrifying as it might be to suggest, this memory you’ve recovered has given us a new option. If Far Harbor could be made more…tranquil…by our intervention, the perhaps the same trick will work twice, on the Children of Atom.”

Piper said, breathed really, “No…”

DiMA nodded, “We could replace High Confessor Tektus with someone willing to forgive Far Harbor and work towards reconciling.”

Nick said, “Are you insane, DiMA? We just got done forgiving you for the last one!”

Piper nodded, “That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nora broke in, “Except for all the other options. Those are even dumber.”

Nick and Piper turned and looked at her in shock. Nora shook her head, “You’ve been there. Does Tektus strike you as a live and let live kind of guy?”

Nick said, “There must be another way to we could make things right.”

DiMA shook his head, “None that I can see. The authority of the High Confessor is absolute. The Children of Atom won’t see the need for peace unless he…changes his mind.”

“I know that,” said Piper, irritably, giving Nora a nasty look. “What I haven’t heard is any kind of good reason we should do this.”

Nora said, “Because Tektus isn’t going to stop. You know that, Piper. He’ll keep pushing and pushing until The Children wipe Far Harbor off the map. And after he’s gotten them to do that, getting them to slaughter a colony of synths will be child’s play. He won’t have a problem getting them to cut down inhuman monsters. No offense, DiMA.”

DiMA shook his head, “None taken. I’m sure that’s how he sees us.”

Nora looked at Nick and Piper, “Then he’ll probably export his Holy Crusade. Hell, he could reach
the Commonwealth. Want to see Nat and Shaun executed or turned into religious fanatics?"

Nora said, “I can see only two options to protect Far Harbor,” she held up a hand with one finger raised. “We do this, distasteful though it is,” and now she raised a second finger, and her other hand. “Or I use this, and we solve the problem forever.”

In her other hand was the launch key for ‘The Vessel’s’ nuclear missile.

“There has to be another way,” said Nick.

“I’m open to suggestions,” said Nora.

Faraday said, “Could we get Far Harbor to accept missionaries?”

Piper said, “Are you kidding me? First, I think the Far Harbor-people wouldn’t accept them, and I know that the missionaries wouldn’t not say unbelievably offensive things. That’s no solution. Maybe we could get the Harbor-people to leave? This Island is a craphole, and I know from crapholes.”

DiMA shook his head, “This is their Island too. They deserve to live here if they want. And you know they do.”

Piper nodded glumly.

Nora wasn’t going to say it. Her wife and her partner had to accept it. Piper turned to Nick, “What do you have, Nickie?”

Nick said, “I don’t have a goddamned, fucking thing. I hate this, and I’m realizing that doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. Shit!”

The Nick sighed heavily, “All right.” He turned to DiMA, “Tell us what your plan is.”

Nora slowly let out the breath she’d been holding.

_Am I relieved they saw reason, or disappointed they didn’t come up with something I could support? I suppose that list isn’t mutually exclusive._

DiMA said, “This will be difficult. For all of us. Especially you three. But I think it’s our only option. I’ll need you to leverage your access to the High Confessor and lure him into a secluded location.”

He shook his head as he spoke next, “You should be able to find a spot in the bay’s old Command Center where you can deal with him discreetly…and hide the remains. Once your work is done, return here and the replacement will move in and take command.”

Nora shuddered, “Do I have to kill the High Confessor?”

Piper said, “Why are you implying just you?”

Nora shook her head, “I may be a better person than I was. I may not be a monster any more Piper, but I am the assassin among us.”

Piper opened her mouth, and Nora put her finger on her wife’s lips. “Shh. You know I’m right.”

Piper nodded silently. Nora could almost read her thoughts.
“I know it’s not fair that I have to do this yet again, Piper,” Nora said. “But nobody said life was fair. I’m the right person to…”

Piper looked over at Nora, as Nora spoke. Tears were running down Piper’s cheeks.

Nora spoke again, “…to do what needs doing.” She turned to DiMA, “Any thoughts on how to get him alone?”

DiMA mused, “Tektus lives in fear of being usurped by his predecessor Martin, despite that fact that Martin is, in all likelihood, dead. But if you somehow recovered evidence of Martin’s imminent return, I expect Tektus would be interested in hearing all that you know…in private. “

DiMA began warming to his own plan, “All we have to do is engineer Martin’s uprising. To do so, I’ll need raw material. Martin recorded many of our conversations. Those in the Nucleus have no doubt been destroyed. But I built a small refuge for Martin many years ago when he needed respite from the family. Go there and collect any tapes you can find. I’ll begin work on our replacement.”

Nick said, “That’s the part that bothers me most. Who are you going to make…”

“I’ll do it,” said Cog, from the doorway.

Nora, Nick, and Piper looked over in shock, and Cog continued, “It’s my fault Jule is gone. I couldn’t leave well enough alone, even when she asked me to. I just had to be the guy who found out.”

He looked disgusted, “Well now I can’t live with myself. Lucky me, I don’t have to, and I can even commit suicide in a useful way.”

Faraday said, “You don’t have…”

Cog said, “Shut up, Faraday. You’re lucky I’m not suggesting you replace Richter. Asshole.”

Nora said, “Are you absolutely certain?”

Cog nodded. He was defiant. Nora nodded, “Ok, but no need to be stupid about this.”

She got on her radio and called back to the Commonwealth. She reached PAM, which is what she expected, and she transmitted the request that Dr. Amari come up to Acadia to perform the surgery and the personality implant.

Nora looked at DiMA, “It’s that I don’t trust you to do the job right…oh, what the Hell. Yeah, it’s totally that if he is going to sacrifice himself, it better actually work.”

DiMA smiled sadly, “Based in the available evidence, you’re not wrong.”
The next day, two things happened. Charlie arrived with Dr. Amari and Nora, Piper and Nick left to track down the holotapes. When Amari arrived, Nora made a request. Amari considered it, then told Nora that she was pretty sure she could do what was asked.

Then the three climbed into the Vertibird and took off. According to the coordinates, the hide-out lay just south of a lumber mill on Echo Lake. When they arrived, Charlie lowered her Vertibird into the Fog slowly, with one eye on the radar altimeter, at all times. As they sank into the Fog, Nora peered out looking for any sign of a structure.

They were hovering 60 feet above Maine 102, and there was a clear spot just north of the coordinates. That was nice. There was no sign of any kind of structure around. That was rather less so. As they landed Nick and Piper hopped out and Nora asked Charlie to stay on the ground with her rotors turning.

After Charlie nodded, Nora hopped out as well. Piper met her, “I’m not seeing anything. You think maybe the Children found out about Martin’s little hideaway and tore it down?”

Nora shook her head, and answered, “DiMA seemed awfully certain that it was intact.”

“Yeah, well,” Nick said, and gestured around the barren landscape. 102 crossed a low bog at this point, and it was easy to see that there was nothing for as far as the eye could see. In the Fog visibility was about a quarter mile.

If we end up slogging through a salt marsh looking for damn shack due to imprecise coordinates, I’m going to be pissed.

Nora walked to the precise coordinates of Martin’s Hideout. She found herself standing slightly off center on the highway, just on the southbound lane side of a double yellow stripe. She swore then said, “The coordinates say the thing should be right here!”

Nick looked over and gave Nora helpless shrug, “Don’t blame me for DiMA. I just found out he existed. Relatively speaking.”

Piper, standing off the highway to the west, looked back and the two of them, “Hey Nickie! Your brother’s a dick!”

Nick said, “He has his quirks, sure, but dick…”

Piper said, “I’m pretty sure you’re standing right in the middle of Martin’s Hideout, Blue.”

Nora gave Piper a look, and asked, eloquently, “Huh?”

Piper pointed at her feet, just off the side of the road, “’C’mere, you two.”

When they joined her, they found a culvert about 5 feet in diameter. Nick looked inside it at a door, set into one side of the culvert a bit less than halfway through. “My brother is a dick.”

Nora nodded agreement, and as they stepped into the culvert, they heard a growl, and got their
pistols ready just in time to catch the ghoul coming at them. Piper beat everyone to the draw. About then, the Geiger counter on Nora’s Pip-Boy began clicking and Nora sighed and dug into her satchel for the Rad-X and passed the bottle around.

“I am not going to miss this when we’re done with this lot of fanatics. If there’s anything I genuinely hate about this new world, it’s the constant need to bring a counter everywhere I go,” Nora said.

“I never really thought about it, Blue,” said Piper.

Nora shook her head, “You wouldn’t, Thing. For you guys it’s as natural as putting on shoes.”

Nick opened the door into Martin’s little hidden hole. There was a bed, a table, and a small shrine to Atom. On the table were a pair of holotapes. Nora checked them to be sure they were what they were looking for. The first bore a label that read “What Atom Requires” in small neat block handwriting.

The tape played, and they heard DiMA’s voice, “I have to say I'm surprised. I had assumed you and your followers would be more adamantly hunting for the sub's launch key.”

A new voice, presumably Martin’s said, “I hope we haven't disappointed you too greatly. I'd hate to anger our landlord.”

DiMA said, “Am I mistaken? Does your god not require you die in a nuclear blast? Is that not why you've taken up in the Nucleus?”

He’s talking like he knows. Maybe from before he offloaded the memory?

Martin replied, “Our worship is not a transaction, DiMA. Atom requires nothing of us. He has granted us a chance to become something greater. To Divide our weak mortal frames and bring life to millions of new worlds. We are simply accepting the opportunity His Glow presents, whatever form it may take.”

Piper rolled her eyes at that.

DiMA asked a probing question, “So if you found the launch key, you wouldn't use it?”

Martin sounded troubled, “That... I don't know.”

DiMA, sounding increasingly troubled, asked “Are you afraid?”

Martin replied, thoughtfully, “I'd be mad to say I wasn't. But... we've made a home for ourselves here. Friends. A family.”

DiMA said, “A place you and yours belong.”

Martin answered, “Exactly. The Nucleus, it is a blessing of the truest order. It would be hard to leave such a gift, even if it is for another. But, regardless, the key is lost. So until Atom sees fit to return it, I'd dare say you're stuck with us.”

DiMA said, indulgently, “I believe I'll survive.”

The tape ran out. Nora looked over at Piper, “If we just walked up and gave Tektus the key, what would happen?”

“Under Tektus? They’d use the key, I’m pretty certain,” Piper answered, “But not before they wiped Far Harbor and Acadia off the face of the Earth.”
“So much for just letting self-determination run its course then,” Nora said.

Nick raised an eyebrow, “Cold. But appropriate. This Martin seems a decent sort, but I never had DiMA’s experience with him. All I’ve seen is the Children under Tektus, and I wouldn’t exactly mourn if they…ah…chose to implement the more extreme elements of their doctrine.”

Nora nodded, then slotted a tape labeled “An Execution” in the same neat handwriting as before.

It started with Martin, “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

DiMA replied, concern audible in his voice, “I heard about the execution. I can't believe they killed your missionary, Martin. I'm sorry.”

Martin replied. There was something in his voice. It didn’t come over the tape well. “Brother Andrews. A good soul. The fault... is mine. If I'd realized things had become so tense in Far Harbor, I would've never let him leave. They blame us for the Fog overrunning the town, DiMA. And now the Children... it's Tektus. He won’t listen. He wants to prepare for war.”

_Fear. Martin’s afraid._

DiMA asked, “Do you believe the others will follow him?”

Martin paused, then finally spoke, “Time was, I would've laughed at such a notion, but now... Andrews was beloved by many. It's brought out the worst in them. Fury. Hate. It was tolerable when it was just Tektus... DiMA, something must be done.”

DiMA asked, “What can we do?”

Martin answered, “Exodus. I think it's time you and I convinced the citizens of Far Harbor to leave.”

DiMA sounded shocked, “You can't be serious.”

Martin sounded almost pleading, “You know as well as I they're not meant for this place. The Fog grows thicker every year. How long before the condensers are finally overwhelmed? It's not banishment, DiMA. It's mercy.”

He wants...no, he needs...DiMA to rescue him from his own people.

DiMA replied, “I'm sorry, Martin, but no. They have as much right to be here as you do.”

This must be after he replaced Avery. He keeps trying to find a way to thread the needle. He keeps juggling the pieces. And DiMA was about to lose control, unless I miss my guess. Even if we hadn’t come and stirred up all this shit, Allen would have killed one Child too many, or Tektus would have managed to whip them into a frenzy anyway.

Martin barked back, and now he was angry, fear anger, “They have a right? This place is trying to kill them. And now my people are at my throat because of the mess you created by allowing them to stay! And if you can’t recognize that...then I suppose there’s no reason for you to be here. I think you should go.”

DiMA was the one pleading now, “Martin, please. This can be solved in other ways.”

Martin said, cold and angry, “Get. Out.”

DiMA said, “Very well. We'll talk again... when you come to your senses.”
This must be just before whatever happened to Martin happened. He sounds terrified and he’s lashing out.

Nora looked at the others and pointed her chin at the door. They left and made their way to the Vertibird. Based on their exposure, Nora popped a RadAway. Piper noticed and checked her own dosimeter, and followed suit, as did Nick.

By that time they were descending on Acadia, and as the wheels thumped down, the three disembarked and jogged up the stairs. Nora opened the door and made a beeline for DiMA.

“I recovered the tapes from Martin’s hideout.”

DiMA took the tapes from Nora and slotted them. “Excellent. Yes. These look like they’ll serve. Let me take a listen.”

He looked into the distance, “Hmmm. Good to hear his voice again. Some grim material to work with.”

“Let me edit these,” DiMA finished. “Your friend, Dr. Amari asked to see you when you got back.”

Nora nodded, and turned to go. DiMA called after her, “Have you decided how you’re going to handle Tektus?”

Nora stopped, hesitated a moment and then turned. She nodded, “I can’t trust him to just leave if asked. The fact that he’s so terrified of Martin’s return tells me that he would want to come back if he were just run off. I can’t take that chance.”

Then they went down to see Amari. Cog was already out, but not yet changed to match Tektus. Amari looked up, “Ah. You’re here. I was able to do as you asked. His personality isn’t gone, just placed under deep cover. When his time as Tektus is over, he can be brought back.”

Faraday, who’d been assisting, looked up in shock. “That’s what we’ve been doing? You can do that?”

Amari nodded, “It was experimental, but as Nora and I discussed, the worst that could have happened was a normal memory wipe. But now, when you people decide to pull him out because his work is done or because he ought to ‘die’ of old age, we can give him his old personality back. He’ll remember his time as Tektus, and he can have his old face back, keep Tektus’, or be someone all new.”

Amari smiled now, “Just like any other Commonwealth citizen. Especially like Deacon.”

Nora nodded, “Fair enough, doc. I appreciate it.”

She waved and went back to find DiMA. When she found him, he was just finishing writing a label on a holotape. It read “A Call to Arms” in Martin’s neat block letters. DiMA looked up as he finished, “There. No pleasure in twisting the words of an old friend, but I believe Martin would understand. This tape should be sufficient to pique the high confessors interest in joining you in the Command Center, but Tektus is nothing if not wary.”

“Make sure you’ve fully earned his trust before approaching him. It should help guarantee that this all plays out more…smoothly,” DiMA went on.

Nick interrupted, “Already taken care of.”
DiMA inclined his head, and said, “You’ll then have to dispose of the remains. Old maintenance shaft walls were never terribly well maintained. There should be one in the command center that will be able to serve your needs. Once you’re done, return here and we’ll send the replacement on his way. Now are you ready to begin?”

Nora sighed. Piper laid a hand on her wife’s shoulder, “Honey, if you don’t want to…”

Nora shook her head, “It’s not a matter of ‘want to’ or ‘don’t want to’. It’s a matter of what has to be done, and who’s the best person to do it,” and Nora looked at DiMA, “I’m ready.”

DiMA said, “Then I won’t keep you any longer. Here, the tape,” and he handed Nora the holotape, “The fate of the Island rests on our works.”

Nora said, “No pressure, then. Good.”

Chapter End Notes

I have had the ‘pleasure’ of searching around in underbrush for a navigation point that isn’t exactly where it’s supposed to be. That "It must be here SOMEwhere" search is so much fun...

And I’ve been looking for a missing silenced phone, listening for the vibrations, and all but tearing apart a couch to try and find it only to realize that it was upstairs in that exact point. Neither of those are fun…it’s a cramped frustrated feeling.
Once again, Charlie had the Vertibird primed and ready to go. By this time, Nora just wanted to finish what she’d started. She climbed in and gave Charlie coordinates far enough away from the Nucleus that the Children would probably not associate the noise with Nora. At least until she was long gone.

*May this be the last in a long line that started with Alex Smith. I never want to assassinate anyone else ever again.*

*It’s the Wasteland. I’ll be in fights. Have something that has to get done and Raiders or Gunners or Mutants will be in the way. But no more, ‘This person is your target. Learn who they are. Walk in their shoes. Know them. Plan your mission. Then terminate with extreme prejudice.’*


*Not that, ever again.*

They landed well south of the Nucleus and Nick, Piper, and Nora walked up the road to the entryway. The Zealot at the door smiled at them as they walked up, “Greetings Sisters, Brother.”

*I’m doing this so you Children can live. Don’t make me regret that.*

They went into the Nucleus. The first person they met was Devin. He’d filled out a little. Not a lot, he was still lean, but his didn’t look like he pounding on death’s door for admission.

Nora smiled at him as he gazed at her worshipfully, and then she moved past and made her way to the sub. She opened the hatch and slid down the ladder, and made her way through the conn to Tektus’ chambers. As usual, he was praying.

“How Confessor?” Piper said.

Tektus stood and turned, and smiled beneficently at them all, “Greetings my children. You’ve set quite the example here. True devotion to faith and family.”

Nora stepped forward, “I recovered a holotape. Confessor Martin is planning to come back and take over,” and at that Tektus hissed in shock. Nora added, “We should come up with a plan…but not here. The Command Center Tunnels should be far enough away from the rest of the Children. We can plan there.”

Tektus was in shock. “Martin, it can’t…Play it. I want to hear that coward’s voice.”

Nora slotted the tape and pressed play. Martin’s voice came out, shaping words he’d never spoken. “Listen Children. Tektus’ time is over. The Nucleus must prepare for a New Order. Mine.”

Tektus looked like he’d seen a ghost, and spoke as if to himself, “I can’t believe it. He’s alive.”

Then he looked right at the three of them, “None of the other Children can know of this. The Command Center you said? I’ll ensure we aren’t…disturbed.”

Nora, Piper, and Nick went straight to the Command Center. Up the stairs and past a guard. Then
into the Center. The maintenance hallway was to their right as they entered, just short of the former security check.

They opened the door and found themselves in two small adjoining rooms. The first was filled with various tools and diagnostic equipment carts. The second was the access room. There was a partially collapsed wall.

Inside the wall was a corpse. Based on the tattoos still visible, and the robes, Nora was fairly sure…

“Confessor Martin,” said Piper in surprise.

“Are you really that surprised, Thing?” Nora asked, “I was fairly certain Tektus had killed him. Or had him killed. I was counting on his innate mysticism to provide the motive for him to…”

There was a voice, “Now, where are you?”

Nora pulled her pistol, and held it down by her side out of sight, as she stepped through the doorway.

Tektus smiled at her and said, “Ah. There you are. Now, Martin. Tell me what…”

Nora closed the distance between them with three strides, and as Tektus spoke, her pistol came up, centered on his chest, and from a distance of four feet she fired into his body. Four times she fired directly into his chest.

Tektus collapsed like a rag doll and Nora was pleased to note that there were no exit wounds in his back.

_That’ll make clean up easier._

As she watched, his mouth moved feebly. She said nothing as she watched the light leave his eyes. She sighed deeply as he died.

She turned. Piper was looking at her in concern. Nora shook her head. “I’m Ok. Really, Thing. I’m pretty sure that,” and she pointed at Tektus’ corpse, “Is my last mission. My last assassination. But even if he isn’t, they’ll be like this from now on. Jobs so clear cut and with no other options that it’s obvious they have to be done. He had to die so that every single other person out there can live.”

Nora smiled, and it wasn’t ghoulish or shaken or any other adjective you’d care to note, it was a simple smile, “I killed him, premeditated, so that hundreds could live. I’m fine with that. If that were the only way I’d ever used these skills? I’d have always been just fine.”

Piper thought for some time and said, finally, “Some people need killing?”

“Some people need killing, Piper.”

Nick nodded, “Eddie Winter. Elder Maxson. Conrad Kellogg. There are people that the world is just better off without. Tektus was one of them.”

Piper said, “Mom.”

Nora nodded, and then said, “But I could do this job right. Dispassionately. Quick. Clean. Speaking of which…”

Nora gestured for Nick to take the legs and she and Piper took the arms. They placed Tektus in the same wall as his predecessor. Then Nora looked back at the spot where Tektus had fallen. There was a small puddle of blood.
Nora pulled out a bin of bituminous clay, labeled ‘Dry Sweep’. Other places than the military would have called it ‘Kitty Litter’. She spread it over the puddle, then ground it in with her boot. The clay rapidly soaked up the blood, and soon, Nora was sweeping the clay into a dust pan and dumping it in with the body. Then all three of them bricked up both bodies, and pulled a shelf over to cover the spot, and stocked it with items. As a last touch, Nora gathered up handfuls of dust and threw them from several feet away at the shelving.

Nora looked around surveying the scene.

 нескольages people walked in. Several are walking out. There’s nothing indicating a killing or hiding a body behind a superficially undisturbed shelf.

It’s not like The Children are going to send a homicide investigator and their team in. We’re fine.

“This’ll stand up to fairly close amateur inspection,” said Nick, satisfied, “Which is all it will ever get. We’re good here.”

The three left the Command Center. There was no guard at the door. Apparently Tektus had sent them away. They moved directly to the exit. No one really looked up at their passing.

It’s entirely possible Tektus instructed them to take no note of us, assuming that we’d be doing his dirty work.

They stepped out of the Nucleus and walked away. They never looked back. They walked the mile or so south and boarded the Vertibird waiting for them. It took off. Nora kept waiting to feel something bad. It never happened, then or at any point in the future.

When the ‘bird landed, Chase was waiting for them.

Nora walked over concerned, “Is something wrong?”

Chase smiled and said, “Quite the opposite, really. DiMA would like you to meet someone.”

Nora gestured, “Lead on.”

Chase escorted them in, and as they walked into the main corridor, Nora saw DiMA speaking with Tektus.

As they approached they heard DiMA speaking, “It sounds like quite the experience. But I’m glad to know there will be peace on the Island again.”

Tektus spoke and he sounded humbled, “Atom’s vision was clear on the matter. I-I must thank you again for sheltering me while under its sway.”

DiMA smiled benevolently, “Think nothing of it. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.”

Tektus made little bow, “You are too kind DiMA. I should only need just a little more fresh air.”

He smiled at DiMA, and then turned and left Acadia.

Nora waited until the door outside closed behind him. Then she turned to DiMA.

DiMA said, “I suppose you’ve heard the news? The High Confessor’s had a vision. Atom demands peace. Can I assume you’re here to tell me your task is done?”
Nora nodded, “It is. Does this mean the island's finally safe?”

DiMA nodded, “I believe it does. Peace can finally come to the Island. It’s a heavy burden what we’ve done, but now the Nucleus, Far Harbor, and Acadia will all flourish. Together.”

Nora said, “It was the right thing to do.”

DiMA said, sadly, “It was necessary. Hope for a better future. That will be the judge of our actions.”

DiMA added, “I’ll handle things here. I’ll arrange talks between the Children of Atom and Far Harbor. They will learn to prosper together, and under our guidance the Harbormen will continue to survive and reclaim what the Fog has taken from them, and my people will remain safe.”

DiMA thought for a second, “You should pay a final visit to the Nucleus. I believe the High Confessor will want a word with you. And of course you are welcome in Acadia whenever you like,” he smiled, “After all, where would we be without you?”

Nora nodded, and then she went down to speak with Amari. She found her chatting with Faraday. “Our mutual friend is on his way,” Nora said. Amari nodded and Nora went on, “I believe I promised I’d get you home as soon as possible…”

Amari smiled. “Not necessary. I’m having a lovely time with DiMA and Faraday. When you are ready to pack everything up and send it all back, I’ll fly home with Charlotte.”

Nora nodded, and she went back out. She had Charlie fly them straight back to the Nucleus. They made their trip back up the highway. When they arrived Grand Zealot Richter was waiting outside. He greeted them. “Sister. Have you seen the High Confessor? We cannot find him anywhere.”

Nora spoke seriously, “When we spoke to the High Confessor he seemed in thrall to a vision. Perhaps it holds him still?”

Grand Zealot Richter seemed ready to burst, when Tektus came up the stairs.

“Ah. Grand Zealot. Please gather the Children for an address. Atom has vouchsafed a vision unto me, and I would tell the Children the good news.”

And with that, Tektus stepped past them and into the Nucleus.

Richter looked at Piper in shock.

She shook her head. “You’ve got me, Grand Zealot.”

They all walked in.

Chapter End Notes

It's easy to know when your ‘first time’ for something is. It's fairly well defined. But everyone also has a last time for everything, and you usually only realize it in extreme hindsight.

But I wanted to show what Nora was like, even now when it isn't her first or even second recourse, that she is good at what she does, when she has to do it.
As they walked in, the Zealots were shouting for everyone to gather. Through the grimy windows in the entryway, they could see Tektus walking up the ramp to the submarine’s sail. They followed, but even as they were walking up the ramp he began speaking, “Gather Brothers and Sisters, gather to hear his word.”

Tektus paused dramatically, “Peace.” Beside her, Nora could hear Richter gasp.

Tektus raised his arms, “In the throes of a brilliant vision he speaks and now, now I must obey. Atom demands peace. With Far Harbor. With Acadia,” and now he sounded grieved, “Within our family.”

Nora felt shaking, and she turned and saw tears on Richter’s face.

*Maybe someday I’ll tell him Gwyneth’s alive. Maybe. At any rate, I can stop worrying about him starting a Counter-Reformation. At least in the near term.*

Now Tektus voice took on a more familiar cadence, “And any found disobeying Atom’s word will answer for their crimes. Let none stand in the way of his radiant will. Glory to Atom!”

The Children called back enthusiastically, none more so than Richter, “Glory to Atom!”

Nora walked up and joined Tektus on the submarine sail. He looked them all, “You. I knew it was you. In my vision, there beside our brilliant master. All of you. Here you must have these. It seems only right that they be worn by his favored children.”

He handed each of them a pendant. As it passed over her Pip-Boy, it caused the Geiger counter to chatter.

*I think we’ll keep these in lead lined heirloom boxes. As soon as possible.*

Tektus shook their hands and they took their leave. They left the nucleus and Nora put the pendants into her satchel and took some RadX. When they got to the Vertibird, Nora asked Charlie if she had a shielded box.

“Why?” asked the pilot.

“Because I have a charming gift from an admirer and I would just as soon not destroy any more bone marrow than I already have done, thanks,” said Nora.

Charlie laughed and handed them a sample canister. When the pendants were safely within, Nora’s Pip-Boy returned to normal. Before she could say anything both Nick and Piper were gulping RadAway.

Piper smiled, “Of all the things I won’t miss about this Island when we finally get out of here? I won’t miss this the most.”

“What it lacks in intensity against the Glowing Sea, it makes up for in sheer relentless bloody minded ubiquity,” said Nora.

Piper laughed, and they climbed aboard.
The flight was short. Nora left Tektus’ gifts with Charlie, with instructions for PAM and Tinker Tom to check them out. If his paranoia didn’t find anything there was nothing to be found.

When they entered Acadia DiMA waved Nick over, “I guess this is goodbye, brother.”

Nick shook his head. “No. See you later. I want you guys to keep the antenna and radio. Hopefully, I’ll have an invitation to send. I expect you to come down to see me.”

DiMA smiled. “I kept thinking I was here to make a home for synths. To be an example of how people and synths could get along. And here you and your friends are a better example than I ever was.”

Nick said, “I’m not looking to be anyone’s example. You help who needs help. It doesn’t have to be more than that.”

DiMA said, “I’ll try to live up to that, brother. Maybe I can stop offloading memories.”

Nora said, “How about you and Faraday visit CIT? I bet Allie and Madison could help. And if they can’t and your tolerance for mad science is high, there’s always Rosalind Orman. Though she’s liable to decide to soup up your head and give you laser beams for eyes.”

DiMA laughed.

Piper said, “She’s serious, DiMA.”

Nick smiled at DiMA’s shocked look, “You could do worse. She’d fix your memory issue. And your looks COULD kill.”

DiMA smiled, “I’ll think about it. Now, I believe that you originally came here for a very specific reason?”

Nora nodded. DiMA clasped her hand, “Until we meet again.”

The three went all the way to the basement, where they found Kasumi standing by a packed bag. She looked at them, her eyes glistening, “So it sounds like there’s going to be peace on the Island. It was you, wasn’t it? You found a way to fix things.”

“If you both have a knack for fixing things, Kasumi,” said Nora. Kasumi smiled, “I can’t believe people like you exist. Part of the reason I didn’t trust DiMA was because he seemed so selfless, but you’re just like him.”

She took a breath, “So listen, when you first showed up you came to get me. To bring me home. I’ve been thinking a lot about that. I hurt Kenji and Rei by leaving, didn’t I? I could’ve just stayed there, pretended everything was all right, but I left them. Should I go back?”

She was speaking to herself, “They obviously still care about me…or who they think I am…They need a daughter. They deserve to have one.”

Nora took Kasumi’s hands, “Kasumi, please listen to me. You’re not a synth. You’re the real Kasumi. You’re their daughter.”

Kasumi sighed, “That’s the thing isn’t it? Now I’ll never really know. That idea is always going to be there, somewhere in the back of my mind. But you’re right. I’m real enough, aren’t I? Maybe that’s all anyone can be sure of.”
She picked up her duffel. “I’ve made my goodbyes. It’s time to go…home.”

Nora smiled at Kasumi. The four of them walked by, and Faraday was saying goodbye to Amari, who was also packed, and joined them as they walked up the stairs. As they were leaving the building, Nora heard a voice from behind.

“Not bad, for a human,” said Chase. She smiled, “If you ever need backup, I’ll be here.”

Nora said, “Thanks Chase. Appreciate it. Maybe I’ll take you up on that one day.”

“You do that, human.”

And Chase waved and went back in the building.

The five went down to the pad where Charlie had parked the Vertibird. She’d loaded up all the heavy munitions Nora’d requested when she’d thought the Red Death was something a bit more than just a navigation hazard, albeit a potentially lethal one.

When they walked up she turned away from her ‘bird, and said, “You sure you want to leave the antenna?”

Nora nodded, “Yeah. I suspect they’re going to need it. Since a lot of folks here are likely to join the Commonwealth. Although the Harborpeople will probably need another few decades to warm to the notion.”

Charlie barked a short laugh. “Got that right, Director. Hop in?”

Nora shook her head, “Maybe after I do what I came here to do. But I owe a man his boat back. Not to mention a couple their daughter. Keep the radio open. Once we close the case, I probably will want that ride. In the meantime make sure the doc here gets home safe and sound.”

Amari turned to Nora and said, “Just when I think you’ve topped yourself you find another way to do it again.”

Nora smiled, “Stand by doc, I’ve got at least one more adventure left in me.”

Amari waved and climbed in, and she and Charlie took off and headed southwest, for the Commonwealth.

Kasumi walked with the three down the mountain. Presently Nora looked over at the young woman.

“How? It’s killing me here.”

Nora smiled, “All you had to do was ask. The CIT. The scientists there can try and ‘talk’ to your control unit. If they can’t…”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Pardon?” Kasumi asked.

“I said, would you really like to know? If you’re a synth. For certain?”

“I-I think so. Maybe?” Then Kasumi nodded to herself, “Yes, I want to know. But Kenji and Rei can never know. If the answer is…you know.”

Nora nodded, “Deal.”

They walked a while longer. Kasumi eventually said, “I give up. How? It’s killing me here.”

Nora smiled, “All you had to do was ask. The CIT. The scientists there can try and ‘talk’ to your control unit. If they can’t…”
“Then I’m human?”

“Some extra tests as well, cellular biodegradation rates, and so forth, just in case your control unit is malfunctioning.”

Kasumi shuddered, “Can we talk about something else? Suddenly I’m skeeved out.”

Nora laughed, “Of course. But then, I’m not the one claiming I’m a synth.”

Kasumi shook her head, “Fine. You win.”

After a while they reached Far Harbor. They found Avery in a large meeting on the pier. She was shouting. “Now everyone. Quiet, quiet. High Confessor Tektus, the leader of the Children of the Atom has made a formal peace with us.”

Allen Lee made a disgusted noise, “And you believe him?”

Avery nodded, “I do. He said it was a vision from Atom. And if you know anything about them you know how serious that is.”

Mitch, from The Last Plank said, “But those missionaries of his…”

Avery interrupted, “They won’t be a problem, he’s keeping them clear of Far Harbor. No more preachers coming.”

Mitch persisted, “So they just going to forgive what Allen’s done?”

Allen started, hotly, “Hey! It weren’t just me…”

“Wasn’t” said Piper.

Avery spoke over them, “Their…well their god commanded them to let that go. So, yeah, I think they’ve forgiven us. So they’ll stay on their part of the Island and we’ll stay on ours. That’s it.”

The crowd began to disperse and Nora sought out Abigail.

“Mariner?”

Her face lit up. She was still looking haggard, “Mainlander.” Her voice dropped as she hugged Nora, “I told Avery. She’s doing everything to make me comfortable. I think I’ll tell the rest soon.”

Nora smiled and held Abigail briefly. Then she stood straight, “I have to go soon. This girl needs to get home.” She pointed at Kasumi.

Mariner smiled, and said, “I know. I guess this is goodbye.”

“Not quite, Abigail. When the time comes, don’t you leave without letting me get here first.”

“How can you make that promise?” Mariner asked.

“My Vertibird. I’ll make it before you go. I promise you.”

Mariner nodded. “Damn me if I don’t believe you, Main-…Nora. See you. One more time.”

Nora nodded. She hugged Abigail again, and then she stepped into Avery’s shop. Avery looked up as Nora walked in, “I need to talk to you, Nora. Tektus wasn’t specific but he said you were an
‘instrument of Atom’s will.’ Because of you I think we have a real chance of peace here.”

She smiled at Nora, and said, “Truly we don’t deserve you. Once the Fog recedes - and it always does - we’ll take our Island back. And that’s thanks to you.”

Nora smiled and then she turned serious, “Captain. Mariner told me you know about…”

Avery looked sad, “Yes, she told me shortly after you two killed the Red Death.”

“I need a favor Captain. When…when the end comes, send someone up the mountain to Acadia. They’ll call me. I’ll come.”

“How can you get here in time, Mainlander?”

Nora smiled a sad smile.

“I’ll tell them to floor it.”

Chapter End Notes

Mariner is another in a long line of bit characters I've chosen to imbue with more pathos and life (Marcy, K1-98/Jenny, etc.) than the game gives 'em. It says something about me that I feel compelled to do that, but I don't know what...
The four travelers walked out on the dock. Kenji’s boat was there, waiting. Nora heard Kasumi give a tiny little cry, and then she ran along the dock, and shyly touched the boat. Then tossed her bag aboard and followed it.

Nora, Piper, and Nick followed Kasumi. Without much in the way of fanfare, Nora looked over at Kasumi’s nod and pressed the return course. The boat’s engines fired up, and it backed off the pier and turned. They all watched as the boat showed Far Harbor her stern. There was a small group watching them leave.

Nick said, “They have a chance.”

“Because we made sure of it,” said Piper. “Being out here with you, Blue? It’s the best thing I could ever have done with my life. I love you.”

Nora smiled and kissed Piper tenderly. Then they all watched as Mt. Desert Island slid by on the starboard side, as the boat picked up speed and headed for open ocean. When the island was just a smudge on the horizon, they all sat down to kill the 9 or so hours left in the trip.

Nora looked over at Kasumi, “Ok, hit me.”

“I beg your pardon,” the young woman said.

“If you don’t have a million questions, you really ARE inhuman, Kasumi. I didn’t exactly debrief you before we left,” said Nora

Kasumi looked at Nora for a long moment, “Ok. What the actual fuck happened on that Island?”

“Oh wow, that’s gonna take a while. Which I guess makes it perfect for the trip,” said Piper.

“I have no pressing appointments,” added Nick.

“Allright Kasumi. There are number of things that went on, but they all really have their roots in three things. First, insanely stiff necked Harborpeople. They are, if anything, even more prickly than Mainers before the war, and let me tell you, that is really saying something.”

Nora smiled, “Second, DiMA being as good as he really seems, while at the same time being a leader for the synths at Acadia. When you’re responsible for a lot of people, you sometimes don’t have the luxury of perfect morals. And DiMA tried to have his cake and eat it too, by offloading the memories of all the compromises he’d had to make over the years to protect his people.”

“And finally,” Piper interrupted, “The Children of Atom are a militant group who have decided to hasten then end of everyone, to release the ‘worlds inside’. Back in the Capital Wasteland, someone fairly susceptible to religious mania got ahold of a physics or chemistry textbook, and a diagram of an atom. They decided that the resemblance of atoms to solar systems was to be interpreted literally. So they ‘embrace division’ when they die, and become new worlds.”

“That’s nuts,” said Kasumi, “That kind of diagram is a vast oversimplification of the structure of an atom…”
“Oh, we know,” said Nora, “and don’t even get me started on the one of them who noticed how much empty space there is in one of those diagrams of an atom, and decide to worship the far greater amount of ‘Nothing’.”

“Anyway,” said Nick, “all of us, including you, walked into an unstable system. That whole situation was about to blow up. Because while my brother was being so ‘ruthless’ he almost couldn’t stand it, he was failing to resolve anything, because it was almost unresolvable.”

Nora said, ‘So I arranged to be seen by all three factions as ‘reliable’. And then I killed the High Confessor of the Children of Atom, and replaced him with a synth copy who was more susceptible to…the better angels of our nature.’

“Again with the Lincoln, Nora? Plagiarist,” said Nick.

Kasumi said, “How could you…”

“It was that or set off a thermonuclear device in their headquarters, or watch them slaughter all the Far Harborpeople,” said Nora. “This is what I mean by hard choices that DiMA was unwilling to face. And he’d already done it once.”

“What?” said Kasumi.

Nora nodded, “Avery. That nice reasonable woman? Synth. We’ve arranged it so DiMA has secret influence over every faction on the Island. Because while he isn’t perfect, he’s the best option available. It all started when we got a call from an old partner of Nick’s…”

They told Kasumi the story of everything that had happened. As they were passing Gloucester and heading for the Nakano’s the story finally wound down.

Kasumi was silent for a while, then she said, “When I get a bit older than 17…can I come and work with you at the CSIS?”

“Or other parts of government? Sure. The country we’re making could use smart young women who are good at fixing things. And making things. And dreaming big dreams. I’d love to have you planting trees too, Kasumi.”

Kasumi looked confused, Nora laughed and said, “It’s a long story, and I have got to find a copy of ‘Leaves of Grass’. I mean, to help build a nation for us all.”

Kasumi nodded, and looked at the shore approaching. She looked worried.

“Kasumi?” Nora said.

The young lady looked up. Nora smiled at her, “I mean it. We’ll check you soon. And then you’ll know. Ok?”

Kasumi nodded, “Ok. And I will. But honestly, how much does it really matter?”

“That a girl. That’s the answer I hoped you’d reach,” Nora said, as the boat’s engine cut out as it docked. “Now go, your parents are worried sick.”

Kasumi ran down the pier like the wind. Nora, Nick, and Piper followed rather more slowly. This first bit was for Kasumi, Kenji, and Rei. Kasumi opened the door and ran in, and they all heard her speak, “Mom…Dad…I’m home.”
They heard Rei first, “Kasumi? Oh my god, my baby is Ok.”

Nora and Piper, mothers themselves, shared a thought.

‘I know my baby is Ok,’ my ass. You’re never sure enough to not worry.

Kenji said, “Welcome back home, Kasumi.”

Kasumi said in a small voice, “It’s good to be home.”

Then the detectives stepped into the room, and Kenji looked up from the hug his family was sharing, Kasumi’s face buried in her mother’s shoulder.

Kenji said, “You saved my daughter. Thank you.”

Nick smiled, “Happy to do it Kenji.”

Kenji said, “You don’t often see kindness in the Commonwealth. I’ll never forget this.”

Nora said, “Don’t worry about it Kenji. It was our pleasure.”

Rei looked at her daughter, “Kasumi, does this mean…you know we’re your parents right? You’re not a synth.”

Kasumi smiled through tears and said, “I know mom. I’m sorry. I was just so confused I wanted to go somewhere. Anywhere.”

Kenji held his daughter again, “It’s Ok, Kasumi. You’re home now.”

Piper spoke to him earnestly, “Listen to Kasumi next time Kenji. Don’t just try to keep her safe. Talk to her.”

Learned a ton, haven’t you, Thing?

Kenji said, “I know…I will…I was holding on so tight I almost lost her…”

Rei looked at them all, “Can you stay for dinner? I can make some ramen. Maybe a little shrimp tempura.”

Nora looked at Piper, who nodded. Nora turned to Rei, “Tell you what, if we can sleep here tonight, we’d love to have noodles and tempura with you.”

Rei smiled, “I’ll get some sheets, and get started.”

Rei may or may not have been a better cook than Nora. That probably needed to wait for a very delicious contest. But she was definitely a better Japanese cook than Nora.

“You’re better than Takahashi!” said Piper as she tucked into Rei’s ramen.

Kenji nodded, “Power Noodles is Ok, but I always look forward to getting back to Rei’s cooking.”

Kasumi said, “Can I come next time? I’d like to try for myself.”

Kenji opened his mouth, then he paused. Thought. Then he opened his mouth again and said, “Sure. We’ll make it a family trip. Then you can see that your mother makes the best ramen in the Commonwealth.”
Nora smiled to herself as Kasumi beamed.

As they sat, having some of Kenji’s whiskey before settling in for the night, Nick looked over at Nora. “In this line of work you got to learn to expect the unexpected. Still, I have to admit I’ve never quite had a case like Kasumi’s.”

All of them looked over at Nick, Kasumi included, smiling. Nora raised her glass to Nick, “It turned out to be quite an adventure.”

Nick chuckled, “Yeah. A whole Island trying to kill us. Here’s hoping the next case just takes us to a dingy bar. I could use a slow one.”

He looked over at their hosts, “I’m glad things have ended as well as they have. The Nakano’s are a happy family again, as much as anyone around here can be anyway,” and he smiled at all of them.

Nora felt compelled to say, “These days, that’s not too shabby, you know that, right?”

Kenji smiled, “You don’t have to sell me, Deputy Director. I already sent out feelers to the CNE. I may not qualify as a ‘settlement’ but the Minutemen at the cottage down the coast have added us to their patrol. And I’m selling fish, and shrimp, and clams into the Commonwealth.”

Nora looked thrilled. “You mean I can look forward to steamers in addition to everything else? Tell me there’s real lobsters left out there.”

Kenji nodded.

“Oh. My. God. Thing, I know what the next feast’s gonna be. Better get a tarp ready.”

Piper looked confused, but Kenji, Rei, and Kasumi all laughed.

Shortly after that they all went to bed, and the next morning, Nora was on the radio to air control. Charlie was the one who came, having unofficially declared herself their pilot.

As they waited the Nakano’s made small talk. Finally the Vertibird came into view. Kenji turned to Nora. “I would never have believed it, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“Believe it, Kenji. The Institute is gone, and nothing is holding us back now,” Nora said.

They boarded the ‘bird, and as they took off Charlie commented that it was a lot nicer to be able to see everything, including the ground. Nora laughed, but she did enjoy watching Boston’s skyline, such as was left, slowly growing, then sliding to the left as they made their way to Fenway, and the Right Field Landing Pad.

They hopped out and Nora took a deep breath. She could smell Power Noodles, and something coming off the Bobrov’s still, and the Taphouse, even that little asshole Sheng’s purifier. She was home.

As they stood there, Nora grabbed Nick’s hand and headed for Myrna’s. When they got there, Nora said, “Engagement rings. Any in stock?”

Myrna shook her head, “Expecting some from Nuka-World in a few days, though.”

Nick said, “Oh, well, guess we have to wait…”

“Bullshit, Tin Man. No cold feet now. Piper?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Charlie replied.

Nick said, “You know, this thing with the Institute, I just…”

He was cut off by Nora, who said, “Nick, you and I, we are going to work together and nothing is going to stop us now.”

He smiled and said, “I think you’re right.”

Charlie added, “As long as you don’t mind me tagging along.”
“Yeah Blue?”

“Can we borrow my engagement ring to you for a few days?”

Nick tried to protest, but Piper just slid it off, and said, “You bet.”

Piper plopped it in Nick’s hand.

“Nick you’re not gonna be able to put this off. Unless you want to tell me you don’t want to marry her,” Nora said.

Nick’s expression at that told Nora everything she needed know. “Ok, Tin Man, time to go face the music.”

Nick gulped. Piper rolled her eyes, “It’s not like you haven’t done this before.”

Nick snapped, “And look at how that turned out.”

Piper’s face fell. Nick saw it and he admitted, “And it scares me more now, because I’m pretty sure I love Ellie more. I loved Jenny, but I’m nuts about Ellie.”

“C’mon Nickie. Let’s get you engaged.”

They walked back down the alley to Valentine’s. When they opened the door, Ellie looked up and her face lit up when she saw Nick.

“You’re back!” Then she took a breath and said, “How’d everything go with the Nakano case?”

Nora said, “We tracked Kenji’s daughter to a synth refuge up north near Far Harbor. She’s back home safe and sound.”

Ellie smiled and said, “That’s great. We don’t often get to bring people good news. It’s a nice change of pace. I knew something good was happening when you and Nick started working together.”

Nora smiled, “Oh, you have no idea.”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked.

Piper surreptitiously pushed Nick forward. Nick blushed and then he said, “Ellie, I…uh…I…”

He sat on the table for support, “Ellie Perkins, will you marry me?”

Ellie looked at him in shock. Nora was holding her breath.

Then Ellie beamed a huge smile and said, “Yes!”

Chapter End Notes

Kasumi deserves to know what happened...and since she's not recruitable, she just sits in Acadia. Time for some storytelling.

And two fisted noir detective turns out to have the same weakness they all have...
Several days later, as Nora was planning the engagement party, the call came on the radio. Kasumi was ready to find out the truth. Nora let her know that they were getting ready for a party and invited the Nakano’s as one of the proximate causes of the party. Nora offered to fly them to Concord and then Diamond City, as long as Kenji gave her a good deal on steamers and lobsters.

Which was ultimately how she found herself sharing a Vertibird with a subdued Kasumi Nakano, and a clueless Kenji and Rei Nakano, and dozens of live lobsters in coolers and bucket after bucket of steamer clams.

The prior day she’d flown up to retrieve Kasumi and fly her to CIT in Concord. Kasumi had been jittery at best, terrified at worst.

“What if…?” Kasumi had started.

“If you turn out to be a synth, sweetie? Then you turn out to be a synth. The Institute is gone, you’re not going to be given some kind of secret orders that turn you into Lizzie Borden, and you’re a human being no matter how you were made,” Nora had answered.

“But…”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll know soon enough. Madison promised to run the tests herself. And I told you, you’re not a synth. Most synth infiltrators knew who they were. Just wait,” Nora had said.

Kasumi pretty clearly was still worried, but there really wasn’t anything Nora could do. So when they landed at Sanctuary Airfield, Nora made sure she got Kasumi down to the University with no delays. Which had meant that she could only shout to the newly married Meredith Haylen-Danse that she expected them at Nick and Ellie’s engagement party at Diamond City the next day.

And, of course, she didn’t leave until she had gotten an affirmative reply from a smiling Chief Haylen-Danse that she expected them at Nick and Ellie’s engagement party at Diamond City the next day.

And they were greeted by Dr. Orman at the telemetry facility.

*Wow, they trott out their best.*

Madison looked over at Nora, “I know it might seem like this is for your benefit Deputy Director, but the next time this becomes an issue, you’ll see. We’d do this for any synth, so that they can be sure. It’s our responsibility.”

Rosalind led Kasumi over to a chair and explained that there would be no commands, just a communications ‘handshake’. Kasumi, as Rosalind was speaking her language, just nodded. Dr. Ormon’s hands flew over the keyboard.

She stood for a few seconds and then said, “I’ve got no acks.”

Kasumi breathed out, shakily. Nora had said, “What?”
Kasumi was the one who answered, “No ‘acks’ means no acknowledgments. Their system tried to talk to mine and got nothing.”

“I keep telling you don’t have a ‘system’,” Nora said.

“Actually,” Rosalind said, “We all have a system. Even if it’s non-optimized code from 2 and a half billion years of kludges and patches, it’s a system.”

“OK, Dr. Pedant. She doesn’t have a synth system,” Nora had said.

Madison cleared her throat. “Maybe. And maybe it’s waiting on a specific SRB activation code that we just don’t know, because Justin Ayo was a dick.”

Madison turned to Kasumi, “We’re going to need a biopsy sample. I can numb the surface, but it still will be uncomfortable for a few days afterwards.”

Kasumi couldn’t even talk now, so she just nodded for Madison to continue. Nora reached out and held the young woman’s hand. Madison sprayed something on Kasumi’s upper arm, and waited thirty seconds and then before anyone had a chance to register what had happened, pressed a device to Kasumi’s upper arm. There was a popping noise, and Kasumi flinched, and the Madison was putting a bandage over a hole, then jabbing a Stimpack next to the wound.

Madison patted Kasumi’s shoulder, “This should take 30 minutes to an hour.”

Kasumi nodded. Nora tried to distract Kasumi with tales of the Lobster Boil she was planning, but after a while, she subsided and they sat in tense silence, waiting.

At 44 minutes the door opened, and Madison Li walked in with a clipboard in hand. She looked over at Kasumi, and asked, “How exactly do you really feel about synths?”

Kasumi sighed heavily. “I guess I always thought of them as the boogeyman until I found out I was one. And even then, I worried what I might do. But when I met so many of us in Acadia, I think I realized we’re all really just another way of being human. I think the new Commonwealth has it right. Synths really are people, but still I feel for Kenji and Rei…”

Madison interrupted, “I want you to remember that feeling. And you really should call Kenji and Rei ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’, Kasumi.’ She turned the clipboard around, “You can’t read this, but basically it says you’re the natural born daughter of Kenji and Rei Nakano.”

“What? But the dreams, the feelings…” started Kasumi.

Nora said, “You’d just lost your grandfather, who you loved more than anyone. You felt disassociated. I should know…we’re trained to see that,” Nora said, “So when you started feeling depressed and disconnected from your family, you put one and one together and came up with eleven.”

“I’m human?”

“You’d be ‘human’ even if you were artificial Kasumi. But yes, you are as Glory would say a ‘Mark I’ model,” said Nora.

Kasumi sat for a long moment, then suddenly she burst into tears. Madison and Rosalind looked baffled, but Nora had held the 17 year old girl…and at that moment she was definitely a ‘girl’…who realized that she missed her grandpa terribly, and that she’d very nearly run away from home forever on a mistake.
On the flight back to the Nakano’s Nora had said, “Do you want to tell them?”

Kasumi thought, “Maybe someday. Not right away. But then how am I going to hide the trip?”

Nora had smiled, “Maybe this would do?”

Nora handed Kasumi a paper. It showed that she’d been admitted to the Commonwealth Institute of Technology.

Kasumi, shocked, had looked at Nora, and asked, “How?”

“That little chat you had with Rosalind about communications protocols, after you finally calmed down? That was your interview,” said Nora. “They really are eager to see you enroll.”

Kasumi looked at Nora, “Why? Why are you doing this?”

She deserves a real answer, even if it puts a ton of pressure on her.

Nora said, “A long time ago, shortly after I came out of the ground, and before I was even close to finding my son, I told some people that I wanted a real country. With safety, and opportunities to grow. To be what the United States before the war should have been.”

Nora smiled, but her hand squeezed Kasumi’s shoulder almost too hard, “And everything I’ve done since then has been meant to make the world a much better place when I die than when I came out of the Vault. I see in you the potential to take that baton and continue even when I’m gone. You are in many ways another daughter for me…I need you to continue to make a country until we’re done.”

Kasumi thought. Then she said, “Count me in.” And she thought some more and nodded again. “Yes. Count me in.”

Nora smiled and so did Kasumi. Until they got back to the Nakano’s and she told her parents, enthusiastically, her plan. Kenji and Rei were overjoyed. Their daughter was going to grow beyond just their four walls, but even more so, she’d be safe. The Nakano homestead was right on the frontier of the Commonwealth. Concord and the CIT was decidedly…not.

And that was when Kasumi got quiet again. “I’d have to leave you. Again,” she said.

Rei replied, “Yes. But my little girl would be learning how to be more than we could’ve imagined. And we can visit. This will be wonderful, Kasumi.”

And thus, Nora was in the air with a family justifiably proud of their child, and a child, on the verge of adulthood, who’d suddenly come face to face with exactly what that meant. And the Woman Out of Time vividly recognized what she was seeing.

This is a child becoming an adult not by fighting off Raiders, or taking over the Family Farm, but by heading off to college. Just like generations did in the centuries before 2077. Just like I did. I’m doing it. Bit by bit, it’s actually happening.

When they landed at Diamond City with the Nakano’s, Nora got some CSIS personnel to move the coolers and buckets to the center of Diamond City. She’d been able to take over a large area of Power Noodles for her Lobster Boil. And the preparations started with the steamers.

With Kenji’s help Nora got two huge bins loaded with salt water and as Kenji and Nora explained to onlookers, they transferred the steamers to the salt water carefully and gently because Steamers had delicate shells. And a small conical ‘foot’ sticking out one side. While the steamers were soaking in
salt water, Piper had gotten Nick and Ellie and a large group of well-wishers, such as Roger and
Meredith, and Preston and Marie, and half of the Guard force from Diamond City, along with D and
Jenny. John Hancock came to congratulate the couple. One of the guards was wearing sunglasses,
and Piper and Nora had a laugh at that.

Sturges had arrived, fresh from his work reverse engineering Vertibirds. He was trying to figure out a
way to build more. So far the limiting factor was manufacturing facilities, but Nora was positive
Sturges’d crack that problem soon enough.

Irma and Amari were there as well. With Irma’s appointment as Chief Justice, the couple had moved
the Memory Den from Goodneighbor to Diamond City. And James Sun and Stanley Carrington
were here as well. Both acerbic. Cynical. And very much in love.

*Other parties I’ve thrown have been dinner affairs. This sucker is a beach party lacking only the
beach.*

Travis and Scarlett were providing the music and live broadcasting. It was a good thing that Kenji
and Rei had brought a LOT of clams and lobsters.

People were commenting on the tiny Mirelurks and Nora laughingly explained that there were a ton
of lobsters who hadn’t mutated into the 8 foot long, homicidal versions. Kenji had given her reports
of yields that told her that the sea life around Boston, farther out, had gotten back to pre-colonial
levels. Cape Cod had reached a point where it deserved the name again, and lobster had become
plentiful enough to qualify as low-class food again.

*Funniest thing I ever learned at Plimouth Plantation…they fed lobster to the indentured servants. It
was poor people’s food!*

But for today, Nick and Ellie’s engagement party was classic Boston. Boiled Lobster served whole.
Steamer clams with broth and butter. Small mounds of buttered corn on the cob. And all the beer that
Yefim and Vadim, Henry Cooke, and Whitechapel Charlie could funnel into one place and chill to
just above freezing.

Piper looked over at Nora and was surprised to see her wife tearing up.

“What’s the matter. Blue?” she asked.

Nora smiled as a tear trickled down. “Irish,” she said.

“Happy crying?” Piper said.

Nora nodded, “This is a party like anyone would’ve had before the war, Piper.”

About that moment Nat and Shaun pointed at the Steamers and began laughing. Each clam had
extended a conical ‘foot’ out to the side. It looked like…

Piper said, “What?” and at that Ellie looked into the tubs and looked over at Piper and began
laughing uproariously.

Ellie said, “It looks just like…”

Piper looked at it, and she thought about what she knew in theory if not practice about human male
anatomy, blushed and began laughing herself.

Nora said, loudly enough to be heard, “That foot is edible but can be ’chewier’. But it makes a great
handle for stirring in the melted butter.”

Several assistants, briefed by Nora and Kenji, began steaming the clams in pots at the same time as a lot of lobsters met their final fate, dropped head first into the boring water.

“Eww!” cried Piper, “They’re screaming.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “They’re one step up from bugs, Thing. That’s air coming out from under their shells.”

The corn was already boiling and almost ready to come out, when everything began being pulled out of the pots.

Nora stood on chair and shouted. “Alright, before we start eating, or given you are all tyros, trying to eat, and looking around at your neighbors to see if you’re doing it right,” and there was laughter, “We’re gathered here, guzzling cold beer and eating messy seafood in celebration of the upcoming marriage of Nick Valentine and Ellie Perkins.”

Nora raised a beer bottle, “Nick led poor Ellie on a hell of a chase, but she finally bagged her man. Not even a hardboiled private eye could dodge a woman that dedicated…”

“I didn’t want to,” called Nick.

Nora laughed, “Oh, bullshit. As your best friend, I was about to lock you two into your office until you both pulled your heads out of your asses, as I seem to recall being told about me and Piper at one point.”

“Yeah,” called a guard, “But Piper’s a troublemaker. What’s Nickie’s excuse?”

Piper yelled, “Hey!” to general amusement. Then she blushed and beamed as someone said, “Ah, just kick ’im in the balls Piper. You’re aces at that, an’ he deserves it!”

*Yep, Piper is now a fine upstanding, after a manner of speaking, citizen of Diamond City.*

“…so let us raise our bottles. And then pucker our lips, and…sip. Or guzzle.”

Nick laughed loudly and even though only a few others knew why, they all joined in.

Then Nora sat, and began eating by swirling a steamer in clam broth and then butter and popping it in her mouth, then putting the shell in the empty bowl in front of her. She saw a lot of people starting in on corn on the cob and looking over at neighbors, who were looking at neighbors, who were looking at Nick or Nora or the Nakano’s, all of whom knew what they were doing.

*This is just sad. People in Boston of all places should know how to lay into steamers and lobster.*

Nora resisted the urge to put the whole lobster on her head, just to see who might follow suit. Instead she picked it up grasping the tail firmly and bent it back on itself until it came off, then repeated the performance with each claw. She watched out of the corner of her eye as a wave of boiled lobster dismemberments rolled around the table.

Then she pulled apart the claws from the two joints, and cracked those joints open and fished inside for those small morsels, dipped them in butter and ate them with relish.

At that point she said to Piper on one side and Ellie on her other, “Ok, watch.” Then she pulled off each flipper from the lobster tails, and then widened the hole at the other end slightly with her
fingers. Then with care, she inserted her finger into the tail, from the flipper end, almost as if she were giving the lobster a proctology exam, and the tail slipped right out. Then she split the tail meat with a knife down to the cloaca in the center and pulled it out.

She showed nearby people how to do that, and watched as the information rippled down the table. Then she showed her wife how to pull the lower claw out while pulling the central tendon with it. Education over, she settled in and watched as people laughed at the people who messed it up, got juice on themselves and generally made a delicious mess, then swirled it in butter and ate it.

“This is totally not nasty, unlike radroaches,” observed Piper. “It’s even…sweet.”

Nora smiled, as she sipped her cold beer. Then she said, “You know, I feel like this is one of those steps I have to take in remaking the Commonwealth. People from Massachusetts should know how to eat lobster and look down on people who don’t.”

“What is Kenji doing with that green goop from inside the body?” asked Ellie.

“Oh, that. That’s the ‘tomalley’. Some people love it. Me, not so much. If you want to try it, you crack the main shell of the body, pulling it away, then scooping up the green goo. It’s like liver.”


At that point Nora and Piper, and several dozen of Nick’s closest friends, settled to serious lobster, clam, and buttered corn eating, washing it all down with cold beer.

Nick and Ellie look happy. And he’s showing her how to eat it. That’s adorable. I am now officially the nosy, busybody aunt of my country for real.

Nora let the laughter and the companionship wash over her like a tide, basking in a Diamond City as part of the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth as a growing nation. As embodied in a lobster boil that could have been part of any pre-war gathering.

Just not right off the pitcher’s mound at Fenway.

Chapter End Notes

And now four, FOUR chapters of non-game generated content and plot, mainly a way to close out many (but not all) dangling plot strings. And as a way of giving Piper and Nora and their friends some happy endings...although some bittersweet. Others offstage (like Roger Danse and Meredith Haylen-Danse's wedding...later Marie Curie and Preston Garvey have theirs offstage as well...).

I did NOT misspell "Plimoth Plantation": https://www.plimoth.org If you ever are near enough to go, GO. The whole thing is incredible, and it's where I learned (from a docent) that lobster was considered poor folks food (put yourself in the shoes of a 17th Century Englishman...would YOU eat the seabug or give it to the indentured servant 'transported' as an alternative to execution?).

Steamers really are borderline obscene sometimes, but always awesome in broth, butter or both. Lobster is wonderful, if sometimes challenging to eat. And what other 'high class' meal consists of stuff you eat with your hands slathered in butter and is best with
ice cold lagers or light ales? It is a PERFECT late-summer/early fall feast. And of course, I had to have one last, food porn chapter. (Yes, I know the tag is a more literal usage, but I have ALWAYS called the practice of taking a picture of your meal and posting it to Facebook or Instagram, 'Food Porn', and besides, it amuses me to think of the poor SOBs who come here looking to get their kink scratched and find the occasional recipe instead..."
Three weeks after Nick and Ellie’s engagement party, Nora found herself in a desperate position, surrounded by threats on all sides. In other words, she’d kissed Piper at the door, and Piper had headed out to interview Irma about the latest Nuka-World war crimes trials and Nora had gone to CSIS headquarters to do battle with reports.

She sat down and began going through them. The Minutemen had opened a new garrison centered around a cottage on the coast that someone at The Castle, in a fit of originality, had dubbed The Coastal Cottage, which put a detachment north of Salem and most of the way to the Nakano’s. About a third of the way to Gloucester.

In addition, General Garvey had not yet approved, but had plans for, another garrison, this one halfway between Jamaica Plain and Somerville, in a marshy area south of the Gunner Headquarters. He was awaiting the elimination of the Gunner presence in Quincy. Those worthies were under constant bombardment from the Jamaica Plain garrison and the battery sited at Warwick, and reports reaching Nora’s desk indicated that the lieutenant there, a former Minuteman named Clint, had already executed one of his subordinates, someone known only as ‘Tessa’, for insubordination, and his leadership was under constant threat from someone named ‘Baker’.

Nora drafted a brief note to Preston outlining the CSIS intel, and suggesting that he let that situation come to a head first, as driving off the demoralized remnants would be a lot easier after letting their internecine strife mature. At that point he should be able to guarantee a secure supply line to the Marsh Garrison, and that in turn would put his planned artillery in range of the Gunner main camp in the Commonwealth.

At which point, General Garvey could put his fondest and longest running desire to rest. His second longest running desire having been concluded the week prior, when he’d finally married Dr. Marie Curie. She kept her name, and had started in on a long series of reasons, which Preston had interrupted by saying, “All you had to say was, ‘That’s what I wanted, Preston.’ It’s your choice, Marie. Always.”

Preston’s longest running desire, predating the moment Nora had first met him, was to drive the Gunners from the Commonwealth, bleeding and cursing, and then salt the earth where they’d been. What little history Preston had been able to find about the Romans had never made sense to him until he met the Gunners. Then everything he read about the Punic Wars became very understandable, simply by substituting ‘Gunners’ for ‘Carthaginians’.

Preston was sitting on those plans with an inhuman level of patience.

Nuka-World continued to recover and was starting to send out starter settlements, mainly seeding them east of Worcester, back towards Boston and the rest of the Commonwealth first, several of which were getting to a large enough size to justify their own reps. And the folks at County Crossing had added another settlement. After one too many caravans had been lost to the Children of Atom at Kingsport Lighthouse, they’d been cleaned out, and a new settlement put in place.

As she piled though the various reports, Deacon showed up at her office. She looked up and smiled, and gestured for him to sit.
He sat down, put his feet up on her desk, and said, “Y’know, boss, I never thanked you for leaving me out of that trial, although calling me ‘it’ kind of hurt.”

“I thought of all people you’d appreciate a good smokescreen,” she replied.

He started laughing, “All right. You got me, boss. I thought that bit was pretty slick.”

“So what brings you here?” Nora asked.

“Courier duty, Nora. I am but a lowly messenger boy,” and he handed her an envelope. “I was supposed to plant it somewhere under conditions that would leave you confused and surprised, and the more I thought about it, the most surprising way to deliver this would be to just hand it to you.”

Nora started laughing, “You know what, Deacon? You’re not wrong. This is perhaps the most baffling thing I’ve ever seen you do…or it would be if you hadn’t explained yourself. Let see…”

When she opened the envelope, she smiled, “So they set a date?”

Deacon nodded. The card that Nora had found read:

Nicholas Allen Valentine
And
Eleanor Iris Perkins
Invite you to celebrate their marriage
At All Faiths Chapel
Entry Way, Diamond City
4:00 PM, Saturday, October 27th, 2288

Reception (catered by Nora Wright) to follow at
Dugout Inn, 1st Base Street, Diamond City

“I see I got volunteered to cater,” observed Nora.

“Yeah, Nick said you’d just make Codsworth do it,” Deacon said.

“Ouch. He’s not wrong, but ow,” Nora said.

“What I don’t get is why he’s having the reception at the Dugout Inn instead of the Colonial Taphouse. I know why you and Piper had to, but Nick isn’t as disliked as Piper was,” Deacon observed.

“On behalf of my wife, ouch again,” Nora said, “And it’s because Nick knows too much about Henry Cooke. That guy isn’t just a dick, he’s rotten and slimy to boot. No business from us for him. Vadim is a nut bar, but he’s our nut bar. And Yefim is perfectly nice.”

“Well you…or Codsworth…have a couple months to get it all figured out.”

Nora nodded. “True. I figure we’ll offer the holy trinity; beef, chicken, or fish. I’ll get Codsworth going on it. He loves running a party. It’s the closest he can get to self-actualization…”

At that moment, Jenny, aka Agent Canine, aka the Duty Officer of the Day came running up to
Nora’s door. She said, “Nora…I’m supposed to tell you, Captain Avery at Far Harbor radioed. There were only two words, ‘It’s time.’”

Nora was up in a flash, “Get me a Vertibird,” she started.

“I ran into Charlie on the way over, she’s already headed over to the pad, and she was calling for a ‘bird and using really bad words if they weren’t on their way instantly,” Jenny said.

Deacon hopped up, “I’ll let D know where you’re headed.” Then he reached into Nora’s closet and handed her her ‘Go Bag’, a small satchel she kept loaded with essentials, just in case.

“Go, boss. Go. We got it here,” he said.

When she reached the Right Field Bleachers pad, she saw Piper there waiting as well.

Nora saw her wife there and said, “What are you doing….oh god, that’s today.”

Piper looked over, “What are you doing here? Seeing me off? You’ll see me tomorrow.”

Nora looked stricken, “Oh Thing. I just got a call from Far Harbor. It’s Abigail.”

Piper joined her wife in looking stricken, “But…”

Nora said, “I wanted to be there tomorrow, but…”

Piper said, “I know. We could put it off. I could go with you. I know how much you care about her. You’re going to be a wreck.”

Charlie was watching with interest, but Nora just said, “Thing? I’ll be Ok regardless. Don’t worry about me. What do you want to do?”

Piper chewed her lip. “I want to stick with the original plan. It’s also Ok if you’re not there tomorrow. I promise.”

A Vertibird appeared and began descending. Nora kissed Piper, and said, “I love you, and I’ll be back soon. Of all the rotten timing.”

Piper laughed, “It happens, Blue. Our lives aren’t exactly sedate.”

The Vertibird descended, and as soon as the wheels thumped down, Charlie was aboard, all but tossing the pilot out. Nora climbed into the co-pilot’s seat as Charlie did a thorough but rapid checklist for long duration, over-water flights, and when she was satisfied, gave the ground crew the signal that she was taking off.

As they climbed away she spoke over the intercom, “I took over for this flight, ma’am, because I’ve been there, and I can get you right to the gate to Far Harbor. Also, I’m willing to really ‘floor it’.”

And with that she advanced the throttle to military power and left it there.

Just a bit over an hour later Mt Desert Island appeared on the horizon. It was approaching quite rapidly, and Charlie finally eased the power back to a normal cruising speed as they flew in towards the settlement. Then she eased it down into the Fog, and plopped Nora down mere steps from the front gate.

Nora opened the door, and leapt out and ran into Far Harbor. Avery was there waiting for her, and waved her to Mariner’s house. Nora walked quickly into the house and up to the bedroom. Mariner,
Abigail, was lying in bed with Doc Teddy beside her.

Abigail’s eyes focused on Nora entering the room, and she smiled, and said, “Mainlander. You came.”

Nora nodded, “I said I would, didn’t I, Abigail? I promised you.”

She looked frail. She looked like she was dying. But she smiled at Nora, “That you did. And if I learned nothing, I learned you keep your promises. I held on for you, Nora. I wanted to say goodbye. And thank you. But where’s your wife?”

“I’m sorry, Abigail. She couldn’t come. But it’s for a really good reason. Can you keep a secret?”

Mariner chuckled thinly, “I promise I’ll take it to my deathbed, Nora.”

Nora leaned down and whispered in Abigail’s ear. When she straightened up, Abigail eyes were shining. “Thank you, Nora. I have something to tell you too, but it’s not a secret. I made a will. I’ve left this to the people here. A real town to build on. But on one condition; they have to join the Commonwealth of New England.”

Nora looked at Mariner in shock. Mariner laughed, then coughed and said, “’S’true. They don’t join, they’re out on their ass, Mitch and Cassie Dalton and Allen Lee and all the rest. Figure I’m speeding things up by at least two decades.”

Nora laughed, “You probably are, at that.”

Mariner reached up, and Nora took her hand. Mariner said, “Mainlander? Nora? You’re the best thing that happened to us here, and I’m proud to call you my friend. I wish we could have had longer, but I want you to never regret any of it. You helped me build something because at your heart, no matter what, you’re a builder.”

Nora had to lean in, and Mariner squeezed her hand feebly. “You’ve been a true friend. Goodbye, Nora.”

Abigail died.

Nora sat next to her for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last death, I promise. As some have asked, why can’t Curie or Lorenzo Cabot's serum save Mariner? The honest answer is: it never occurred to me. But even if it had, I don’t think I’d have done so, for plot reasons, but also because I do not really think we’ll come up with a genuine "cure" for cancer (and for some reason, I'm convinced that's Mariner's 'condition'). Here's the thing...'cancer' isn't an invasion, it's a revolution. It's the bodies' own cells run amok. Most 'cures' consist of getting the bodies defenses to do their damn jobs, more effectively, but the body doesn't, can't, shouldn't attack itself.

There are some promising therapies predicated on finding something unique about cancer cells that non-cancerous bits of the body don't have and making smart poisons for those things. Because that's what Chemo is...a poison that you hope kills the malignant
cells SLIGHTLY faster than the host. All told, however, I'm not sanguine. At least until we can create genuine nano-machines, and maybe not even then.

Although the story that Scipio Africanus salted the earth in the wake of the second Punic War is likely apocryphal, the Punic Wars were the largest conflicts on the planet up to that point...and the hatred of Roman for Carthaginian and vice versa is hard to overstate. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punic_Wars
Ceremonies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Captain Avery made the arrangements with Doc Teddy to get the funeral ready. Avery told Nora that Mariner had wanted her Mainlander friend to speak at her funeral, because, “…none of these other hangers on would do as good a job.”

That had sounded a lot like the Abigail Nora knew and she laughed in spite of herself. Then she made her way over to the Last Plank, to rent a room and to work on her speech.

I seem to do this entirely too often. Theresa, Cait. Too many friends. I’m happy I met Piper, but the old world had a higher life expectancy.

Well, I guess it did until it really didn’t and most everyone died on the same date. So maybe I can woman up and do right by Mariner.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a mild voice. So looked up and DiMA was there. He sat down with her. He said, again in that mild, soothing voice he had, “I heard about your loss. I got here as soon as I could.”

Nora looked shocked. “For me?”

DiMA nodded. “My brother contacted me, and said you might need a friend.”

Nora smiled, “In a weird way, I see his point. My only real true friend here in Far Harbor just died. We’re burying her, but at best the folks here are acquaintances. Except for you.”

DiMA smiled. “Mariner was your ‘Confessor Martin’. When Martin disappeared, I knew he was dead but I didn’t KNOW know. I think you’re lucky. You get to say goodbye to her publicly. But in many ways she was Far Harbor to you, just as Martin was the Children of Atom to me.”

Nora looked up and said, “Is that why you kept trying to redeem the Children?”

DiMA smiled, “I never gave up, Nora. I just found a different way to do it. I heard about Mariner’s will. I think it’s the right thing.”

Nora said, “I hear a ‘but’.”

DiMA shook his head, “You do? You would be wrong. Maybe an ‘and’ instead. And Acadia will be joining as well.”

“What made up your mind?”

“Your friend, Nora. Martin showed me what the Children could be, and Mariner has shown me what Far Harbor can be. In fact you’ve gone one better.”

Nora raised her eyebrows, and DiMA went on, “I had make replacements. You just changed a woman’s mind.”

“I like to think Abigail was there already,” Nora said.

“You’re probably right, but of everyone on the Island, we’re the two most kindred spirits. We plant
seeds and nurture them, and when we’re very lucky, they grow strong,” DiMA said.

Nora smiled, “Like trees, one might even say.”

DiMA nodded seriously. “Now, is there anything I can do to help?”

Nora said, “Listen. Just listen while I talk,” and she told DiMA about meeting Mariner, and all the errands they’d run, and how Mariner had opened up to her, and even, later, when no one was close enough to hear, about the Red Death.

DiMA had smiled at that. “It seems like everywhere you went on this Island, things were never quite what they seemed. The Robobrain who committed that murder, the Far Harborpeople, me, the Children, the Red Death, even Mariner, Abigail herself.”

“What do you mean, Mariner? She was genuine,” Nora said, a little offended.

DiMA raised his hand and said, “Please don’t misunderstand. Mariner tried to seem hard bitten and cynical, but think about her. For all that she talked poorly of the people living on her docks, did she throw them off?”

“No,” said Nora, “But then she was dying…”

“No,” DiMA said, “She let them come here in the first place. And when she found out she was dying, she immediately tried to find a way to make them safe forever. Does that sound to you like someone who’s a cynical, stiff-necked, unreasonable Harborwoman?”

Nora smiled, “No. No it doesn’t DiMA. You’re right. Everyone here wasn’t, or now isn’t, really what they seem to be. It interesting that that was what I needed to see more than anything. Even now,”

DiMA smiled, “Now what?”

“I write my speech, get some sleep and then you make arrangements to be in Diamond City on the 27th of October,” Nora said.

The next day dawned and Nora made her way to the funeral boats. Far Harbor had little enough land, and no one really enjoyed the idea of their loved ones being dug up and molested by the creatures here, so at some point someone had gotten their hands on a Viking ritual, and it stuck. Mariner was about the get a genuine nautical send off.

Nora sat through a number of speeches about Mariner, the final one from Allen Lee about her bravery in vanquishing the Red Death, on everyone’s behalf. Nora couldn’t let that go completely by, so she quickly scribbled some additional notes. And she stood to deliver the final remarks before Mariner was sent to sea for the last time.

Nora looked at them all, and began.

“Abigail Jonas, Mariner, was my friend. Together we rode out upon these very waves to face a creature none of you will ever be able to imagine properly.”

That was for you, Abigail.

“But that’s not important. More important than how her life ended was how she lived it. She took you all in when the Fog overwhelmed you. And she never threw you off. And everyone here, every one of you knows, she would have been well within her rights, and Far Harbor custom, to do so. Yet
she didn’t.”

“And that was because she was a human being the likes of which none of you have ever seen. Abigail was crotchety, but Abigail, Mariner, spent most of her last days making sure you were all safe. And I have never been prouder to call someone friend.”

“It’s easy to be open handed when you have lots. It’s easy to think of others when you’ve been told it’s important since you were a child. Much harder, impossible, to be a true philanthropist when your resources, your every instinct, and custom says otherwise.”

“And with her dying breath she created this place. And I know that she put a condition on it. That you join the government to which I belong. To build this Island into something more. And I am here to tell you that the second you decide to, I will accept your application. Because of her. Because of Abigail, the Founder of Far Harbor, and its guardian angel.”

“Because for as long as you are here, I can assure you, Abigail is watching over you. You never knew it. Hell, I’m not sure she knew it, but I can see it, clear as day I can see it. She loved you. All of you. You were her family and she wants the best for you.”


“Oh god…”

Allen made to stand and Avery put her hand up, and then she said, “This is a private function, High Confessor, and not a place for proselytizing…”

Tektus said, “I apologize, but you misunderstand. I am not here to convince you of something. I am here to pay my respects. Nora,” and he gestured at Nora, “Was right. I can tell, from all I have heard, that Mariner was a loving guardian for you, as the Mother of the Fog loves and guards the Children.”

There was a rumble, and Tektus said, “Please. Hear me out. Atom has called for peace and that is what you will always receive from us. But respect? That I give of my OWN free will, in honor of this woman.”

Tektus was in preaching voice, but his message was different, gentle. “Atom teaches us that we do not owe him anything, and in the past I misunderstood what he truly expected. He has made of all of us worlds without end, and upon Division, upon our natural deaths, we become greater. Universes untold within us all.”

“But in thinking about my vision from Atom, I have come to believe something more. That if the desire and the will is great, that we direct the potential of the worlds within outwards, to this one, strengthening and bolstering the one we all share out of love for those of us who yet remain. I believe that the Mother of the Fog was one such. And I believe that your friend, Abigail Jonas, also known as Mariner, was another. And just as we Children revere the Mother of the Fog for her place, so too, from this moment forward, will the Children of Atom revere the Mariner of Far Harbor. Your protector and worthy of the Children’s respect and veneration.”

Avery’s eyes were wide. “I…thank you, High Confessor.”

Tektus smiled benignly, and stood with his head bowed as the rest of the group mumbled a small prayer, and then Mariner’s skiff was sent out to sea. Before it was too far away, Nora threw a flare onto it and Abigail and the boat began burning.

As it drifted out Tektus spoke to the gathering, “May the Mother of the Fog and the Mariner of Far
Harbor watch over us all, and keep the Island safe.”

Nora nodded, as did many in the group. Allen didn’t, but then he also looked like he didn’t quite understand what had happened, but understood that something significant had.

Avery turned to Nora, “What was that?”

Nora answered, “Reformation. This version of the Church of Atom is very much its own thing now. I suspect that you won’t have problems with the neighbors anymore.”

DiMA nodded. And he turned to Nora and said, “I believe you have to get back. Can I walk you back up the mountain to your aircraft?”

Nora nodded. As they walked, Nora said, “How’d you arrange that?”

DiMA said, “I didn’t. In my wildest dreams I wouldn’t dare. That was Tektus taking a chance at lasting peace. He has Tektus’ ironclad faith, but Martin’s compassion. It appears to have combined into something…more.”

Nora laughed. “My heart about stopped when I realized he was there.”

“I don’t have a heart and mine almost stopped too,” DiMA smiled.

When they arrived, Charlie waved Nora over, “Well I checked everything from that speed run. As far as I can tell, we’re good. We’ll want to give the old girl a good once over when we get back, though.”

Nora nodded, and then to his surprise, hugged DiMA. “You’ll be there in a couple months, yes?”

DiMA said, sincerely, “Nothing will be able to stop me.”

“Don’t tell Sister Gwyneth that. She might arrange it. From wherever she’s gotten to.” DiMA just looked puzzled and Nora laughed.

They flew back to Diamond City. And Nora once again took up her day to day life. Piper returned the next day, and they celebrated their mutual return, very very enthusiastically.

Two months later, Nora found herself part of yet another ceremony. This one involved rather less crying, unless someone was moved to happy tears. Nora stood to one side of Pastor Clements, as Best Woman, and her wife, Piper, stood on the other as Matron of Honor. Hidden in Nora’s bodice was her pistol. Nick was not superstitious until he was, and he wanted someone who could make sure no one could get their hands on Ellie, under any circumstances.

Nora looked out over the crowd. Recently promoted Major Danse and Chief Haylen-Danse were there. And General Preston Garvey and Dr. Marie Curie were sitting holding hands. Marie was one of the criers, Nora was utterly unshocked to see.

Sitting front and center on the Groom’s side was his brother, spiffed up and shining. Looking like a sparkly pile of computer parts. DiMA was grinning from ear to partial ear.

Mackenzie Bridgeman was there too. She was sitting with Danny Sullivan. James Sun and Stanley Carrington were there. D was there with a man Nora didn’t recognize. Officially. Glory was sitting with her Railroad friends rather than the Minutemen, but you’d never mistake her for an agent.

Finally Allie Filmore, Brian Virgil, Madison Li, and Rosalind Ormon were there.
It was crowded. Nick and Ellie had been the people to go when you were at your wit’s end for years, and while few would admit it, most owed him, and wanted the best for him. Then as the music started Nick walked into the chapel and stood next to Nora, looking nervous.

Finally the march, a Shaker hymn titled, “’Tis a Gift to Be Simple” the basis of the seventh movement of Aaron Copeland’s Appalachian Spring, began and Ellie marched in sedately, looking luminous. Almost as though she’d finally convinced the man waiting for her staring as though he saw nothing else in the world at that moment, and had made him hers.

Ellie arrived in front of Clements and she took Nick’s hand. Pastor Clements said, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Eleanor and Nicholas in matrimony, which is commended to be honorable among all men; and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly and solemnly.”

Clements looked up and said, “Into this holy estate these two persons present now come to be joined. If any person can show just cause why they may not be joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

*Another use for the pistol, should it become necessary.*

Nobody spoke and he went on. “Now I have sought and sought for something to express how I feel about the marriage of Nick and Ellie. And I believe I found it, not in a religious text but in a book by a man named Raymond Chandler,” and Clements paused, and turned to Nick.

Looking directly at Nick, he said, “‘The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor -- by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. If he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things.’”

And he turned to Ellie. “Do you, Eleanor, take Nicholas to be your lawfully wedded husband and to live together forever? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and cherish him, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse for as long as you both shall live?”

Ellie said, clearly and firmly, “I do.”

He turned to Nick, “Do you, Nicholas, take Eleanor to be your lawfully wedded wife and to live together forever? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse for as long as you both shall live?”

Nick said, “I do.”

Then Clements gestured at Nora and Piper, and said, “The wedding ring’s circle symbolizes the unbroken and everlasting love and commitment between husband and wife,” and he looked over to Ellie, “Eleanor, repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed.’”

Ellie slipped the ring onto Nick’s finger, and said, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

He turned to Nick, “Nicholas, repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed.’”

Nick smiled as he slipped the ring onto Ellie’s finger, and the look Ellie gave him melted Nora’s heart, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

Clements said, “By the power vested in me, and with the lawful authority of the settlement of Diamond City, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss.”
Ellie melted into Nick’s arms and kissed him. At that moment the world had ceased to exist and it was only Nick, her, and a love supreme.

Clements faced the crowd and said words that had etched themselves onto Nora’s heart from her own ceremony. Nick and Ellie had apparently liked them, too, “This joyous day celebrates the commitment and love with which Nicholas and Eleanor start their lives together. Through their words and actions, they are joined together in the most solemn of bonds. May I introduce Mr. And Mrs. Nicholas and Eleanor Valentine.”

And as Ellie beamed radiantly, Nora burst into joyous tears, for herself, for her best friend, and for a New World.

Chapter End Notes

Tomorrow.

I will post early, if only because the end note could end up being longer than the chapter (kidding).

An instrumental version of ‘Tis a Gift To Be Simple (or Simple Gifts) can be found here. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0rWtSprRg8

And the Seventh Movement of Appalachian Spring here (if you want to see why they used the former as a bridal march instead of the latter). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5EkDe0VHOs
They had filed into the Dugout Inn, and the crowd was a babble of happy voices. Ellie was nothing less than gorgeous in her gown, and Piper had quite deliberately ensured that no one did, or even could outshine Ellie on her wedding day. It wasn’t triumph, though, on Ellie’s face but relief.

Nora leaned in, “Bottlecap for your thoughts, Ellie.”

Ellie smiled, “Do you remember when I’d declared my love to Nick after all that time hiding it from even myself?”

Nora nodded, and Ellie continued, “And he’d rejected me, and I was crying, and you two asked me, was I sure I wanted Nick and only Nick, and I burst into tears?”

Nora smiled gently and nodded again, and Ellie asked, “And you said you would fix it? How did you know you could?”

Nora cocked her hip and raised a glass and said, “I am the Nosy, Busybody Aunt of My Country and none may say me nay!”

Then Nora laughed and said, more seriously, to Ellie, “Because I wasn’t blinded by overwhelming love for Nick, I could see that he was as crazy about you as you were about him.”

DiMA had walked up and was listening, and Nora gestured at Nick’s brother, and said, “Ironically DiMA’s insistence on Nick’s synth nature was the final straw.”

DiMA said, “I was?”

Nora nodded, “Yes. You may have noticed, Nick is almost obsessively contrary…”

Both DiMA and Ellie said simultaneously, “I noticed,” then they stopped and smiled quite genuinely at each other.

Nora laughed and went on, “The more DiMA insisted that Nick was a synth, the more Nick insisted in his own head that he was human, until it dawned on him, that Nick, 2.0 and later 3.0, was simply a later version of himself, truly. He understood in a way I don’t think even DiMA here understands, that he is the sum of all his experiences.”

Nora looked at them both, “And when he did that, he realized that he was both DiMA’s brother and Detective Nick Valentine, BPD, and that as Nick he very much wanted to marry you, Ellie. From then on the trick was keeping him from backsliding.”

Ellie tipped her glass, and said, “Well I’m glad you managed.”

Nora smiled, and about then, Piper came up to the group and squirmed in under Nora’s arm. DiMA smiled and said, “How are you Ms. Wright?”

“I’mpeachy,DiMA. The question is how are you?”

DiMA looked thoughtful and said, “How so?”
Piper scoffed and said, “I’m too good a reporter to miss it. You’ve been talking with Madison and Rosalind.”

By now, Nick came over and said, “How are my favorite women in the world?”

Ellie looked over at her new husband and said, laughing, “This one,” and she gestured at Piper, “Is on the hunt.”

DiMA said, “Let me put your mind at ease. I admit, I was talking with them because they offered to upgrade my memory storage. I don’t want to forget things ever again…good or bad.”

Nora nodded, “Probably wise, DiMA,” she looked over at Nick, “I’m glad one of us got a happy ending with their family.”

DiMA smiled, then turned to watch Shaun and Nat chatting and having fun, and Piper hugging her, “It looks to me like you already have that, Nora.”

Nora followed his gaze and laughed, “I see your point, DiMA.”

At that point, dinner was called, and they took their places, and as they were winding down, Nora stood up to give the toast, and she said, “I have been asked to be brief. Apparently some of you louts want to get down to the serious drinking. And I can get behind that, because Vadim is giving me a 10% kickback tonight.”

Vadim sat up straight, “I am?” The room erupted in laughter.

“Seriously though, just a little more than a year ago I came out of hole in the ground. My husband had been gunned down and my baby stolen. And in that first week above ground I found two people who forever made a mark on me, for the better.”

“One of them was the woman I would marry, my wife, Piper,” and Nora nodded and then leaned over and kissed Piper.

“The other was the man who would quickly become my best friend, Nick,” and she stood and looked at Nick.

“But before I ever met Nick, I met Ellie. And as much trouble as I had, as much as the hounds of hell were nipping at my own heels, even I could see that Ellie was head over heels in love with Nick.”

“Without going into detail, who I was before I came out of that hole was not exactly a nice person. But when I saw Ellie, I made a decision. In this New World I could be a new person. I would find and bring Nick back to her, and they would be a couple if it killed me.”

Nora looked around the room. They were silent, and she cracked, “Nearly did too. Twice.”

The room laughed and livened up again, and Nora finished, “So while I congratulate Nick and Ellie, and as much as I knew from the moment I met them that they were destined to be together, they are also why my wife puts up with me. Because Ellie’s love for Nick made me want to be a better person.”

“Because Ellie and Nick make us all better people, just by being them.” And she took a sip. The room followed suit, but Ellie’s eyes narrowed at Piper.

Just then Travis began playing a slow dance, and called, “It’s time for the bride and groom’s first dance,” and after that first one, Nick and Ellie danced and danced and danced. An hour and a half
later, after Ellie and Nick had circulated collecting everyone’s fond wishes, they found themselves back in front of Nora and Piper, who’d been joined at their table by Nat and Shaun, both of whom were eating some of the cake that Codsworth had made.

Nora and Piper stood, and Ellie said, “Ok, I have a question. Why is Piper drinking water? It’s bad luck not to drink for toasts.”

Shaun opened his mouth and started, “Because Mom…” and Nat clapped a hand over his mouth.

Piper smiled at her sister and turned back to Ellie, “I’m afraid water’s all I can drink right now, Ellie. I’m pregnant.”

—Epilogue—

Seven months later, Nora and Piper, Nick and Ellie, and Nat and Shaun were in Nora and Piper’s home. Piper was rather considerably larger than she’d been at Nick and Ellie’s wedding. It was beautiful spring evening and they were all happily digesting another Nora meal.

Piper got a look on her face and waddled to the bathroom. Nora and the rest smiled at a not infrequent occurrence. Nora and Piper’s daughter—they’d elected to not engage in genetic ‘surgery’ so daughter she would be—had for the last several months treated Piper’s bladder as a combination punching bag, launch pad, and trampoline.

Then Piper called from inside, “Nora?”

Nora said, “Yes?”

“Could you come in here please?” Piper said.

Nora got up and walked over, Piper was sitting on the toilet. “Um, Blue? I think my water just broke.”

“Oh,” said Nora. She turned and said to Nat, “Code Pink. Go get Dr. Sun.”

Nat, smiling, ran out the door, while Nick and Nora helped Piper to the bed, and Ellie got everything else set up.

After twenty minutes James had arrived. He took a look at Piper’s face and suggested that Piper get undressed and put on a gown.

When Piper had finished putting on her night gown, she started putting on panties and James cleared his throat. “You’re not going to need those for a while Piper.”

Nora laughed, “Hey at least you don’t have to wear a ridiculous hospital gown and no panties too.”

“Oh ha,” said Piper then she winced. James put a telemetry band on Piper’s wrist, and then he bent over and spread Piper’s legs. He began muttering to himself.

_Piper looks like she’s realizing what I did with Shaun. Until this process is over, modesty is thing which does not exist for her anymore._

He sat up with satisfied grunt, “3 centimeters and that was definitely amniotic fluid. Your daughter is on her way.”
"So I push?" asked Piper.

"Oh good lord no," said James, "Not for quite a while. I understand you want Marie Curie to deliver, yes? I will get on the radio and get her on the way."

Piper winced again. "In the meantime," said James, "Can I suggest some painkillers?"

Piper shook her head, but Nora said gently, "Thing? Sweetie? They call it labor. You’re going to need the energy to be working hard later. You should let James give you something that will let you sleep in the meantime."

Piper looked truculent for another few moments, the she nodded. Ellie gave Piper the pills that James gave her. And with that, Ellie took for herself the role of delivery nurse. She brought Piper an extra pillow and then dimmed the lights. Everyone but Nora was shooed out, and Nora laid on two easy chairs smooshed together.

It was about 6 hours later and Piper’s labor had progressed when they woke up. James went spelunking again, and said, "5 centimeters. Good."

Piper said, "That’s nice but this is really starting to hurt. Where’s Marie?"

James looked abashed. "We’re uh...we’re trying find her."

Piper winced as another contraction hit, "Ok, then at least can we start the epidural?"

James said, "Ummm."

"Fucking what?!" said Piper.

"We used our last supply a couple days ago. Marie is bringing more," He replied.

"Marie?" said Piper.

James nodded.

"Who you can’t find."

James said, "Temporarily."

Piper said, "Can you tell me when she’ll fucking arrive?"

He shook his head and Piper barked, "Then it’s not fucking temporary, is it? How fucking hard is it to keep track of one fucking doctor?"

About then, Deacon came in. "We have a lead on her boss," he said to James. "They think she’s at Tenpines."

Piper broke in, "Do they know?"

Deacon shook his head.

"Do they have a radio?"

"Yes."

Piper said, "Then I suggest that someone get on the radio to someone at Tenpines," and now she
shouted, “And fucking ask!!!”

Deacon gave a low whistle, and Piper said, “Deacon, you asshole. You get Marie here in the next hour or I swear to god I will rip off your head and shit down the neck stump.”

“Wow! Ok. I have my mission” he looked at Nora, “Good luck boss.”

“I heard that, asshole.”

However, Deacon was as good as he thought he was, and Marie was flown in with 20 minutes to spare.

When Marie arrived, she swept into the house like, well, like Marie on a mission. Within another ten minutes, Piper had had her epidural and she was calmer. Much calmer. She called James and Ellie and said, “I’m super sorry about all that yelling. That really wasn’t like me. I promise to be much better now.”

Ellie smiled and said, “I’ll let Deacon know.”

Piper said, “Oh no. I didn’t mean Deacon. Fuck him.”

With epidural in, everything was calm again, and for about four hours Piper placidly had contractions that didn’t break through her little helper, and her cervix steadily dilated. At about 11 that morning Marie and James brought in a tray, and Ellie brought up a bassinet. Then they delivered a table to put all the stuff Marie would need, and Marie actually woke Piper from a doze and said, “Piper, *ma chere*, you’re going to start pushing soon, Ok?”

“What? Oh. Ok.”

At about 11:15 Marie said, “Piper, on the next contraction I want you to start pushing, Ok?”

Piper nodded. It was clear to Nora looking at Piper, that the pain was starting to work in around the edges of the epidural. By 11:40, Piper was sweaty, and a bit cross, and bossing Nora and Ellie around peremptorily. Nora and Ellie had been placed one to a leg, and their job was, not to put too fine a point on it, to hold Piper open so she could concentrate and use all her energy for pushing.

At 11:45, Marie said, “I see the head,” and Nora went and looked. Inside Piper’s vagina, already stretching, Nora could see hair.

*I never saw this when it was me. That’s incredible. That’s our daughter, right there.*

Nora could hear Piper say to herself, “Ok. You can do this after all. Just bear down.”

At 12:10 a huge contraction hit Piper. When it was over, Marie said, “Alright now hold off Piper.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Nora saw their baby’s head. It looked like Marie was twisting her head off.

*Just getting the shoulder past the pubic bone. But I canNOT watch that.*

“Ok, Piper, on the next contraction, one more push,” said Marie.

Then Nora and Ellie pushed down on Piper’s feet, holding her open, and as the contraction hit Piper grunted and then…

A baby’s cry.
Marie was moving fast, cutting the umbilical and doing all the things that she needed to do and doing it with all of her considerable skill. But Nora could only see a swaddled baby squalling and then she looked back at Piper.

Piper’s hair was matted, and she had bags under her eyes, and she looked like she’d gone ten rounds with a Deathclaw, and at that moment she was the most beautiful woman in the world to Nora. Piper looked over at the baby getting weighed. Nora looked over at Piper and said, “I love you, Piper.”

Nora walked over and kissed Piper tenderly. Piper looked at Nora and whispered, “Thank you. I love you and thank you for having a baby with me.”

Nora smiled and kissed Piper again. Then Ellie brought over their daughter and laid her on Piper’s tummy. Piper’s arms went around their daughter instinctively. Nora looked over to her wife and said, “Are you ready?”

Piper nodded and Nora called their friends in. Nick and Danse and Meredith. Preston had arrived, as had D and Deacon, who still hung back. And of course Nat and Shaun. And Codsworth.

Piper looked at them all gathered and she smiled, and she said, “I’d like to introduce you all to our daughter. Her name is Caitlyn Abigail Wright.”

The End of To Plant Companionship As Thick as Trees.
The End of Agent of Change.

Chapter End Notes

One last factual note: lest anyone think that birth scene is over the top, it is almost blow by blow the birth of my daughter. My wife's water broke about 11PM, Dec 30. By about 6AM, because she wasn't progressing fast enough (you have 24 hours after the water breaks to give birth without an increased risk of complications) they gave her pitocin. Which supercharges labor. At any rate, after about a half hour of "where did THIS pain come from" we asked for her epidural. "Yeah, about that," said the delivery nurse, "The anesthesiologist just had to go to an emergency surgery. He'll be at least a half hour. Do you want to wait or call in the on call guy?" Wife asks, "Where does on call guy live." The town we're in we're told. "Fine. Bring in the on call guy."

45 minutes later no staff guy, no on call guy, just the anesthesia nurse trying to take my wife's history. That's she's already given. Twice. Nurse is told to "just get the history from the fucking front desk." Has to be taken by nurse too. "Don't fucking care." Anesthesia nurse looks at me. I'm too smart to get in the middle of THIS. She gets the head delivery nurse, who shows up, at which point, wife yells, "Where's the fucking doctor? Every place in fucking [town] is fifteen fucking minutes from every other fucking thing. What is fucking taking this fucking shithead so fucking long. Get someone's ass in here, right fucking now."

Dr. Lollygag shows up about then. For various reasons, including nasty contractions hitting in the middle of arguments and procedures with health care people, takes another
fifteen minutes. Epidural is finally in. About a half hour later, wife calls in delivery nurse. Apologizes. Head nurse, apologizes. NOT the anesthesia nurse or doc. To this day, when the story is brought up her reaction is, "Of COURSE I didn't apologize to them. Fuck them."

So before you call it unrealistic, be advised that I lived through a 13 hour delivery that was 11 hours of placid progression, 1 hour of pushing, and a bit over one hour of Hollywood grade comedic shouting. And you would have to tell THAT woman she didn't live through that. Let me know where you want the remains shipped.

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So this is it. The ending. Yes, there's plot threads left dangling. I might someday want to write the further adventures of my favorite Fallout pair, but for obvious reasons, Nora and Piper aren't going ANYwhere for a while.

My announcement is that I will be writing, and posting, an original work in a few months. I've started in on it already. I plan to release it under Original Work. I confess, for those of you who have enjoyed my writing, I'm planning to have you guys be first draft commenters. If you're interested, just click through if you see something I've written pop up. Then, I'll make edits and in the end I may have something viable.

I started writing here to see if I could, and I VERY deliberately set myself the goal of hitting commercially viable word targets. Mostly I managed. Now I'm going to write something I can use for agent queries. We'll see. Maybe I'm crap, maybe not, but I think I really should at least try.

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Finally, thank you to everyone who was interested enough in the story, in the characters, and in what I was writing to read, or comment, or read AND comment. I really appreciated your words, kind and occasionally otherwise.

And I would also like to say that without the music of: Thomas Dolby, XTC, Vampire Weekend, U2, The Beatles, Alana Henderson, The O'Jays, John Lennon, Van Morrison, Blues Traveller, The Cars, Collective Soul, David Bowie, Counting Crows, The Cranberries, Death Cab For Cutie, The Decemberists, Coleman Hell, Elvis Costello, Goo Goo Dolls, Green Day, Hozier, Ingrid Michelson, Jethro Tull, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Buffett, John Mayer, Joe Jackson, Julie Fowlis, Led Zeppelin, Oingo Boing, Paul Simon, Pearl Jam, Pete Townshend, Peter Gabriel, The Rolling Stones, Son Little, Soul Asylum, Stars, Toad the Wet Sprocket, Tom Petty, The Vapors, ELO, The Who, Warren Zevon, and Loreena McKennitt, There would have been a LOT more days I just didn't want to write,

And just sitting down to bash keys usually leads to readable copy. Most days.

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