Who Kisses the Joy as it Flies

by nightingaelic

Summary
The Lone Wanderer resurfaces, the various Commonwealth factions struggle with each other and internal conflicts, and Sole Survivor Murphy grapples with her own responsibilities as a parent, as an individual and as a leader.
The people of Far Harbor, once they had ensured the fog condensers were all in working order again and none of the creatures littering the dock were still moving, did what they did best. One by one, the harbormen and women climbed down from the roofs and began putting their lives back in order.

Murphy watched them from the clinic as they worked, her limbs warming and numbing as the medicine Teddy Wright was feeding into her arm worked its way into her system. It was a choreographed dance, at this point. Fog creature attacks on the little port town were frequent, expected, even welcome when game was scarce and fishing nets came up empty. Today’s skirmish probably felt little different to most of the residents, but the leaders of Far Harbor were silent as they rolled over bodies and swept up broken possessions. They knew what powered the fog condensers, and what must have happened to shut them down and invite the creatures in.

Still, the dance went on. MacCready and the synths of Acadia climbed down from their sniper’s nests to assist in the clean-up efforts, carefully carrying the fallen into the clinic and unceremoniously rolling the cracked-open mirelurks over toward the Last Plank for processing. Old Longfellow, Mitch and Debby set up an assembly line, breaking down the over-sized crustaceans and amphibians into manageable pieces and stowing them in pots, baskets and buckets. Mitch even hauled out his meat grinder and set Small Bertha to cranking it.

“We get some bloodleaf, we’ll have mirelurk cakes with aioli,” he said somewhat warmly to Longfellow. Longfellow merely grunted in response, whacking a particularly tough claw to pieces with his cleaver.

Murphy scanned the docks and the people walking back and forth in front of the store window, but nowhere among them was the woman from the steamboat. As soon as she had maneuvered the watercraft back into port and tied it securely to an ancient mooring post, the stranger with the long locks and skin like a copper sunset had disappeared. No parting words, nothing. Her orange-haired friend hadn’t seemed particularly bothered by it, either, only helping Murphy to the doctor’s office before hurrying off to assist in the clean-up.

“Elizabeth Titus,” Murphy whispered to herself, staring at the bustle of activity outside. Could it be?

One by one, Teddy laid sheets over the dead on the floor of the clinic. Murphy watched as they came in, recognizing most of their faces and with some effort, putting names to them. The town was small. She had seen almost everyone in it before at some point. There was Candace Turtledove, the fisherwoman who had given her a little string of freshwater pearls when she returned, triumphant, after the Captain’s Dance. Next to her was Andre Michaud, the fog-beleaguered widower who had lost his husband to the creatures of the mist before she had arrived. He had never been the same, even after she, Teddy and Valentine had brought him back from death with a wild concoction of blood plasma, RadAway and anesthetics. And over there was Patrick Dunbar, the orphaned teenager who had lost his father, Howard, to mirelurks less than a year ago.

The hardest jolt came when the orange-haired Nadine and Allen Lee carried in the Mariner, whom
they set reverently on the floor before heading back out onto the dock. Murphy’s eyes welled up at the site of the woman who had dedicated so much of her time, energy and resources to making Far Harbor safe and secure for the men and women marooned there.

“Damn shame, isn’t it,” said a voice from the door.

Murphy wiped her tears away and turned to find the town’s unofficial leader, Captain Avery, leaning in the door frame. Her arms were crossed. She looked tired. Tired, but resolute.

“Captain,” Murphy said with a sniff.

“Avery replied with a nod. “Figures you’d come back and the whole damn island starts to go to shit.”

Murphy grimaced. “Well, that’s what happened last time. Why would this time be any different?”

“Avery sighed and recrossed her arms. “You want to tell me what happened? Before Allen whips up a mob and marches up to Acadia with his collection of harpoon guns?”

“I’m not really sure it’s my place to say,” Murphy replied. “You might want to talk to Chase. She’s got to be around here somewhere.”

“I want to hear it from you,” Avery said firmly. “After the last… revelation you provided, my trust in DiMA and the Acadians has been shaken.”

Teddy shot them a quizzical look from over by his supplies stash. Murphy caught it, and she unstuck the IV needle from her arm and joined Avery by the door. Her knees felt like pudding and every piece of her was bruised and tired. “Somewhere else,” she said with a jerk of her head.

Avery nodded, and led her across the dock to her home in the repurposed gift shop, stepping carefully around the splash of seawater Tony was using to wash blood from the dock. Once the door was shut, Avery turned to her, her expression accusatory. “Why did you come back?”

“I’m looking for something,” Murphy explained. “I went to Acadia to find it. Turns out that might have attracted the attention of people who would like to see this island tear itself apart.”

“The Nucleus getting blown to hell, the condensers shutting off, your return… it’s not just coincidental, is it?”

“No,” Murphy replied with a sigh. “I took the ability to wreak havoc on the islanders with me when I left for the Commonwealth, and when I came back, someone stole it from me.”

“God-fucking-dammit, Murphy,” Avery said, slamming her fist into the counter of the gift shop that now served as her kitchen table. “Why didn’t you just destroy the damn keys, codes, whatever, huh? Did you at least catch who did it?”

“We think so,” Murphy said, looking away in shame. “Faraday confessed to it. Said he was blackmailed into it by someone from the Institute. No idea where she is. Some synths are back at Acadia, trying to find out if DiMA was in on it too. As far as I can tell, no one else was involved.”

Avery hissed and shook her head in disapproval. “He’s in on it. He’s got to be. After… after me, what wouldn’t he do?”

“We’ll see,” Murphy said, resigned. “For now, I’ve… Chase, the Courser, has got things handled. You can trust her. You might want to talk to her about what this means for the relationship between
“the harbormen and the synths, going forward.”

“That mean you’re planning on leaving again, just when everything’s started falling apart?”

Murphy furrowed her brow. “I have to. I came here for information that might keep things like what just happened from happening again. Ever.”

“It wouldn’t have happened again, if you hadn’t come back,” Avery said coldly. “We’d finally worked out peace.”

“Peace bought with the death and replacement of the real Captain Avery and the High Confessor,” Murphy replied, her tone just as icy.

The replacement of Tektus was news to Avery, Murphy could tell. She looked taken aback. They stared at each other for a beat. Finally, Murphy reached out to open the door, but Avery moved to block her from leaving.

“Don’t,” she said quickly. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault DiMA and Faraday…”

“No, it is,” Murphy cut her off. “Trust me, I’ll be gone before you know it, and you and the people of the island can get back to… whatever you do. Surviving. In peace.”

Avery opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish, before blurting out, “What am I supposed to tell them all? If there’s justice for DiMA and Faraday, that’s one thing, but the real perpetrator is out there, still.”

Murphy shrugged. “The truth. Blame me, if you want. I don’t think I’ll be back after I find what I’m looking for, unless I need to be. And as far as the Institute goes… I’m working on it.”

Avery put a hand on her shoulder, her weathered features softening somewhat. “As much as the blame might fall on your shoulders, here, I couldn’t. You did so much good for us, when you first came here. The Mariner…”

She swallowed hard and tilted her head back, as if fighting back tears. “The Mariner would have tossed me into the bay. She always said you were the only one who really put the time in on the hull, besides her.”

Murphy looked at her feet. “Lot of good that did.”

Avery smiled. “It held up, until most of us were out of harm’s way. We have her and you to thank for that.”

Murphy bit her lip and nodded. “I suppose I should get out there and start hammering it back into shape.”

Avery looked her up and down skeptically, then clapped her on the shoulder. “Just don’t say anything to Allen until after I’ve had a chat with Chase, okay?”

Murphy staggered out the door toward the gate, but she was stopped almost immediately by MacCready. The sniper put a hand on either of her shoulders and studied her.
“You okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” Murphy lied.

“That’s a no,” MacCready said, turning her around and shoving her toward the bait shop. “You haven’t slept since the boat ride. Come on, there was a cot in that doctor’s office, right?”

“The hull needs repairs, they’re still cleaning up… everything, and I left my power armor on Nadine’s steamboat,” Murphy protested. “Just let me-

“Nope.”

“Bobby-”

“You need a nap. You get all doom and gloom when you’re tired, I can see it on your face.”

Murphy sighed and let him steer her back to Teddy’s office. When they found the patient cot occupied by a pale harborman with gritted teeth and a slashed-open shoulder, MacCready swung her around and led her instead to the Last Plank, where Debby held the door open for them with a grin.

“Gonna lie down?” she guessed, taking in Murphy’s wobbly stance. “Upstairs. On us.”

MacCready tipped his hat to her and shoved Murphy inside and up the stairs to the dingy attic room that Mitch rented out to visitors. Despite her complaints, he sat her down on the bed, helped her pull off pieces of combat armor while she untied her boots, and made sure she was snug in the covers before having a seat on the edge of the bed next to her and feeling her forehead.

“If you get out of this bed before an hour has passed, I’ll tie you down,” he joked.

“Kinky,” Murphy mumbled, already barely able to keep her eyes open. “You wouldn’t dare.”

MacCready blushed and chuckled, running a hand over the back of his neck. “I’ll get your power armor to that work station next to the gun shop and grab your pack. Maybe leave word with whoever’s at the gate that Nick and Piper are supposed to be on their way. Stay put.”

“You’re too good to me,” Murphy said with a yawn.

He smiled and rose. “Probably. Sleep.”

Murphy watched the back of his duster and the rifle slung across it disappear out the door, and then she was out like a light.

A squeak of rusty metal woke Murphy some time later, and she opened her eyes to find a dark figure climbing into the attic room through the window.

Every muscle in her body tensed, and she reached for her plasma pistol holsters on the nightstand. The figure was next to her in a flash, a hand over her mouth before she could cry out.

“Not a sound,” a familiar voice said.

Murphy put her hands up slowly and shifted back, wriggling into an upright position. Elizabeth Titus
kept a hand over her mouth, her eyes glinting fiercely in the fading light from the window.

“I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” she said, her voice low and hushed. “I only snuck up here because your bodyguard has been sitting on the stairs since he took your power armor off Nadine’s boat, and he won’t let anyone up here because they might disturb you. Can I have your word you won’t start screaming bloody murder? I just want to talk.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes, but she nodded. Elizabeth took her hand away and crouched down on the floor next to the bed. The light from the window broadened the lines in her forehead, the scar through her eyebrow, the crooked nose. Her brown eyes set in her warm features were still kind, but there was something else there, too. Weariness. The sort of weariness that spoke to something deep down inside Murphy herself.

“You know of me,” Elizabeth said.

“What do you mean?” Murphy asked.

“The name, Elizabeth Titus. It means something to you,” the woman clarified. “I could see it did, when I gave it to you on the boat.”

Murphy swallowed. “It does. You’re… I’ve heard of you.”

Elizabeth tilted her head back, studying Murphy. She held her chin a fraction of an inch higher than necessary, Murphy noticed. Pride, maybe. Possibly defiance. Of what, she wasn’t sure.

“And I know you,” Elizabeth went on. “Murphy. Mother of the Commonwealth.”

“Mother of the- what?” Murphy screwed up her face in disgust. “Is that what they’re calling me?”

Elizabeth smiled. “You have plenty of names, Captain. Some call you General, I’ve heard. Or Paladin. Still more call you the Sole Survivor. The last of your vault.”

She cocked an eyebrow at Murphy. “Last of a dead world, others say.”

Murphy sniffed and looked down at the ratty blanket over her legs. “It’s not dead. Just… different, now.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “But you would know what that feels like, as well as me. What it feels like to step outside into a world you thought was gone. Paladin.”

Elizabeth cocked her head to the side. Ever so slightly, she brought her chin down, until she was regarding Murphy on a more equal level.

“You aren’t hiding it,” she said in wonder.

“Hiding what?”

“Who you are. What you are.”

Murphy gave her a confused look. “Should I be?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I’ve learned over my life that it’s easier, to keep some things to yourself.”

A shadow crept slowly up in the door frame behind the woman on the floor. Murphy willed herself not to look at it. “Why?”
Elizabeth leaned back, her features thrown suddenly into darkness. “I’ll save that story for another time.”

The corner of Murphy’s mouth twitched into a smile. “The story of the Lone Wanderer?”

“Lone Wanderer?”

Elizabeth whipped her head around at the sound of MacCready’s voice. The sniper was standing in the doorway, his gun leveled at her head. Murphy snatched Alpha from her holster and flipped off the safety, pointing the plasma pistol at the intruder. Elizabeth smiled and put her hands up.

“I’m losing my touch,” she said.

Murphy kept her gun level, but she was surprised to see MacCready’s rifle falter a little. He was staring in awe at the woman on the floor, as if he had just seen a ghost.

“It’s… it’s you,” he stammered, his eyes wide in shock.

Elizabeth studied him curiously. “Have we… met?”

MacCready laughed, then took in a shaky breath. “You… L-Little Lamplight. About… 10, 11 years ago?”

“MacCready?” Murphy asked.

Elizabeth spun around and clambered to her feet. She squinted at MacCready, before her face bloomed in recognition and a winning smile spread over it.

“My saints and stars,” she said softly. “If it isn’t Mayor MacCready. Still threatening the mungos, I see.”

“Ho-ly shit,” MacCready breathed. “It is you. The woman who never came out.”

Murphy threw the covers off of her and stood, the wooden floor cold against her bare feet. “Bobby, you know her?”

MacCready nodded, unable to take his eyes off of the woman in front of him. Elizabeth looked back at Murphy over her shoulder and smirked. “Bobby? So you two are…”

“We’re not,” MacCready said a little too quickly. “Boss, this is… well…”

“I know who she is,” Murphy said, more than a little flustered. “How do you know who she is?”

“Relax, Captain,” Elizabeth replied, easing her fingers into the pockets of her mechanic jumpsuit and twiddling her thumbs against her hips. “It’s a long story. What say we go downstairs and share it over a drink or two?”

The meandering tale came out in the bar room of the Last Plank, over a couple of beers, Nuka-Ryes and a token bottle of Vim. In a low voice in the corner booth, Elizabeth and MacCready took turns telling the story of the plucky little mayor of a cave full of children, and the woman who wandered in one day looking for the back door of a vault full of monsters. Murphy stared in disbelief at the
impossible reunion, her misgivings melting away as MacCready’s face lit up at the memories while Elizabeth shushed him periodically and glanced around the bar suspiciously.

“So this girl comes walking back in with Sammy, Squirrel and Penny a day later, like it was just a trip to the store or something,” MacCready said, tapping his index finger on the table between them to emphasize his words. “A deal’s a deal. I take her back to Murder Pass, open the gate, and she looks up at me, pops her power armor helmet off, gives me and Princess a salute, and just walks in. Just walks in.”

Elizabeth threw back her drink and pointed at him. “And you never saw me again.”

“And we never saw you again,” MacCready agreed, tossing his hat on the table. “What in the world happened to you? We had a bet going on how you would die, but no one ever found your body, and next I hear of you, you’re…”

“Famous?” Elizabeth shook her head with a smile.

“Alive,” MacCready corrected her.

“The Enclave,” Elizabeth replied, tilting her glass from side to side to catch the light from the bar’s lanterns. “They came in through the front of the vault and knocked me out, after I found the G.E.C.K. Took it, and me, to their base at Raven Rock and interrogated me.”

“And you escaped, then came back with Liberty Prime,” MacCready said weakly, a star-struck smile growing on his face.

“You blew it up?” Murphy asked.

“I did.” Elizabeth leaned back in the booth. “But that was a long time ago. I was young and reckless. I’m a different person now. Hardly anyone remembers that, anymore.”

Murphy gave her a sympathetic nod, but MacCready looked aghast.

“Are you kidding?” he blurted out, before looking around and continuing in a conspiratorial whisper. “You’re the *Lone Wanderer*. You purified the Potomac, you drove the Enclave into the ground… you’re a legend.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Elizabeth said, waving her hand around dismissively. “All I did was pop out of a hole in the ground, shoot some people, make some waves.”

“Sounds familiar,” Murphy remarked, taking a sip of her Nuka-Rye.

Elizabeth grinned. “Doesn’t it? You’ve got a reputation of your own, Captain. Lately, everywhere I go, all anyone is talking about is the girl in the Commonwealth who gave an explosive middle finger to the Institute.”

“So you’re traveling now?” MacCready asked. “Where?”

“Here and there,” Elizabeth replied mysteriously.

The door to the bar flew open, and the orange-haired Nadine strolled in, looking pleased as punch. “Someone hit me with something stronger than saltwater, I’ve been in need of a drink since breakfast,” she called out.

Elizabeth turned around in the booth and waved to her. “Speaking of traveling, here’s my partner in
“God, I’ve missed your nicknames,” Nadine replied, sliding into the booth and planting a kiss on Elizabeth’s dark locks. “Figures the one time we manage to connect in port, it gets attacked by fish monsters and giant crabs.”

“You two don’t travel together?” Murphy asked, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, no, love,” Nadine said, signaling across the room to Debby to bring her a drink. “This one here flies free as a bird. Meanwhile, I’m just plugging away on old Catherine, making my living selling junk and hauling tourists. Cleaning out the odd nest of mole rats.”

“That’s the one,” Nadine replied with a grin. Her teeth were a little crooked, but not in an unattractive way. Murphy thought she looked like the stereotypical depictions she used to see on television of tomboy girls, only about 20 years older than the usual child actresses that were hawking Sugar Bombs or Mister Handys or the latest line of backyard toys.

Debby plunked another beer down on the table and Nadine took a long swig from it, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “So, you’re the little icicle that escaped a vault and led a revolution, then?” she asked, pointing the neck of the bottle at Murphy.

“That’s me.”

“Cute.” She transferred her attention to MacCready. “And you’re the paid muscle?”

MacCready puffed out his chest. “Yep.”

Nadine giggled and reached out to pat Murphy’s hand. “You can afford bigger muscles, love.”

The girls snickered while MacCready deflated, a sour look on his face. “So, you two are just passing through then?” he asked, changing the subject.

“I’m headed north,” Nadine replied, rolling her bottle between her fingers. “Got a whole load of junk up in Annex Nation with my name on it that I’m due to deliver to Point Lookout in a few months.”

She put an arm around Elizabeth. “And if I know this one, she’s just drifting aimlessly as usual.”

Elizabeth shoved Nadine’s arm off playfully. “It’s ‘annexation,’ not Annex Nation. And I’m running a job for Reilly.”

“Ach, of course,” Nadine said, her voice imbued with a mock tone of offense. “The other woman in your life. I should’ve guessed.”

“Well, at least her orange hair is natural,” Elizabeth teased.

Nadine slammed her palms down on the table. “That’s it. I knew it the second I saw you, your heart’s starting to stray. You’ve gone far too long without some proper romancing. I can fix that.”

She twisted around in the booth and she caught sight of Mitch behind the bar. “Hey bartender,” she barked. “What’s your name?”

“Mitch.”

“You got a guitar in this joint, Mitch?”
Mitch produced a rather worn-looking guitar from behind the counter. “This do?”

“Perfect, love.” Nadine gave Elizabeth a flutter of her eyelashes before flouncing over to a stool at the bar, swinging the instrument’s strap around her shoulder and plucking experimentally at the strings. Here and there she tweaked a tuning peg, until she turned out a chord that was satisfying to her.

“To my baby,” she said with a sweeping arm gesture at Elizabeth. “A little something I’ve been working on in my spare time.”

She broke into a familiar, rollicking tune, and Murphy perked up.

“I’ve been on the run so long that back in the city
I’ve been taken for lost and gone
And unknown for a long, long time.

Fell in love years ago with a vault dweller girl
From the Capital Wasteland home,
Home of the heroes and villains.”

Nadine was grinning while she sang, her smile broad as the side of a barn. She playfully winked at her partner across the room. Elizabeth rolled her eyes and downed her drink.

“She just can’t resist a chance to absolutely mangle the Beach Boys,” she said over the strums of the guitar.

“It’s nice,” Murphy said with a smile. “Does she know any Elvis?”

“Don’t encourage her.”

“Once at night John Eden squared the fight
And she was right in the rain of the bullets that eventually brought him down,
But she’s still walking in the night,
Unafraid of what a girl will do in a town full of heroes and villains.”

“Probably still have a few bullets in me too,” Elizabeth muttered.

Murphy looked down at her glass, swirling the contents ponderously. “You said you’re a different person now. How do you mean?”
“Hmm.” Elizabeth glanced over at Nadine playing her heart out, then down at her empty glass. “Guess I wanted to settle down. Sort of. Being… me, that was hard to do without…”

She trailed off. Murphy leaned forward in her seat and studied her face. “Without disappearing?”

Elizabeth nodded and looked out the window at the lights of the dock in the night. “Something like that.”

MacCready nodded knowingly, but said nothing. Murphy bit her lip, but she couldn’t help thinking of Maxson’s face, the rainy night he had told her about the forever-missing Paladin. The one he still wondered about, all these years later. She wondered if Elizabeth even remembered his name.

The three sat in silence, and Nadine finished her song with a few whoops and improvised vocals. She accepted a shot of liquor from Mitch before relinquishing the guitar and trotting back over to the booth.

“That silver vixen was planning on making a speech at dusk,” she said with a yawn. “Want to go check it out, love? I’m bunking on the boat tonight, anyway.”

“Silver vixen?” Murphy asked. “You mean Avery?”

“That’s the one.”

The people of Far Harbor were already assembling in front of the bait shop when Murphy, MacCready, Nadine and Elizabeth walked out onto the dock to join the crowd. Murphy noticed with a wave of relief that Piper and Valentine had arrived while she was asleep, and were mingling with the group of synths from Acadia over by the gate. Piper seemed engrossed in her conversation with Chase, but Valentine spotted her group and walked over to join them.

“You made it,” he said happily. “Glad to see you’re still in one piece.”

“Same to you,” Murphy said, surprising him with a ferocious hug. “What took you so long?”

“Well, the wind farm maintenance bunker wasn’t exactly… asleep, anymore, when Piper and I showed up to turn the condensers back on,” he explained, straightening his hat when she released him. “The laser turrets that popped out were a breeze, but we were pinned down by the two assaultrons for longer than I would’ve liked.”

“Are you two okay?”

“Sure, sure,” Valentine said with a wave of his mechanical hand. Nadine and Elizabeth caught sight of it, and while Nadine stared, open-mouthed, Murphy noticed that Elizabeth only regarded it with vague curiosity. “No new dents to report.”

“What… are you?” Nadine asked, her eyes sparkling with interest. Valentine raised his eyebrows and gave Murphy a skeptical look.

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“Detective Nick Valentine, meet Nadine and… Elizabeth,” she said with a laugh. “Nick’s a synth. A bit out of date, but still going strong.”

Valentine extended his human hand in greeting, and Nadine shook it enthusiastically, examining the
seams where his plastic skin platings were pieced together. “You’re… amazing,” she said. “I’ve heard of synths, but I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting one.”

“You sure about that?” MacCready asked.

“Well, none like him,” Nadine said with a shrug. “You from the Commonwealth, too, private eye?”

“Of a sort,” he replied. “Long story.”

“I’d love to hear that one.”

Their conversation was cut short by Avery raising her arms across the dock and shushing the assembled crowd. “Now everyone, silence,” she ordered sternly. “The bright light last night… the rumors are true. It was a nuclear detonation. The Children of Atom… they’re all dead.”

There were gasps in the crowd, and a chorus of whispers broke out. Elizabeth looked sideways at Murphy, and Murphy looked at her boots.

“’Bout time,” Allen Lee said with a loud chuckle over the hushed conversations. Avery shot him a look of contempt.

“Allen,” she said, her voice rising in anger. “We had our differences, yes, but a lot of people died. Some… well, not all of them deserve to be mourned. But others were friends, and family that just… came to believe differently than us.”

“Brainwashed, you mean?” Allen retorted. His sister, Sandra, snorted in laughter next to him, the ember of her cigarette bobbing in her thin fingers.

“This should be a solemn occasion, Allen,” Avery replied icily. “Please. A moment of silence.”

The crowd fell quiet for a few seconds, while Allen shuffled his boots and smiled brazenly at anyone who would catch his eye. Avery cleared her throat loudly at him and shook her head before continuing.

“And now, there’s the matter of our own condensers,” she said.

“What happened?” someone in the crowd called out. “Are we safe?”

Avery nodded. “We’re safe, for now. Thanks to Chase and some of the Acadians, we’ve driven away the fog and its creatures for a good, long time, I hope.”

Her expression hardened. “But the fact remains that the fog condensers were turned off by someone in Acadia, and we must bring them to justice.”

Chase stepped forward. “People of Far Harbor, I am sorry for what has happened today. Rest assured, we have one culprit in custody and we are searching for any others that may have been involved. We will bring the culprits forward when we have rooted them out, and there will be no need to see the peace between our peoples come to an end.”

“Peace?” Allen spat. “You call turning off our power and leaving us to die, ‘peace?’”

“They didn’t leave us, Allen, they came to help,” Avery replied, gesturing at the quiet group of synths by the gate with rifles on their backs and splinters in their clothes from climbing the rotten roofs of the surrounding ruins. “They weren’t involved. The only ones to blame are the individuals who turned off the fog condensers.”
“I say we end them and burn the whole, god-damned Acadia to the ground!” Allen shouted. Sandra nodded, and the crowd began to murmur in confusion.

The corner of Chase’s mouth twitched. “You can try.”

“Allen, enough.” Avery was doing her best to keep her voice even. “The guilty individuals will pay for their crimes. But not Acadia. The path you want leads to murder. Cold-blooded murder.”

“We leave them be and we’ll never know if they’ll do it again someday,” Allen sneered. “We should kill every last one of them, to be sure.”

He turned from side to side, looking for support. “Who’s with me?”

Something swelled in Murphy’s chest. She crossed her arms and widened her stance. “Every time you open your damned mouth, Allen, the whole town suffers. Shut up.”

MacCready snickered next to her, and Allen looked as though she’d just slapped him. “Why… you… I oughta…”

“I’ve been wanting to say that since we first met that guy,” Valentine muttered, a smile growing on his face.

“Chase and Avery are right,” Murphy went on. “Don’t let everything fall apart because a couple of people decided to try to divide you. You’re better than that. Don’t let them win.”

“Don’t listen to the mainlander,” Sandra cried, trying to salvage the situation. “My brother knows what we’ve got to do!”

“You going to listen to Allen’s hate-mongering?” Teddy cut in. “You even remember who did the Captain’s Dance, brought us all closer together? If she stands with Acadia and Far Harbor, then I stand with her.”

“Mainlander cleared my farm,” piped up old Cassie Dalton. “Avenged my family! More than the rest of you ever did for me.”

“What’s Allen really ever done, besides cause trouble?” Small Bertha asked, taking her brother’s hand in hers. “Remember who cleared the lumber mill. Remember who’s given us a new chance to take back our island.”

Mitch nodded. “My uncle’s safe and alive. The Captain’s always steered us right.”

One by one, the members of the crowd nodded and looked to Murphy. There were a few smiles, but more than anything else there was trust. Confidence that she knew what she was doing. It nearly broke her heart.

Avery nodded at Murphy and turned back to the disgruntled gun shop owner. “Allen, the harbor’s spoken. This ends here.”

Allen looked around the crowd, his anger diminishing into resignation. “E… enough,” he said gruffly. “I’ll… back down.”

Chase nodded, satisfied. Avery put a hand on the synth’s shoulder and raised her voice to carry across the entire dock.

“Every homestead, town and people has a dark side,” she said. “But if we’re ever to know peace, we
don’t let the worst of us define us. Justice will be done. And I expect everyone to respect the peace between us and Acadia.”

With that, she waved her arms again, and the people of Far Harbor began to melt away, back to their homes, boats, families. The synths by the gate remained huddled together, and Murphy excused herself from Nadine and Elizabeth to go speak to Chase, with MacCready and Valentine in tow.

“That went well,” said Chase by way of greeting. “Relatively speaking.”

“Are you heading back up to the observatory tonight?” Murphy asked.

Chase nodded. “There aren’t enough beds in town for us, and there’s still the matter of Faraday and DiMA to resolve. Our people deserve an explanation, as do the people of Far Harbor.”

She hung her head. “And right now, they need a leader. I may be their only choice in that, for now.”

“You’ll do fine,” Murphy assured her. “If you’re all going back together, I’ll come with you. I want to find out what exactly happened with the other Courser, and there’s…”

She lowered her voice. “There’s still the other thing I came here to ask you about.”

“Of course,” Chase replied with a thin smile. “When we have the luxury of privacy, I will tell you anything you need to know. You’ve… you’ve saved us. Again.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” Murphy said despondently.

Chase shrugged. “It’s still true. We will depart in a few minutes. You’re welcome to accompany us.”

Murphy and Valentine nodded, and MacCready shifted his rifle strap on his shoulder. “You sure it’s safe? I don’t want to run into that big, ugly fog crawler in the dark.”

“Shipbreaker knows when to cut her losses,” Valentine replied. “Or so Old Longfellow tells me.”

“I’ll send word back to Acadia that we’re on our way,” Murphy offered. “Unless Brooks lost his two-way radio in the fight.”

She left the group and headed toward the bait shop to find the synth shopkeeper, but before she could enter the store, Elizabeth intercepted her.

“How long are you in town?” she asked.

Murphy shook her head. “I’m not sure. Why?”

Elizabeth looked as though she was struggling with her answer. “I have… questions. For you. About…”

“Friends?” Murphy guessed.

“Of a sort.”

Murphy smiled. “Honestly, I didn’t plan to stay too long. There are things I need to get back to, back… home. With luck, I’ll be leaving within the next few days.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “Nadine’s in port for a little bit, so as long as the steamboat’s here, come… come and visit. I’d love to talk, before you go.”
She nodded curtly, turned, and marched off toward the woman with the fiery hair beckoning her from the stairs down to the boats. Murphy watched her go, and something in her posture, her stride, reminded her of a certain Brotherhood Elder, hundreds of miles away.
Unorthodox Origins

Chapter Summary

In which Chase tells her story.

Murphy could tell that Piper’s hunch about DiMA’s involvement in the attacks on Far Harbor and the Nucleus was correct as soon as the group arrived back at Acadia. The prototype synth’s figure was limp in his memory visitation chair under the dome, as if all motivation to go on living had left him. Aster approached Chase from the dais, pulling the Courser aside to speak in hushed tones. Murphy couldn’t hear what she was saying. She didn’t need to.

Beside her, Nick Valentine’s shoulders sagged as he took in the sight of his disgraced brother. “Goddammit,” he said, so soft that only Murphy caught it.

Murphy took his hand in hers, ignoring the cold of the metal joints between her fingers. Valentine stiffened in surprise, then clutched at her for an instant before pulling away and disappearing back out the door they had come in.

“Is he going to be alright?” Piper asked, concern plain on her face.

“Possibly,” Murphy replied sadly. “But don’t go after him. He’ll need… he’ll need time.”

Over by the wall, Chase patted Aster on the shoulder and turned back toward Murphy. “We’ll settle this in the morning,” she said, half-addressing the assembled synths. “For now, rest. Those who can’t sleep, relieve the watch outside. They’re likely in need of a break.”

The synths nodded and whispered, scattering into the shadows of the observatory. A handful went back outside into the night, their heads down. The feeling of disappointment in the air was crushing.

Chase slung her laser rifle over her back and straightened out her Institute-issued Courser jacket. She looked down at her feet, nodded, and looked back up at Murphy.

“It’s time,” she said. “You have questions. I would answer them.”

Murphy swallowed and nodded. “If you’re ready.”

“Alone.”

“What?” Piper blurted. “I want to hear this, too.”

Chase’s eyes narrowed. “There is no need for this story to go beyond the one who most needs to know it.”

Piper crossed her arms and screwed her face up in annoyance. “We come all this way, we fight a bunker full of robots and a town full of monsters for you, and you won’t do us the common courtesy of telling us what in the hell is going on to make the Institute so keen to shut you up? Jesus, woman, what do we need to do to earn your trust?”

Murphy sighed. “Piper, it’s okay. Maybe it’s for the best.”
She lowered her voice and glanced around. “If Faraday is telling the truth, then that means someone knew we were coming here, and they told the Institute, who tried to stamp out our lead before we even made it to the island. Personally, I’d like to keep what I know…”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Piper cut her off. “You’re saying someone squealed? To the Institute?”

MacCready nodded and stepped in closer to the three women. “People knew we were leaving, but only a handful of us knew where we were headed, exactly. Right boss?”

“Right.” Murphy tugged at the straps of her combat armor chest piece. “So that means we only have a handful of suspects to narrow down. Unless you were telling everyone you met that we were headed to Far Harbor, Piper.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Blue,” Piper said flatly. “You didn’t even tell me where we were headed until we were at the Nakanos, remember? I just came along for the sheer amount of trouble I knew you would get into.”

“Right,” Murphy replied with a smirk. “My bad. Maybe you and MacCready can work on a list of who all knew we were headed here, while Chase and I talk.”

“Flushing out a rat is one thing, but whatever information she’s got should be shared,” Piper protested. “You just gonna ignore what your boyfriend said?”

That took Murphy aback. “What did he say?”

Piper scoffed. “You were there, Blue. In the Dugout? ’The only way we’ll find the Institute is if we share our information?’”

Chase nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps there is truth in this. But parts of my story… I would rather they be left out, when all is said and done. Yet the whole of it must be told.”

Murphy pursed her lips. “Okay. I’ll listen, then I’ll share the relevant bits. That work, Piper?”

“Sure, you’ll listen to the Elder of the Brotherhood, you’ll listen to a Courser, but you won’t listen to me,” Piper grumbled.

“Elder of the Brotherhood?” Chase asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s nothing,” Murphy said quickly. “Come on, Chase. Let’s go somewhere where we can talk by ourselves.”

Chase led Murphy out into the forest, far enough from Acadia to be out of earshot for those manning the walls around it, but not so far that they were out of sight. The lights of the observatory were still visible when they came upon an outcropping of rock surrounded by a copse of trees. Every trunk was riddled with blight, the fungus glowing a faint gold in the cold night.

Chase climbed the rock with ease, her hands and feet light on its mossy sides until she was seated atop it, cross-legged. She gestured at the space in front of her, and Murphy clambered up after her, trying her best not to displace the greenery clinging to it.

“I come here to reflect,” Chase said quietly, rubbing her hands on her knees. “Sometimes to
meditate.”

“So, to get away from Cog,” Murphy said with a grin.

Chase gave her a thin smile in return. “Only when he’s being especially tiresome. We may talk freely, here. About my… past. But I would know the nature of your search, before I answer your questions.”

Murphy nodded and gave her a brief rundown of her information on the Institute, post-explosion. Chase listened, her eyes betraying nothing, even as Murphy described the mysterious group of synths in Salem and the woman who stole one, the Courser who attacked her in Diamond City, and her theory that the surviving scientists may have split into different groups. When she reached the information the Railroad had gathered about the female Courser and the surprise the Brotherhood and Railroad had shown at its gender, Chase nodded and straightened her posture a little, as if bracing herself.

“It does not surprise me, that they would know nothing of our existence,” she said when Murphy was finished. “Operation Yankee was effective, even if it was somewhat of an embarrassment and a secret among those in the Institute.”

“Operation Yankee?”

Chase nodded. “Better known as the Y-line series.”

She stopped and looked Murphy square in the eye. “My story is an interesting one, but it is the wrong one to tell if you are looking for clues as to the Institute’s whereabouts now.”

“Right,” Murphy said. “Secondary locations for the Institute. Can you remember anything, anything at all that might help me find them?”

“I remember,” Chase said. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, as if trying to picture it. “No specific locations, coordinates, anything like that. It’s standard that details like that fade from synth memory upon desertion. But I remember rooms. One complex, different from the main laboratories. Basic furnishings, outdated by Institute standards, but enough for resupplying and rest for Courser in the field. Synth combat teams on assignment. Enough to house at least 100. A small-range molecular relay, itself outdated. Essential personnel only. And… a door.”

Murphy sat up straight. “A door? Underground?”

“A locked door.” Chase took another deep breath and let it out, laying her palms flat up toward the night sky. “Marked ‘emergency exit.’ No one used it.”

“What kind of door was it?” Murphy asked, frantic. “What was it made out of?”

“Metal,” Chase replied, unhelpfully. “But its frame… reinforced, sealed. Airtight. It smelled of water. And… the wall was stone. Polished stone.”

“What color was the stone?”

“White.” Chase squeezed her eyes and mouth, as if willing the image to come forward. “Flecks of black. Veins of gray.”

Murphy nodded. A relay. Stone walls. Water. It was something. “What about the robots? The deep range transmitters?”
Chase shook her head and opened her eyes again, flipping her hands over to cup her knees again. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Murphy bit her lip and nodded. “Okay. Now, tell me about Operation Yankee.”

“How familiar are you with the creation and training of Coursers?”

“Not very,” Murphy admitted. “When I was in the… I know they’re supposed to be top of the line, even among combat synths. Stronger, faster, smarter… better. And they’re trained in all sorts of things, right?”

“Right.” Chase pulled a knife from an inside pocket of her coat and laid it on the rock between them. “Combat synths are already created to be the best soldiers the Institute could ask for, but those who stand out are selected to become Coursers. They are put through rigorous training regimens, and only a small percentage are able to complete the program. All others are wiped and returned to basic combat roles.”

She glanced at the knife. “The tests are… grueling. I was trained among others in how to finish an opponent with an array of weapons. To test our abilities, we were placed in a room with another Courser trainee and given a single weapon to… demonstrate our knowledge.”

A shiver ran down Murphy’s spine. “Jesus. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” A faraway look crept into Chase’s eyes. “The creation of Coursers became a necessity after Gen 3 synths became the template for all of the Institute’s labor force. Prototypes were beginning to be successful only a few years after the Institute’s acquisition of your son, and full-scale production of the Gen 3’s first line, the A-line series, began in the 2240s. All male, in the image of Father.”

She sighed. “And with the mass production of slaves, came the need to create those who would retrieve the ones who ran away. The first Coursers were also from the A-line series, merely trained in combat and tracking in order to carry out their duties. They were effective, to begin with, but over time, they, too, began to defect.”

Murphy smiled. “Freedom rings.”

“Much to the chagrin of the Institute,” Chase agreed. “In response, the Synth Retention Bureau was formed, and one of the Robotics department’s brightest scientists, Dr. Hermann Zimmer, was placed in charge of the Courser program. Zimmer brought the Courser program into the 2260s with the first line of synths completely dedicated to synth retention, the Z-line series. Again, all male, and all extremely good at their jobs. A number of them were still in operation at the time of the Institute’s fall, I believe. But Dr. Zimmer had plans beyond the mere retention of runaway synths. Thus began Operation Yankee.”

She rocked back and forth slightly, her knuckles white where they clutched her knees. “What I am… I have never told anyone. Not even DiMA. I do not give you this information lightly.”

“I understand,” Murphy replied. “I promise, I’ll keep it to myself.”

Chase took a deep breath. “By the 2270s, the Institute had gone into a number of new Gen 3 synth lines, and had mostly cracked the code to Father’s DNA that allowed them to create female synths. Dr. Zimmer saw usefulness in having female operatives in the SRB, and using file DNA he created the first of the Y-line series. Seven female androids that withstood the Courser trials, using the DNA from Father spliced with the DNA of a pre-war government operative that the Institute had held in
cryostasis since the Great War.”

“Hold on,” Murphy said, rubbing her temples. “Pre-war operative? You mean a spy? How did the Institute get its hands on spy DNA?”

“There were a number of government projects the Institute was involved in before the bombs fell,” Chase replied. “Your friend, Nick Valentine, I believe can attest to the truth of that. To my understanding, there was one relevant, remaining sample of DNA in storage. Not enough to create synths from the ground up, but certainly enough to imbue the basic synth template with the abilities of the woman who spent her life working for her country in secret.”

“Whose DNA did they have?”

“A Chinese agent who went by Wan Yang.”

Murphy’s eyes widened. “Wan Yang? The Niagara Sabotage Wan Yang?”

“The very same.”

“Damn,” Murphy murmured. “So they did get her, eventually. And that’s what you are? A spy, synth… hybrid?”

“Not quite,” Chase went on. “The Y-line series was a resounding success. Each one of the women created was a natural agent. Remarkable tracking skills, combat proficiency, of course, but beyond that, they were masters at blending in. They could win the trust of anyone, appear and disappear in wasteland settlements as easily as if they were using a Stealth Boy. They were charming, shy, outgoing, intelligent, demure… whatever they needed to be. And for the Institute’s emerging plans to infiltrate, observe, even influence the surface, they were perfect. They were unstoppable.”

She smirked. “It is no wonder to me that the Railroad was never aware of their existence. When they were operating, they were truly indistinguishable from the women of the surface.”

“When they were operating?” Murphy pressed. “What happened?”


She re-crossed her legs and massaged her knees. “The Y-line series began to break down, slowly at first, then quickly. The deterioration of the synths was attributed to the unconventional splicing of DNA involved in their creation, and similar projects were abandoned as a result. But Dr. Zimmer felt he was on the cusp of something great. He became convinced the Institute’s previous findings, that synths created from mutated human DNA were flawed and unusable, were wrong, and the secret to synth longevity lay in the adaptation of mutated DNA. The DNA of wastelanders.”

“And the Institute wasn’t so accepting of that viewpoint,” Murphy guessed.

“They were not,” Chase said with a shake of her head. “Whispers about Dr. Zimmer began when he ordered that five of the seven deteriorating Courser women be tested on with FEV strains, to observe mutation effects. All five perished during exposure. In frustration, Dr. Zimmer began to accompany some of his Courser on retrieval missions, hoping for inspiration. In 2279, he found it.”

“What happened in 2279?”

Chase shrugged. “No one knows, exactly. Dr. Zimmer returned from an excursion with two large samples of DNA, each from a different, supposedly exceptional woman. He spliced the DNA of
each with the Institute’s template DNA, and created two new Y-line synths: Y2-01 and Y2-02.”

Up until this point in the conversation, the Courser had been keeping her emotions in check. Upon uttering the second synth unit designation, however, Chase’s shoulders sagged and the lines in her face deepened considerably. She fell silent for a moment.

“Someone you cared about?” Murphy guessed.

“Y2-02…” Chase blinked rapidly. “Y2-02 was… no. Her name… her name was Ember.”

“It’s okay,” Murphy assured her. “Take your time.”

Chase took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Y2-01 and Ember were as effective, if not better, than the first Y-line synths. They didn’t deteriorate, and they didn’t fail. But both of them had… quirks, which in the eyes of the Institute, made them ineffective. It was enough for the Directorate to cancel the project, and instead focus on the traditional male Courser design, which at this point had been nearly perfected by Dr. Zimmer’s brightest protégé, Justin Ayo.”

“What sort of quirks are we talking about?”

Chase picked up the knife from between them and felt the blade with her fingertips, studying its curve. “Y2-01 was ruthless, in her excursions to the surface. Completely remorseless, as Courseres are expected to be, but she seemed to take pleasure in killing. Some called her methods ‘sadistic,’ but Dr. Zimmer defended her. Missions in the wasteland were no longer merely retrievals, and Y2-01 was the perfect weapon for when the Institute needed a person, a group, or an entire town wiped out.”

She flicked her eyes up to Murphy’s. “You’ve heard of University Point.”

Murphy gulped. “Some of her work?”

Chase nodded. “Subtlety was not one of her strong suits, when she could help it. But Ember… Ember was exceptionally independent. Too much so, for the Institute. Over and over, her memory was wiped, her programming rewritten, when she showed signs of questioning the work she was expected to do as a Courser. She was too useful to decommission, but too bright to keep her obedient forever. I don’t even know how many times she must have woken up, unaware of who she was, how much time had passed, what she had done, been forced to do…”

She paused again and stared down at her lap. Murphy gently took the knife from her hands and set it down on the rock again. “So… how do you fit into this?”

“In 2280,” Chase said quietly. “Dr. Zimmer’s beloved wife, Gabriella, died. Dr. Zimmer was devastated, and in his grief, he disobeyed the rules of the Institute and used her DNA to create one more female Courser. Y3-01. Me.”

She turned her head and looked back toward the lights of Acadia. “It took some time for Ayo to turn him in, but for his unsanctioned use of Institute resources and for the desecration of his wife’s remains, Dr. Zimmer was stripped of all directorial control overnight and relegated to field work. He retained Y2-01 as his personal bodyguard, but Ember and I were put into the mainstream Courser program under Ayo. The SRB and the Directorate did their best to sweep the scandal under the rug.”

Murphy frowned. “Why use his wife’s DNA to create a Courser? Why not just a regular synth model?”

“Gabriella Zimmer was a gifted Bioscience botanist,” Chase replied softly. “She devoted her life to the study of plants. More than anything, she wanted to visit the surface, walk among the new,
mutated species above and observe them in their natural habitats. Obviously, she was never allowed to do so, and she died having never seen the sun. Dr. Zimmer likely believed the last, best chance for his wife to walk this world freely was to create a Courser in her image and hide her among the SRB’s ranks. It was a poor decision. It came from a place of love. Supposedly."

“I’m surprised they didn’t have you destroyed,” Murphy said, her voice low. “Or at least have your memory wiped.”

Chase drew in a shaky breath. “There were days… I wished they had. Dr. Zimmer… his wife meant everything to him. And I was… he…”

Murphy shook her head quickly and grasped the Courser’s hand. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

Chase squeezed her fingers and nodded. She turned back and met Murphy’s gaze. There were tears in her eyes.

“Ember and I… we grew close, while Dr. Zimmer drifted further and further afield in search of high-profile synths,” she said, letting the tears fall freely. “The Institute let him. He was an embarrassment to them. No one wanted him around, least of all me. Ember used to say she would kill him, the next time he came back, even if it meant her destruction. I never let her follow through.”

“What happened to Ember?” Murphy asked. She was fairly certain she knew the answer.

“I taught her to hide her feelings, her thoughts of freedom,” Chase replied. “We bided our time, and we planned. And five years ago, we tried to run.”

“She didn’t make it.” Murphy whispered solemnly.

Chase bowed her head. “She held the other Coursers off so I could be free. I don’t know what happened to her. She’s… she’s probably dead. I ran, for so long, and when I found DiMA… it was easier to say I was hunting the synths under his care than to tell him the endless pain my existence and escape had brought me.”

“Chase,” Murphy said softly. “I’m… I’m so sorry. That’s unthinkable.”

“Such is the life of those under the Institute’s control,” Chase replied bitterly. She cleared her throat, straightened up, and looked Murphy square in the eye.

“Describe the female Courser from the debate,” she demanded.

Murphy had no trouble conjuring up the face of the woman who had parted the Diamond City crowd with energy blasts and left Deacon to breathe his last on the cold ground, surrounded by chaos.


“Thin? Curvaceous? Muscular?”

“Definitely thin,” Murphy replied.

Chase let out a breath she had been holding in. “It sounds like one of the two that were put into cryostasis. Y1-01 or Y1-02. It’s no wonder the crowd was able to overpower her, in that case. Their functionality was in question even before they were frozen.”

She leaned forward and put her hands on Murphy’s shoulders. “I don’t know who is sending Coursers after you, but if it was Y2-01 or Ember, you would be dead by now. They do not miss. They do not make mistakes.”
Murphy swallowed hard, and a thought struck her. “If that’s the case, do you think maybe they don’t want me to die just yet?”

“It’s possible,” Chase said, releasing Murphy and leaning back in thought. “Their motives would make sense. Kill you, discredit you, unnerve you… many survivors of the Institute’s fall would have reasons upon reasons to target you, whatever their tactics.”

“Who has access to the female Coursers, besides Zimmer?” Murphy asked.

“Anyone within the SRB or the Directorate,” Chase replied. “In the case of Y1-01 and Y1-02, a sizeable portion of the maintenance staff.”

Murphy slumped forward and rested her chin on her hands. “That narrows it down.”

A thought struck her and she turned her eyes up toward Chase again. “If you were the last, most recent Courser, does that mean…”

Chase smiled, and in a flash the knife that lay between them was at Murphy’s throat. Even before Murphy could tense, the blade was gone from her skin and was instead quivering in the trunk of a tree ten yards away. A piece of blight dropped lazily to the ground, rolling away into the grass.

“Yes,” Chase said. “Despite my unorthodox origins, I am the best Courser the SRB has ever seen.”

“Holy shit,” Murphy muttered. “No wonder they wanted you dead. Whoever they are.”

Chase nodded. “They caught me by surprise. They will not get another chance to do so.”

Valentine was smoking a cigarette on the roof of the observatory when Murphy and Chase arrived back at Acadia. Murphy could make out the jagged edges of his face, the metal pieces of his hand flaring orange in the glow of the little torch between his fingers. Chase held the door open for her, but Murphy shook her head and instead climbed the stairs up to where the synth detective was staring off over the railing.

“Rough night,” she remarked, approaching him cautiously.

Valentine sighed and pulled out his pack of cigarettes. Murphy accepted one, and he lit it for her, his golden eyes watching the flame as it danced over the tip until it, too, glowed in the dark.

“She give you anything good?” Valentine asked after another puff of smoke. “Please tell me something useful actually came of this trip.”

Murphy hopped up over the railing and sat on its topmost rung. “She did. You don’t have to be a detective tonight, though. We can put the clues together later.”

“Maybe when I want a little distraction from…” Valentine trailed off, jabbing his cigarette at the observatory dome behind them. Murphy nodded, and they fell silent.

“Do you think I was wrong?” he asked after their cigarettes had burned down a ways.

“About what?”
“About giving him a chance,” Valentine clarified. “To be my brother. To be family.”

Murphy bit her lip. “No. I’m… I gave mine a chance, too. But chances don’t always stick. That’s not your fault.”

“Right.” Valentine glanced at her. “Your son. I forgot.”

Murphy nodded. “You should teach me sometime, how to do that. Forget about him.”

The corners of Valentine’s mouth turned up, just for an instant. “Will do.”

“I’m sorry things worked out this way, Nick.”

Valentine sighed. “I’m glad you care that much, at least. It’s just… it hurts. I thought he was trying to be good, with Acadia and everything, and it turns out he was only holding himself back from doing the wrong thing by wiping it from his mind. Every time he made a mistake, every time he did something morally reprehensible, just…”

He tossed his cigarette butt over the railing. “Gone. Erased.”

“Well.” Murphy took a deep breath. “You gonna be alright?”

Valentine’s face soured. “No. No, I don’t think I will be.”

Murphy nodded, and he turned to her, regret plain in his features. “Don’t get me wrong. I’ve taken a lot of knocks, but this one… this one hit a little too close to home.”

“What do you think they’ll do to him?” Murphy asked quietly.

“Who knows.” Valentine turned and leaned back against the railing. A breeze fluttered the tail of his trenchcoat, striking a mournful figure against the night sky. “Far Harbor will probably want him dead, if they find out.”

“About that.” Murphy looked back over her shoulder at the stairs. “I think I have an idea that might appease them. It’s not exactly… well, maybe you can give me your thoughts on it.”

She laid her proposal out for Valentine. When she had finished, his face was stony. Without a word, he nodded.
On Condition of Anonymity

Chapter Summary

In which Acadia's fate is decided.

Murphy awoke several times that night, in a cold sweat from nameless nightmares. Even though she didn’t shriek or wake anyone else that she knew of, MacCready must have heard her shallow breaths and shifting on the cot. When she sat up yet again, her chest rising and falling in terror, he pushed himself up on one elbow and gave her a bleary look of sympathy.

“Come on,” he mumbled, before rising into a sitting position. He patted the cot next to him.

Murphy didn’t argue. She pulled the blanket she had borrowed from Cog over her shoulders and sat down next to him. MacCready dozed off again immediately, his back propped against the shipping container and his head lolling before coming to rest against Murphy’s. She tried not to move too much, even though she knew she shouldn’t worry. MacCready was capable of sleeping just about anywhere, thanks to his time with the caravans and the Gunners.

Having a warm body to sink against helped. She brushed some white strands of hair away from her face, smoothing them down around her ear. MacCready stirred briefly at the movement, just long enough to plant a kiss on the side of her head before falling back into sleep. The warmth of the little, unexpected gesture was enough to still her racing heart.

Dawn brought clear skies around the observatory, though the internal mood of Acadia was anything but sunny. Murphy, Valentine, Chase and Piper began their day by questioning Faraday about the Courser who had approached him in the woods and ordered him to turn on the island’s other residents.

Faraday was a blubbering mess, which irritated Murphy. Even in court, she had preferred a hostile witness to one who dissolved into tears at the slightest questioning. Faraday definitely fell into the latter category, though he was more than forthcoming about the details of the confrontation.

“I did-didn’t get a good look at her,” he admitted, rubbing his eyes with the sleeve of his lab coat. “She had a hood on, a-and… it was gloomy out, really gloomy, and there was something over her face.”

“Then how in the heck did you know she was a Courser?” Piper asked.


Valentine nodded. “She scared the daylights out of you, in other words. What did she say?”

“Sh-she said I should listen closely, or Acadia… Acadia…”
Chase slammed her palm down on the table over which they were conducting their interrogation. “Spit it out, Faraday.”

Faraday flinched. “Or Acadia would dis… disappear.”

“She specifically said disappear?” Murphy asked.


Valentine and Murphy shared a look. “Retention bureau?” Valentine asked.

“More like acquisition,” Murphy replied, rubbing her forehead in thought. “The Courser we saw in Salem… she grabbed a synth and relayed away. Probably wanted to do the same here, but thought she could kill two birds with one stone and blackmail Acadia first.”

Chase nodded. “Fear tactics and elimination of threats. Destroy the renegade Courser, destroy the two other groups that might come to Acadia’s aid when the Institute descends to reclaim its property.”

Faraday paled. “You mean…”

“Yes,” Chase snapped. “You were dense enough to believe that you would be safe if you killed your best defender and all of your allies. In reality, you would have brought every synth in this place back into bondage.”

“Luckily for you, Far Harbor isn’t so easy to wash into the sea,” Murphy added.

“Fog,” Piper corrected her with a smirk.

Faraday stared down at his hands, his eyes wide through the tears. “DiMA…”

“Yes, DiMA,” Murphy pressed. “His memories from that span of time shortly after you claim the Courser contacted you are missing. What, exactly, was his involvement?”

“I t-told him, when I got back from Far Harbor,” Faraday said. “And he… he said he would do anything, anything to protect us all. Please… please don’t hurt him. It’s my fault. Mine.”

“What happened to the memories?” Valentine growled.

“I erased them,” Faraday replied, blinking rapidly and trying to look anywhere but at Valentine or Chase. “He wanted us to… to… disappear.”

“Disappear how?” Chase asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Leave.” Faraday put his head in his hands. “After everything we went through to keep this place, to make it home, all of the work and the lies and the deaths… he wanted to run.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Murphy caught sight of Valentine’s shoulders relaxing, ever so slowly. “But you thought you knew better than DiMA,” the synth detective said, his tone a shade softer than it had been.

“God help me, I did.” Faraday looked up at Murphy, his eyes red from crying. “He wanted to consult his stored memories of the Institute, so when he went under to review them, I… I just…”

“Wiped out his memory of what you told him,” Murphy said grimly.
Faraday nodded and collapsed again. The five of them sat in silence while he cried, until Valentine excused himself to go have a cigarette. Piper, Chase and Murphy left the scientist alone in the storage room, and went upstairs to the observatory dome where DiMA had been sitting since he had discovered his memories were missing.

“Well, looks like Nicky won’t be disowning you just yet,” Piper said in way of greeting. Murphy shot her a look of disapproval.

DiMA raised his head and gave Piper a grave look. “And yet, here we are, in a situation where one of my closest friends chose to value our lives above any others, and acted upon that choice. A choice which I was apparently aware of.”

“Yes,” Chase said bluntly. “You knew. But you did not support his actions, if Faraday is telling the truth. I am inclined to believe him.”

Murphy crossed her arms. “We can check your databanks, try and salvage what he says he deleted, but it’s probably gone forever. Which leaves us with one professed guilty party and one whose actions could be construed as omission, maybe even accessory.”

Piper made a face. “Layman’s terms, Blue.”

“He knew about the potential crime, at one point, but didn’t stop it.” Murphy sighed. “Not like the laws of my time apply here, though. Either way, it’s apparently common knowledge around the observatory now that you replaced Tektus and a person in Far Harbor with synthsin. It’s only a matter of time before Far Harbor finds out. I think…. I think you should confess.”

Chase turned to look at her. “They’ll call for his execution. Are you sure?”

“Nick and I talked about that.” Murphy turned away and paced around the dais. “There might be a way to appease the harbormen and keep anyone from being thrown into the ocean. DiMA, I think it’s time for you and Faraday to… start over. Get a clean slate.”

Chase took in a sharp breath and DiMA pressed his lips together in contemplation, but Piper looked confused. “What do you mean?” the reporter asked.

“A full wipe, of everything past his escape from the Institute,” Murphy clarified. “And then no more tampering with memories after that. No storage, no revisiting your greatest hits, no more selective wipes and secret stashes of information. Just, one shot at living a life and basing decisions off of what you know and remember. Like Nick had to.”

“Nick approved this?” Piper asked, surprised.

“Nick…” Murphy turned and faced a row of buttons and blinking lights on a nearby bank of computers. “Nick thought it was a very… Institute-like proposition. But in the end, he would rather trade in memories than lives.”

Chase shook her head and stepped forward, closer to DiMA. “It is a very Institute-like proposition. I don’t support it. We’re better than that.”

“We’re not,” DiMA said softly, staring at the floor. “Or rather, I’m not. Chase, if it can save us, save Acadia and salvage what friendships we have left with the people of Far Harbor, I am willing to sacrifice the memories of freedom that I have. Those memories have only led me down the path of murder and destruction.”

“What if someone slips up?” Piper asked, biting her lower lip. “Say you actually do this. What if
someone spills the beans? Won’t that… damage his and Faraday’s psyche? Send them in a direction we don’t want?"

Murphy crossed her arms and looked over at Chase. “Acadia’s already well-familiar with the idea of mind wipes and new identities. Faraday’s done it before, for sure. They can keep secrets.”

“Victoria,” Chase muttered. “I suppose it could work. But that doesn’t solve the more pressing issue that the Institute is aware of our existence, and our supporting alliances have been… halved. We are no longer safe here.”

“I’ve thought about that, too,” Murphy replied. “And maybe DiMA’s initial reaction to the Courser’s threat was right. Acadia should move. But they needn’t move far.”

She tugged thoughtfully on her plasma pistol holsters. “What if Acadia took its operations northeast? What if, instead of living in your own, secluded spots, the synths and the harbormen joined forces?”

“Move to Far Harbor?” Chase said in surprise. “The harbormen would never support it.”

“Hell, the synths wouldn’t go for it,” Piper added, leaning on a cart full of spare computer parts. “Granted, I haven’t been here long, but most of them like the fact that they can be themselves here, without worrying about fitting in with us humans.”

“It’s not about fitting in,” Murphy argued. “It’s about surviving. Attacking a cohesive community would give any Institute personnel a little more pause, I think.”

“You’ll have to sell it to Avery,” DiMA murmured. “But perhaps Acadia can fill in the gaps that have been left by the Fog’s creatures. Maybe even expand the town. Additional fog condensers, fixing up the surrounding buildings, the dock…”

“But what about the observatory, DiMA?” Chase asked. “Would you have us just abandon it? Along with the wind turbine bunker?”

“I will stay,” DiMA replied. “We can maintain a small presence here, but it is our people that I would see protected, first and foremost. The Institute is not interested in the likes of me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Murphy said, scratching the back of her neck. “If the Courser is out in Salem snatching up Gen 2s, who in turn are snatching up Mister Handy robots, they’re probably in dire enough straits to consider a prototype.”

“I will stay,” DiMA repeated, more firmly. “Alone, in that case. If the Institute comes for me, they will find no secrets in my unburdened mind.”

Chase’s face fell, but she nodded. “Then I will make the arrangements. If Far Harbor is appeased… we will join them.”

She turned and headed back toward the stairwell, her head bowed in resignation. Piper and Murphy looked at each other.

“DiMA, how old are you, again?” Piper asked.

“I am unsure,” he replied softly. “Nick and I escaped the Institute a hundred years ago, and I was some years old at that point. Perhaps three. Perhaps more.”

“104?” Murphy guessed. “Funny. I’m technically older than you.”
“And… you’re just willing to delete all of that,” Piper said, an edge of disappointment in her voice.

“You sound as though you have something you want to say.” DiMA leaned forward in his chair, a slight smile on his face. “Speak your mind.”

“It’s just, what a waste.” Piper paced around in a tight circle, her hands clutching at the air as if she was pained by her own words. “A hundred years of life, of experience… gone? I mean, I know it’s for your own good, and jeez, you definitely didn’t put all of it to good use, ethical use, but…”

She stopped pacing. “Can I interview you? Get your life story all down? Before it’s gone forever.”

DiMA regarded her with an aloof curiosity. “I suppose,” he said finally. “You plan to write it?”

“I don’t… I don’t know.” Piper straightened her cap. “If nothing else, I’ll just type it up once I’m home and… I don’t know, have it?”

DiMA glanced over at Murphy. The concern he found on her face widened his smile. “On condition of anonymity, if you ever do publish it,” he said in a reassuring tone. “Yes.”

“Fantastic,” Piper said with a grin. “I just, I have a holotape recorder in my bag, let me grab my things and we can get started.”

She hurried off after Chase, and Murphy gave DiMA one last nod before wandering over to the door in search of Valentine and his ever-present pack of cigarettes.

To her surprise, Valentine was leaning over the railing atop the observatory bunker with none other than MacCready. The pair of them were laughing about something, and MacCready was almost doubled over, trying to tell a story between wheezes.

“And then, he just, he just yells to his crew, ‘Tunnel Snakes rule!’” he said, wiping a tear away from his face. “I swear to god, and Kimba yells back that he should keep his tunnel snake to himself, the pervert.”

Valentine rolled his eyes and waved Murphy over. “Thought you picked the term up from some raiders or something,” he said with a chuckle. “Didn’t know it was a Capital Wasteland original. I swear I’ve seen that kind of jacket before.”

“Never thought I’d see the two of you getting along,” Murphy said with a smile, leaning on the railing next to MacCready. “We’re done. DiMA agreed to my plan.”

Valentine’s face sobered, and he nodded. “Good.”

He tossed her his pack, and Murphy took a cigarette out. MacCready, shoulders still bobbing with laughter, lit it for her. “What’s next boss?” he asked when he had regained his composure.

Murphy told them what had occurred in the dome between the three women and DiMA. “So Piper’s jotting down DiMA’s life story before it’s gone, meaning we’ll probably be stuck here for another night,” she finished. “I’d go into Far Harbor and give Avery the news, but I don’t want to leave her.”
“Don’t want to stick around for the fireworks when Acadia finds out what he plans to do?” Valentine guessed. “Can’t say I blame you.”

Elizabeth’s face floated through Murphy’s mind. “That, and there’s someone else I need to talk to, before we go home.”

Valentine looked thoughtful. “If you want to go into town and wait for us there, I’ll stick around until Piper’s done,” he offered. “It’ll give me time to say goodbye.”

“You sure?”

He nodded. “Sure as I can be. There are some parts of DiMA’s life I’m curious about, anyway.”

Murphy jerked her head back toward the stairs. “Better get down there, in that case. Bobby and I will go into town together, with any other synths that are looking to.”

Elizabeth Titus wasn’t hard to find. The woman with the world-weary eyes and winning smile was hanging over the railing of the steamboat in the harbor. She was laughing raucously with her orange-haired partner as they straightened out the metal Murphy’s power armor leap had bent, banging on the steel with hammers and cursing periodically at their task. Elizabeth’s hair was wound up in a thick braid that swung in time with her hammer’s rhythm, and despite the chilly November weather, both women were wearing shorts.

The sound of laughter was a welcome one to Murphy, who had watched Captain Avery’s expression wither exponentially while she explained what was going on in Arcadia. Without saying a word, the town’s matriarch had made her feel like she was an underperforming student again, a feeling she hadn’t been visited by for a lifetime or two. Even MacCready had shivered a bit under her gaze.

Nadine caught sight of them as they made their way down the dock. She straightened up and tousled her orange hair before giving them an enthusiastic wave.

“If it ain’t the icicle and the muscle,” she cried in welcome. “Come aboard, we can always use an extra hand or two for swabbing the deck.”

“How much you paying?” MacCready called back with a grin.

“Supper,” Nadine shot back, her smile widening. “I make a mean sweet tato stew.”

“I’m sold.” Murphy hopped over the divide onto the steamboat’s main deck, then offered a hand to steady MacCready as he did the same. “You put razorgrain in yours, or do you stick to the traditional mix?”

“Razorgrain?” Elizabeth straightened up and wiped some sweat from her forehead. “You’ll have enough starch per bowl to stiffen out every preacher’s collar from here to the Commonwealth.”

“There can’t be that many preachers,” Murphy replied.

Elizabeth cocked her head. “More than you’d think. There’s a whole mess of them just west of where you hail from.”

“Last one I met was a sassy little feller up from Broken Banks,” Nadine said with a sigh. “Man could
even turn the swampfolk into believers.”

“Swampfolk?” MacCready perked up. “I’ve heard stories. You ever have a run-in with them?”

Nadine laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Have I ever,” she said. “Come on up top with me and help me sort scrap while I tell you. I think these two want to talk by themselves.”

MacCready looked to Murphy, and she nodded encouragingly. He followed Nadine up the stairs to the steamboat’s second level, leaving Elizabeth and Murphy alone to size each other up.

“You look tired,” Elizabeth said finally.

“Well.” Murphy scratched the back of her head. “I’ve got plenty of reasons to be.”

“I’d believe that.” Elizabeth grinned. “You want to nap, or do you want to see something cool?”

A half hour later, Murphy’s jaw dropped as the rowboat she, Elizabeth and Old Longfellow were crewing rounded Bar Island and “something cool” came into view.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” Murphy muttered, almost forgetting the precariousness of the water craft and trying to stand. “That’s a plane.”

“Flying boat,” Elizabeth corrected her while pulling her back down onto the seat.

The amphibious aircraft was moored next to the partially-sunken boat that was beached on the northwest end of the island, condensation and seawater gleaming along its white wings. It bobbed invitingly, its sky blue trim and shiny exterior a bright spot in the gloomy sea. As the rowboat moved closer, Murphy could make out dings here and there along its side, and a bullet hole or two up by the cockpit, but the sight of it still had her feeling giddy.

She splashed out into the shallows as soon as the rowboat scraped the ground, wading over as close as she could to the aircraft. Elizabeth hopped out and helped Old Longfellow pull the boat ashore, before splashing over to join her.

“It’s incredible,” Murphy said, her voice cracking with emotion. “Like… like something out of my era.”

“She is from your era,” Elizabeth said softly. “Took me a few years to fix her up. One of them I just spent converting the engine to run on fusion, with some help from a friend.”

She glanced over at Murphy with a smirk. “Want to see the inside?”

Murphy nodded, and stared in awe as Elizabeth waded over to open a hatch on the side and pull down a makeshift step ladder. She climbed up a rung and beckoned Murphy over. “Watch your step.”

The inside was just as interesting as the outside. The enormous gun Elizabeth had used to take shots at Shipbreaker was propped across the co-pilot’s chair. A Vault Boy bobblehead nodded casually at them from atop the dashboard of controls.

“Welcome aboard the Duchess Gambit II,” Elizabeth said, spreading her arms out in pride. “I named
her after Nadine’s steamboat, when Nadine’s mom died and she decided to rename the boat Catherine, after her. Pre-war, obviously, Lockheed LC-176. Part of a line of flying boats that used to fight wildfires.”

She flipped on a set of lights, illuminating the interior fully. Two rounded tanks narrowed the hallway partway down the fuselage, both covered in an array of photos and stickers. A fold-out cot was down on the right side, made up with a quilt and plenty of pillows. Above the cot was a poster for the Museum of Technology’s Virgo II Lunar Lander exhibit, surprisingly vivid and unweathered. Here and there were ammunition containers, crates full of clothes and shoes, a stack of first aid kits on the floor, even a violin case tucked away on a shelf. There was a Pip-Boy on an anchored table across from the cot, atop a pile of grid papers and drawing equipment, and hand-drawn maps covered the wall above it. To top it all off, there was an oddly-shaped suit of power armor strapped against the back wall, bulkier than any Murphy had seen, with a pronounced breathing mask on the helmet and yellow-tinted glass over the eye slits.

“The tanks are for collecting water when making ocean and lake landings,” Elizabeth explained, moving forward to slap one affectionately on its side. “Haven’t had to use them for a while, but they still work. And obviously, she can land on water, but I’ll take runway landings when I can find them.”

She rattled the specifications off, marking them with her fingers. “Length 65 feet, height 29, 93-foot wingspan, 181 miles per hour cruising. Carries up to 10,000 extra pounds, if needed.”

Murphy sat down on the cot, looking around her in wonder. “Where did you find this?”

“Ah.” Elizabeth came and sat down next to her. “At Adams Air Force Base, in the Capital Wasteland. Poor thing had been abandoned in a hangar for ages. Some friends and I spirited her away, and I fixed her up with parts from the base and the Museum of Technology, and good, old-fashioned elbow grease. God, I was terrified, the first time I took her up, but she hasn’t let me down yet.”

“Adams.” Murphy bit her lip. “Was that before or after you left the Brotherhood?”

Elizabeth looked over and furrowed her brow. “It was around that time. Why?”

“No reason.” Murphy studied the pictures on the water tanks. Nadine was in a lot of them, smiling on the steamboat in a bathing suit, posing like a pin-up girl on the wing of the plane, throwing back a beer in front of a sunset over what looked like a marsh. Some of the photos were landscape shots, taken from the air over rivers and lakes and forests, and a couple were ground-level scenes of ruined skyscrapers, the Washington Monument, even what looked like an aircraft carrier with lights blazing in the windows. A fairly recent picture showed Elizabeth with a group of mercenaries, in mismatching armor pieces emblazoned with crossed swords over a four-leafed clover. There were a few older group shots of Elizabeth and soldiers together in Brotherhood power armor, next to vertibirds on tarmac, smiling and giving thumbs ups to the camera. A blonde woman, her expression more serious than the others, was at the center of them with Elizabeth, and *The Pride* was scrawled across the bottom of the clearest photo in pen.

But the photo with the most wear and tear was of teenaged Elizabeth under the harsh lights of a vault, next to a man with salt-and-pepper hair that could only be her father. He had kind eyes, and his arm was around his daughter’s shoulders. Confident. Happy.

“I thought that was you.”

“I used to be.” Elizabeth kicked her legs out in front of her and rubbed her knees. “But Project Purity was his baby, even more than I was, really. He might have put it on hold for almost two decades because of me, but it called him back in the end.”

“Do you wish it hadn’t?” Murphy asked.

Elizabeth’s face hardened. “Sometimes. But leaving Vault 101… that place couldn’t hold him, even without his greatest aspiration at stake. There’s no way it could have held me forever, either. And turning back to the wastes always came with its risks. Dad knew that.”

“Mmm.” Murphy nodded and crossed her arms, hugging her torso. “Wish my vault had been like that.”

The comment earned her a sharp look. “No you don’t.”

“I mean, I wish I’d even had the choice,” Murphy said quickly. “To stay or go.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at her. “From what I’ve heard about you, I’m pretty sure you would have chosen to leave in a heartbeat. Vault 101 had a… leadership problem.”

“Lack thereof or an excess?”

“Definitely an excess.”

“Yeah,” Murphy admitted with a faint smile. “Then probably.”

She stood up and turned to face the other woman on the cot. “So, you said you had questions for me?”

Elizabeth nodded and stood as well. “Want to come up front? It’s a little claustrophobic back here, for some.”

She led the way and moved the gigantic rifle and some gum wrappers out of the co-pilot’s seat before offering the chair to Murphy. Murphy took it, settling into the worn upholstery and watching Old Longfellow on shore chopping firewood with some interest.

“What on earth do you need a flying boat for anyway?” she asked.

“I work with a freelance group that moves around a bit,” Elizabeth replied. “I guess you could call them mercenaries, but they’re more like an organized, paid band of explorers. They map regions, for a fee. Sometimes recover items of interest. With Duchess, I can work on some of their smaller, farther-ranging projects.”

She leaned back in her chair and studied Murphy closely.

“So you’ve been to the Institute,” she said bluntly.

Murphy looked at her in surprise. It wasn’t the question she had been expecting. “What?”

“The Institute,” Elizabeth said again. “You’ve been inside. At least, I assume you have been, because you had to blow it all up somehow, which is easier to do from the inside.”

“Yes,” Murphy said uneasily. “I did. Why?”
“Did you ever meet a woman by the name of Madison Li?”

“Doctor Li?” Murphy said in bewilderment. “The head of Advanced Systems? What about her?”

Elizabeth leaned forward, her eyes full of hope. “How… how was she?”

“Rude,” Murphy replied in confusion. “Well… she installed a chip in my Pip-Boy so I could relay in and out at will, when I first arrived there. I don’t think I ever had more than a conversation or two with her. She always seemed preoccupied, or bothered by my very existence.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yeah, that sounds like her. Did she…”

“Die?” Murphy shook her head. “I have no idea. I didn’t see her, during the… everything. Maybe.”

“What was she working on?”

Murphy’s mind jumped to Shaun, and she straightened up. “Why do you care?”

Elizabeth looked taken aback. “I… she and my dad were close. She worked on Project Purity with him, then with the Brotherhood for a bit, but she left. I’d heard rumors she joined the Institute, but I wanted to know for sure what happened to her.”

“Oh.” Murphy took a deep breath. “Advanced Systems was… well, they were mostly focused on weapons and armor, from what I could tell. There was talk about experimentation with dark matter in the future, I think, but the main project Doctor Li was working on was a kind of… prototype synth. That’s all I know.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth settled back in her pilot’s chair. “I had heard rumors she went to the Commonwealth, but no one could ever confirm it. I’m not sure why, but not knowing what happened to her… it always bothered me. Thank you for putting my mind at ease.”

Murphy looked at her incredulously. “That’s it? That’s all you wanted to know?”

“I- what about the Brotherhood?” Murphy put a hand to her forehead. “You used to be a Paladin. A Paladin. You’re telling me that you don’t have anyone in the Commonwealth Brotherhood force that you would like to know is doing okay?”

“No,” Elizabeth replied, her eyes darkening. “My connections with the Brotherhood have been severed. There is no one there, anymore, that I would care to hear from.”

“You’re kidding,” Murphy said in disbelief. “None of the Proctors, Knights, Lancers… hell, the Elder?”

“Not a one.” Elizabeth stood up from her chair again. “We should go. Nadine won’t like it if I’m late for supper again.”

“Why not?” Murphy stood up too. “Not the supper thing, the Brotherhood. Why don’t you care?”

Elizabeth crossed her arms angrily. “I don’t owe you an explanation for why I no longer associate with them. Let’s go.”

“Humor me.”

“No.” Elizabeth fixed her in a glare. “You’re used to people giving you what you want because of
your various titles. I get it, I’ve been there. But I don’t answer to you, or anyone else with opinions on my choices. Now, please exit the floating boat before I push you out the door myself.”

Murphy stood her ground. “You don’t have to justify why you don’t like them, then. Just tell me why you left. For… someone else’s sake.”

Elizabeth brushed her thick, dark braid back over her shoulder and her chest swelled in indignation. “And whose sake would that be? Has some other Paladin, Knight or whoever got it in their heads that I turned down the Eldership way back when because I was too noble to accept the position and become more than the common soldier? Do they think I walked off into the horizon and the mists of legend? Would you like an autograph to go with that delusion?”

“Jesus, what is your problem?” Murphy said, her eyes wide. “After what Arthur said about you, I thought-”

The name brought a spark of recognition to Elizabeth’s eyes. “Arthur?” she said, her voice raw for a fraction of a second. As if it caused her pain. “You’re on… first-name terms with him?”

“I…” Murphy looked around, helpless. She nodded, and Elizabeth shook her head and wordlessly pointed toward the exit hatch. The look in her eyes was enough for Murphy to drop the subject and follow her direction.

The two were silent as they rowed back toward Far Harbor, while Old Longfellow called after them to bring the boat back sometime the next day. Murphy watched the waves, deep in thought, listening to the breaths of exertion from the Lone Wanderer on the seat next to her. What on earth had happened, between Elizabeth Titus and Arthur Maxson, that had left him so attached to the memory of her, but her so full of anger?
Murphy could tell, as soon as she and Elizabeth arrived back at the Catherine, that Nadine had picked up on their stony silence. The orange-haired woman just didn’t seem to care.

“Stay for dinner,” she demanded as soon as Old Longfellow’s rowboat was tied up on the dock and the two women had exited it. “It’s my pleasure.”

“I’m not sure…” Murphy trailed off, with an uncomfortable glance at Elizabeth.

The Lone Wanderer took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, managing to make even a rush of air sound judgmental. “I’m going hunting,” she said, before turning on her heel and striding away up the dock toward the town.

“You don’t have a rifle, love,” Nadine called after her. Elizabeth pulled a combat knife from the belt of her jumpsuit and waved it in the air above her head in answer.

“Eh, she’ll be fine,” Nadine said with a shrug, then ushered Murphy onto the steamboat before she could protest. “Left your hired muscle inside with the stew fixings. Shouldn’t leave him long, though, he keeps eating the mutfruit.”

MacCready was, in fact, mid-bite when they entered the small cabin. He looked at Nadine, then down at the mutfruit in his hands, then back up again.

“I, uh, this one’s rotten,” he said sheepishly.

Nadine scoffed. “Then why are you eating it, kid? You’re worse than a rad-rat.”

“Rad-rat?” Murphy asked curiously.

“Big, ugly rats that hold grudges,” MacCready said, between chews. “Not so common in the Commonwealth.”

“Count yourselves lucky,” Nadine said with a point of her finger at him before moving to a bubbling pot on a tiny cook stove across from the table MacCready was sitting at. She picked up a wooden spoon and gave the pot’s contents a generous stir. “Got a bit to go yet, you two want drinks?”

Murphy accepted a Nuka-Cola and MacCready opted for a beer. Nadine pulled a chair up to the table for Murphy, and the three sat down to chop up mutfruit. MacCready gave his knife to Murphy, and she sliced the fruits open before handing them off to Nadine for seed removal. Nadine tossed the seeds MacCready’s way, and he tried to catch them in a spare bowl, laughing if any of her tosses flew wide.

“You’re doing that on purpose,” he accused her when one of her globs of mutfruit guts landed on his knee.
“You’re not fast enough,” Nadine said, with a wink to Murphy.

Murphy smiled, and handed the next two halves of mutfruit over. The last time she had been part of a kitchen prep line had been back at the Castle, when she and Riley had been shucking corn and had to spend a half-hour chasing down Adams the dog when he stole a cob and ran off with it. The most fun she had ever had with it, however, had been the time Paladin Danse had reprimanded her and Knight Lucia for misuse of Brotherhood property, during her days of training after being named Knight. She and Lucia had been trying to recreate Knight Petris’s record power armor jump from the Prydwen flight deck to the airport below, but Danse had somehow gotten wind of their plans and confronted them as they tried to leave the power armor bay at midnight. They were sentenced to a day of peeling and chopping tatoes, and Lucia had made a game of it, competing to see who could get through the most in under a minute. Proctor Ingram had agreed to time them, and Murphy had been in the home stretch, only half a tato behind Lucia when Elder Maxson had walked through the mess hall. Lucia had upended her bucket in her haste to jump up and salute, and all Murphy and Ingram could do was laugh helplessly while the Elder looked at them, perplexed, before striding off toward whatever important business he was heading to.

The memory of the look on Maxson’s face broadened Murphy’s smile, but it faded quickly when she remembered Elizabeth’s reaction to his name. She sliced into the next mutfruit absentmindedly, nearly nicking her thumb in the process.

“You alright, love?” Nadine asked gently.

Murphy looked up to find the laughter in the room had dissipated, and Nadine and MacCready were looking at her. Nadine with curiosity, MacCready with concern.

“Fine,” she said quickly, shaking herself slightly. “Just… thinking about something else.”

“She didn’t give you a hard time, then?” Nadine held a seed up to the light and pretended to inspect it.

“A hard time? No.” Murphy reached for a nearby dish rag and wiped the blade of the knife clean before handing it back to MacCready. “Is she… does she normally give people a hard time?”

“Oh, not at all,” Nadine said casually, grabbing the rag from Murphy to wipe her own hands off. “But she tends to get a bit insensitive around your type.”

“Her type?” MacCready asked, raising his eyebrows.

“You know.” Nadine popped a piece of mutfruit in her mouth and chewed experimentally, then with relish. “The wasteland heroes.”

Murphy picked up her Nuka-Cola and leaned back in her chair. “Do tell.”

“Ah, I couldn’t,” Nadine said with a wave of her hands. “Suffice it to say she’s a tad skeptical about people with big reputations, even the ones who are sworn up and down as the good eggs. But that probably says more about her than them, in the end.”

“She doesn’t trust me,” Murphy said, folding her arms.

“Well of course she doesn’t.” Nadine stood up, gathered the chopped mutfruit into a bowl, and began dropping pieces into the stew. “You’re the talk of the coast. Anyone who gets big enough to be known from here to Hallandale Beach has to have a few skeletons in their closet. Or in your case, your vault.”
She grabbed the wooden spoon again and twirled it, arms up in a shrug. “No offense.”

Murphy took a sip of her Nuka-Cola and swished it around before swallowing. “Well, she’s not wrong.”

MacCready jumped to her defense. “Sure, but who doesn’t have stuff in their past they’re not proud of? I’ve had more than my fair share of nightmare situations. That’s just life.”

Nadine pointed at him with the spoon. “Right. Which, again, is why I think it says more about her than you.”

“And what big, ugly skeletons are strung up in Elizabeth’s closet?” Murphy asked. “Are they Brotherhood of Steel-related?”

Nadine plunked the wooden spoon back down into the pot and turned to Murphy with a hand on her hip. “You did not bring up those tin cans to her.”

Murphy pressed her lips together and looked down at her Nuka-Cola. Nadine clapped a hand to her own forehead in exasperation. “Oh, for the love of... if I have to listen to yet another lecture about the current state of the Brotherhood, on what is supposed to be my romantic weekend getaway with the woman of my dreams, I swear I am going to hire someone to track you down and kill you in your sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Murphy said hastily. “It just seemed weird to me that she would invite me to her seaplane and then only ask me about a woman she knew who worked with the Institute.”

“Flying boat,” Nadine corrected her.

“She asked you about someone who worked for the Institute?” MacCready said in surprise.

Murphy waved him off. “I thought... I mean, I had heard she was part of the Brotherhood, in the past, so I asked her about it. I guess I could have been more polite.”

Nadine let out a long, low whistle and sat down in her chair again. “Oh, she was. Top brass, for a bit there, too. But she quit. Never looked back, from what I can tell.”

“You don’t know what happened?” Murphy asked.

“I’ve heard bits and pieces,” Nadine said with another shrug. “You pick up the stories, hauling junk.”

“You mean she never told you?” MacCready stared at her. “Aren’t you two... a thing?”

“Well, sure,” Nadine said, chuckling. “But we have our own lives, our own pasts. Love doesn’t mean you two need to know every damn thing about each other. She offered some pieces, but not others, and I didn’t ask.”

MacCready seemed taken aback by this answer. “You’re... sorry, in bed with this person and you don’t know everything about her? Doesn’t that seem kind of dangerous?”

“Absolutely,” Nadine said with a grin. “That’s part of the fun. But Lizzy’s good people. She wouldn’t cause me harm, and I wouldn’t want to reopen any of her wounds. We’ve got lives now, never mind the ones that we used to have.”

“Would you be willing to share what you do know about what happened, between her and the
Brotherhood?” Murphy asked.

“Don’t see why not,” Nadine said after a beat. She slapped the table and leaned back in her chair. “But not until we have some stew in our bowls.”

The sun did its best to shine through the gathering fog as it set that evening, and it cast a golden orange glow over the town of Far Harbor as it did. It nearly matched Nadine’s hair, and the steamboat captain’s smile widened considerably when she, Murphy and MacCready took their bowls of sweet tato stew up to the second level of the boat to watch the daylight fade.

After a few hearty spoonfuls, Nadine wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her oversized sweater and set her bowl aside. “Delicious,” she said. “Now, Elizabeth. I ain’t telling you anything she told me in confidence, just the basics. You caught up on her whole Lone Wanderer shtick?”

“Shtick?” MacCready remarked. “She’s the Lone Wanderer. What about it?”

Murphy nodded, and Nadine smirked. “Yeah, she doesn’t mind talking about that none, if you recognize her. The water in the Potomac, her dad, the Enclave, even Adams. But she gets hedgy if you ask her about after all that.”

“When did you meet her?” Murphy asked.

Nadine screwed up her face in thought. “Let’s see, I think she first crashed into my life around… oh, ’79? I think? Right, because I was 20, and she said she was 21… anyway, I’d run away from home again and dear old mum talked her into coming to find me. She was still Brotherhood, then, but she wasn’t advertising it. Just running around in power armor with their logo on it.”

She chuckled. “God, we were so young then. Nothing like a knock on the head, a swamp full of inbreds and a cult that worships a giant punga plant to bring two kids together.”

MacCready nodded sagely as if he knew what she was talking about, and Murphy couldn’t help but giggle. “You’ll have to tell me what punga plants are later.”

“Oh, I’ve got a few below, if you want to try some later,” Nadine replied. “Anyway, when we first met, she seemed… sad. Not mopey or weepy, just distant. Like she was unsure of herself, preoccupied with something a world away. She told me about her dad, and I thought I had my answer, so I didn’t press her. When we got back to the Capital Wasteland, she just kind of walked off into the ruins, and I assumed I’d seen the last of her.”

She took in a sharp breath and shook her head. “And she was back, two weeks later. I’d put in by Rivet City for the night and she just kind of showed up. This time she actually was mopey and weepy, but she seemed like she was more… peaceful. Like she’d come to terms with something, and at least the sadness made sense. She told me later that someone she cared about had died, and she’d quit the Brotherhood. So I got the sense that maybe the distance I saw in her before wasn’t about her dad at all.”

“2279,” Murphy muttered under her breath. She did the math in her head. Maxson would have been 12. The year his mother had died. The year Sarah Lyons, the Elder he had succeeded, had been killed in battle.
“What was she up to after that?” MacCready asked. “Anyone who leaves the Brotherhood… well, people don’t just quit the Brotherhood. Or they didn’t, then. And post-Purity, you couldn’t really do business in the Capital Wasteland without running into them. They were running all the water caravans, then.”

“No, you could not,” Nadine agreed. “But then again, she wasn’t really in the Capital Wasteland after that. For a bit, she came with me and mum on our trips. Took merc jobs, or hooked up with Madame Panada- she’s a junk trader, back in Point Lookout- for extra caps or when she wasn’t feeling like sleeping on a boat. If she did go out in D.C., she stuck to Underworld, Megaton, anywhere that was a bit skeptical about the Brotherhood’s involvement in their lives. That’s how she got in with Reilly’s Rangers, the gang she’s with now.”

“Who are they?” Murphy asked.

“Merc group,” MacCready answered.

“Buncha stuck-up army brats,” Nadine said with a playfully sour expression.

“They’re like the Gunners, but less concerned with killing people,” MacCready added. “I wanted to join, back when I left Little Lamplight, but they’d moved on from D.C. by then.”

“Gotta go where the work is.” Nadine shook her head. “They helped her get her Duchess out of Adams, after she did their leader a favor, and that was her baby for years. When she finally fixed it up, she offered to run jobs for them, and how were they gonna say no to the only woman around with wings that wasn’t a vertibird pilot for the Citadel?”

“Where are the Rangers now?” MacCready asked.

“Last I heard? Philly.” Nadine picked her stew back up and shoveled in a few more mouthfuls, talking around the food. “Something about the Liberty Bell.”

As much as Murphy wanted to inquire about the current state of Philadelphia, she brushed it aside for the moment. “So that’s all you know? She went back, quit, and never looked back?”

“Well.” Nadine set her spoon down again. “Not exactly. She stopped grieving, eventually, yeah. But even when she was drifting around with me and mum, I got the sense she was waiting for something. Patiently, at first, and about three years went by like that. She stuck close for those years too, didn’t stray far from the boat or Point. But the fourth year rolled around, and she got restless. We were hearing some crazy stuff about mutants in the Capital Wasteland, to the point where I had stopped going up there for a bit until things blew over, and I thought she might be bothered, since she had friends up there still. One day, she comes to me and begs me to take her back. Drop her off in Rivet City. Of course I do, and of course I wait for her to come back, and of course she doesn’t. Spent a whole month in port there, and there’s absolutely no sign of her, no word. It killed me, but we had to go home eventually. We were running out of food, caps, we had to.”

She sighed. “Almost a fucking year goes by, and then suddenly, there she is, blending in with the other passengers I was taking on. Smiling at me like we’d never split. Not a word about where she’d been, what she was doing, except now she was proud mother to a broken flying boat. And then she really started to live up to her title of ‘Lone Wanderer.’ Wasn’t until I was chatting with my pal Cherry that I found out she had been offered the Eldership and she turned it down.”

MacCready was wearing an interesting mix of perplexity and annoyance on his face. “Why are you in love with this woman?”
“Ah, well.” Nadine smiled and stared off into the sunset. “Who wouldn’t be? She’s wild.”

“Wild, indecisive and challenging,” Murphy muttered, echoing the words Maxson had used to describe her once.

Nadine nodded. “But she ain’t the only one, love. I’m no basket of melon blossoms to be in love with, either, mind you.”

She tapped her chin. “Let’s see… She maps all over the east, and some even claim she’s been west, but right now she’s been doing a lot of stuff up north, by the old borders. Wealthy benefactor, generous with the caps. I know she writes articles for the Wasteland Survival Guide under a fake name, mostly when she encounters something weird out in the world that she wants people to know about, and she and Moira in Megaton are pretty close. Oh, and I know a guy who swears up and down that she spent some time helping slaves escape, even as far away as the Pitt.”

MacCready frowned. “She was pretty anti-slavery when I first met her, or at least she seemed like it. Do you think she ever fell in with the Railroad? That might explain why she’s not a Brotherhood fan.”

“Eh, I dunno. Harboring fugitives or wandering around in the dark with lanterns isn’t really her thing anymore. Suppose I wouldn’t put it past her, though.”

“You said she lectures you about the state of the Brotherhood today?” Murphy asked.

“Oh, sure,” Nadine said with a chuckle. “Last time we met up in port like this was in December. The good old Brotherhood boys had just flown into the Commonwealth to fight the Institute, and damned if she didn’t spend the whole month in Chincoteague talking about the very nerve of them. Couldn’t say enough about how different things were from the old days.”

She stood up and stretched. “Now, you two want dessert? We’ve gotta introduce your boss to punga fruit, muscles.”

“I don’t get it,” Murphy grumbled as she and MacCready walked back up the pier from the Catherine, in the light of the town’s lanterns. “She saves the Capital Wasteland, quits the Brotherhood after Sarah dies, but sticks around and goes back one last time? What the heck was so important? And why does she hate Maxson?”

“Well, I was in the Commonwealth by the time all that was happening,” MacCready replied, sticking his hands in his pockets apologetically. “Lucy and I didn’t come back until the end of ’83, just before we had Duncan. But if what Zip said when we were visiting the Railroad checks out, that was when that whole super mutant uprising was happening.”

Murphy snapped her fingers. “Right. Shephard. Maybe she just wanted to check in and make sure everyone she cared about was okay? But then, why would that take a year?”

“Maybe it didn’t.” MacCready shrugged. “Maybe she just ran off to have time to herself. She seems like she does that a lot. That’s basically how Nadine said they met, she ran off to Point Lookout to get away from something.”

“True.” Murphy sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe we’ll never know why she quit. Maybe we don’t
want to know.”

She stopped walking and ran a hand through her white hair, up over her head. “Christ, what am I going to tell Arthur? That I ran into his childhood hero and she hates everything he stands for, now?”

MacCready stopped walking too and turned back to face her. “Honestly? I wouldn’t even tell him.”

“How can I not tell him?” Murphy turned and paced, side to side, between two mooring posts. “He doesn’t know what happened to her, he doesn’t even know if she’s alive. Doesn’t he deserve that info, at the very least?”

MacCready sighed and leaned up against one of the posts, arms crossed. “What happens if you tell him?”

“I don’t know. Closure, maybe.”

He nodded. “Maybe. Or maybe he pries how she really feels about him out of you, and it eats him up inside until he’s second-guessing every decision he’s ever made during one of the most critical moments in Commonwealth history. Or, alternatively, he drops everything he’s doing to go chase after her and shake the truth out of her himself.”

“God, you’re pessimistic.” Murphy stopped pacing and frowned at him. “He wouldn’t drop everything. He won’t even drop everything for me.”

“Well, no offense, boss, but you’re not the Lone Wanderer.” MacCready yawned. “Whatever, so he sends a recon squad to retrieve her instead. The vertibird finds her flying boat, fires on it, she fires back, suddenly we have a dead childhood idol and a lot of unanswered questions.”

“Oh, okay, okay, I see your point,” Murphy conceded. “Its owner might be kind of an ass, but that flying boat is breathtaking.”

She gestured up the pier. “We getting a room? Or are we walking back to Acadia tonight?”

“I mean, if you want to get eaten by something in the woods, we can…”

Murphy laughed and slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Come on. Mitch will probably give me a discount, anyway. At least, until he finds out the synths want to move in.”

“Take what you can get while you can,” MacCready said in approval.

The two of them made their way up to the Last Plank and pushed the door open to find a dismally empty bar room. Mitch was polishing glasses behind the bar, whistling tunelessly to himself while Debby swept up around the booths.

MacCready approached Mitch with a few caps in hand. “Got a room?”

Mitch shook his head. “We already got it booked.”

MacCready put the caps back in his pocket and turned right back around. “Guess we’re dying in the woods tonight, boss.”

Murphy laughed and redirected him toward the bar. She plunked down on a stool and put her own caps on the counter. “If it’s my last night on earth, I want whiskey.”

Mitch poured her a glass, and she threw it back in one gulp before turning to MacCready. “What’re you drinking? After that dinner party, I’d need something stronger than beer.”
“I’ll have what you’re having,” he replied, sliding onto the stool next to her.

“One more glass, and leave the bottle, Mitch.” She patted MacCready on the shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry, Teddy’s got a spare cot we could borrow. Or we can bunk at Avery’s, if she can still stand the sight of me. And there’s always the boat.”

The two of them drank and tried to put together the pieces of Elizabeth Titus’s story in a way that made sense, but their theories grew more and more outlandish the further into the whiskey they got. Murphy found she didn’t mind. It was fun, just sitting, drinking and talking about a crazy life that wasn’t her own, for a change.

Finally, MacCready stood, wobbly on his feet, and flapped his hands like he was shushing a crowd. “I’ve got it. Aliens.”

Murphy burst out laughing. “What?”

“Aliens,” he said, a smile creeping over his face. “Elizabeth Titus was kidnapped by aliens, brainwashed, and ever since, she’s hated the Brotherhood because they’re the only group with enough resources to ever challenge the mothership.”

“Bob-Bobby,” Murphy said, between wheezes. “Bobby, aliens… aliens aren’t real.”

He staggered backward as if he had been shot, clutching his chest. “How dare you. They’re out there. Probably listening, right now.”

All Murphy could do in response was laugh, and he joined in too. When they were done, he doffed his hat to her and put it back on crooked.

“I gotta take a whiz,” he said, before meandering toward the back door and out of sight.

Murphy shook her head and wiped tears from her eyes, still chuckling at his theory. Someone sat down next to her, and she tried to regain her composure before turning to see who it was.

Elizabeth Titus was regarding her with a somewhat amused look on her face. Sobriety hit Murphy like a runaway truck, and she sat up straight.

“So, aliens?” Elizabeth said, smirking.

“Um.” Murphy rolled up her sleeves and cleared her throat nervously. “We—we’re just messing around.”

“Mmm.” Elizabeth grabbed the whiskey bottle and finished off the half-inch that was left in it. “You two make a cute couple.”

“We’re not a couple,” Murphy said automatically.

“Right, right,” Elizabeth answered, setting the bottle down a hair too heavily. “Because you and Arthur Maxson are.”

Murphy froze. “How did…”

“You called him Arthur.”

“So?”

“So, Arthur Maxson doesn’t get to a first-name basis with just anyone.” Elizabeth smiled sadly.
“That’s the Brotherhood way, to make you feel like you’re part of something bigger than yourself. Elder Maxson. Paladin Titus. Knight so-and-so.”

Murphy took a deep breath. “Sentinel Lyons?”

Elizabeth stiffened, but said nothing.

“Calling him Arthur doesn’t mean we’re a couple,” Murphy argued.

“No, no it doesn’t,” Elizabeth admitted. “But the way you tensed up when I suggested it means either you are a couple, or you would like the pair of you to be. I guess the former.”

“Why?”

“Because look at you.” Elizabeth’s eyes swept up and down Murphy’s figure quickly, a hint of affection in her gaze. “You’re a catch, even without the name recognition. He’s blind if he doesn’t see that.”

“Thank you, I think,” Murphy replied. “But you hate him, so I don’t know what you’re actually saying.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Hatred. Hmm. No.”

She tapped the bar, and Mitch sauntered over. “What’ll it be?” he asked.

“Aqua Pura,” Elizabeth replied.

“Huh?”

“Purified water.”

She counted out a few caps, and Mitch pulled a can of water up from behind the counter and popped the top for her. Elizabeth declined a glass and drank deeply from the can, tipping it back until half of the container was gone.

“How much did Nadine tell you?” she asked after she had wiped her mouth.

“Just what seems to be common knowledge,” Murphy said carefully. “Nothing you asked to keep secret. Though it doesn’t seem like you told her many secrets. Or much at all.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “She’s more perceptive than she lets on. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s got an outline in her head about me and my life and times.”

The two of them fell silent. Mitch looked pointedly at Murphy’s empty glass. She shook her head, and he drifted off toward the stairs, leaving them alone. Out of the corner of her eye, Murphy caught sight of MacCready re-emerging through the back door. He stopped short when he saw the two of them, eyes wide in surprise. Murphy gave him the tiniest shake of her head, and he backtracked silently until he could slip out the door again.

“So, you and Sarah, huh?” Murphy asked finally. “You did the same tensing thing I did, when I said her name.”

Elizabeth smiled sadly and took another sip of her water. “Yes.”

“Did Arthur know?”
“No. Nobody did.”

“Is that why you quit?” Murphy asked gently. “Because she… died?”

“Yes, but that wasn’t the whole of it. Merely one rock in the avalanche.”

“You know,” Murphy said, running a finger around the rim of her empty glass. “I’m not exactly in good standing with the Brotherhood, either. I’m not good at following rules, and I think they see me as a bit of a threat.”

Elizabeth snorted. “Anyone capable of forming their own opinions is a threat to the Brotherhood. Even back then, before the western Elders swooped in and put their little king in charge of the Citadel, to speak up against the leadership was almost treasonous. The battles I had to fight in the wasteland were sometimes nothing, next to the ones I fought with the Scribes.”

She leaned an elbow on the bar and faced Murphy with a look of skepticism. “I don’t doubt you’re the talk of the Citadel, perhaps even the target of derision. But if there’s something there in you that resonates with Maxson, that worries me enough. Still, the feelings I harbor toward him are not hatred.”

“Then what?”

Elizabeth fiddled with a zipper on her jumpsuit. “Disappointment.”

“What about him disappoints you?”

“Everything.” Elizabeth slumped forward to prop her chin on her hands. “The rhetoric, the isolationism, giving in to the western leadership, inserting themselves into local affairs, influencing and controlling trade, taking what they want and fuck everyone else. Do you know there are idiots out there who actually worship the ground he walks on? It’s exhausting to watch, having known the beacon of hope they used to be for the Capital Wasteland.”

Murphy nodded. “Yeah. When I first saw the Prydwen… they flew into the Commonwealth, and Nick pulled out some Edgar Allen Poe verse, which I guess was appropriate. To me, it felt like something pre-war, like whenever traffic stopped in Boston to let a convoy of tanks and trucks carrying missiles go by, or when the military began seizing properties to use as outposts.”

“History repeating itself.” Elizabeth looked at her curiously. “But cooler heads prevailed, this time. You took it upon yourself to address the threat. How you managed to keep Maxson out of it, now that’s a story I’d like to hear.”

Murphy took a deep breath. “It wasn’t easy. I’ll chalk a lot of it up to luck, but most of the time I felt like I was walking on a tightrope, trying not to fall off on either side. Trying not to say the wrong thing, anger the wrong person, make the wrong decision. And in the end, I still wound up wiping a whole civilization off the map.”

“Mmm,” Elizabeth murmured, sympathy in her voice. “Everyone wants to be the woman they write songs about, but once they do, you realize just how much they left out.”

Murphy shook her head. “This isn’t about me. We were talking about Maxson. That stuff you said, you’re right. I challenged him on everything, when I first joined up, and he hated me for it. But lately… he’s been listening to me. He actually takes my advice, and he’s trying to pull the different pieces of the Commonwealth together. The Minutemen, the Railroad… everyone. And I don’t think it’s just because we’re…”
“Fucking? Don’t be so sure.” Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “People will say and do a lot to get what they want. Especially if what they want is a person.”

Murphy frowned. “I’m not agreeing with you, but so what, in that case? The Commonwealth benefits, everyone’s happy.”

“Doesn’t sound very sustainable to me,” Elizabeth said, reaching for her water again. “You planning on settling down with the Elder of the Brotherhood of Steel?”

Murphy’s silence was enough to answer that. Elizabeth finished her water and slammed the can down on the counter.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she announced. “I’ll tell you why I’m not a fan of Maxson, on one condition. You forget you ever saw me.”

“He misses you,” Murphy said, shaking her head. “Not knowing what happened to you eats at him. I can’t promise not to tell him.”

“I don’t care,” Elizabeth replied bluntly. “That’s my offer. Take it or leave it.”

MacCready’s warnings floated through Murphy’s head again. What might happen, if Maxson finds out that Elizabeth is alive. Doubt. Desertion. Disaster.

“Okay,” she said finally. “I won’t tell him.”

In answer, Elizabeth pulled an old holotape from a pocket in her jumpsuit and set it down on the bar. “Pop that into your Pip-Boy.”

Murphy obliged, and the tape began to play back after some whirs and clicks. Elizabeth’s voice came through the speakers on her wrist.

“Hey, little pilot,” she was saying. She sounded younger, and there was love in her tone, as if she was speaking to a sibling. “It’s Elizabeth. I know, it’s probably been a while, and I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you. There’s so much I want to tell you, things that you need to hear, now that you’re older. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you sooner, but Sarah made me promise not to give you this message until you were at least 15. Which, by the way, happy birthday! I hope you’ve improved your laser rifle technique by now.”

“What does this-”

“Ssh.” Elizabeth shook her head and indicated that Murphy should keep listening.

“Anyway,” the recorded Elizabeth went on. “I know there are people out there who would rather this message never reaches you, so I’ve given it to two friends and one colleague and sworn them to secrecy about it. Whichever one got it to you, please thank them for me. Arthur, there’s something about Elder Owyn Lyons’ death that you haven’t been told.”

Murphy’s eyes widened.

“When the Elder passed away, he told me and Sarah on his deathbed that he… he wanted you to leave the Citadel. Not forever, just for a little while. With me. He made Sarah promise to release you into my care before you come of age, so you can travel the wasteland a bit and meet its people. Grow to understand them, before you become Elder.”

The Elizabeth of the past sighed heavily. “I know you have no reason to believe me, and now that
Sarah… well. Here.”

There was a familiar click, and the crackling sound of a holotape playing came over the recording. Though the layered recordings distorted them somewhat, Murphy could make out three distinct voices.

“Father, it’s too risky,” a woman was saying. “Even if we give him the best training, the best equipment, there’s no telling what might happen.”

“Sarah,” the younger Elizabeth cut in, but she was interrupted by the voice of an older man.

“Daughter, this is imperative,” he said, between coughs. “He needs this. It’s what I needed, and what my journey from Lost Hills gave to me. He cannot become Elder before he understands what the Brotherhood means. What it should mean.”

“No,” Sarah replied firmly. “He’s the future of the Brotherhood. I can’t just send him into the wastes with…”

“No, he is not. But he should have the chance to be, before that chance is gone.” Owyn Lyons broke into a coughing fit, and Sarah muttered something that Murphy couldn’t make out. “Sarah, please. Promise me. Promise me you will let him be free, if only for a little while.”

“I… I promise,” Sarah replied. The helplessness in her voice was heartbreaking.

With a click, the tape within the tape ended, and Elizabeth’s voice cut back in. “Sarah decided to let you choose, when the time came. You can stay at the Citadel, at Adams, with the Brotherhood, if you want. But I think, and Elder Lyons thought, you should… well.”

She sighed again. “I’m not good at this. Arthur, if you decide to leave, come find me. There’s a steamboat, the Duchess Gambit. She visits Rivet City pretty regularly. Get there, if you can, and ask for the captain. Her name is Nadine. She’ll get you to me, and then we’ll figure it out. If you don’t want to leave, then get me a message saying as much. I’ll be waiting for you. Ad… ad victoriam.”

The tape ended. Murphy took it out and put it back down on the bar. Elizabeth stared at it for a little bit before putting it away.

“You were waiting for him,” Murphy said quietly. “And he never…”

“No.” Elizabeth pushed back her stool and stood up. “He never came.”

She turned to leave, then paused. She fished a key out of her pocket and tossed it to Murphy. “Room’s yours. I’ll sleep on the Catherine. You can tell Mayor RJ to stop listening in, now.”
Liberty Risk

Chapter Summary

In which the gang returns to the Commonwealth just in time for a surprise.

Murphy didn’t say much when she and MacCready shut the door of the little room above the bar and the two started stripping off ammunition belts, pieces of armor and weaponry. MacCready was quiet, too, but he settled into the room the same way he did anywhere else—by flinging his gear anywhere and everywhere. Despite her roiling thoughts, Murphy couldn’t help but smile a bit as his hat went on one bedpost, his scarf twirled around another and his duster wound up in an unceremonious heap on the floor.

MacCready sat down and gave the bed a few experimental bounces, then a few more when he discovered that it squeaked atrociously. Finally, he kicked his boots off and rolled over to leave Murphy enough room to crawl in next to him.

“You want to talk or you want to sleep?” he asked, yawning.

Murphy half-wanted to take him up on his offer to talk, but she could see he was already tired. His hair was a mess, and he had sunk into the mattress and quilt as if he wasn’t going to leave them for at least a day.

“Sleep,” she said, leaving Alpha and Omega on the nightstand. Within reach, in case Elizabeth Titus decided to pay her another visit in the night.

He nodded and turned over, nestling further into the bed. “Just let me know if you change your mind. Or, you know, if a bunch of mirelurks try to murder us again.”

“Will do.” Murphy turned out the light and climbed in bed as well. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the darkness. The dock creaked outside, in time with the gentle rush of the sea around its mooring posts. Smaller creaks from the building settling around her answered, and MacCready’s breathing slowed and fell into the steady rhythm of sleep.

Murphy inched a bit closer to his warm back, and sighed. She was at a loss. What Elizabeth had told her had raised more questions than it had answered. Setting aside the questions about Maxson, there was still no clear answer as to why she had quit the Brotherhood initially, turned down the Eldership. The death of Sarah Lyons, yes, but what else? If the Brotherhood had changed so much since Elizabeth’s time, to the point where she despised them now, then what had been the deciding factor in her departure, a decade ago?

Even more mysterious was why she had disappeared for a whole year after Maxson hadn’t answered her summons. Surely it didn’t take a year to return to the Citadel and figure out why he hadn’t come. That bothered her, though. Why hadn’t Maxson followed the wishes of the Elders Lyons? Why hadn’t he sent Elizabeth a message saying as much? And why hadn’t he mentioned her brief return from the wastes to, presumably, chew him out before disappearing again?

Murphy shook her head a tiny bit at that. He must not have known she came back to find him. But how could he not? He would have been practically Elder, by the time he killed Shephard. Elizabeth’s
return would have caused a stir. Did she even go to the Citadel? Or did she just watch from afar and decide he didn’t need her anymore?

A vision of the Lone Wanderer perched atop a ruined skyscraper, tears running around the rim of her binoculars while a young Arthur Maxson held a super mutant’s head aloft in triumph, sprang into Murphy’s mind. As much as the thought appealed to her in a purely storybook sense, she set it aside. Elizabeth didn’t strike her as the type to contentedly walk away from things left unfinished. Her air, her inquiries about the Institute scientist, her very history refuted that. There was a flaming trail of destruction behind this woman, left on her way to end the Enclave. It was fueled by the murder of a father and a worthy cause, but it was a trail of death nonetheless.

Visions of the explosion over the Commonwealth Institute of Technology flashed in her eyes, and Murphy turned over, pushing aside the similarities she held with this wasteland defender, now fallen into obscurity. The obscurity, she could understand. She had flirted with the idea of disappearing herself, right after the Institute was consumed by a mushroom cloud. Running away, leaving the Commonwealth, leaving the pain of her choices and past behind. Elizabeth must have felt that pain too, and simply followed through.

And that led to maybe the most important question of all. Why had Elizabeth told her anything at all? She had said it herself, on the Duchess Gambit II. She didn’t owe Murphy an explanation. She didn’t owe Murphy anything.

But she definitely owed Arthur Maxson something.

Murphy sighed, perhaps a tad more heavily than she meant to, and MacCread stirred next to her. “Mmmsup?”

“It’s nothing,” she whispered back. “I’m fine.”

He rolled over and blinked at her. “Sure?”

“Yep.”

“Hm.” He chuckled, then propped himself up on an elbow. His hair looked like it couldn’t decide whether to stick straight up or fall into his eyes. “Lay it out, boss. I might doze off again, but it’ll help.”

Murphy sighed again. “Even if I got up, tacked a bunch of pictures and notes on the wall and tried to connect them with string, I don’t know what it would help.”

“Arts and crafts. Fun.” MacCready yawned. “I was listening in, I’ve got questions too. But they’re not as important as yours, obviously. Just get to the root of what’s bothering you.”

“Obviously?”

“You know, you’ve got the… mmm, whatcha call ‘em… parallels.” He fell back into his pillow and rubbed his eyes. “Like, your life, her life, same basic paths, hers is just further along. You want to know why she took the road she did, and whether you should too.”

“That’s… awfully insightful, for someone who just woke up,” Murphy admitted. “I guess that’s part of it. But why does that mean your questions aren’t as important?”

“Eh.” MacCready waved a hand above his head dismissively. “The answers to my questions about her aren’t gonna change my life, in the long run. I might wonder about the gaps in her story, but they won’t make me quit being who I am.”
He turned over to face her. “To me, she’s just a curiosity. But to you…”

“She’s either a paradigm or a cautionary tale.” Murphy nodded. “Okay. Maybe I’m just coming at this from the wrong angle. Maybe I should look at her more like you do.”

“But you can’t, because of Maxson.”

Murphy bit her lip. “That whole thing doesn’t make any sense. Even if… even if she’s telling the truth, and he did turn down Lyons’ deathbed request, what does it matter? So he never got to go off and be himself for a few years, so what? He clearly proved himself capable of being Elder without having done that, even if he’s chomping at the bit now. And as much as I used to roll my eyes at Danse when he would lecture me about the old Brotherhood’s shortcomings, he wasn’t really wrong. Maxson’s changes did make them stronger in the long run.”

“It sounds like there’s a ‘but’ coming,” MacCready replied, raising his eyebrows.

“I was going to say, ‘but at what cost,’ but that seemed a little cliché.” Murphy sat up in bed and crossed her legs under the covers. “If he turned Elizabeth down, he probably had a good reason. But I don’t think he did. He’s not the type to just leave people hanging like that. It sounds more like he never got the holotape she left him. But…”

“But, then what happened when she went back to confront him about it,” MacCready finished the thought, sitting up in bed next to her.

“Right.” Murphy smoothed her mussed hair back over her ears. “He brought her up to me, once. Said he always wondered what happened to her, after she turned down the Eldership and quit the Brotherhood. So, again, what the hell happened when she went back during the super mutant uprising? Did he just miss that visit?”

She sighed. “This would be a hell of a lot easier to figure out if I hadn’t promised not to tell him I saw her.”

“Bummer.” MacCready nodded sagely, then elbowed her gently in the ribs. “You should definitely tell him.”

Murphy squinted at him in disbelief. “What? Weren’t you the one who was advising me not to do that, earlier today?”

MacCready held up his hands in defense. “True. But after what she said in the bar- hear me out- I think she’s messing with you.”

“He cracked his knuckles and neck before settling against the headboard with the air of someone versed in interpreting human behavior. “So, what’s the first thing we know about Elizabeth Titus, thanks to the person she is closest to?”

“Nadine?” Murphy smirked. “‘Close’ is kind of subjective.”

MacCready ignored her. “She doesn’t trust heroes. Coincidentally, you happen to be a hero. Heroine.”

Murphy laughed, surprised. “You think I’m a heroine?”

MacCready smiled mischievously. “Nah, I just think you stumble into situations where you have to
be heroic to survive.”

“That’s a very… MacCready way of looking at it.”

He rolled his eyes at that. “Course I think you’re a heroine. Your life is a better story than any of the comics Hubris managed to put out before the bombs fell. Except maybe the Mistress of Mystery. Or the Silver Shroud.”

Murphy chuckled. “Or Grognak.”

“Oh, you’ve got Grognak beat,” MacCready assured her. “Once they introduced Maula the War Maiden of Mars, it was all downhill from there. It’s a cautionary tale about writing a villain that’s more interesting than your main character. That’s why they shifted focus to his relationship with Femme-Ra, and why he comes across so one-dimensional in the Unstoppables series.”

He crossed his arms. “But we’re off track. Nadine says that Elizabeth doesn’t trust heroes, and every word she said to you, beyond sucking up to you to get information about her Institute scientist friend— which, by the way, is super suspicious—backs that up.”

“Not her friend.” Murphy shook her head. “A colleague of her dad’s. Supposedly.”

“From Project Purity?” MacCready dropped his analytical airs for a second. “If she’s a scientist that worked on the water purification system, then the Brotherhood probably has files on her.”

“Good thinking. I’ll be sure to bother Proctor Quinlan about that, next time I’m welcome to board the Prydwen. Or imprisoned.” Murphy smiled at him. “You were saying?”

“Right. So here’s a fellow wasteland heroine, ripe for the criticizing, but you make the mistake of letting slip that you’re connected to the Elder of the Brotherhood of Steel. Now, she’s at a loss, because believe it or not, Paladin Elizabeth Titus still cares about Arthur Maxson.”

Murphy furrowed her brow at that. “That’s a pretty big assumption. She said multiple times that she’s not a fan of him. Hell, Nadine chewed me out for even mentioning the Brotherhood around her.”

MacCready shrugged. “Sure, she may not like his policies, or what he turned the Brotherhood into, but I heard her voice on that holotape. The way she sounded… well, that kind of feeling doesn’t just go away.”

_Hatred? Hmm. No._ Elizabeth’s words echoed in Murphy’s head, and the tone she had said them in had been very similar to the way she said Maxson’s nickname on the other holotape. _Little pilot._ Dammit, he was right.

“Ohay,” she said slowly. “But how does that play into whether or not I should tell Maxson about her?”

MacCready grinned. “I’d be willing to bet she’s banking on you breaking that promise, because either way, for her it’s a win-win. If you don’t tell him, she can go on flying around under the Brotherhood’s radar, living a free life, and leave you forever wondering what the hell happened between the two of them until it slowly eats you away and you turn into a cynical old hag, proving her right about how wasteland heroes are corruptible and untrustworthy. And if you do tell him, then she’s automatically proven right about wasteland heroes being untrustworthy, and her secret wish to reunite with her long-lost Brotherhood brother just might come true.”

Murphy stared at him. “I feel like you’re leaving a few possible scenarios out.”
He shrugged. “Probably.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong.” Murphy pulled her legs up to her chest and hugged them, resting her forehead on her knees. “But even if you’re right, what if all of that wasn’t a conscious choice of hers? What if I tell Arthur, he reaches out to her, and she completely chickens out and disappears? And that doesn’t even factor in how he might take the news, at all.”

MacCready eased back down until his head was on the pillow again. “Guess you’ll just have to find out,” he said with a yawn. “Or learn to live with not knowing what happened.”

Murphy sat in the dark, silent, and he dozed off next to her. She couldn’t deny that his theory made sense. But so had his other theories, about Maxson possibly questioning his life and choices, or hunting down a woman who had clearly put time and effort into hiding from her Brotherhood past.

Eventually, the swirl in Murphy’s mind slowed, and her eyelids grew heavy. As she slipped away into sleep, part of her wished that the warmth at her back belonged to a man with storm-blue eyes and a scar on his face. Another part of her wondered if that was something that would, should, ever happen again.

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Murphy woke up before MacCready did, when the sky outside lightened enough to illuminate the room. She got up from the bed as quietly as she could. MacCready mumbled something, but didn’t wake, so she grabbed her boots, plasma pistols and holster and slipped out the door.

The sunrise was doing what the sunset couldn’t quite accomplish the evening before, shining peacefully through a rare break in the fog around Far Harbor. There was a guard at the beat-up Hull gate, leaning idly over the railing at the top with a cigarette in hand. The tiny street was still quiet, save some female laughter coming from over by the pier.

Murphy drifted that way, thinking she recognized the voices. Sure enough, Elizabeth and Nadine were relaxing in chairs atop the Catherine, their backs to the town, looking out over the ocean at the dawn.

“So he’s still there, then?” Elizabeth was saying. “I figured he’d have split by now, being the anti-establishment guy he is.”

“Last I was in range,” Nadine replied. “Guess he knows a good gig when he sees it.”

“Define ‘good.’”

“Uh-uh.” Nadine chuckled. “I ain’t getting into that with you.”

“Oh, you’re not?” Elizabeth said, leaning over to poke Nadine in the ribs. Nadine squealed with laughter and rolled out of her chair, and Elizabeth leapt out of hers to pounce on the helpless steamboat captain and begin tickling her. Murphy took advantage of their distraction to sneak down the stairs and dodge into the cabin of The Impulse - or Bessie, or whatever the Nakanos’ boat was called- and listen in.

“Enough, enough,” Nadine cried out, wheezing between giggles. “I’m not as young as I used to be, and neither are you.”
Elizabeth helped her up, then pulled her in and kissed her. “No quarter,” she said when they broke apart again.

Nadine brought her hand up to her lips, as if to feel the warmth Elizabeth had placed there. “You’re a scream, Lizzy.”

In response, Elizabeth brushed Nadine’s orange hair back and pulled her into a hug. They stood like that, in the sunlight, until Nadine said something that Murphy couldn’t make out. Elizabeth’s face wasn’t visible, but she stiffened and stepped away.

“Not an option,” she said, the words almost too quiet to hear. “It’s not-”

“Safe?” Nadine interrupted. “Don’t give me that bull. I’m trolling along by myself every damn day on this sitting duck, and you know she’s held together by tape, string and wishful thinking. Sooner or later, some raider’ll get in a lucky shot, and it’s curtains for yours truly.”

She snaked her arms around Elizabeth again and pulled her in by the waist. “I could retire her. Join your one-woman crew as a grease monkey. Could be you and me, up above the clouds together.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders sagged. “It’s a sweet thought, ‘Dine. But there are people out there who want me dead. I don’t want them putting a target on you, too. Even if it means we’re apart, you’re free of them.”

Nadine smiled and put a hand up to Elizabeth’s face. “I don’t care who wants you dead, love. I’ll dust ‘em.”

“You’re a stronger person than me.” Elizabeth kissed Nadine’s forehead, then took her hand away from her face and pulled her toward the stairs. “Come on. Time for breakfast.”

They disappeared into the lower cabin of the steamboat, and Murphy sank against the metal wall of the boat cabin, sliding down until she was seated on the floor.

Piper and Nick Valentine arrived not long after the sun was up, with Chase, Miranda and a few other synths in tow. From the long looks on their faces, Murphy could tell that the deed was done. DiMA and Faraday, as they had known them, were no more.

Valentine and Piper lingered with the synths for a minute to say their goodbyes, but Chase made a beeline for where Murphy was sitting, across from Cassie Dalton outside the Last Plank. “A moment of your time,” she asked, with a pointed look at Cassie.

Cassie raised an eyebrow at her, then looked to Murphy. “Captain’s orders?”

“It’s fine,” Murphy said quickly, rising from the battered lawn chair and gesturing toward the pier. “Over here.”

Chase followed her down the stairs until they were out of earshot of anyone in town. “The plan has been set in motion,” the Courser said, when she was sure no one else was near. “Faraday and DiMA…”

Murphy nodded. “I understand. I’m sorry.”
“Yes.” Chase bowed her head. “My shortcomings have extracted a heavy toll from Acadia. From the island.”

“Hey, hey,” Murphy said. She hesitantly placed a hand on Chase’s shoulder. “What happened isn’t on you.”

“The Children of Atom would disagree with you.”

Murphy took a deep breath. “Okay. Sure. You, Faraday, DiMA, and me… we all played a part in it. But none of that would have happened if the Institute hadn’t sought to drive you all apart.”

Chase nodded, and her features hardened. She put her hand over Murphy’s and gripped it, much harder than the average human’s grasp. “Find them. For Far Harbor, for the Nucleus, for Acadia. For all of us. And… and for Ember. Bring them to justice. And if necessary…”

Murphy squeezed Chase’s shoulder. “End them. I promise.”

When they broke apart, Murphy took a deep breath. “Chase… it’s entirely possible that I’ll run into Ember if I find them.”

“I know.” Chase’s eyes flickered up to hers. There was a depth to them that Murphy recognized, having seen it in her own eyes whenever she happened upon a mirror. A haunted look. “If that moment should come, do what you must do. The Ember I knew has been gone for a long time.”

She nodded curtly. “I must speak to Captain Avery. Have a safe journey back to the Commonwealth.”

Murphy followed her back up the stairs, where Piper, Valentine and MacCready were waiting for her. “Ready to go?” she asked.

Piper shook her head. “I forgot what traveling with you is like, Blue. We’ve only been here three days, but it feels like a whole month.”

“I hear you,” Valentine agreed, shifting a rather large sack he was carrying over to his other shoulder.

MacCready nodded. “Ready to go when you are, boss.”

“Great. Head for the boat, then,” Murphy said, jerking her head back over her shoulder. “There’s one last thing I need to grab, before we head out.”

The three of them headed down to the pier, while Murphy hurried off toward the power armor station next to Allen Lee’s shop. She stopped in front of the battered metal suit, studying the nicks and scrapes marring the cherry paint job emblazoned with the joyful logo, Vim! Tempted as she was to bring it with her, she didn’t want to slow the boat with its weight. Besides, sooner or later, the people of Far Harbor might have need of it again.

“Heading out?”

Murphy turned to find Teddy Wright watching her, arms crossed with a knowing smile on his face.

“I almost feel like I should stay,” she admitted. “Try to make sure things with Acadia and the harbormen go smoothly.”

He walked over and clapped her on the shoulder. “Take my advice. Get out of here before they
throw you off the dock for suggesting we ever try to make friends with synths.”

Murphy laughed. “You think it’s going to go that badly?”

“Nah. We’ll make do.” He grinned. “We always do. What’re you looking for over here?”

Murphy peered behind the power armor and spotted Atom’s Judgment. “A souvenir,” she replied, grabbing the handle of the super sledge and dragging it out into the light.

Teddy burst out laughing, and walked away shaking his head. “Smooth sailing, Captain.”

Despite barely being able to lift the massive weapon, Murphy determinedly staggered across the dock with the hammer, huffing and puffing and giving happy salutes to anyone she made eye contact with. She managed to ease it down the stairs to the pier and stopped to take a breath, only to find her path blocked by Nadine.

“Oh, come on, icicle,” she said with a chuckle. “You’re not going to be swinging that around unless you’re boxed up in one of those suits.”

“That’s the plan,” Murphy replied, panting. “Elizabeth around?”

“She’s out at the Duchess, trying to decide what project she wants to take on next for Reilly.” Nadine rummaged around in her pockets before extracting a crumpled piece of notebook paper and holding it out. “Here. I want you to have this.”

Murphy took it and smoothed it out. *Channel 72-A, it read, 156.625 MHz.*

“A radio frequency?” she guessed. “What’s this for?”

“It’s the frequency most of the East coast mariners operate on,” Nadine explained. “Short-range, unless you’ve got special equipment. Thanks to Lizzy, I’ve got some. Bit of an unofficial radio operator, in my free time. Unless I’m clear across the Atlantic, you try me on that channel from something stronger than a two-way, I’ll hear you.”

Murphy stared at her. “Why are you giving this to me?”

“Well.” Nadine smiled. “Consider it a gift, after what you did for this town and its folks. You seem like you can handle yourself, but if I know your type, you get in trouble every now and then. I’d be happy to assist, if I’m nearby, or call in some buddies to help ya if I’m not.”

She crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side. “But more importantly, I’m your best bet at getting a hold of the *Duchess.*”

Murphy narrowed her eyes. “What makes you think I’d try to get a hold of Elizabeth?”

“Call it a hunch. The call-sign’s ‘Catherine.’ Don’t go ringing me up for any old liberty risk, though.”

Murphy nodded and made a mental note to ask Kasumi Nakano what a liberty risk was. “Thank you. I’ll save it for an emergency. With luck, maybe you’ll never hear from me.”

“Oh, don’t say that.” Nadine surprised her with a hug. “We’ll see each other again. Us wasteland warrior women gotta support each other. Next time I come through the Commonwealth, I’ll look you up.”

Murphy squeezed her back. “I look forward to it.”
Nadine waved goodbye once Murphy had gotten Atom’s Judgment stowed away on the Nakanos’ boat, and as they eased out of the harbor, a few harbormen and synths came out to wave as well. Piper waved back enthusiastically with her cap, and even Valentine and MacCready doffed their hats at the people as they shrank away into the distance.

“I cannot wait to start typing this up,” Piper confessed when the outline of the island had begun to fade into the fog. “The unique challenges of a synth society, the fears of the native populace, what happens when a corrupt few take power, or outside forces try to influence the way the groups interact…”

Murphy sighed and sat down on a nearby crate. “Sure, Piper. I just hope we didn’t miss anything that was going on in the Commonwealth while we were away.”

Piper shook her head, clearly still in disbelief at the whirlwind visit to the island. “Even if we did, how could it top what we went through?”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Valentine cautioned her. He sat down next to Murphy on the crate and put down the sack he was carrying, unearthing a large, metal disk with various attachments. He turned it over in his hands, his face a mix of curiosity and mourning.

“DiMA gave me this,” he explained. “As a parting gift. It’s a storage drive. He offloaded all of his memories of the Institute- and me- onto it, before he was wiped.”

He handed it to her, and Murphy felt the weight of the gesture along with that of the drive itself. “Oh, Nick. About DiMA…”

“Don’t even say it.” Valentine held the sack out for her, and tied the top off when she had safely deposited it inside again. “DiMA dug his own grave, metaphorically speaking. At least he’s not dead in the street somewhere.”

Murphy nodded. “How does it work? I remember recovering some for Faraday, but I didn’t ask.”

“Faraday had a special hook-up to run it directly into DiMA’s brain, but it should pop into a memory lounger just fine, too,” Valentine replied. “I’m sure Irma can help me figure it out. I’m about due for another visit to the Memory Den anyway. With Doctor Amari gone, I’m sure she appreciates the company.”

“I could come with you,” Murphy offered. “If you want someone to help you make sense of whatever is on there.”

He smiled. “Thanks, doll. We’ll see.”

MacCready leaned against the outside of the boat cabin and yawned. “How long until we’re back in range of Diamond City Radio? I miss Travis.”

Murphy flipped her Pip-Boy radio dial experimentally, but received only static. “Not sure. But we’ll be back in the Commonwealth by tomorrow morning. Settle in, everyone.”

She rose and tapped the screen of her Pip-Boy thoughtfully. “Guess what,” she said.

“You’ve decided you want to retire from heroics?” MacCready piped up. “About time, boss.”

“No.” Murphy chuckled. “Well, yes. But not yet. No, I was going to say, it’s Friday. November 9th.”
Piper looked puzzled. “So?”

“So, that means on Tuesday, I will be turning 238.” Murphy sighed. “God, I’m too old for this shit.”

The four of them burst out laughing.

Later, when everyone had retreated to their respective corners to wind down, Murphy took a seat next to MacCready in the cabin and offered him a piece of bubblegum. “Thanks.”

He took it. “For what?”

“For keeping me sane.” Murphy popped a stick of gum into her mouth and chewed, savoring the artificial strawberry flavor that the centuries still hadn’t managed to stamp out. “Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do without you watching my back.”

“You’d do just fine,” MacCready assured her. “But it wouldn’t be even half as fun without my handsome mug around.”

Murphy smacked his shoulder playfully. “You arrogant son of a bitch.”

He laughed. “What do you want for your birthday, boss?”

“Truthfully?” Murphy thought for a second. “Unrelated question, how much would you hate me if we were stuck on this boat for a few more days?”

MacCready gave her a suspicious look, then recognition dawned on his face. “Duncan.”

She nodded. “I promised you. I want to meet your son.”

“He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair nervously. “Are you sure? It’s a long trip, and there’s the Institute to deal with, not to mention…”

Murphy stopped him. “Hey, Bobby. It’s okay. I know you’re scared, and not about traveling to D.C. It sounds like the Brotherhood kind of holds the area together, enough to make caravans safe, anyway.”

She took his hand in hers and squeezed. “It’s okay. It’s okay to be scared. But, from what I’ve seen, I think you’re going to be an incredible dad.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “You really think so? It’s been so long. Over a year. I don’t even know what to say to him.”

“How old is he, now? Five?” Murphy picked up her pack and opened the hidden inside pocket. Nate’s holotape was there, and next to it was a familiar carved piece of wood that she pulled out.

“You give him this,” she said, holding the toy soldier up to the light. “And you tell him the truth.”

MacCready smiled at the carving. “What truth would that be?”

“That you went out and became what his mom knew you to be. A soldier.”
She pressed it into his hand, and MacCready studied it, turning it this way and that to look at the miniature man sporting a rifle and helmet. “I was wondering if you’d kept this.”

“Of course I did.” Murphy looped her arm through his. “After Med-Tek, I half-expected you to take off, you know. But then you pulled that out and gave me that speech about repaying your debts, and I knew I’d never have a reason to doubt you ever again.”

“Yeah, I remember.” MacCready set the little soldier down on the floor in front of them. “I’d worked part of it out beforehand, you know. About how you had the world’s problems on your back, but there you were, helping me with mine anyway.”

He looked at her gratefully. “You still are.”

Murphy put her head on his shoulder. “The way I see it, you’ve been following me around for the past few months to make sure I don’t fall into a pit of radscorpions and disappoint everyone by dying too early. I owe you so much, Bobby. The least I can do is make sure you get back to your son.”

MacCready unlaced his arm from hers and put it around her shoulders. “And then what? I stay in Canterbury Commons, or I bring Duncan back to the Commonwealth and try to eke out a living doing… something.”

“It’s up to you.” Murphy patted his knee. “If you need somewhere to live, you can have one of my two places. You fancy Diamond City living or a home in the Sanctuary suburbs? I hear the Diamond City guard is hurting for members, and the Minutemen can always use an extra gun.”

“You’d do that?” he asked, surprised. “That’s too much. I couldn’t accept.”

“Nonsense,” Murphy replied. “I said it before we left, I haven’t paid you in ages. Consider it your compensation with interest.”

She stretched her arms out and down in front of her, wiggling her fingers and cracking her elbows. “You’ve got time to think about it, if we’re dropping Piper and Nick off and then heading straight down.”

He nodded, obviously a little overcome at the prospect of resuming his role as a parent. “I think Duncan would like the city. And there’s a school. Oh my god, he’s going to be old enough to go to school.”

“What’d I tell you?” Murphy smiled at him. “You’re prime dad material. I’ve seen how you are with Shaun. I have complete faith in you.”

They talked for a bit longer, weighing the pros and cons of raising a kid in the relative safety and bustle of a wasteland town versus the sprawling freedoms afforded by countryside settlements. MacCready didn’t bring it up, but Murphy began thinking about where she would eventually decide to put down roots with Shaun. Somehow, bringing him back to Sanctuary didn’t feel right. The house where she had shared morning coffee and Sugar Bombs with Nate, trimmed the hedges with Codsworth and rocked her son to sleep, only stood to remind her of a life that didn’t entirely feel like she was the one who lived it.

She had promised to go on a trip with Shaun when she returned to the Castle, and she still intended to honor that promise. Her plan had been to take him to Breakheart Banks, to meet Danse and the other synths open about their past, gently break the news to him that he was one of them. Thanks to her argument with Maxson, she didn’t have to do that part anymore, but she still thought it was important for him to get to know others like him, maybe grow to embrace that part of his identity.
Plus, it wouldn’t hurt to have Danse teach Shaun a few self-defense moves and weapon tactics, if he was dead set on traveling with her in the future.

Still, Murphy knew that she would have to settle down with Shaun somewhere. Maybe she didn’t have to decide it right this instant, but she would have to decide eventually. Kids, even eternally-youthful Institute creations, weren’t meant to roam the wastes.

The day turned to night, and the boat steadily motored on across the waves. Piper and Valentine filled Murphy and MacCready in on DiMA and Faraday’s last moments, on Chase’s promises to the residents of Acadia and a small vigil the synths had held for the buried Children of Atom. MacCready and Murphy told them about their encounters with Nadine and Elizabeth, and Piper’s jaw nearly hit the floor when they laid out what they knew of Elizabeth’s history.

“You mean I was on the same island as the Lone Wanderer, and you didn’t say anything?” she shrieked.

“Give it a rest, Piper,” MacCready said, laughing at her exaggerated distress. “She wasn’t the type to hand out interviews. Murphy barely got anything out of her.”

“That’s because neither of you know how to ask the right questions,” Piper replied, bristling slightly.

“Um, lawyer?” Murphy said, indicating herself. “Don’t worry, if I run into her again, you’ll be the first person I introduce her to.”

“How do you feel about what she said about Maxson?” Valentine asked.

“Mostly confused,” Murphy admitted. “It just doesn’t make sense, from any angle I look at it. We’re missing something.”

Piper snapped her fingers. “Maxson. I knew there was something I was forgetting to tell you. While you were off talking to Chase, MacCready and I made up a list of everyone who knew we were going to Far Harbor.”

She pulled out her notepad and flipped around in it until she got to a list of names. “Let’s see, us four, though we’ve been under near-constant supervision by each other ever since we set out from Diamond City, and I personally didn’t know where we were headed until we got to the boat. MacCready said you didn’t tell anyone with the Railroad, but he wasn’t sure who in the Minutemen knew besides Sturges and Haylen. And there’s the Nakanos, too.”

Murphy shook her head. “I didn’t tell anyone in the Minutemen where we were headed, just that we needed a boat and we were going somewhere north. I kept it vague.”

Piper crossed off Haylen and Sturges. “That helps. So of the Nakanos, was it just Kenji and Kasumi who knew?”

Valentine shook his head. “Kasumi only. Kenji just knew we were borrowing the boat.”

“So that’s us four, Kasumi…” Piper looked up at Murphy. “And Maxson. I assumed you told him.”

“I just want to point out that I assumed you didn’t,” MacCready added.

Murphy sighed. “I did.”

MacCready looked scandalized. “Well, that’s just terrible secret-keeping.”
“So our Institute leak is one of six,” Valentine said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Though I think Piper’s right. We can pretty safely rule ourselves out.”

Piper nodded. “One of two. How well do you trust Kasumi and Maxson?”

Everyone looked at Murphy.

“Kasumi… Kasumi initially ran away to Acadia because she thought she might be a synth,” she admitted, looking down at her lap. “And I asked Maxson not to spread our destination around, but I didn’t tell him not to tell anyone. I highly doubt Maxson turned us in to the Institute, but I can’t speak for anyone he might have told.”

“Aw hell,” Piper said, flipping her notepad shut.

“No,” Valentine interjected, shaking his head. “No, this could be a good thing.”

“How?” MacCready asked.

“Assuming Murphy can find out from Maxson who he told, if anyone, then we’ve got the perfect opportunity to try to smoke out the Institute informant,” Valentine explained. “We feed the mole.”

“Mole?” Piper looked confused. “Like a mole rat?”

“Exactly like that,” Murphy said. “If we know there’s a rat in the system, then we feed different information to everyone in the system and see how the Institute reacts. How they react determines who the rat is. That’s a great idea, Nick.”

“Except we’re dealing with an enemy who can travel to and disappear from locations in an instant,” MacCready pointed out. “And they’re known to wipe out everything in their path.”

Murphy nodded. “Good point. We’ll have to wait for the exact right opportunity, hopefully with minimal consequences. In the meantime, I’ll contact Maxson and figure out who all knew about Far Harbor.”

“Well, keep your friends in Diamond City posted on the outcome,” Piper said cheerily. “I can’t wait to see how this whole thing turns out.”

The boat nuzzled gently against the Nakanos’ dock the next morning, and its four passengers disembarked, all legs except for Valentine’s slightly wobbly on the solid ground. “Perks of being a mechanical man,” the detective said with a smile.

Kasumi burst from the house, the door slamming so hard that Murphy jumped. The youngest Nakano practically ran down the walk toward them, her eyes wide with fear.

“Is it the Institute?” she asked breathlessly.

“You okay, kid? What’s going on?” Valentine asked.

“The attack,” Kasumi said rapidly. “West of here. Some little town. The radio’s been talking about it ever since the sun came up.”
Murphy brought Diamond City Radio up on her Pip-Boy and turned up the volume. Travis Miles was in the middle of a somewhat frantic-sounding newscast.

"-too many details, yet, folks, but it seems some caravan traders happened upon the settlement last night and noticed the gates were ajar," he was saying. "We have confirmed reports that there appear to be no survivors. We’re bringing you information as we receive it, but it could be some time before we have more to tell you, as I am told the Minutemen and the Brotherhood are on the scene in Covenant."

"Covenant?" Piper said in surprise. "That little patch of questionable perfection? I always thought something was a bit off about that place."

"They’re all dead?" MacCready edged closer to the speakers on Murphy’s wrist. "What happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Kasumi said. "Dad’s glued to the radio. He said you might have a theory."

Murphy shook her head. "We had no idea."

Kasumi wrung her hands. "My parents are really freaking out. Travis said earlier that they didn’t think it was raiders, because it didn’t look like anything was taken, no one was missing. They were just… dead. Everyone. That doesn’t just happen to little settlements, without some kind of warning."

"What can we do?" Piper asked, looking between Murphy and Valentine. "We’re miles away from Covenant, and Murphy’s a wanted woman."

MacCready had gone very quiet, and he and Murphy shared a look.

"Go on inside for a minute," Murphy said, herding Piper, Valentine and Kasumi toward the house. "We’ll be along in a second."

She waited until they had shut the door behind them before turning to look at MacCready helplessly. "I have to go," she said.

He nodded. "I know. I’m coming with you."

"I’m not having this argument with you again," Murphy said, shaking her head. "There is literally a boat waiting for you on this dock to take you to your son. Don’t miss it."

"So, what, I’m supposed to just leave you to charge into danger by yourself? No way." MacCready shifted the rifle on his back and straightened up to his full height.

"Why are you like this?" Murphy cried out, exasperated. "If you’re worried about Duncan’s safety, then stay in the Capital Wasteland for a bit. Take Kenji and Kasumi with you, and they can take the boat back. I’ll even kick in some caps for their time."

"Duncan is safe," MacCready retorted. "He has been this whole time, and he will stay that way until the Institute is gone and the Commonwealth can live without being afraid all the time. I’m not leaving you, not now."

"Bobby, I have to do this."

Murphy pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut for a second. "Don’t ask me to explain why, but I need to fix this, before anyone else dies. I don’t want you to be one of those people. Duncan might be safe, but he still needs a dad. I don’t want… I can’t… I couldn’t live with myself if you…"
“Hey, hey.” MacCready stepped forward and gathered her in his arms as she started to tear up. “Murphy, it’s a choice for you, too, you know. You don’t have to be the hero all the time.”

“I’m not being a hero, I’m doing the goddamn right thing,” Murphy said, furiously wiping away tears. “I fucked up this world, I’m gonna fix it.”

“You. All by yourself.” He smiled down at her. “God, you’re something else, boss.”

She pushed him away. “Get on the fucking boat, Robert Joseph MacCready. And don’t come back unless you come back with Duncan. That’s an order.”

“No.”

“I’m not letting you get away with this twice. From one parent to another, go find your son.”

“Not a chance.”

Murphy took a deep breath, sized him up, and played her last card. “Lucy would be ashamed of you.”

The slight shades of amusement slid off of MacCready’s face. Already, that was too much for Murphy to bear, but she kept going.

“Following a broken woman around while she tries to single-handedly clean up the Commonwealth is a poor excuse for being an absentee father,” she said in a low voice. “You’ve already got a whole year to make up for. That’s months and months of games, questions, smiles you’re missing out on, a birthday, hundreds and thousands of words and laughs and tears and… and… fucking, *everything.* You have a son. You have a son. He’s yours. Do you know how lucky you are? Do you know… do you know what I went through, to have that? What I’ve done?”

“Murphy.”

“No, don’t ‘Murphy,’ me, you know I’m right. Get out of here. I’m… I’m firing you.” She sniffed and turned away from him. “One of us has to be a good parent, and I already know it’s not me.”

She heard MacCready take a step closer to her, loud against the worn wood of the dock. But louder still were Elizabeth’s words to Nadine, echoing around in her Murphy’s head. *There are people out there who want me dead. Even if we’re apart, it means you’re free of them.*

“Promise me.”

The words were soft, but they cut through to Murphy’s core. She turned around to find MacCready staring at the ground, hands in his pockets.

“Promise me that when I get back, you’ll still be alive,” he said, his eyes still downcast. “And we’ll show him Diamond City together.”

He sounded more vulnerable in that moment than she had ever known him to be. More than when they had found the cure to Duncan’s illness in Med-Tek, more than that night atop the Mass Fusion tower where they had watched smoke rising over the Charles, even more than the quiet moment they had shared on the battlements of the Castle under countless stars and violin music.

She nodded. “I promise. I’ll buy him his first bowl of noodles.”

MacCready half-smiled at that. “You know… I couldn’t ask for anyone better to watch my back.”
He pulled the little wooden soldier out of the pocket of his coat and held it up between them. “It was nice of you to hang onto this. I’ll get Duncan a whole set of his own someday. But this little guy has been yours for… well, a long time.”

Murphy hesitated, but she reached out and took the toy. She smiled at the olive-green uniform, the three dots that made up the steadfast soldier’s face, before putting it away in her pack.

“Do you hate me?” she asked.

“I don’t hate you,” MacCready reassured her.

She hugged him then, and for some reason, it felt different.
Gritty Details

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy takes a page out of Deacon's book and just skulks around.

Somewhat to Murphy’s surprise, Kenji Nakano jumped on her request for him to accompany MacCready and the boat down to the Capital Wasteland in search of Duncan.

“This business in Covenant, the Commonwealth is not safe,” he said, hurriedly putting dishes away in the kitchen and filling a backpack with canned food. “A trip will be good. We will all go.”

“You sure, Kenji?” Nick Valentine grumbled questioningly. “It’s a long trip. Lot of water between here and Brotherhood-controlled territory.”

“I’m sure,” Kenji said quickly. “Rei, Kasumi. Pack what we need, put away what we don’t.”

Kasumi looked as though she wanted to say something, but she snapped her mouth shut after a sharp look from her mother. Rei pulled out a woven laundry basket and began filling it with clothes and shoes.

“We’re coming back, you know,” MacCready said, crossing his arms and leaning in the door frame that led out to the dock.

“Yes, of course,” Kenji said absentmindedly. The old fisherman stuffed a box of BlamCo into the backpack and zipped it shut.

MacCready skeptically raised his eyebrows at Murphy. She shook her head.

“Kasumi, can I borrow your radio?” she asked. “Nick and Piper and I need to get back to the Castle somehow.”

“Sure,” Kasumi said, gesturing at the stairs while she re-assembled a tool kit that was strewn all over the living room floor in front of the partially-working television set. “In my room.”

Murphy dodged the activity and made her way up to the second floor. The radio set was on Kasumi’s desk, microphone at the ready. Murphy took a seat in the red office chair, pulled on the attached headset and flipped a few switches. “Castle, come in. This is Captain Murphy, location Nakano. Anybody got their ears on? Over.”

There was a pause, before the radio crackled to life in reply. “10-4, Captain. You looking for a ride? Over.”

“Affirmative,” Murphy said, keeping her voice as clear as she could. “Anyone down there heading our way, or are your resources tied up in Covenant? Over.”

“We’ve got the shared bird taking off from Spectacle in a few minutes, but it’s on its way to the scene,” the man on the other end answered. “Could swing by for you, but there’s no set return. Over.”
Suddenly another, more familiar voice cut in. “Breaker, Captain, this is the General speaking. Did you say you’re back in the Commonwealth? Over.”

“Preston?” Murphy said in surprise. “I mean, General Garvey. Yes, we all made it back in one piece, and we need a ride. That something you can arrange? Over.”

“Well, if you’re all going to Covenant, then yes,” Preston replied. “Otherwise we can send Haylen with one of the boats. Sturges and I are about to take off, what’ll it be? Over.”

Murphy thought quickly before responding. “Both. I’ll come with you to Covenant and Haylen can pick up the others. How soon will you be here? Over.”

“You sure that’s a good idea, Captain?” Preston asked. “What with you on the run from the Brotherhood and all? Over.”

“I’ll think of something. Over.”

Murphy waited in silence for a few seconds before Preston replied. “Copy that, Captain. We’ll be there within the hour, and Haylen won’t be far behind. Over.”

“See you soon, boys. Over and out.” Murphy shut the microphone off and sighed, leaning heavily against the back of the chair.

“Everything okay?” a voice asked from the doorway. Murphy turned around to find Kasumi watching her curiously.

“Yes,” Murphy replied. “No. I don’t know. It’s a mess.”

“Like always?”

“Like always.” Murphy frowned. “Do you have a hat I can borrow, or something? I need to hide my hair.”

Kasumi took a deep breath. “Only if you help me convince dad that I need to stay here.”

“Why do you want to stay?”

“It’s the settlements,” Kasumi said, crossing over to a map of the Commonwealth she had tacked above her bed. “Me and this other operator, we’ve been trying to connect everyone in the Commonwealth with short-range radio to share information, give them a method of checking in on each other. We’re pretty small so far, and there aren’t many people out there with the radio equipment to talk long-range. Most of them have the tech to tune into Diamond City, or Radio Freedom, but no one’s really tried to connect the wastelanders that aren’t associated with a particular group.”

“A citizen’s band,” Murphy said, nodding. “You put this together yourself?”

“Me and the Mechanist,” Kasumi replied, smoothing out the map. “I don’t know her real name, but she’s really good with this stuff.”

“The Mechanist? Like the Silver Shroud villain?”

Kasumi laughed. “Right. That’s her handle. I haven’t met her, but I know she’s based somewhere in the city. We started talking not long after I got home from Far Harbor with you and Nick, and we both realized we wanted to help the others out there who are on their own, the ones that have to rely
on broadcast radio or the caravans for news. She built two radios and gave them to the settlers at County Crossing and Nordhagen, and I built one and got it to the people at that old manor by Nahant. They loved it. We all keep tabs on each other."

“Kasumi,” Murphy smiled in surprise. “That’s amazing. But can you trust this… Mechanist? The last time you trusted someone on the radio, you wound up running away to Acadia.”

Kasumi smirked and looked down at her feet. “Yeah, I know. I was suspicious of her at the beginning, because she used a voice modulator the first few times I talked to her. Made her sound like a robot. She eventually stopped and explained that she does it to keep her identity a secret, because she’s holed up in a pretty sweet spot and doesn’t want anyone to recognize her at a market or something and follow her home to steal her tech. Still sketchy, I know, but she’s for real. I took the boat and visited the folks at Nordhagen Beach and County Crossing to check her radio setups, and there’s nothing out of the ordinary about them. She genuinely wants to help.”

“Did any of the settlers see her?” Murphy asked, frowning.

“Nope.” Kasumi shook her head. “She delivered the radios using an eyebot. Name of Sparks.”

“Huh.” Murphy took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. If Piper’s list was accurate, then the girl in front of her was a possible Institute plant, or informant. Her desire to stay in the Commonwealth could be motivated by selflessness, but it could also be for more nefarious purposes. To keep tabs on the woman with the white hair and plasma guns, and her friends. Pass the information along to a Courser, waiting in the shadows. And if that was the case, wouldn’t she simply find another way to stay in the Commonwealth, despite her family’s wishes?

But looking at Kasumi, waiting hopefully for a response, Murphy couldn’t help but wonder if she was nothing more than a girl growing care and concern for the people around her. Qualities she refused to squash, in today’s world.

“Okay,” she said finally. “To tell you the truth, we might have need of a radio operator, if the attack really was the Institute. I’ll talk to your dad.”

Kenji was livid when Murphy backed up Kasumi’s request to stay behind.

“You are my daughter, and you will do as I say,” the old fisherman bellowed, jabbing a finger angrily at the floorboards of their oceanside home. “This business in Covenant is only the beginning, I guarantee it. If the Institute, the synths, are still out there, then the safest place for you is with me and your mother.”

MacCready and Piper sat on the couch, looking respectively amused and embarrassed by the argument, but Valentine jumped to Kasumi’s defense along with Murphy. “Kenji, your daughter is a grown woman,” the detective argued. “If she wants to stay in the Commonwealth and help out the folks who are worried they’re in danger, then that’s her prerogative.”

“Stay out of this, Nick,” Kenji rumbled, moving aside to let Rei sneak through the door behind him with a basket of supplies. “I would have thought that you and Murphy, of all people, would understand why Kasumi is not ready for these kinds of decisions.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Kenji,” Murphy warned him. “Yes, she’s made mistakes. But
deciding to stay for the good of a cause is not necessarily a mistake.”

“Dad, I want to be here for the people who can’t hop on a boat and sail away,” Kasumi pleaded. “I have friends here, now. I can’t just leave them.”

“Yes you can,” Kenji replied adamantly. “For your own safety. Many men and women have died for causes more noble than sitting by a radio waiting for a voice on the other end. You will come with me and your mother and we will bring the mercenary to Rivet City together, where it’s safe. You cannot and will not stay here alone.”

“You can’t expect me to stay under your wing forever, dad!” Kasumi argued, her voice getting steadily louder with every sentence. “And you can’t just pick up and run off anytime you feel threatened by something. What if Murphy and Nick had done that, when they came to Far Harbor looking for me and saw what the island had in store? What if Murphy had run away from the mirelurk queen at the Castle, or the Glowing Sea, or the Institute? You have to keep going, and you have to fight back!”

“Kasumi.” Valentine tried to interject with a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off and stared her father down. Kenji stared back, his face red with rage.

“You are my only daughter, and I will not lose you again,” he said quietly.

“Damn,” Piper remarked from the couch.

Murphy cleared her throat. “I have a suggestion that might ease your mind, Kenji.”

All eyes turned to her, and Murphy took a deep breath. “What if Kasumi went with Nick and Piper back to the Castle? She could stay with the Minutemen while you’re gone, and assist with radio operations there. It’s one of the safest places in the Commonwealth, I guarantee it.”

“Say what now?” Piper said, rising from the couch. “Nick and I are going back to the Castle? What about Covenant?”

“I’m going to Covenant by myself,” Murphy said firmly. “Preston and Sturges are on their way here with a vertibird to pick me up, and we’re going to the scene. Haylen won’t be far behind them with a boat, and she’ll take you back to the Castle.”

“What about all of my equipment?” Kasumi asked. “I need it to stay in contact with everyone.”

“What about the story?” Piper added. “You’re going to the scene of the crime, great. I should go too, for the exclusive. You heard Travis, he’s in the dark.”

“Piper,” Valentine said sharply over his shoulder. “Murphy, you can’t go by yourself. The Brotherhood…”

“Will not recognize me,” Murphy assured him. “Kasumi and I have it covered. But they’ll definitely recognize you, and probably won’t greet you too happily if this was an Institute attack. And Kasumi, if you want, I’m sure Haylen would be more than willing to make a few trips to grab everything you need. Piper, just, give it a rest, okay? The fewer people involved, the better. It’ll attract less attention and the last thing I want is the Brotherhood-Minutemen alliance breaking down over who brought the reporter. I’m sure the gritty details will be all over the wasteland by tomorrow.”

“Hmph.” Piper crossed her arms and sat back down. MacCready patted her elbow in mock sympathy.
“What do you think, dad?” Kasumi asked.

“I…” Kenji’s voice shook, and for a second, Murphy thought he was going to explode again. Just then, Rei appeared in the doorway behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Let her stay,” she said, her tone compassionate. “It was never going to be forever with her, Kenji. You knew that.”

Kenji turned his chin slightly toward her hand, then sighed and hung his head. “Kasumi. You know I only want the best for you. You’re… you’re my little girl.”

He put out a hand, and Kasumi took it and squeezed it. “I know, dad. I know.”

“Do you have to do this?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Your grandfather…” Kenji smiled. “Taichi would have been so proud of you.”

“He was proud of you,” Rei said, moving to stand next to Kenji.

Tears sprang up in Kasumi’s eyes. “I know.”

Murphy and Valentine backed up to give them space, and the three Nakanos hugged. Kenji sniffed loudly, tearing up like his daughter, and Rei patted them both on the back matter-of-factly before pulling away and turning to Murphy.

“If anything happens to my daughter while we are gone, I will hold you responsible,” she said.

Murphy nodded. She knew that tone. *If anything happens to my daughter, I will kill you.*

“Mom, can Murphy borrow some clothes from you?” Kasumi asked, wiping her eyes.

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The vertibird kicked up sand as it eased down onto the ground next to the Nakanos’ house. Murphy pulled the green hood around her head and neck tighter and tried to keep the long tails of Rei’s leather coat from flapping too much.

When the aircraft was safely on the ground, Preston hopped out and saluted the group of people standing by watching. “Ready to go, Captain? We’re on a schedule.”

Murphy shouldered her pack and turned to MacCready, who was watching the vertibird with a look of resentment. “Don’t do anything I would or wouldn’t do,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever that means.”

Murphy pulled the pair of sunglasses Kenji had loaned her from the leather coat pocket and put them on. “How do I look?”

He smiled half-heartedly. “Like Deacon.”

She nodded and glanced down at the ground between them. “You know, you don’t have to hurry
back. Take your time, let Duncan show you around, catch up with your friends. What were their names again? Derek and…”

“Machete.” His smile widened a fraction. “They’ll be wondering where you are.”

“Well, maybe I’ll meet them some other day.” Murphy wrapped him in a hug. “In the meantime, just tell them I’m doing what I’m always doing.”

“Saving the Commonwealth?” MacCready chuckled, squeezing her too hard for just an instant.

“Saving the Commonwealth.”

Piper and Valentine stepped up on either side of MacCready. “Take care of yourself, kid,” Valentine said, with a tip of his hat.

“Yeah, don’t get yourself captured again,” Piper joked.

Murphy hugged each of them, then turned to the Nakanos, who were watching the goodbyes with hesitation. “Thank you. For everything.”

Rei and Kenji nodded in return, and Kasumi threw her arms around Murphy enthusiastically. “Thank you. We’ll be in touch, okay? Keep your Pip-Boy handy.”

“I always do.”

“It’s channel 27 to reach me, you remember.”

“Of course.” Murphy pulled back and ruffled Kasumi’s hair. “Make friends with Haylen. She’s into that stuff too.”

Preston beckoned her from the vertibird, and Murphy made her way over to climb inside. As Sturges powered up again, Murphy waved to the six bystanders, who responded with whoops and whistles. MacCready stood still in the middle, his arms crossed, and the worried look on his face made Murphy’s heart clench. Even though she knew otherwise, she somehow felt like she was making a mistake.

When they were out of sight and flying over the wasteland, Murphy settled back into her seat next to Preston. “So what’s the situation? Travis said the whole settlement is dead.”

The general straightened his headset before replying. “That’s the short version. Eleven deceased, for sure. Only thing left living in the place was a housecat, our latest report said. The turrets that usually keep the place safe were blown to bits, and everyone was lying out dead in the street, like they tried to fight back. All killed by laser blasts, no casings anywhere. Nothing taken, so it wasn’t raiders or someone hard up for supplies.”

“Certainly sounds like the Institute,” Murphy remarked, rubbing her forehead. “Or someone else with access to a load of laser weapons. But why kill the town and take nothing? Were they trying to send a message again, like in Diamond City?”

“No idea, Captain.” Preston sighed. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in a day or so. “Truth is, the caravan that discovered the place put out a distress call to anyone in the area, and the Brotherhood got there first. They already had teams nearby for the Lexington clean-up along the 95. There were a bunch of boys in power armor traipsing around the town by the time our unit from Starlight made it over. I’m told there’s been some tension.”
“Tension?”

“What he’s trying to say is the Scribes and the ones from logistics on Spectacle are pretty much used to working with us, now, but their peacekeeping units aren’t so great at keeping the peace,” Sturges commented from the cockpit. “General Garvey here is going in to smooth things over, if he can.”

Murphy couldn’t help smirking. “So that’s why you borrowed the vertibird. To make an entrance.”

“Well, if it’s good enough for their Elder, then it’s good enough for us,” Sturges replied with a grin. “Shock and awe, or whatever they say.”

“Have you been in contact with the Prydwen at all?” Murphy asked.

Sturges and Preston glanced at each other. “It’s been, what, a week since you left?” Sturges asked.

“Right,” Preston said, nodding. “And we haven’t heard anything from their leadership since.”

“Aside from the usual transmissions from Knight-Sergeant Gavil,” Sturges added. “Something tells me that if the Great War part two came along, he’d still be in his depot after the bombs fell, tallying up rations.”

Murphy frowned. “Nothing? Have you tried reaching out? Lancer-Captain Kells is usually monitoring radio communications pretty closely up there.”

“Usually, he is,” Preston admitted. “But lately all we get are Scribes and other Lancers. Their usual operations patterns haven’t changed, though, as far as we can tell, so it’s probably internal.”

“Might be you ruffled some feathers, with your Railroad partnership deal,” Sturges suggested. “I’m sure they’ll work it out.”

“Yeah.” Murphy bit her lip and looked out at the ground passing by under them. Broken and leaning telephone poles jutted out from the dust and wild grasses along the faded highways, and here and there lay an overturned Chryslus or an abandoned freight truck. “Desdemona said something like that might happen. She said she assumed Maxson would spend the next month ‘bringing his troops to heel.’ I thought she was just joking, but I should’ve known big changes like that don’t always go down easy.”

She turned back to Preston. “Speaking of which, how are the Minutemen taking the leadership change? You as the new General?”

He smiled. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Captain, but there’s hardly any difference in the way things are going.”

Murphy laughed. “That’s what I figured. I was never home long enough to make too much of an impression.”

Preston shrugged. “We appreciated that about you. Or at least I did. You were around when we needed you, and when we didn’t, you were off helping someone else in need.”

“Ditto,” Sturges said with a tiny salute. The vertibird dipped left slightly, and he cursed and straightened it out again.

“So you’re okay with me tagging along to check out the scene at Covenant?”

Preston nodded. “Of course, Captain. It’s only fitting the old guard should accompany the new on
their first field mission.”

Murphy waved her hand dismissively. “You’ve had field missions before.”

“Well, not as General.” Preston took off his hat and ran a hand over the back of his head. “I’m a little nervous.”

“Hey, you’re gonna be fine.” Murphy patted him on the shoulder. “Remember Station Olivia? I’ve got your back. Maybe not publicly, because I don’t want to get arrested again or shot, but I’ll be with you as much as I can be.”

He chuckled at that. “I appreciate it. And hopefully we’ll have fewer people shooting at us, this time.”

Murphy grinned. “And fewer exploding mole rats. We’ll figure out what happened, together.”

Sturges set the vertibird down on the pavement near the little walled town, close to a pair of Brotherhood vertibirds guarded by a Knight in power armor. Murphy let Preston get out first, and hung back with Sturges as they approached the gates of Covenant.

Their arrival had caused something of a stir among those already on the scene, and Preston was greeted by a small host of Minutemen soldiers who appeared to have been waiting for him. The rest of the Brotherhood’s team emerged from the town as well, a dozen in total: Two Scribes, two Lancers, seven more Knights, and, to Murphy’s alarm, Paladin Brandis.

The aging Paladin stepped forward and removed his helmet to speak with Preston. Murphy moved slightly behind Sturges and the little shack outside the gates, out of the Brotherhood leader’s line of sight.

“Greetings, General,” Brandis said in a grave tone. “Unfortunate that we should meet again under these circumstances.”

“Agreed.” Preston nodded. “If we might speak alone, I’d like to hear what your investigation has turned up so far, and how the Minutemen can be of assistance here.”

“We’ve set up operations in one of the dwellings inside,” Brandis replied. “We can speak there. As for your men, as I’ve been trying to tell them for the past few hours, their presence is not necessary here in Covenant.”

Preston looked Brandis up and down. Murphy guessed he was weighing the consequences of arguing with a man in power armor in front of their forces. Unsurprisingly, he took a more diplomatic approach.

“Search the area for any survivors,” he said to the nearest member of the Minutemen. “In pairs. If you find anything out of the ordinary at all, bring it to our attention. And at least two of you should go check on that family living in the boathouse over the hill, see if they’re okay. Sturges, with me.”

Sturges followed Preston through the gates with Brandis and the Scribes, and Murphy blended in with the Minutemen as they divided up to patrol. There was an uneven number, so she joined a pair that headed down toward the shoreline of the nearby Mystic Lake.
The sand was full of rocks, submerged trees and garbage, but nothing showing signs of human life, or death. Murphy and the Minutemen combed through the bushes, tangling their clothes on brambles as they went. A few Knights watched their progress from the road, but soon grew bored and began talking amongst each other.

It was what Murphy had been waiting for, and she casually moved closer, until she was just within earshot of their conversation.

“You hear about Knight Womack’s mission into the Lexington supermarket?” one of them was saying. “The lot of them came back covered in glowing feral juices. I think her armor is still glowing. I’m telling you, I wouldn’t mind having a bucket of that stuff to throw on Quinlan’s cat, next time it steals my socks. See how the Proctor likes a living night light.”

The female Knight next to him laughed. “You’re disgusting, Phillips. Emmett only stole your socks because you took forever to put them away after they come back clean.”

“I’m just saying, Kerrigan, we wouldn’t have a problem if the cat didn’t steal my socks,” Knight Phillips said with a shrug.

“I wouldn’t count on that,” a third Knight cut in. “Last time Kells walked through the bunks, he gave Ricky a dressing-down in front of everyone, just because he didn’t have his corners tucked in. I saw it, he was practically spitting right in his face. Over sheets.”

“Well that’s Ricky’s fault,” Phillips retorted.

“For what, being friends with the Elder?” Knight Kerrigan asked.

“No, for not tucking his sheets in. I don’t leave my socks out when Kells does walk-throughs.”

“I don’t know,” Kerrigan replied. “Seems like it was personal, for Kells anyway.”

“Ricky took it like a champ,” the third Knight offered. “Waited until the Lancer-Captain was gone before calling him an asshole.”

The three Knights laughed. “Better than I would’ve handled it,” Phillips admitted. “If Kells has an issue with Maxson, he’s got no right to get up in the face of his subordinates about it. He should take it to the source.”

“You didn’t hear?” the third Knight said in surprise. “I thought everyone on the Prydwen knew by now.”

“He’s been out in Lexington for the past few weeks, Ross,” Kerrigan said. “How would he have heard?”

“Right, right,” Knight Ross said, nodding. “It’s all anyone’s been talking about for the past few days, is all. Kells…”

The Knight lowered his voice, and Murphy strained to try and make out what he was saying. She only caught words and phrases. “Top-secret officers’ meeting,” “no confidence,” and something that sounded like “litany.”

“No kidding,” Phillips said when Ross had finished. “That’s insane. But he can’t do that, right? The Codex…”

“Right,” Kerrigan said confidently. “He’s not a Paladin. But still…”
“What’s Maxson gonna do?” Phillips asked.

Ross shook his head. “No idea. It’s crazy, but I have to hand it to Kells. I’m no fan of the guy, but to have the balls to say that to the Elder’s face… you know he’s worried.”

“Forget Kells,” Phillips replied. “I’d be more worried if I was Maxson.”

“Well who do you think is in the right?” Kerrigan asked, turning to Ross. “Maxson’s never let the Brotherhood down before. I trust him.”

Ross put his hands up and took a step back. “I’m not talking about this with the Paladin nearby. We’re not supposed to know about it. He’d have me scrubbing the deck for the rest of my career. All of us.”


“Well, duh.” Ross picked up his laser rifle and checked the chamber. “It’s obviously something to do with her.”

Kerrigan let out an exasperated sigh. “Typical men. Thinking a woman is the cause of all the Brotherhood’s problems. You’ve been spending too much time around Proctor Teagan.”

“What a woman, though.” Phillips pressed a hand to his chest and threw his head back in a mock display of emotion. “I saw her take down three green uglies, once. Out by Waypoint Echo. That snow-haired gal is poetry in motion.”

Kerrigan laughed and punched his shoulder playfully. “Wish someone would talk about me that way. I could take down three super mutants.”

Ross scoffed. “Not without power armor, you couldn’t.”

Some noise back toward Covenant snapped them all back to attention, and they thundered off, leaving Murphy in the bushes with even more questions than when she had arrived.
Emerging Stars

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy reflects on how the Commonwealth led her to this point in her life.

The sun was sinking in the sky by the time General Preston Garvey and Sturges reemerged from the gates of Covenant. The Brotherhood team appeared to be packing up around them, and Murphy watched from across the street, where a group of the Minutemen were sharing cigarettes and grumbling about “the tin cans stepping on our toes.” Paladin Brandis gave Preston Garvey a salute, before replacing his helmet and directing a nearby group of Knights to help the Scribes pack up equipment.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing more we can do,” Brandis said. “Whatever intel we gather from the autopsy, we will share with you. That’s all I can assure you of, at this point.”

A pair of Knights passed behind him, gingerly carrying a body bag between the two of them. Preston’s eyes followed the bag, and he nodded curtly.

“I thank you for your response, Paladin,” he said. “But please, tell the Elder that I would like to speak with him, as soon as his schedule permits.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” Brandis pointed at two other Knights who were standing idly by. “Move, you two. The Elder and I expect a full scouting report by 0600 tomorrow.”

The two Lancers powered up the Brotherhood vertibirds, and one by one, the Scribes, Knights and Paladin boarded, carrying various bags of what Murphy assumed was evidence. One of the Scribes was lugging what looked like a smashed computer terminal, its screen burned and shattered and the keyboard in pieces.

Preston crossed his arms and watched the aircraft leave, before turning to his men. “We’ve got ten to bury,” he said, gesturing inside the town. “There are shovels over by what used to be the store, looks like. Outside the walls, please.”

Sturges shook his head and led the way through the gates, the Minutemen following. Preston stayed put. He caught Murphy’s eye, and jerked his head over toward the gateway shack.

Murphy followed him over to the indicated spot, where he leaned heavily on the former welcome desk and sighed. “Bad business. You ever been here before?”

Murphy nodded. “Once. Took their entry test and everything.”

Preston’s eyes widened in surprise. “You did? Did you pass?”

“Yeah, I did.” Murphy sighed. “But Danse didn’t. The guy who gave us the test made it pretty clear we weren’t going inside together, so we kept moving.”

“Was this before or after…”

“Before,” Murphy cut him off. “He thought it was some sort of statement, trying to keep the
Brotherhood out of Covenant. Demanded he get to retake it. He and the guy who administered the test got into a pretty heated argument, and I had to drag him away to go camp somewhere else.”

“Whoa.” Preston shook his head. “Did you guys know they were testing to see if you were synths?”

“Not then.” Murphy crossed her arms and leaned back against the wooden wall of the shack. “I found out later. Word of mouth among the caravans at Bunker Hill, rumors. There were plenty of stories about them being rude to other travelers, and some of them had just started avoiding the place, which only pissed the people here off. They wanted the supplies, but couldn’t suck it up and play nice with those who failed their test.”

“Did Danse ever find out?”

“Not that I know of. But he definitely marked the location as a place of interest for the Brotherhood. Wanted to know what they were up to.”

“Huh. I wonder if that’s why the Brotherhood was eager to jump on this,” Preston mused, rubbing his chin. He paused as the Minutemen began to pass by outside with the remaining bodies, silent until all ten had gone by and the sound of shovels hitting the dirt in the distance had begun. “Our earlier report was mostly accurate. Eleven dead, no sign of looting, cat sitting in the window of the communal house. But there is something missing, and some of the things here don’t add up.”

“What’s gone?”

Preston pursed his lips. “A Mister Handy robot.”

Murphy straightened up. “Seriously?”

“I thought that might pique your interest,” Preston said, taking a seat on the surface of the desk. “Yes. The common house computer mentions a robot, that apparently handed out lemonade.”

“Lemonade?” The memory of the summertime drink was enough to make Murphy’s mouth water. “But where did they get the lemons?”

“Beats me.” Preston shrugged. “Either way, the robot’s gone. No trace of it. The Paladin seemed to have drawn the same conclusion on the Institute’s involvement, which is why he was bagging and tagging everything he thought would be useful.”

“The computer,” Murphy said, nodding slowly. “Was it like that, when they found it?”

“Blasted to bits? Yeah. Whoever shot the town up did a number on it,” Preston said. “Must’ve been something on there they didn’t want getting out. Brandis had them pack it up for data recovery on the Prydwen, but the look on the Scribe’s face was not hopeful.”

“So what else was fishy?” Murphy pressed.

Preston shifted uncomfortably. “There were eleven dead, but one of them doesn’t appear to have been living here. Wasn’t wearing a picture-perfect Americana outfit like the rest of the residents, and what’s more, I recognized him. He’s a caravan master, based out of Bunker Hill. But I don’t know what he’d be doing here, alone. The caravan that discovered the scene, it sounded like they tried to take his body with them, but the Brotherhood refused to let them. Brandis said they left in a hurry, as soon as they were done being questioned. He’s also the one they took to autopsy.”

“Huh.” Murphy peered around, before pulling down her hood and shaking her hair out. She ran a hand through it and twisted her fingers up at the back of her head. “Whose caravan unit was he
with?”

“Stockton’s, I think.”

Of course, Murphy thought, the Railroad’s best conductor. If one of his men was sniffing around a community of known synth-haters, there was no way the shadow organization wasn’t involved. She considered telling Preston about Stockton’s secret stop for synths beneath Bunker Hill for an instant, but decided against it. “Anything else?”

Preston got up from the desk and looked around outside the shack before moving in next to Murphy and pulling a piece of paper from inside his coat. “Someone slipped this in my pocket. I didn’t see who it was, but it must have been a Scribe or a Lancer. I think I’d have noticed if one of the ones in power armor tried to be stealthy and pass me a message.”

Murphy unfolded the paper and read over the words on it.

In the dark pine-wood
I would we lay
In deep cool shadow
Midnight of day

She looked up at Preston and furrowed her brow. “A poem?”

“Turn it over.”

On the back of the paper was a plus sign, surrounded by eight lines radiating outward. Murphy whistled.

“You know what it means, too,” Preston surmised, keeping his voice low.

“Yeah,” Murphy admitted. “There’s a Railroad ally nearby.”

“Where?”

She frowned. “I’m guessing it has something to do with the poem. Do you recognize it?”

Preston shook his head. “Do the first letters of each line, or word, correspond to anything?”

Murphy scanned the words over again, then shook her head. “Too many consonants, and I doubt it’s that deep. I bet the Railroad didn’t bank on me being here to decipher this, so it’s supposed to be easy enough for you to figure out yourself.”

The Minutemen general turned, pacing slowly to the other side of the shack and back. “Pine-wood… there isn’t a proper forest nearby, so it can’t be…”

He snapped his fingers and whipped around. “Let me see the map on your Pip-Boy.”

Murphy pressed a few buttons and pulled up the map of Boston, centering on Mystic Lake. She held her arm out, and Preston scrolled around a bit, zooming in and out around the topography until a
smile spread over his face.

“I thought that’s what it was called,” he said, voice full of satisfaction. “Take a look.”

He had highlighted a location on the far side of the lake. Murphy rubbed a smudge off the screen of the Pip-Boy and tapped it thoughtfully. “Mystic Pines. Another retirement home.”

Preston nodded. “Midnight of day. I guess we wait.”

At Preston’s behest, Sturges treated the responding Minutemen to a vertibird ride back to Starlight. It took two trips, and as the second group was about to depart, Preston leaned into the cockpit to have a few words with Sturges before takeoff.

As the aircraft rose into the sky, Preston walked over to the fire pit outside the gates that Murphy had been working to ignite. “I told him not to come back until morning,” he said, shouting over the sound of the rotors.

“Oh?” Murphy lit the ball of dry grass she had rolled up between her fingers and blew on it, coaxing a little flame to life. She nestled it inside the hut of twigs she had assembled. As it grew, she fed it pieces of firewood from the pile she had carried out of Covenant.

Preston settled himself on the ground next to her and laid his laser musket down. He grabbed a stick, poking it at the ashes aimlessly. “I’m sure we can handle whatever might cross our path tonight. And after we rendezvous, we can go inside and shut the gate.”

Murphy leaned forward and grimaced. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not sure I want to sleep in there.”

“Yeah, me either.” Preston tossed his stick in the flames. “I came through here, too, once. Didn’t go in, because we didn’t need to. Colonel Hollis handled talking to the citizens, making sure everything was okay. They always seemed well off, even too much so. Made me wonder what kind of deals they’d made, to stay alive.”

“Guess they were the wrong ones,” Murphy said softly.

She pulled a pen and a now well-worn list from her pack and studied it. The first 38 names on it had sunk into the paper long ago, and the three in pencil underneath them were smudged. On the boat ride back to the Commonwealth, she had added in the names from the island. The ones she could remember, both Children of Atom and harbormen. Sister Mai. Zealot Ware. The Mariner. Andre Michaud. Eight more, with five dashes underneath to represent the dead she hadn’t known.

She had decided against putting DiMA and Faraday on the list, after some internal debate, and now she struggled to recall the name of the man who had gotten into a shouting match with Danse, what seemed like a lifetime ago. It was no use, and she rose with the intent of going inside the walls to the common house terminal to see if there was a town directory.

“What’re you doing?” Preston asked.

Murphy held the list up, then thought better and tried to put it away. He stood up and stopped her before she could, and gently took the piece of paper from her to examine it. His expression softened
in recognition.

“You kept this,” he said.

All Murphy could do was nod. She held her hand out, but Preston was still reading the names, a look of pity and understanding growing on his face.

“Why?” he asked when he was done. He folded the paper up and handed it back to her.

“Because it’s my fault they’re gone,” Murphy answered. She swallowed hard. “I need to keep track. I need to know what went wrong, and learn from it.”

Preston studied her. “And you want to know the names of the folks in Covenant?”

She nodded again, and he sighed. “Their deaths are on the Institute, Captain. You didn’t pull the trigger and empty this place. They did.”

“I didn’t kill Deacon either, but he’s still dead because of me,” Murphy replied, allowing a bit of edge to creep into her voice. “I need to do this, Preston. I’ll be right back.”

“Murphy-”

She strode off before he could stop her, heading into the ghost town. There were tears on her face, but she wasn’t sure if they were from sadness or anger.

The terminal opposite the bunks was unlocked, but the only name in the files on it was a “Mr. Fitzgerald.” Murphy slammed her fist against the side of the terminal, causing the green text on the screen to bounce, before slumping forward over the keyboard in defeat.

Preston appeared in the doorway to her right. “Murphy.”

“Don’t.”

“No, I- there’s a list,” he said quickly. “In the mayor’s office. A mail system or something. I’ll show you.”

Reluctantly, Murphy followed him into the house at the back of the walled settlement. He led her to the mayor’s desk and pulled a neat clipboard from its top drawer. On it was a list of names and corresponding numbers, labeled 1 through 10.

“Bunk numbers, I think,” Preston commented as she scribbled the names down. “For deliveries, probably. Paladin Brandis didn’t know which citizens were which, so it was useless to him. I only knew a few by face, not really by name.”

Murphy sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Thank you. The eleventh man. Stockton’s man. What was his name?”

“Dan, I think.”

Dan. Murphy jotted it down, then blew on the ink before folding the paper up again. “I’m running out of space.”

Preston smiled grimly and pulled a leatherbound journal from the same desk drawer. “Want this one? The mayor won’t be needing it anymore, unfortunately.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes, but she accepted the offer, turning the book over in her hands.
pre-war, fake leather. She flipped through it and found the first few pages covered in notes about the weather and conditions on the lake, but the rest were blank. She tore the pages with writing on them out and put them back in the desk with the clipboard. Carefully, she tucked her list inside the journal’s cover.

“Know what went wrong, and learn from it,” Preston said, a tad more gentle than his tone had been by the campfire. “It’s admirable. I’m sorry I was quick to judge.”

“Thank you.”

He frowned slightly. “Murphy, do you remember why I gave you that list?”

“For the fireworks,” she answered, confused. “Why?”

“Right.” He tilted his head back, eyes closed, like he was picturing the colors blooming over the Castle that night in August. “To honor them. To remember them.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Murphy said.

“You’re trying to avenge them,” Preston corrected her. “Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I’ll be the first to say the Institute deserves to have vengeance come crashing down on it, after what they’ve done. But Murphy, every name on that list was a person, not just a reason to hold yourself responsible for your actions. If you truly want to remember them, then you need to honor their memory in a way they would have found meaningful.”

“Isn’t designating myself the savior of the Commonwealth doing that?” Murphy asked, half-jokingly.

He smiled. “Of course it is. Far be it from me to stop you from doing what you’re doing. Let me give you an example, though. The first 38, they were Minutemen, through and through. They fought and died for the Commonwealth, and I decided to give them a send-off the way the Minutemen used to, before everything fell apart and we stopped keeping track of the dead.”

Murphy nodded. “A rocket for each of them.”

“And acknowledgement of their sacrifice.” Preston hesitated, then put a hand on her shoulder. “They would’ve been proud, to see you standing up to remember them.”

“I hope so.” Murphy wrapped her arms around her chest, pressing the journal close to her heart. “But I don’t know how I would go about doing something like that for the rest of the names.”

“May I?”

Murphy handed him the book, and he flipped it open, running his finger down the list until he came to the three in pencil beneath the 38. “Cal Rooney. The Diamond City guard that died?”

She nodded. “Travis said his name on the radio, when I was on the Prydwen. I ran into two of his friends at the Dugout, next time I was in Diamond City. They weren’t happy, they… they blamed me.”

Murphy looked away. “I was drinking, and I gave them some kind of speech about how they got to be angry, but so did I. How I wouldn’t quit hunting the Institute down. I think I scared them off. Or Maxson did.”

Preston raised an eyebrow at her. “Subtle.”
“Stupid, more like.” She sighed. “Piper said a lot of the guards were upset, but I left town before I got any more angry looks.”

“Yeah, there’s definitely some animosity there,” Preston said thoughtfully. “Theo’s been keeping me updated on the election. That Ann Codman is trying to imply that we’re not all on the same page, when it comes to safety. I think she’s trying to pit the Minutemen and the guard against each other.”

“Is she?” Murphy frowned. “I can imagine how the news about the synth acceptance initiative went down.”

“Not well.” Preston shook his head. “Back to Cal, though. What did Diamond City do, to honor him?”

“Candlelight vigil and burial in the mutfruit orchard,” Murphy replied. “I couldn’t attend.”

“Right.” Preston thought for a beat. “What did people do before the war to remember someone?”

“Bury them somewhere nice, get a grave marker, pick or plant flowers,” Murphy said, counting off on her fingers. “Scatter their ashes in the country. Buy a city bench and engrave their name on it. Make donations to charities in their name.”

“You know who could use some donations? The Diamond City guard.” Preston shook his head. “Their weapons supply is seriously lacking, Theo tells me. Pipe rifles, baseball bats… not an energy weapon to be found. They’re good with what they have, but imagine what they could do with some better firepower. I’m sure Cal’s buddies would appreciate it.”

Murphy smiled. “You think I’m made of caps or something? I don’t have the money for that.”

“Start saving up,” Preston advised her. “Take up a collection. Or the next time you run into some Gunners, break into their armory stash. A new paint job, a good word to Arturo about ammunition supplies, and you’re in business.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Murphy admitted. “I guess I see your point.”

“Come on,” Preston said with a smile, snapping the book shut. “Let’s go back to the fire. We’ve got a few more hours to go before we need to set out for Mystic Pines, and something tells me you need to talk about this.”

Murphy laid it out for him, when they returned to warming themselves next to the fire pit. Preston listened silently as she told him about the island, the people on it, and the ones on the list who used to reside there. Concern crossed his face when she told him about the Courser’s attempt to blackmail Acadia, the near loss of Chase and the fog creatures’ attack on Far Harbor. She left out the details of Chase’s life and the discovery of Elizabeth and Nadine, but she told him about the decision to wipe DiMA and Faraday’s minds, the synths’ decision to join the harbormen on the dock.

When she reached the part about their return to the Nakanos’ house, and her decision to send MacCready to find Duncan in the Capital Wasteland without her, he nodded. “I was wondering where that merc was.”

“He’s more than a mercenary, now,” Murphy corrected him. “I haven’t paid him in ages. He’s a
friend.”

“Whatever you say, Captain.” Preston chuckled. “Suppose he hasn’t asked me if I’m ‘still wasting my time trying to save the world’ in a while. You must have rubbed off on him.”

Out under the sunset and the emerging stars, Murphy could almost imagine she and Preston were simply on a camping trip. She’d told herself that over and over, on the first excursions she had made outside of Sanctuary into the wilderness overnight. Codsworth had been a great traveling companion then, as the robot had never needed to sleep, and eventually she stopped waking every hour when the wind shifted or a dog barked in the distance.

After Codsworth had come Dogmeat, a warm body to snuggle up to and exponentially more quiet about the current state of the world. Preston had accompanied her and the dog not long after that, guiding her on the way to Diamond City as soon as they had seen the remaining residents of Quincy safely installed in Sanctuary. He was full of survival tips and stories about his service with the Minutemen, which she had grown to appreciate over time, even if they became repetitive.

Diamond City brought the interest of Piper, long-used to charging forward in pursuit of the truth, and brimming with questions about the old world. The attention had been flattering, at first, as Murphy realized she was a bit of a curiosity. It was cathartic, to point at an old skyscraper and tell the reporter about the people who used to work there, the lives they led. Inevitably, though, Piper would misunderstand something, or there would simply be no context for Murphy to give that could explain the Boston of old, and their conversations would peter off into silence, or yet another gunfight with raiders.

Nick Valentine was a revelation in that aspect. He could remember Boston, and he shared memories of some of the circles Murphy had run in, before the bombs. Different sides of the law, sure, but he remembered the public attorneys, the local law firms, the judges in the local circuits. She remembered the chief of police, the detectives, had even read about Detective Valentine’s arrival to take down Eddie Winter in the Bugle and the subsequent death of Valentine’s fiancée.

It took a while, especially since Valentine was less-than-inclined to revisit some of the memories he didn’t fully regard as his, but they grew to trust each other. He knew the Commonwealth better than anyone, and he knew what Murphy was struggling with more than most. When he came to her asking for help to finally bring down the man who killed Jennifer Lands, she agreed wholeheartedly. She stood by as the ghoulfied crime boss emerged from his bunker, and watched the synth detective put a bullet in Winters’ head. It had been the closest she had come to feeling like she was serving justice in a long time.

Serving justice to the man who killed Nate and stole her son had come next, and Valentine was at her side for that. But then had come the Brotherhood, and resentment for their values, their very imagery consumed Murphy. Circumstances threw her together with the Railroad, and she embraced their mission, running under cover of night with Glory and Deacon to rescue some of the Commonwealth’s most downtrodden. They taught her what she had been relying on others to do—when and where to hide, how to wait for the right opportunity, how to leave no trace. She and Deacon had shared countless nights under the stars, in the shadows of wrecked buildings, even inside a freight container or two. Murphy disappeared into the Railroad. As months passed, she all but gave up on seeing her son again.

Then came Curie. A foray into Vault 81 led to the discovery of the robot who would be human, and with Doctor Amari’s help, she had. But the decision to upload Curie’s memories into the body of G5-19 left Murphy with an internal dissonance. Suddenly, the task of rescuing the synths and wiping away their old lives had a cost. She distanced herself from the Railroad as best she could, instead
Traveling with Preston and Curie promised plenty of adventure and laughter along the way. Curie had a fresh-faced way of looking at the world that both Murphy and Preston appreciated. They felt like the Unstoppables, when they rolled into a settlement: The formerly-mechanical doctor, the last of the old Minutemen, and the Sole Survivor. Even if they didn’t always feel like the Unstoppables, the people of the Commonwealth treated them like they were. There were smiles on the faces of the kids, offers of home cooked meals, gifts of caps and supplies. Preston and Murphy would listen intently to whatever the latest threat had been for the settlers, usually raiders or ferals, while Curie sat down with everyone who didn’t appear to be in perfect health and conducted physicals or dispensed medical advice.

That was how they had met Rylee, already a seasoned trader, and Curie’s partner and fellow doctor Bethany. Their message of support for the settlements resonated with quite a few people, and they began to flood into Sanctuary. Young men and women, drawn by the promise of providing aid and protection, or just hoping to make a name for themselves. The town was nearly bursting by the time Preston decided it was time to set their eyes on the ultimate prize, the old Minutemen headquarters. The Castle.

After the triumphant battle, as Murphy stood amid the sea of mirelurk carcasses and raised the Minutemen flag over the old world fort, she knew she had gone off track. Doctor Amari and the implant from Kellogg’s head had pointed her toward the Glowing Sea, a seemingly impossible task, even with the help of the Minutemen or the Railroad. Murphy knew it, and eventually she swallowed her pride and answered the invitation of the Paladin she had helped out in Cambridge when she was still traveling with only Dogmeat.

Danse had taken a woman who knew how to survive and turned her into a soldier in a matter of weeks. It was what he was good at, what the Brotherhood was good at, and it was what Murphy had needed. But she hadn’t needed the information the Glowing Sea gave up to her. She hadn’t needed the flash of blue light and Shaun’s face, older than hers. She hadn’t needed that. Or much of what followed.

It didn’t take long in the Institute for Murphy to realize what she would have to do, and it shattered her into pieces. Running away with Valentine to find a missing girl on a faraway island was a last-ditch effort to escape the fate that was fast approaching her, and it hadn’t worked. Returning with Kasumi couldn’t fill the void, and she wound up in the Third Rail one night, drowning herself in whiskey and debating whether or not to start a bar fight and invite Hancock’s wrath. Instead, she woke up the next morning with the mother of all headaches and a newly-hired mercenary following her around.

MacCready was the best of distractions. Once she got him talking, the regrets of his past started to spill out, and he had nearly as many as her. They traded in stories of survival, mistakes made, the holes in their lives they couldn’t fill. At some point it turned into hopes and fears, dreams of the future that seemed a touch more attainable when said out loud to each other. It felt natural for her to follow him to the Mass Pike Interchange, then lead him into Med-Tek Research. It didn’t matter that she was paying him. It hadn’t mattered for a while. It was what he needed, so it was what she wanted.

And still, fate came over the horizon toward her, and it was MacCready who was behind her in the Institute attack, MacCready who was next to her when she pressed the button that blew the underground facility sky-high. And now that he was about to reunite with his son for the first time in forever, she wasn’t there at his side.
It felt wrong, wrong in a way that Murphy had only one comparison for—the same feeling that had flooded her body when she rose on the elevator from Vault 111 into the Commonwealth, 210 years past her time.

“Fuck,” she said suddenly, interrupting Preston’s story about the time he saw a bloodbug fly off with a brahmin. “Why did I let him go by himself?”

“What now?”

“MacCready,” Murphy said, putting her head in her hands. “He’s always been there for me, and me for him. What kind of friend am I?”

She moved to get up, but Preston put an arm out to stop her. “Whoa, whoa. What are you going to do, jog all the way down the coast looking for them?”

“Kasumi stayed behind, she went with Nick and Piper to the Castle,” Murphy said. “I can radio, I can…”

She realized the absurdity of what she was saying as soon as she said it. Could what? Get the boat to turn around and come back for her?

Preston patted her arm. “They’ll be fine without you. I may not completely trust the Brotherhood, but from what I’ve heard about the Capital Wasteland, it’s one of the safer places on the East coast. And MacCready being MacCready, he’ll be back before you know it.”

Murphy nodded. “I know.”

“Besides.” Preston pulled a pack of bubblegum from inside his coat and handed her a piece. “I might be a little biased, but I think the Commonwealth and I need your help a little more than he does, right now.”

Murphy accepted the piece and smiled. “Thanks. But you, personally, really don’t. You’ve had this whole General thing down-pat for a while, now.”

“But doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate having you on my side.”

They set out around the lake an hour before midnight, moving carefully in the moonlight. Murphy tripped over concealed driftwood on the beach twice, but she didn’t dare turn her Pip-Boy light on, for fear of attracting the attention of the Commonwealth wildlife, or something even deadlier.

The Mystic Pines retirement community was a wreck, silent in the shadow of a nearby overpass. After peering inside the building, Murphy and Preston sat down on the deck outside to wait.

It wasn’t long before there was a whistle from the north, and two women came around the side of an old school bus. One of them had a shock of hair as white as Murphy’s on her head and was toting a minigun, and Murphy grinned in recognition.

“Hey little dandelion,” Glory said in her usual raspy drawl. “Wasn’t expecting you tonight. We need to stop meeting like this.”

“Do you have a Geiger counter?” Murphy countered.
“Mine is in the shop,” Glory replied, bobbing her head. “Desdemona probably didn’t mention in the bunker, but we’re trying to phase that one out. Appreciate the caution, though. This assignment is a heavy one, and I don’t mean just because we’re here.”

“I’m not a heavy anymore,” Murphy said. “General Preston Garvey, meet Glory. She’s an old friend.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Glory,” Preston said with a nod.

Glory reached out to shake Preston’s hand. “Pleasure’s mine.”

She turned and gestured at the woman next to her. “This here’s Nike, and she’s going to be your point of contact for the Railroad from now on, General. This ain’t her first rodeo, so I think you’ll get along just fine.”

Nike nodded in greeting. She had a complexion as dark as Glory’s, but she appeared to be much older than any Railroad agent Murphy had ever met. Late 40s, early 50s, she guessed, though by pre-war standards she would have guessed higher. Her dark hair had mostly gone gray, and there were deep lines in her cheeks and across her forehead. This woman had been living in the wastes, and it showed.

Preston pulled the Railroad note out of his coat and held it up. “Who put this in my pocket?”

Glory tapped the side of her nose. “That’s need-to-know. You’re here, and that’s what matters. Like my rendition of Joyce? Carrington acted like I was butchering one of his children, changing the wording.”

“Tell him I wouldn’t have known, if you hadn’t said anything,” Murphy said with a chuckle. “So, did you just call us out here to introduce us to Nike, or was there something else?”

“There’s something else,” Nike replied darkly.

Glory nodded. “Hope you two brought your waders. We’re going sewer-slogging.”
“They called it the Compound,” Glory said quietly.

Murphy and Preston stared in horror at the room around them. Their initial disgust at wading through the irradiated pipes to access the sewer reservoir had disappeared quickly, replaced with shock. Bodies littered the floor, a mix of men and women in leather armor and lab coats, all showing the tell-tale burns of death by laser weaponry.

Glory hefted her minigun and pointed it around the corners, but there was nothing to be heard but the sound of their footsteps and water dripping in the distance. Down a dark hallway, through a door that had been blasted off its hinges, and the four found themselves in what could only be described as a dungeon.

Prison cells, tables with restraints, surgical equipment and blood. So much blood, and not all of it from the corpses left to lie on the dirty, concrete floor. Old blood, splashed against the legs of tables and the bars of the cells, in the hard-to-clean places.

“What was going on here?” Preston asked, his voice echoing against the concrete and brick.

“That SAFE test the people of Covenant were so keen on,” Glory said. She put her minigun on a nearby chair and walked over to the body of an elderly woman in a lab coat and safety goggles. “It was the brainchild of Dr. Roslyn Chambers, over here. Hell of an origin story, she had, but it turned her into a mad scientist.”

“What do you mean?” Murphy asked, crouching down to examine a pair of handcuffs that were dangling from the bars of the one of the cells. One cuff was still encircling a bar, but the other looked as though it had been forcibly pried open. There were pieces of skin and dried blood caught on the metal.

“Dr. Chambers was a survivor of the Broken Mask Incident,” Nike answered. “Her parents were not. She and her colleagues approached Covenant and turned it into a synth-free settlement, then a trap. The ones who were caught in the trap…”

“Became lab specimens,” Murphy guessed. “Jesus Christ.”

“Don’t leave out the part about how the ones they pegged as synths weren’t always synths,” Glory added. She spat on the body of the scientist. “Shame I didn’t get here first.”

“Why didn’t you?” Preston asked. “Seems like a place the Railroad would like to wipe off the map.”

“Believe me, it was on our list of things to do,” Glory replied. “But after the Switchboard, all of the non-essential missions got pushed to the back burner.”

“Switchboard?”
“The Institute found the Railroad’s headquarters,” Murphy clarified for Preston. “Is this why the Institute attacked Covenant? For the synths?”

“We think so,” Nike said, nodding. “We don’t know how many they had imprisoned down here, but we know they had at least one of ours. And her body isn’t here.”

“Did the town know about this?” Preston asked, his tone bordering on demanding.

Nike nodded, and Preston shook his head. “Damn. I’m almost sorry we buried them.”

“That caravaner, in Covenant,” Murphy said, rising from examining the cell. “Dan. He was one of yours.”

“Indirectly,” Glory admitted. “He came here looking for J6-17.”

“Amelia,” Nike corrected her.

Murphy gasped. “No. Not…”

Glory nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“You knew her?” Preston asked Murphy.

“I… I did,” Murphy admitted. “But I didn’t know she was…”

“A synth.”

“I’m going to cut you two off right there, before Charmer gives away any more of our secrets,” Glory said, moving to pick her minigun back up. “We might be working together, but there are some operatives who are still in some delicate situations. Don’t screw it up.”

“Right.” Murphy walked over to the room’s terminal and skimmed through the stored message files. Dr. Chambers’ missives to other scientists in the Compound confirmed the experimentation and imprisonment, the captives’ pain bundled up into neat little sentences about results and assets. She leaned heavily on the table, letting out a slow breath.

“So now what?” Preston asked. “The Institute’s reclaiming synths again, it’s confirmed. We’ll warn the folks at Breakheart to keep their origins hidden from outsiders, but there’s not much else we can do. It’s horrible, but it’s not new.”

“Signs point to this being the handiwork of another Courser,” Nike replied. “No telling if it’s a regular one, or one of the mysterious female units. Desdemona was hoping Charmer could shed some light on it, when she returned to the Commonwealth.”

“What does she want me to do, report in?” Murphy asked.

“That’s a little difficult at the moment,” Glory said, smirking. “She wants a report on what you learned while you were abroad. If it helps us pinpoint where the Institute is holed up, great. If it doesn’t, we only have three weeks before Tinker Tom’s algorithm dismantles the encryption on the Courser chip, and it can point us in the right direction.”

“You can give the report to me,” Nike added. “Some things are too important for the usual message systems.”

“And as far as the Minutemen are concerned?” Preston asked.
Nike nodded. “I’ll be enlisting at the Starlight outpost in the morning. I assume I’ll be transferred to the Castle with the other new recruits. From there, any messages you need to get to the Railroad can go through me. Desdemona doesn’t often reply, but if she does, I’ll make sure her responses get to you.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to blend in,” Glory commented offhand, swinging the nose of her minigun up to examine the enormous barrel. “Sneaking someone on our side into the Brotherhood ranks was the hard part.”

Preston shook his head. “This feels wrong, somehow. The Minutemen don’t sneak around in the shadows.”

“Shadows are our specialty,” Glory said, grinning. “Relax, cowboy. It’s all for a good cause.”

Glory and Nike melted away into the darkness, and Preston and Murphy made their way back to Covenant in the wee hours of the morning. Sleep was the last thing on Murphy’s mind, but she and Preston begrudgingly pulled the gates of Covenant shut and bedded down in the empty common house for the night. The sheets were scratchy, and there was a whip-poor-will singing its song somewhere nearby, but eventually she slid away into sleep.

Her dreams were as expected. Nate, dead. Nate, running from her. Shaun, running from her, then dead at her hands. Deacon, the Mariner, High Rise. All dead. There were tears on her face when she jolted awake in the morning, to the sound of a vertibird approaching from the west. If he had noticed her restlessness during the night, Preston didn’t say, but the Covenant cat had curled up by her feet to share the warmth, so Murphy guessed the nightmares had been hers alone.

The morning brought fog, and Sturges flew the vertibird above the gray-blanketed Commonwealth in silence. Murphy clutched the she-cat until it gave up struggling, ignoring the scratches on her wrists and hands. She was a gray tabby, and she bore signs of having been well-loved, particularly around her middle.

“The dogs will tear her apart,” Preston said, clearly not that concerned for the cat’s well-being.

“I’m not staying,” Murphy replied. “I’ll write up a report on Far Harbor for Desdemona, and then I’m heading out. The cat can come with.”

“Where are you off to?”

“Breakheart. I made someone a promise.”

Sturges graciously dropped Murphy and Preston at the Castle before whirring off in the direction of Spectacle Island. There were looks of curiosity and surprise as Murphy walked through the courtyard, her white hair and face free in the morning sun for all to see. She had considered covering up to avoid recognition again, but ultimately decided against it. It sounded like the Brotherhood had bigger fish to fry, rather than tracking down a runaway Aspirant, and whatever rumors the
Minutemen might spread would not reach anyone who meant her harm in time.

Upon her request, Preston gave her and the wriggling cat the general’s quarters for some privacy. “How long do you need?” he asked, holding the heavy, wooden door open for her.

“How long do you need?” Murphy replied, trying in vain to un-stick the cat’s claws from her shoulder. “I’ll type up the report, then you can read it and keep it safe until it’s sent.”

Preston nodded. “I’ll send in the cavalry around noon. Be prepared.”

Murphy released the tabby once the door shut behind her. The cat immediately dove under the table, winding herself around a chair leg to fix her captor in a reproachful glare.

“Suit yourself,” Murphy said with a shrug. She sat down at Preston’s desk, pulled out a well-worn typewriter from its drawer and began typing.

The words came slowly at first, then faster. Murphy did her best to summarize Chase’s story without giving too much biographical information, clues about where she had been. Desdemona wasn’t the only one who appreciated anonymity. She explained Operation Yankee, the five female Coursers, the description Chase had given of the one Institute facility that had stood out for its outdatedness. When she had finished, she put the typewriter away and read it over twice. If she had to guess, the Railroad would probably start with questioning its synths to see if anyone could recall a similar location. She also guessed that they would find nothing.

There was a knock at the door. Murphy hastily folded the pages in half to hide the print. “Come in.”

The hinges squeaked, and a white puppy with black patches around her ears and nose scampered in before Murphy could say anything. Shaun’s flushed face and ginger hair appeared from behind the door. “Mom?”

She ran to him, as much to scoop him up in a hug as to shut the door before the cat could escape. It all came pouring back to her so vividly—her fight with Maxson, Shaun’s face frozen in a look of horror at what the Elder had called him, his initial rejection of her, then their reunion on the beach before she set sail for Far Harbor. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, but she couldn’t stop a tear from leaking out, running down her cheek onto Shaun’s red Sunset Sarsaparilla t-shirt.

“You came back,” he said, his voice muffled by her jacket.

Murphy nodded, her chin bobbing gently against his shoulder. “I promised. I didn’t forget.”

“I thought…”

“Hey.” She set him down gently, ignoring the puppy gnawing at her boots. There they were. Nate’s dimples, her freckles, her hair, Nate’s smile in miniature. It was easy, far too easy to see him, love him as her own. For the first time, she wondered if maybe that had been part of why Maxson found Shaun so unsettling— not just that the Institute had put the synth child together, but that he was in the image of the woman…

Murphy shook the thought off. Arthur could wait. “I told you that night. I didn’t leave because of you. I left because I had a job to do, and I’ve done it.”

Shaun studied her. “Your friends said you got delayed.”

“My friends?”
“Mister Valentine and Piper. And Kasumi.”

Murphy nodded. “You met them? Are they still here?”

“Kasumi is, but Piper and Mister Valentine left for Diamond City this morning. Piper needed to write something in her newspaper, and Mister Valentine said something about ‘getting back to Ellie.’ They said to tell you they’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

“Okay, okay.” Murphy smiled and ruffled his hair. “How did you like them? I don’t think I properly introduced you, that night before we left on the boats.”

“Kasumi was kind of quiet, but Piper’s really nice, and pretty, and smart,” Shaun said thoughtfully. “She’s just like you, mom.”

Murphy chuckled. “Is she? I’ll have to tell her you said that, next time I see her.”

He blushed. “And Mister Valentine… he doesn’t look like any synth I saw in the Institute. But I like him.”

“Well, he’s different from the others,” Murphy admitted. “He’s every bit his own man. Just like them.”

“Like me?”

Murphy took in a sharp breath, but she nodded. “Like you.”

A particularly hard chomp on her toe distracted her, and she picked the white puppy up. “Is that you, Nine? You’ve gotten so big!”

Shaun giggled as Nine covered Murphy’s face in kisses, but his expression quickly sobered in thought. “You said when you came back, we were going to go on a trip. Are we going to Diamond City?”

Murphy shook her head and set Nine down again. “Someday we’ll go there, but not this time. We’re going to visit some friends out in the wastes. How’s that sound?”

A flurry of emotions crossed Shaun’s face. “When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Shaun put his hands up in his hair and twirled around. “But that’s… that’s so soon, Mom! I need to pack, I need to say goodbye to Preston, and Curie, and the dogs, and…”

He stopped abruptly. “The dogs…”

“The dogs will be just fine,” Murphy assured him. “Washington takes care of the pack, and Madison can handle the puppies.”

She screwed up her face, trying to remember. “How old are they, now? Two months?”

“Two months and a week,” Shaun said proudly. “Curie said they’re all weaned now, so they’re eating the big dog food. But they’re still so little.”

As if to prove him wrong, Nine let out a surprisingly deep bark, directed at the cat hiding under the table. The cat hissed in return, and Shaun’s eyes widened. He dropped to the floor immediately and scooted toward the table legs.
“Careful, Shaun,” Murphy warned him. “She’s not exactly the friendliest, and I can’t say I blame her. She just lost her family.”

Shaun grabbed Nine and put her, wiggling, on his lap. “What happened, Mom?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Murphy said quickly. “She just needed a new home, but it looks like she can’t stay here. Preston thinks the dogs might bother her too much.”

“They would,” Shaun said, his face falling. “She’d just look like a big squirrel to them.”

He looked up at her again with pleading eyes. “Can I keep her, Mom? Can she come with us?”

Murphy sighed and tucked the pages of her report inside her jacket. “Well, I don’t know what we’re going to feed her. And I can’t hold onto her for the whole trip, so we’re going to need a cage. Why don’t we talk to Rylee, see if we can’t figure something out.”

“Breakheart, eh?” Trader Rylee said, slamming an array of wicker chicken crates down on the counter of the trading stall in the Castle courtyard. “You know, I’ve been meaning to send a crew up there with a shipment of farm supplies for a while now, but none of the caravans are headed out on that circuit lately. And now with Covenant, well, I’m sure everyone’s spooked.”

“What do they need?” Murphy asked, picking through the dropping-encrusted crates. “Maybe I can haul it, if it’s not too heavy.”

“Yeah, I’m strong,” Shaun piped up, curling his arms over his shoulders to show off his muscles, or lack thereof.

Rylee laughed. “Unless you’re good at driving brahmin, you two won’t be enough to haul what I’ve got in mind. They need shovels, buckets, back-up weapons from Ronnie, some parts for a water purifier. Preston wants to send a few sacks of the tatoes from Spectacle, see if they transplant well enough for the far-out settlements. Plus, Curie’s been pestering me to get Doc Weathers to add the place on his list of stops so they can stock up on medical supplies, but he’s being stubborn. Wants caps up front, and we’re not exactly swimming in those right now, so she’s scraping together what we don’t absolutely need to send out there, too.”

“That son of a b-” Murphy cut herself off when she caught Shaun looking at her curiously. “Guess I need to pay Kessler a visit sometime, have a chat about that agreement we hammered out after the prep school situation.”

Rylee rolled her eyes. “That agreement was with you. Now that Preston’s in charge, well, it’s his problem.”

“Still my problem, just means I’m not getting paid to deal with it.” Murphy held up a chicken crate with some disgust. “Do you have anything cleaner than these? I’d feel bad stuffing a raider in this, let alone a poor, innocent cat.”

“Well, we do have a few of these,” Rylee said, pulling up a stack of round, woven baskets with lids. “You’d have to tie the top shut with twine, and they’re made for holding produce, not animals.”

Murphy picked up the largest and turned it about in the sunlight. “What do you think, Shaun? Big
“We could put a blanket down in it,” Shaun suggested. “Maybe she’d like that.”

“You’re too sweet,” Rylee said with a smile. “Tell you what, Murphy. Why don’t I come out there with you? Been a while since Buttercup and I hit the road, I’ve been itching to get out and about.”

Making the rounds of the Castle with Shaun turned up some more parties interested in making the trek to Breakheart Banks. Curie, who was stitching up a mirelurk wound on a patient, insisted she come along in order to conduct check-ups on the newest settlement’s residents.

“It has been far too long for them out there without medical attention,” she said, furrowing her brow to focus on the arm wound she was closing up. The man in the chair winced, and she paused. “Are you sure you do not want something for the pain, monsieur?”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you want to come?” Murphy asked, steering Shaun away from the bottles of pills he was examining on the counter next to Curie. “We’re leaving right away tomorrow. Rylee said it’ll take us a day or so to get up there, if we don’t run into trouble along the way.”

“But of course,” Curie replied, pausing her work for the moment. “Bethany can handle anything that may arise. Besides, I would very much like to see Jules and Marina again. I do miss them, sometimes.”

She sighed prettily and went back to delicately threading the needle through the Minuteman’s arm. “I will begin packing this evening. Oh, j’ai presque oublié. Perhaps you should see if Haylen would like to come as well? I believe she is ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

“To become their doctor,” Curie explained. “Her expertise médicale is already so advanced. To teach her more is not necessary, unless she wants to become a surgeon. Besides, I believe her desires to specialize lie there.”

Haylen did, indeed, jump at the opportunity. The former Scribe practically tackled Murphy and Shaun with a hug upon receiving their invitation, almost knocking Sturges’ toolbox over in the process.

“Careful,” the resident handyman said with a laugh, moving his wrench set out of the way of Haylen’s feet. Sarge the Mk II sentry bot, who had been receiving a tune-up from the two, let out a mechanical squawk in agreement.

“I’d love to come!” Haylen cried, but she drew back almost immediately and gave Sturges a sheepish look. “Only, I haven’t finished putting together all the mirelurk sonic signal transmitters. I don’t want to leave them unfinished.”

“You got the blueprints drawn up?” Sturges asked.

“Almost. I suppose I could finish them tonight, after we’re done here.”
Sturges slapped Sarge’s metal side. “Go on, do ‘em now. I can finish this guy up myself.”

Haylen brushed herself off and followed Shaun toward the kennels, lagging somewhat behind with Murphy. “So, Piper told me you finally got RJ to go home to Duncan.”

Murphy nodded. “He wasn’t happy about it, but he went.”

“Figures. Let me guess, he wanted to come with you to Covenant?”

“Bingo.”

Haylen sighed. “No wonder he looked so forlorn when I came to pick the other three up. I swear, the guy doesn’t know what to do without you.”

Murphy laughed, hollowly. “To be honest, sometimes I feel the same. Traveling alone… well. But he’ll be back in no time. If there’s one thing Kenji hates, it’s being separated from his daughter.”

“Oh yeah, I’d believe it. I saw the look on his face, when we left.”

“How’s Kasumi taking it?” Murphy asked.

Haylen gestured over toward the Radio Freedom tower. “She spent about three hours just sitting next to the DJ when we first got here, checking out the equipment and hooking her own up to it, before I distracted her with my own radio set at my bunk. Last I checked, she was still tinkering with it in the bar, trying to extend the range. Better hurry up, too, because I’m planning on taking it with me.”

Murphy smiled. “She fit all of her things in the boat then? Good.”

“Mom?” Shaun interrupted from over by the door to the kennels. “Remember what you said about Preston? Before you left?”

“What did I say about Preston?”

Shaun unlatched the little gated area, then knelt down in the middle of the rolling puppies, letting them sniff and nibble on his pants and shoes. “You said he might let me keep a dog, if I asked nicely. Do you think he still would?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Murphy replied, crossing her arms. “You should ask him.”

As if on cue, Preston ducked around the corner of the adjacent Castle hallway. “Ask me what?”

Shaun froze up, but Murphy jerked her head at the general. “Well, go on. I’ll be outside, when you’re done.”

Back out in the sun, Murphy and Haylen chatted a little more, before the latter went to go take care of her transmitter blueprints. Murphy leaned back against the cool stone of the Castle wall, soaking in the sounds around her. Lively fiddle music coming through the tower speakers. Laughter and cheers coming from the Shot Heard Round the World. Brahmin lowing over by the northwest gates. The dogs yipping behind her. The slam of burlap sacks against each other from over by Rylee’s trading stall. Crows cawing on the battlements. The ocean lapping at the beach beyond. If she closed her eyes, she could feel it, all of it, echoing in her head and wrapping around her waist and arms, pulling her into the dance of this world, this world that was not hers but nevertheless felt like it had been waiting for her, to move through it, discover it, understand it.

Careful.
Murphy stiffened at the sound of Nate’s voice in her head. She pried one eye open, cautiously, but the specter of her husband was, thankfully, nowhere to be found. The hair stood up on the back of her neck.

From the doorway next to her, Preston emerged. “Well, he’s saying goodbye,” the general said, removing his hat to scratch the short, dark curls underneath it. “It didn’t take him long to choose, so that’s a blessing.”

“Nine?”

“Nine,” Preston confirmed. “But he’s going through and telling all of the others that he loves them, too. Probably going to take him a while.”

“I’ll wait,” Murphy replied. She pulled the folded report she had typed out of her jacket and handed it to him. “I finished, by the way. I’m planning on leaving with Rylee, Curie and Haylen in the morning, so if you have any questions, catch me before we set out.”

Preston tucked the papers into his coat. “Will do. I can’t say I’m pleased that two of my officers are running off with you on such short notice at such a dangerous time, but I can’t say I’m surprised, either. Someone had to replace the merc.”

Murphy grinned. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t lie,” he replied with a chuckle. “You take care on the road. I don’t want to have to come investigate your crime scene next. And say hi to Danse for me.”
Common Knowledge

Chapter Summary

In which Danse gets hit with a lot of news, all at once.

The four women, the brahmin carrying a full load of supplies and a cat basket, the white puppy and the boy left the Castle just after sunrise, making their way along the safety of the coastline toward the Charlestown Bridge and Bunker Hill. Murphy had warned Shaun to keep quiet while they skirted downtown Boston. Even though the Minutemen were vigilant about stamping out raider groups and super mutant hives along the coast, the occasional challenger would emerge from the rusting city to harass soldiers and travelers alike.

Today, though, the roads and boardwalks were eerily still. Somewhere in the distance by Hester’s Consumer Robotics there was an echo of gunfire, but it was far-off and not even enough to spook Buttercup. Nine whimpered and stuck close to Shaun, who eventually picked her up and calmed her.

“Is it always this quiet?” he whispered.

“Not always,” Murphy murmured. Honestly, the silence was spooking her a little. The news from Covenant and the possibility of the Institute’s involvement was enough to keep caravans and settlers from straying too far, sure, but when even raiders and Gunners were keeping their heads down, that meant something was truly wrong.

Rylee patted Buttercup’s side and kept moving, and the streets went by quickly. Summer Street. Congress Street. Seaport Boulevard. In no time, they were passing Christopher Columbus Park, its vine trellises dry in the November air. Murphy caught sight of the trawler where she and Maxson had stowed their boat before exploring the Mass Fusion skyscraper, and she stopped, remembering the shrapnel in her hips and chest, the sensation of being lifted by the Brotherhood Elder. She ached, with more than pain.

Haylen paused next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

Murphy nodded and fell back into step next to Haylen. “Fine. Just… thinking.”

A different thought struck her, and she turned to the former Scribe. “Hey… how familiar are you with the Brotherhood’s recent history? Specifically when they were Elder-less, I mean. I forget when you joined.”

Haylen pursed her lips, clearly still a little pained by her recent departure. “I joined in 2284, under Knight Rhys’ and Paladin Danse’s sponsorship. Just after the super mutant uprising, when Maxson became Elder. I missed all the controversy before, but I know a bit from what Danse told me. Why?”

“No reason,” Murphy said quickly. “I might just ask him, then. And there’s something else I need to talk to you ex-Brotherhoods about, too, but it can wait.”
Mid-morning brought the group into the Bunker Hill trading post, where Shaun gawked, wide-eyed, at the bustle of activity in the columned marketplace. He clutched Murphy’s hand while she haggled with Cricket over the price of plasma cartridges, pinning the struggling Nine to his chest with a careful arm.

“Gonna grow up to be a fierce attack dog?” Cricket asked him, in a rare attempt to be friendly. Shaun just stared at her, and she gave Murphy a perplexed look. Murphy shrugged and smiled apologetically.

Shaun warmed up a tad when she took him to meet Tony Savoldi and his father Joe. Tony crouched down to rub Nine’s belly and ask the boy questions about the puppy, and Joe slipped Murphy a box of gumballs with a wink and a smile. “Fine-lookin’ boy you got there. Looks just like you. Didn’t know you were a mom, Murph.”

Murphy smiled. “If it means he’s safe, let’s keep it that way.”

“I hear ya there,” Joe replied solemnly. “Say, where’s the other string bean? MacCready, he around here somewhere?”

“Not today. He went to go collect his own offspring.”

“’Bout time,” Tony said, straightening up from petting Nine. “You two moving in to Diamond City? Putting the two halves together, make a whole?”

“Uh, something like that.”

Shaun looked up at her. “What’s he talking about, Mom?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Murphy put a hand on his shoulder to steer him away. “Thanks, you two.”

Once Rylee had secured a few extra boxes of screws and a roll of duct tape from Deb, the caravan got back underway. Shaun, now a bit more comfortable with the lack of strangers and the decreasing amount of high rises and brick apartment buildings, sang songs along the bridge to Admirals Hill. Murphy walked ahead and checked the empty cars for mines set by raiders or stray feral ghouls, but the way was clear. They left the city and followed the highway north, into the grasses and blasted trees of Chelsea, while Shaun serenaded them with “She’ll be Coming ‘Round the Mountain” and “Oh My Darling, Clementine.”

“Le chat,” Curie said fondly, laying a hand on the lidded basket bumping along the side of the brahmin. The contents hissed. “Have you found a name for her, petit ombre?”

“Mom calls her ‘little queen,’” Shaun replied, cutting off his singing before he reached the part about the miner’s daughter drowning. “But that’s not really a name. I don’t really know many queen names.”

“Mon dieu, there are so many!” Curie said excitedly. “Ermentrude of Orléans, Richilde of the Ardennes, Adelaide of Paris, Saint Richardis…”

Curie went on listing long-dead French monarchs and consorts while Shaun listened, enraptured. Murphy jumped in when they hit a name she recognized. “How many Joans were there? Must have been a popular name in France.”

A twinkle grew in Curie’s eye. “But of course. Though I presume you are thinking of Jeanne d’Arc, not Joana of Navarre, mademoiselle.”
“John Dark?” Shaun tried to puzzle out the French syllables.

“Jeanne d’Arc,” Curie corrected. “You must roll the ‘r’ and stretch out the vowels, like so.”

“Or you can just call her ‘Joan of Arc,’” Murphy said with a smile.

“Jeanne d’Arc. Who was she?” Shaun asked.

“The Maid of Orléans,” Curie replied wistfully. “Shall you tell the story, or should I?”

“You take this one, Curie.”

Given the chance to expound upon knowledge she did not often use, Curie’s face lit up in the late morning sun. Her hands flowed seamlessly through the air before her, stitching together the story of the teenager who sought to win back France from the clutches of the English. Murphy could recall learning about the young saint in school, but not in the vivid way Curie taught it. Her English slipped in and out, but somehow, the French phrases that came in only added to the experience. Even Rylee and Haylen fell silent, listening to the doctor speak of a girl who lived, conquered and died well over 800 years ago.

Upon learning that Joan of Arc had gone up in flames, Shaun became indignant. “But she didn’t deserve that! She was just trying to do what was right!”

“Oui, oui,” Curie said, putting a comforting arm around the boy’s shoulder. “It was an unjust world, then. But Jeanne d’Arc outlived her persecutors all the same. She lived on in the stories, in the hearts and souls of the people of France. And she proved that someone from the bottom of society could rise to lead une révolution.”

The doctor and the boy went back and forth for a bit, Shaun asking questions about medieval France and knights and battles which Curie answered happily. Eventually, Shaun fell silent, and Murphy thought he might have lost interest in the conversation. Just as they came up on the little settlement at County Crossing, however, he piped up again.

“What do you think she would have done, if she hadn’t died?” he asked. “If the English hadn’t caught her, and she’d won the war, I mean.”

“Je ne sais pas,” Curie replied with a shrug. “The war went on for another two decades after she died, but this was much shorter than it may have gone if she had not come forward to fight. France followed her example, and won, but it was not the end of strife for them. I expect she would have been there to see those periods of strife through, if she could.”

“And then what?”

“Perhaps she would have wandered the world, looking for places where justice, and her God, could be served.”

Shaun said nothing after that, but when the group paused so Rylee could give Buttercup a drink of water at the crossing, Murphy caught him staring at her from the shade of the brahmin’s piled packs.

Once they got back underway, he announced that he wanted to name the cat Joan. There was new determination in the way he walked. Murphy smiled when he fell back to walk next to her, trying to match her strides, even the way she swung her arms.

“What’re you doing, kiddo?” she asked when he picked up a stick and began swinging it around like it was a sword.
“Practicing.”

“Practicing what?”

“Well, now that MacCready’s gone home, you need a new partner, right?” he asked. “That’s me.”

“You’ve got some growing up to do yet,” Murphy said with a chuckle. “Remember? You have to be 16 to be a Minuteman.”

“Joan was 13 when she decided to help France,” Shaun protested. “I’ll be 13 soon. That’s only three years away, not even, because my birthday is in…”

He trailed off in confusion, looking wildly around, trying to remember. “I… I don’t know when my birthday is.”

“Hey, hey.” Murphy bent down to take his hand in hers. “It’s okay. I know when it is.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Murphy bit her lip. “May. May 16th.”

He looked up at her, skeptical. “But if I’m…”

“It’s May 16th,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I’m sure of it.”

“Okay. Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Am I going to grow up?”

Murphy stopped walking. “Shaun…”

“Do… do synths…”

“Shaun.” She knelt down on one knee and looked him in the eye. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Are you just trying not to answer the question?”

Murphy couldn’t help smiling at that. “No. But before I answer it, do you want to know what I have to say?”

“I guess.”

Murphy looked around conspiratorially before leaning in close. “It’s my birthday tomorrow.”

His eyes widened, then narrowed. “That’s not a secret.”

“Okay, maybe not. But guess how old I am.”

“40.”

Murphy put a hand to her chest in mock pain. “Ouch. Older.”

“50?”

“Older.”
“60.”

“You’re still in double digits, we’ve gotta go higher.”

“A hundred?” Shaun said in disbelief.

Murphy grinned. “Tomorrow, I will be 238 years old.”

“That’s impossible,” Shaun said, crossing his arms. “You’re lying, Mom.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die. I did spend a few years on ice, though.”

“You were frozen? Well that’s cheating,” he protested. “How old are you, really?”

“If you don’t count the years I was asleep, I’ll be 28.” She patted his head. “And you thought I was 40.”

Shaun was doing the math, mouthing the numbers as he worked it out. “So… you were born… before the war?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Whoa,” he breathed. “Does anybody else know?”

“Well… a lot of people. Piper interviewed me about it, once. Most think it’s a lie or a rumor, and that I came from somewhere out west, or somewhere down south, and I just dye my hair white and act like I was around in the ‘good old days,’ before there were radscorpions and deathclaws running around. But my friends, and now you, know the truth. So I want you to know, before I answer your question, that age isn’t always based on looks, or even numbers. It’s how you act, and how you grow inside, even more than how you grow outside. Okay?”

“Okay. So am I going to grow up?”

Murphy took a deep breath. “I don’t know. There’s never been anyone like you before, anyone. But you don’t need to be scared. I don’t have all the answers, but I can promise you that I’m going to try to find them.”

His face fell, and he looked down at the ground. “Oh.”

She put a hand under his chin and lifted it gently. “Do you want to grow up?”

Shaun nodded, and Murphy sighed. “Then we’ll figure out how you can do that. Together. I know some people who might be able to help us.”

“Who?”

“Well, I can’t tell you their names yet, but you can help me find them, if you want.”

He perked up. “How do I do that?”

Murphy stood up again. “You can help me keep an eye out for mailboxes. Know what a mailbox is?”

Shaun nodded excitedly. “Yeah, Mr. Kellogg had one, just outside his house. He didn’t let me out much when I was there, but I saw it a couple times.”
“Did he.” Murphy grimaced. “Okay. If you see one, let me know.”

A few hundred unmarked mailboxes later, as the sunlight faded behind the horizon, the tired little caravan made its way down a dusty side road toward a pair of bonfires that marked the Minutemen’s open synth settlement at Breakheart Banks. A lone figure carrying a laser rifle stood in the center of the road, his muscular frame and thick, dark hair silhouetted by the flames.

“Who goes there?” the man called, pulling the rifle up in a practiced arc.

Murphy smiled and stepped out in front of Rylee and the brahmin. “Friends, Danse. Long time, no see.”

A familiar, pointy-eared dog emerged from the darkness and stood next to Danse, sniffing the air with interest. Danse glanced down, and Dogmeat gave a single, happy bark before launching himself forward to bowl Murphy over in greeting.

Danse lowered his gun and smiled. “It’s about time you arrived. We were starting to worry.”

“Ah, well, these things take time,” Rylee said with a smile. She patted Buttercup’s hindquarters, and the brahmin huffed happily and lumbered forward toward the fire, clearly pleased at having reached their destination. “Got everything you need here and a few extras.”

“Yes, indeed,” Curie said, rushing forward to throw her arms around Danse. The former Paladin looked shocked, but didn’t resist, even when the doctor gave him a peck on the cheek. “It has been so long, monsieur, and we must catch up. Perhaps you are more open to sharing stories of the Brotherhood’s technological marvels this time, yes?”

“I, uh…”

“An unfortunate business.” Curie shook her head. “It is as I was saying to Bethany, when we heard the news. Time and time again, scientific understanding is at odds with basic morality. You served them well, and how did they repay this? Why should it matter if you’re a synth or not?”

“Curie,” Haylen said, stepping in before the doctor could say anything more. “Paladin. It’s good to see you again.”

“Affirmative, Scribe,” Danse said gratefully. “Where is your uniform?”

“Why don’t we all go rest up a bit before we catch up,” Murphy cut in.

The others nodded, and Haylen shot her a thankful look before moving off toward the little camp. “Oh, how wonderful!” Curie remarked as they passed through the archway that once held cages hung by super mutants.

Murphy stayed put with Danse and Dogmeat. Shaun came up next to her, hesitantly, holding Nine to his chest.

“Danse, this is my son, Shaun.” Murphy took Nine from him and set her down gently, allowing Dogmeat to sniff the puppy. “Shaun, this is my friend Danse. He’s been looking forward to meeting you.”
Danse swallowed. “I… I have.”

Shaun stuck his hand out. Danse eyed it for a second, then shook it.

“You’re a synth, too?” Shaun asked.

Danse looked up at Murphy in alarm. She nodded grimly, and he quickly regained his composure. “I am. Is that alright?”

Shaun smiled hesitantly. “Yeah.”

Later, when Shaun had settled in by a campfire with Curie, Marina, and a Railroad-referred synth by the name of Rory, Murphy pulled Haylen and Danse away from the group and took them down the hill toward the Saugus River, where she was sure they wouldn’t be overheard. In a low voice, she filled them in on what she and Preston had discovered at Covenant and the Compound. Haylen’s face went pale as she told the story, and Danse’s expression darkened considerably.

“How are we supposed to fight that?” Haylen asked, glancing back at the happy gathering of synths atop the hill. “They just pop in and out at will, taking people, and we have no idea where their base is. If they’re gathering up synths again, everyone here is in danger.”

“We prepare,” Danse said. “Turrets, bots, dogs, whatever it takes.”

“Those people had turrets, Danse, and there were more of them than there are of us,” Haylen argued. “Adding me, that’s six of us living here permanently, plus Dogmeat. Five of you can be taken out of commission using a simple code phrase. It’s not enough.”

“We go by name instead of designation at all times, we secure combat armor for everyone, we develop escape plans and fallback points, set up tripwires, go out only in pairs,” Danse went on, ticking off the plans on his fingers. “I’ve already begun giving everyone here basic firearms training with the weapons we traded for last time Cricket visited Greentop Nursery, and I’ve been exploring the possibility of utilizing ear protection during combat, so as to counteract any Courser’s attempt to shut a synth down.”

“Ear plugs? Would that even work?” Murphy asked.

Danse shrugged. “It’s not ideal, fighting without being able to hear minute sounds, and there’s no way of testing it before an actual attack to see if my methods are useful. At best, we may only be able to prevent a Courser from shutting others down after it has already succeeded in incapacitating one. If I recall correctly, all witnessed shutdown codes only worked for a single synth.”

Murphy nodded. “I’ve seen it. They’re all different. But I have no idea how to reawaken a synth once it’s been shut down. Maybe the Railroad can shed some light on that. Have you had any contact with them?”

“Not me, personally,” Danse replied. “I was at the listening post when our two newest arrived with an agent. He didn’t stay long, but Jules said he confirmed the Railroad would contact us in some way before sending any more escapees. Nothing since.”

“Ohay,” Murphy said, making a mental note to scout the nearby area for dead drop boxes. “I want to
hear everything about how the past two months have gone, while I’m here, and I promise I’ll fill you in on what else I’ve been up to as well. But first, I have a Brotherhood-related question. Does the word ‘litany’ mean anything to either of you?”

Now it was Danse’s turn to pale. “What? Where did you hear that?”

“Is it bad? The Knights I was listening in on at Covenant acted like it was.”

“It’s part of the Codex,” Haylen said, confused. “Almost like a group of amendments, really. Instructions on how…”

“How to force an Elder to step down,” Danse finished for her. “You overheard Knights talking about this? What happened?”

A chill ran down Murphy’s spine. “I don’t know, I was just trying to eavesdrop a bit while Preston was talking to Brandis, and the Knights said something about a meeting, and Kells and the litany, and I had no idea what was going on…”

“A meeting?” Danse stepped forward and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Try to remember.”

“It sounded like Maxson held a meeting, after we got back from talking to the Railroad, with his officers, and Kells wasn’t happy about it,” Murphy said, wracking her brains. “One Knight said he couldn’t do… whatever he tried to do, and one Knight said he shouldn’t have done it, but they all seemed to agree it was because of me that it was happening, but I, I didn’t…”

Danse’s eyes were wild, and his grip on her shoulders tightened. “Elder Maxson met with you and the Railroad? What about?”

“A ceasefire, Danse,” Haylen said, trying to pull him away from Murphy. He wouldn’t budge. “They agreed, all three groups. It’s not common knowledge.”

Murphy nodded. “The beginnings are there, already, but the Railroad is still being as secretive as possible, with the Institute still out there. Danse, let go of me.”

Danse seemed to realize for the first time that he was holding her too hard, and he let go instantly. “I’m sorry. I just… invoking the Litany is as serious as it gets, for Brotherhood leadership. No one does it lightly.”

“But that Knight is right,” Haylen added, patting Danse’s arm reassuringly. “You have to be a Paladin to invoke it. I always thought that bit was kind of a relic, but then, so was a lot of the Codex.”

“Don’t speak ill of the Brotherhood’s defining laws,” Danse chastised her. “They’re still yours to follow.”

Haylen glanced at Murphy fearfully. “Actually…”

Murphy took a deep breath. “Haylen quit the Brotherhood, Danse. Just after the attack in Diamond City.”

Danse’s eyes widened, and he turned to look down at Haylen. “What? You… you left?”

“I… I had to!” Haylen blurted out. “After they arrested Murphy, and the way they treated you, I couldn’t… I couldn’t stay.”
“They arrested Murphy?” Danse’s head swung between the two of them, bewildered. “I heard you were demoted, but I… what have you two been up to?”

Murphy sighed. “It’s a long story, Danse. Come on. Let’s go back to the fire, and I’ll tell you the whole of it.”
“How does it work?” Murphy asked softly, after Shaun and the puppy Nine had been tucked into bed on the upper level of the Breakheart Banks shack, along with Rylee, Curie and three of the settlement’s synth inhabitants. She huddled next to the fire with Danse and Haylen, while Buttercup and the settlement's own brahmin munched contentedly on a sack of razorgrain nearby. Off in the distance, Dogmeat could be heard sniffling along the ground, accompanying Jules on his watch rounds.

Murphy and Haylen looked to Danse expectantly, and he sighed.

“It begins with a challenge,” he said, voice heavy and dour. “A Paladin of the Brotherhood may issue a formal objection to an Elder’s authority if they find them lacking in their duties, their motives or their conduct. From there, the challenge leads to a hearing before the rest of the chapter’s Paladins, after which the matter is put to vote. If the Elder prevails, that’s the end of it. If the challenger wins the vote, the matter is forwarded on to the Council of Elders for consideration, and they make the final ruling.”

“And then?” Murphy pressed.

“Then either the Elder stays Elder, or the challenger becomes the new Elder,” Haylen replied.

Murphy’s eyes widened. “So Kells…”

“Was not just seeking Elder Maxson’s removal, yes,” Danse said. “Apparently, he thinks he can do better.”

“Good thing he’s not a Paladin,” Haylen pointed out.

“Why is it a Paladin-only thing?” Murphy asked. “Seems like Kells, or any of the Proctors, would be the best people to determine if the Elder is ineffective in some way. They know him best.”

“Because it’s an archaic set of rules,” Haylen said. She ignored Danse’s glower. “I’m serious. Until about, oh, 100 years or so ago, it used to be a test of combat. The challenger would invoke the Litany, and then the two of them would fight to the death.”

“Jesus,” Murphy said, disgusted. “Danse, I feel like you should have mentioned that tidbit when you were lecturing me about promotions and the chain of command. You never told me I could wind up in a position where I could argue or fight my way into leading a military state.”

“Haylen, you’re forgetting that the formation of the Brotherhood was under extraordinary circumstances, including the end of the world,” Danse said. “The people of the land reverted to baser instincts and harsher laws, capital punishment and worse. The strong survived, and the Brotherhood knew it. Weakness meant the end of them, the end of humanity again. The Codex was rewritten when the Brotherhood’s position allowed it to be.”
He turned to Murphy. “As for your question, Haylen is partially right. The Council of Elders’ opinions, and therefore the laws of the Codex, do not change quickly or easily. Not that long ago, the Scribes under the three Proctors and the Head Scribe worked nearly independently from the Brotherhood’s military forces, and the air forces only came into existence within the last 10 years. The seat of Elder is formally at the head of the Brotherhood’s military forces, and the ones who know the Elder best are the ones who answer to him. If one of those directly beneath the Elder begins to question the orders they are given, it is their duty to bring it to the attention of their fellow Paladins for review.”

“Like I was supposed to do with you,” Haylen said.

Murphy nodded. “Okay. So it’s a mix of outdatedness and the people under Maxson being responsible for noticing if his orders stop making sense.”

“Or go against the Brotherhood way,” Danse added.

“Which I’m guessing is kind of up for interpretation?”

Haylen shrugged. “You form your own opinions once you’re inducted. Most sponsors are pretty good about instilling the basic values of the Brotherhood into Initiates, even if they might lean one way or another in their interpretations of the Codex. I got lucky with mine, though. Could have been stuck with an ex-Outcast.”

Murphy pressed some fingers to her forehead. “Outcasts. Capital ‘O,’ right? I’ve heard the term before, but…”

Danse looked dismayed and Haylen giggled. “That’s Recent Brotherhood History 101,” the former Scribe said. “Danse, I thought you trained this woman?”

“I did,” Danse huffed. “Though I’m beginning to realize she wasn’t paying attention as often as I thought she was.”

Murphy smiled sheepishly, and Haylen got up, shaking her head and chuckling. “If you two are going to sit out here and talk about things I’ve heard a million times over, I’m going to bed. Don’t stay up too late, Curie and I start check-ups tomorrow morning.”

Danse and Murphy bade her good night, and Murphy scooted over on the park bench to sit closer to the former Paladin. The fire before them crackled, happily shooting sparks up into the Commonwealth sky.

“So, the Outcasts?”

Danse didn’t respond right away. When he did, it was with another question. “Was there ever a point, during any of your training, where you considered taking the Oath of Fraternity?”

Murphy was caught off guard. “I… I don’t know. Maybe.”

“When?”

She scratched her head. “Remember when we were hunting down parts for Liberty Prime? That foray into the Glowing Sea? Just you and me, Sentinel Site Prescott, a horde of ferals…”

Danse smiled. “A Child of Atom and his assaultron.”

“Right. And you wanted to stay behind to make sure the Mark 28s got out okay, and I let you.”
Murphy sighed. “To be honest, I just… wanted out. Of the Glowing Sea, I mean. That place… well, you know how things went the first time I dove in there.”

He nodded. “The deathclaw. I remember.”

“Yeah. Did I tell you I basically ran all the way back to Waypoint Echo?” Murphy chuckled. “But once I got there, I felt so ashamed of myself. Haylen and the others were good sports, said you did the right thing, supervising the payload, but I was a nervous wreck. I kept thinking, what if that Child of Atom changed his mind, what if you got fried by the assaultron, what if the nukes were completely unstable, what if we didn’t get all the ferals…”

She put her hands up in the air. “I was dead on my feet from running out of the crater to begin with, but I kept pacing, back and forth, until the retrieval team came back with the payload and you. And when those vertibirds burst through the clouds, I could’ve started singing. So, that’s when I realized, maybe I wasn’t so averse to the idea of joining the Brotherhood. Maybe I did care about you guys. You were my team. My recon squad.”

Murphy slumped forward. “And then…”

Danse’s face fell. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No, don’t apologize, Danse.” Murphy punched his arm playfully. “It’s hardly your fault you turned out to be the very thing the Brotherhood came hunting.”

“That’s not what I’m apologizing for,” Danse clarified. “I’m sorry that what happened brought out the worst in Maxson, in the rest of the Brotherhood. I’m sorry it tainted your view of us… of them. Yours and Haylen’s.”

“Danse.” Murphy put a hand on his shoulder and smiled reassuringly. “What’s done is done. We made our choices, and if it led to us sitting on this bench together, alive, then I don’t regret it. Any of it.”

“Perhaps.” Danse looked up at the stars over their heads. There were clouds moving in from the west, lazily beginning to obscure the Milky Way and the constellations Murphy could recognize. “Don’t tell Haylen, but I’m not surprised she decided to leave the Brotherhood.”

“Yeah?” Murphy said in surprise.

“I suppose, like you, it was an inevitability.” He looked down at his lap and grinned. “Because some idiot taught her to stand by her principles, no matter what tries to influence them. It was the first thing that I learned when I entered the Brotherhood of Steel, and I was just passing it along. I never realized that my advice could backfire.”

“Backfire on who, exactly?” Murphy asked, a grin growing on her face as well.

“Honestly? I’m still not sure.” Danse patted her hand and stretched, looking back at the shack behind them. “Can I speak to you in confidence?”

“Of course.”

He settled back down on the bench. “When Haylen warned me about Quinlan’s discovery, she begged me to confront Maxson.”

Murphy frowned. “She did?”
Danse nodded. “She told me that there were Brotherhood soldiers that still believed in me, that would stand behind me if I challenged his authority.”

“She wanted you to invoke the Litany, even after everyone knew you were a synth?” Murphy’s eyes widened. “God, she really had faith in you. I don’t know if even I would have pushed you to do that. And if you need to convince all of the other Paladins, plus the Council…”

“I told her that it wouldn’t be right to cause a rift in our ranks,” Danse went on. “We were on the brink of war with the Institute, and weakening our unity felt like I’d be… backstabbing my own troops.”

“Yeah.” Murphy ran a hand over the back of her neck, massaging it thoughtfully. “I don’t know that she was wrong, though, about the ones who would have supported you. I got more than a few dirty looks, when I went back to Maxson with your holotags, and even when I dropped in after the Institute assault. They thought I sold you out, to get a promotion.”

“They did?” Danse looked taken aback. “I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well.” Murphy shrugged. “I’d decided to leave, at that point. It didn’t matter. I was just… confused. Sad. And angry.”

“Still.” Now it was Danse’s turn to put an arm around her shoulders. “You didn’t deserve that. If you had said something, I’m sure Maxson would have silenced them. I’ve known him for a long time, and under all that protocol, he’s a decent man.”

“I know.” Murphy stared into the fire. “But I wanted him to feel that disapproval as much as I did, then.”

Danse frowned and tried to question her, but she shrugged him off. She wasn’t in the mood for a speech about ‘toying with the Elder’s emotions.’ “The Outcasts. You were going to re-educate me.”

“Right.” He gave her one more look of regret before launching into the tone of voice that Murphy had gotten very good at tuning out, once upon a time. “When Elder Owyn Lyons arrived in the Capital Wasteland in 2255, the Brotherhood had two simple missions: Scour the ruins of Washington D.C. for technology, and report back to the Council of Elders about any super mutant activity in the area. Upon discovering Liberty Prime, Lyons founded the Citadel, and settled in to combat the super mutant menace while working on Prime. But over time, the people of the Capital Wasteland came to rely on the Brotherhood, and Lyons’ priorities changed. He began trying to protect the people, focusing on that even above his primary missions.

“When word reached the Council of Elders about what he was doing, they cut off contact with Lyons and stopped all support. In 2276, a group of Brotherhood soldiers still loyal to the western leadership left the Citadel, and Lyons had their names struck from the Codex as traitors. But the dissenters, who called themselves the Brotherhood Outcasts, maintained that Lyons was the traitor, as he had abandoned the Brotherhood’s true ideals.

“After Lyons’ death, his daughter, Sarah, took up the title of Elder. She upheld his ruling, but she was killed in the field after not even a year of leadership. Our chapter was thrown into chaos for a few more years, until Arthur Maxson stepped up to be the Elder we needed. He was able to bring us back toward Brotherhood traditions, reconnect with the Council of Elders and finally bring the Outcasts back into our numbers.”

“So when Haylen said she was happy she wasn’t sponsored by one, she’s basically calling them sticklers for ‘the true Brotherhood way,’” Murphy guessed. “And if Maxson strays from the true
Brotherhood way…”

She twisted her mouth up in thought. “How much of the Brotherhood is made up of former Outcasts?”

“Not many,” Danse admitted. “But plenty hold high ranks. It was part of the peace agreement, that returning Outcasts maintain their equivalent titles upon rejoining.”

“Huh.” Murphy eyed him suspiciously. “I bet you were buddy-buddy with them.”

“Some of them, yes.” Danse bobbed his head noncommittally. “Two of them I worked with on a regular basis. Paladins Morrill and McGraw. McGraw, I feel you would get along with. Morrill, on the other hand, is more strict about combat form and technique than even I was.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Murphy stood up to grab a stick. She poked at the fire, turning logs over and stirring the ashes. “They’re the ones who would have crucified you, though, if you had tried to challenge Maxson.”

“Most likely. But either way, I think I hold more in common with Elder Lyons now than I did when you first met me.”

Murphy threw the stick into the fire and put a hand on her hip. “Why’s that?”

Danse smiled. “Because of you. The idea of a mere Commonwealth wastelander bringing down the Institute would have been laughable less than a year ago. And yet here you are, in spite of everything the wastes have thrown at you. It makes you wonder if Lyons was right. If the Brotherhood invested time and energy into caring for all wastelanders like they did for you, what might others be able to do?”

He scratched his head, clearly struggling with the words. “So… I suppose I’m proud of you. And I don’t know if it’s friendship, or an anomaly in my programming…”

“Danse,” Murphy chuckled. “Hey. That’s not how that works. We’re friends. Hell, as far as I’m concerned, you’re like a brother to me.”

Danse patted the seat next to him and she sat down again, squeezing his shoulder as she did.

“Look,” he went on. “I know this has been difficult for you. I don’t envy some of the recent decisions you’ve had to make. If our roles had been reversed, I’m not so sure I could’ve handled it as well as you did. So I just want to thank you for sticking by me, and let you to know that if you need me, I’ll be there for you.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Danse.”

They sat in silence for a bit, watching the fire burn down. Danse was throwing off almost as much heat as the fire, and Murphy was glad of it. The November nights were getting longer and colder by the day.

“Do you think Maxson’s in danger of being deposed?” she asked, after Jules and Dogmeat had stopped in to check on them and warm up by the fire before going back out into the dark.

“Not by Kells,” Danse replied. “Haylen’s right, that he can’t directly challenge Maxson.”

“But if he manages to convince one of the other Paladins that he’s slipping in some way…”
“unlikely.” Danse tossed another log on the fire. “With you and I out of the picture, the only Paladin left on the Prydwen is Paladin Brandis. Any other Paladin invoking a challenge would be hard-pressed to convince their fellow soldiers of Maxson’s inadequacy, simply because they’re not present in the Commonwealth to assess his behavior. And Brandis is as loyal to Maxson as they come.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.” Danse ran a hand through his hair, something Murphy recognized as a sign he was worried. “However, the fact that the soldiers are talking about it… concerns me. Rumors can be just as damaging to a leader’s credibility as a direct challenge. Respect is hard-won, and easily lost.”

Murphy rubbed her knees. “Do you think… do you think it’s because of me?”

Danse gave her a quizzical look. “I don’t think you’re entirely to blame for Maxson’s latest decisions regarding alliances with the Minutemen and Railroad. It makes sense, with the Institute still out there, to work together. But I suppose some might see you as a sort of catalyst.”

“Catalyst.” She nodded. “Right.”

Murphy excused herself from the fire not long after and curled up next to Shaun on her sleeping mat. As she lay there, she found herself wondering if an extended stay at Breakheart Banks with the boy might be the best thing to do, for everyone.

The clouds Murphy had watched gathering the night before covered the sky when she woke up, and just before noon they loosed a torrential downpour of rain. Shaun, Nine and Dogmeat were caught in the beginning of it, bounding through the grass with shrieks of laughter and yipping. Once inside the safety of the shack, Shaun presented Murphy with the bouquet of hubflowers he had been hiding behind his back.

“Happy birthday, Mom,” he said proudly.

Curie and Marina cooed their approval, and Murphy swept him up into a hug, swinging him around hard enough to scatter raindrops across the wooden floor. Dogmeat and Nine followed suit, and Curie and Haylen cried out and rushed to cover their medical supplies before they became completely drenched. The dogs were banished to the lower level of the shack, and the two doctors carried on with their examinations.

With not much else to do because of the rain, Murphy took notes for them while they worked, learning more about the Breakheart Banks synth s as they went. Jules’ beard had grown bushier since she’d seen him last, and his hand was steadier on the laser pistol at his hip. Marina seemed to have lost some of her timidity and willingly handed out suggestions if any of the others appeared to be in need of something to do. The two newest arrivals, Rory and Briar, still jumped at small noises and were mystified by the kindness of their visitors, but they willingly submitted to their exams as if it was the norm.

“It reminds me of the trial periods,” Rory said brightly while Haylen checked his blood pressure.

“Trial periods?” Haylen asked.

“Volkert?” Murphy guessed. Rory nodded enthusiastically, his ponytail bobbing, but Murphy and Haylen shared a look of understanding.

“They weren’t so bad,” Briar said, catching their glance. “Most of the time, it just meant some nausea and time off normal duties so he could monitor our vitals. Plenty of synth would rather have had that.”

“What did you do in the Institute?” Shaun piped up. Murphy tried to shush him, but Briar smiled and waved her off.

“Sanitation,” she replied. “At first. Then Bioscience maintenance. Rory here was a regular little guinea pig, though. Some sort of anomaly in his system made him immune to certain pathogens, so he was in and out of Volkert’s office when he wasn’t running food packets to the scientists who had forgotten to eat.”

Shaun looked as though he was trying to remember. “Did you water the plants?”

“Once,” Briar said, surprised. “When the misting water line broke, we had to. You saw that?”

He bobbed his head up and down enthusiastically. “Me and Dr. Li. She brought me in there to show me the gorillas, and said I shouldn’t tell anyone, or we might get in trouble.”

Murphy stiffened a little at the mention of Dr. Li, but she kept quiet. Shaun, Rory and Briar chatted a bit more about superficial comforts the Institute offered, like indoor plumbing and clean floors and gorillas, but they all agreed in the end that they were happier above the ground. Curie and Haylen let them talk, only directing an occasional order to Murphy to record something they deemed important.

Danse finally came in from the rain to conduct his exam, and Curie tutted disapprovingly at his soaking hair and clothing. Still, his body temperature read slightly warmer than average like the rest of the synths’, and Curie admitted that he was in peak condition.

“C’est remarquable,” she said, massaging the muscle of Danse’s bicep with a look of curiosity. “But surely you must have changed routine and diet from when you were in the Brotherhood?”

“Somewhat,” Danse replied. He begrudgingly agreed to begin logging his meals and exercise regimens for Haylen to study and compare with his weight.

Shaun also insisted on a check-up, and the results of Haylen’s administrations turned up a temperature at the same level as the rest of the synths, a full 70 pounds of weight and a ticklish elbow. Curie took full advantage of this last fact, and he eventually fled the shack to go play with the dogs.

“You shouldn’t let him wander so much,” Marina said pointedly to Murphy. “It’s dangerous out here.”

Murphy swallowed and nodded, before turning her clipboard over to Curie for inspection and going to keep an eye on the boy for the rest of the afternoon. Back at the Castle, Shaun had had a dog pack to keep him safe. Here, it was just her and Dogmeat.

The rain subsided that evening. Rylee cooked her famous squirrel on a stick for the group, and Curie presented them with a basket of mutfruit she had spirited away. The smell of the food cooking over the fire drew in Joan the cat, who had been hiding in the lower levels of the shack since her basket had been opened the evening before. Slowly, Shaun coaxed her in with pieces of squirrel, until the tabby was purring happily in his lap before the fire.
While Haylen regaled them with stories about the Capital Wasteland, Curie massaged Murphy’s shoulders, working out knots Murphy hadn’t even known were there. It was something the doctor had done while they were on the road for the Minutemen, and Murphy had missed it immensely. She sank into the rhythm of the hands on her shoulders, relaxing for what felt like the first time since her last night in Diamond City.

Once she was well and truly melting under the synth’s fingers, Curie leaned forward over her shoulder and handed her a tiny jar. Inside was a familiar, dark, ground substance, and Murphy couldn’t move her fingers fast enough to unscrew the top and take a whiff.

“Coffee,” she breathed. “Curie, where…?”


Danse’s eyebrows popped up at that. “It’s your birthday?”

Murphy nodded absentmindedly, turning the little glass container of heaven around and around.

Danse leaned over to Haylen. “Did you get her anything?”

“Not exactly,” Haylen said. “Speaking of which, what time is it?”

Shaun peered at Murphy’s Pip-Boy. “Almost six.”

“Ooo, turn on Diamond City Radio. Do it, do it.”

Murphy flipped the radio on and caught the tail end of Magnolia’s “Train Train,” before Travis cut in.

“Well, folks, we’ve got something we don’t get very often here at Diamond City Radio tonight—brand new music,” the DJ said. “About a month ago, I got a walk-in from two lovely individuals who asked that I circle today on my calendar, and pop in this holotape every hour on the hour after five in honor of a very special someone’s birthday. That’s right folks, our very own vault dweller, Murphy is turning a whopping 200-some years old! For full details, see the interview in the Publick Occurrences issue, ‘View from the Vault,’ or just talk to Piper. I’m sure she’d love to give you all the details about our favorite blue-suited gal’s adventures. And now, here’s Nancy Sinatra, with ‘Sugar Town.’”

Murphy’s jaw dropped, and she whipped her head around toward Haylen. “Did you do this?”

Haylen dissolved into laughter. “The look on your face! Yes, it was RJ’s idea. It just took a couple of caps to get Travis on board, and I already had the holotape. I found it in a desk at the Cambridge outpost.”

“Haylen, you’re amazing,” Murphy gushed. She turned up the radio volume and rocked side to side in time with the lazy beat.

“I got some troubles, but they won’t last

I’m gonna lay right down here in the grass

And pretty soon all my troubles will pass

‘Cause I’m in shoo-shoo-shoo, shoo-shoo-shoo,
“Where’s Sugar Town?” Shaun asked.

“Your happy place,” Murphy replied, putting her arm around him to pull him into her swaying. “Wherever you most want to be, in the world.”

“Where do you want to be, Mom?”

She stopped rocking and put a finger to his forehead, before she realized she used to do the exact same thing to Nate. “Right here, kiddo.”
Principium

Chapter Summary

In which the ex-Brotherhoods plant flowers.

Wednesday brought a crackle on Haylen’s radio and Kasumi’s voice on the other end, excited and laden with relief.

“They made it!” the Nakano daughter said happily. “They made it to the Capital Wasteland, Captain. Over.”

Curie clapped her hands joyously, and Rylee patted Murphy on the shoulder while she talked out the details with the Castle’s newest radio operator. MacCready, Rei and Kenji had docked at Rivet City the previous night, and the mercenary had set out that morning for the settlement of Canterbury Commons with a trade caravan. Kenji and Rei would wait for him to return with Duncan before setting sail for the Commonwealth again, though MacCready had not been sure how long he would stay to visit with his friends.

“He’ll be fine,” Haylen reassured Murphy after she disconnected. “He can take care of himself. Just give him the time he needs to catch up with his son.”

Murphy nodded, but she noticed a slightly mournful edge to the girl’s voice. “Did he talk to you at all before he left?”

“He… we… it’s not important.”

Haylen didn’t say anything else about it, and Murphy didn’t press her.

Curie and Rylee stayed at Breakheart Banks through the week. Come Friday morning, though, Rylee loaded up Danse’s bunker scrap collection and much of the settlement’s corn harvest onto Buttercup, and the two women made their way out to the cracked asphalt with many calls of “adieu!” and “stay in touch!”

“Let us know next time you’re heading our way!” Rylee shouted, before the three figures made their way down the southbound road.

“Oui! And don’t forget, écoute la radio!” Curie added.

The days began sidling by faster. Murphy helped the synths tend the razorgrain they had planted after clearing the settlement’s cornfield of stalks and cobs. Jules, Briar and Haylen put together the water purifier on the banks of the river while Shaun and Nine supervised. Murphy and Danse teamed up as often as they could to teach the synths laser weapon techniques, Danse correcting her here and there when her form slipped. Laser rifles and pistols were familiar to Murphy from her time spent training with the Brotherhood, but she was more at home with the comfort grips of Alpha and Omega and the neon-green cartridges that loaded so easily and released furious bursts of vapor and plasma.

Danse also led the settlement’s residents in close-quarters sparring routines, and he seemed to thoroughly enjoy knocking Murphy off her feet when she was sore in the morning from sleeping on
the floor. Once warmed up, however, Murphy could match his moves more than adequately. Danse was built like a tank, but she was faster.

Haylen sometimes joined in the exercise, but she seemed like she was only interested in it to stay in shape. When she wasn’t washing cuts or applying bandages, she was documenting everything around her, a notepad and pen perpetually clutched in her hands. She watched the synths and their movements during combat practice intently, scribbling notes and tallying up the bumps and scrapes everyone acquired.

“I’m trying to assess their healing rates,” she explained to Murphy after a particularly rough session, where a careless kick from Marina had caught Rory on the side of the head. “Curie has kept some pretty detailed notes about her own experiences, but outside of the Institute, no one has really studied synths and the way their bodies react to their environment. All Senior Scribe Neriah ever wanted to do was cut them up and get a look at their insides.”

Murphy bit her lip. “I remember. She couldn’t wait to get her hands on the Diamond City Courser.”

Haylen sighed. “I wish I’d gotten my hands on that Courser. What I wouldn’t give to study one of them.”

She backpedaled when she caught Murphy’s look of skepticism. “I mean, not that I want to see a Courser out and about. That would be…”

“Bad.”

“Very bad.”

Though the residents of Breakheart Banks didn’t talk about it openly, the threat of a Courser descending on the settlement to collect the synths was on everyone’s minds. Danse grumbled intermittently about the need to stockpile more fusion cells, Briar was constantly looking over her shoulder and Haylen kept her radio on every waking moment to monitor frequencies for any news from the Minutemen, Diamond City or others about Institute movement. Murphy did what she could to assuage fears. She took extra night shift watches with Dogmeat. She accompanied Danse on visits to Greentop Nursery to trade for supplies, carefully keeping her tell-tale white hair covered. She turned her own Pip-Boy radio on and off constantly, waiting. For what, she wasn’t sure.

The Commonwealth was on edge, too. The radio DJs tried to keep their usual, positive tones when reading out the news, but the news itself was disheartening. Disappearances. Deaths. No more than the usual offerings, but now it felt like the way things had before the Institute had been destroyed, like their shadow was looming over the wasteland again. It was no surprise to Murphy when Travis announced during one of his morning newscasts that the second mayoral debate had been delayed indefinitely, “in a near-unanimous decision by the Diamond City council.”

“An announcement was made this afternoon that the debate between candidates Ann Codman and Nelson Latimer would be inappropriate at this time, as the city is still grieving the citizens lost in the attack on October 20th,” Travis said. “In response to questions about a rescheduled date for the debate, candidate and council member Ann Codman said she would let us know, ‘as soon as we can be sure Diamond City is safe again.’”

“They’ll never be sure,” Marina said darkly on Murphy’s right side, rolling a spoon between her fingers over her bowl of razorgrain porridge. Murphy grimaced and turned the volume up.

“Freshman council member Detective Nick Valentine, however, thinks delaying the debate indefinitely is a mistake, and was the sole dissenting vote,” Travis went on. “The recently-returned
former candidate said today he feels that, while remembering the October victims is crucial to healing, Diamond City should also focus on moving forward.”

A recording of Valentine’s voice cut in. “Look, we all know what’s out there, now. We know what they were trying to do when they sent a Courier into the debate. But if we put this off forever, we’re playing right into their hands. We’re doing exactly what they want, and I won’t take credit for it. I won’t dance to the Institute’s drum.”

“Bold words from Nick Valentine,” Travis said. “Coming up, we’ve got more from the Ink Spots, but right now it’s ‘Crawl Out Through the Fallout,’ brought to you by Diamond City Surplus.”

“He’s right,” Danse said, nodding on the other side of Murphy. “Disrupting the Commonwealth and turning neighbor against neighbor is something the Institute wants. Diamond City shouldn’t just lie down and let the Institute walk all over them.”

“They’re scared, Danse,” Murphy replied. She turned Sheldon Allman’s crooning baritone down and went back to her own bowl of porridge. “They’ve got plenty of reason to be.”

“Fear should be the fuel you need to take action,” Danse muttered. “Fortunately, my training prevents…”

He let out a yelp when Joan the cat suddenly jumped into his lap. The startled creature stuck out her claws and hissed, and Marina and Murphy burst out laughing as the pair toppled off the bench.

Danse immediately got up and brushed himself off, casting a sour look at the cat streaking away into the bushes. “Not a word to Haylen,” he warned them.

The former Paladin had been hanging around the former Scribe fairly often, Murphy noticed. Danse would find some excuse to ask Haylen about his dietary log, and Haylen would happily talk for ages about the various benefits of the fruits, grains and meats of the wasteland while he listened and jotted down notes. Murphy had a sneaking suspicion that Danse didn’t stay because he had taken a sudden interest in nutrition- she still saw him snarfing down Cram kebabs and Sugar Bombs while he was on overnight watch- and Haylen didn’t seem to rush her lessons, even when both of them had other chores to take care of.

It made sense to her, Murphy supposed. As part of the same recon squad, fraternization would have been discouraged. As free citizens of the Commonwealth, the sky was the limit. Still, because of her friendship with MacCready, she couldn’t help but view the budding relationship as a bittersweet one. She became quieter around the two of them, tuning her Pip-Boy radio dial back and forth as they reminisced about the Capital Wasteland and their time spent in the Brotherhood.

Shaun, however, ate their stories up. He took in everything around him with enthusiasm, and despite initial misgivings from a few, he won every single one of the synths over. Rory took to him immediately, recognizing him as a fellow victim in Institute experimentation. Though they didn’t talk about it openly, the signs of shared traumas were there. More than once, Murphy woke in the middle of the night to find Rory holding Shaun after a nightmare, rocking the boy softly and pointing at the stars outside the shack. She sat with them then, putting names to the bright points of light in the vast, indigo expanse of the sky, reassuring them that they were no longer caged.

Briar, Marina and Jules warmed to Shaun as well, sharing lessons they had learned in their short time above ground about farming, mechanics, wildlife. Slowly, Shaun more easily unstuck himself from Murphy’s side, and she smiled to see him walking the perimeter with Nine and Jules, or fitting pipes together at the purifier with Briar, lost in their words as much as their projects. Danse in particular took the boy under his wing, running him through a title-less training program similar to the ones the
Brotherhood Squires undertook once they were old enough. Chores, observation, even field training in the form of miniature resupply missions or basic weapons handling- Danse oversaw it all. Haylen watched their progress with amusement, and she joined in here and there to teach Shaun about the history of the Brotherhood, and the people of the surface world he was still new to.

Still, there would be moments where it was painfully obvious that Shaun was not like the others. He had far more happy memories of the Institute than the other synths, and couldn’t seem to understand why few of the synths wanted to talk about their pasts. A sharp rebuke from Marina one night sent him into tears, collapsing heavily into Murphy’s arms while she was on watch.

“I just wanted to know what she used to do, down there,” he sobbed. “Rory said she used to work with the doctor, but he had her transferred because she was ‘distracting his son.’ What does that mean?”

“I…” Murphy pulled Shaun in closer and lowered her voice. “I don’t know, but she doesn’t want to talk about it. It hurts her, to remember. Can you respect that?”

He sniffed. “I guess.”

There were other signs. Shaun had a tendency to become so engrossed in projects that he would forget to eat, or forget to watch where he was walking, or forget to keep his voice down around the borders of the settlement. He was also oblivious to the possibility of danger around every corner, and was used to a wider range of freedom from his time under Minutemen care. Murphy did her best to keep him from wandering off by himself, but he had to be retrieved more than once. The first time, Dogmeat and Nine alerted everyone with their barking when Shaun decided to try swimming after a pile of debris in the river, and Danse had to dive in to fish him out. A few days after that, Murphy ran frantically down the road when she noticed he and the dogs were missing, only to find them poking around the remains of a crashed military convoy.

“Danse said there used to be robots here,” Shaun protested when she took his arm. “I just wanted to see if there were any screws or gears I could use.”

“This isn’t the Castle,” Murphy said, exasperated. “It’s dangerous out here. Dogmeat may be grown enough to go out on his own, but you and Nine are not. Don’t wander off like this.”

He stood his ground, his little chin high. “I’m never going to be grown. You said.”

There was nothing Murphy could say to that, except to forcefully lead him back to camp and sentence him to shucking corn with Briar. Later, she sat down with Haylen and poured her feelings out, setting voice to fears that had been rattling around in her mind.

“He’s right,” she said, after recounting Shaun’s comments that afternoon. “He’s not going to grow up, not in any normal sense of the phrase. But I’m still his mom. Does that mean this is going to be my life, running after a perpetual 10-year-old until one of us… one of us dies? What do I do?”

Haylen nodded sympathetically. “Did you talk to Curie about it? She’s got the most experience with… well, with unconventional ways of growing up.”

“I thought about contacting Doctor Amari, with the Railroad, but…”

Murphy trailed off, and Haylen patted her on the shoulder. “There’s not a guidebook for that sort of thing, I get it. But if it’s what Shaun wants- to grow up, I mean- then you should explore it. Maybe you can get some answers, at least. Options.”

She was right, and Murphy knew it. In the morning, she explained the situation to Danse, and he
agreed to accompany her on an unplanned trip to the nearby town of Malden. It took most of the day and a run-in with super mutants, but Murphy finally located a mailbox with a white teardrop on it. While Danse kept watch, Murphy pulled out the piece of paper she had prepared and read it through one more time.

Glory, it read. Have questions about the boy. No extraction necessary, but must meet with the Good Doctor ASAP. Forward any messages to the Dismal Dancer. Charmer.

She fished a pen out of her pack and scribbled an addition. P.S. Hope everything’s okay with Max. If he’s in trouble, we all are.

With a deep breath, she dropped it in. Danse, who had snuck a peek as she wrote, eyed her suspiciously. “Max?”

“Yep.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing you need to know about, yet.”

Near the end of November, Danse broke his own rule about traveling in pairs and snuck off one morning to Greentop Nursery, returning triumphantly with a sack full of food. Murphy chewed him out while she sifted through the sack’s contents, but her scolding faded as she unearthed several boxes of InstaMash, bags of silt beans and tarberries and a wrapped, freshly-plucked rad-chicken, most likely from the nursery’s own flock.

“What on earth are you up to?” she demanded, ignoring Rory’s curious looks from over by the razorgrain field. “We’re doing just fine on supplies. You’re supposed to be the one who lectures me about taking unnecessary risks.”

“It’s a special occasion,” Danse replied. “A traditional feast.”

Murphy surveyed the food again. “Throwing a harvest party?”

“Of a sort.”

Haylen filled Murphy in on the holiday the Brotherhood of Steel had adopted after the Great War, when Captain Roger Maxson led his followers into the desert of Southern California to the Lost Hills bunker, birthplace of the Brotherhood. Their November arrival date had been recorded in the Codex as a day of memorial and celebration, a funeral for the world the former Americans had known and the bonds they must form to survive the future. The end of the Exodus and the beginning of an even longer journey.

As Haylen described the typical celebrations and ceremonies held by Brotherhood members, a smile grew on Murphy’s face. “The Feast of Principium’ had all the hallmarks of two old-world holidays she was more than familiar with: Veterans Day and Thanksgiving. It was no wonder to her that Maxson’s ancestor had mashed the two together for a road-weary group of ex-militaries and their families, desperately in need of something to remind them that life was still worth living, even after the world had ended. Food, family and ties to beloved pieces of Americana could lift anyone’s spirits.
Shaun and the synths took an interest in the holiday as well, despite Jules’ cynical comments about celebrating the same things as a group of people who regarded them as less-than-human. Danse shot him icy glares whenever he made his feelings known, but Haylen, Murphy and the others ignored him. Together, Murphy, Shaun and Marina stuffed the rad-chicken with razorgrain, herbs, carrots and corn. Briar whipped up several bowls of InstaMash and salted silt beans, and Rory ground the tarberries into a paste that somewhat resembled cranberry sauce. The resulting feast was delicious, and voices and laughter tumbled happily into the air around the fire that afternoon. Even Jules quit complaining when his mouth was full of rad-chicken stuffing.

Come evening, however, Haylen and Danse sobered considerably. As the sun set, Murphy saw them walking up the southeast hill, tinted in the brilliant oranges, roses and violets of the sunset. Danse was carrying a shovel.

She trailed them up curiously, and the two nodded to her, as if her presence was expected. Haylen pulled an unmarked packet of seeds from her pocket and held it up to the dying light, muttering something in Latin as the breeze tugged at the envelope. Danse produced a can of purified water and cracked it open.

“How did you keep them?” he asked Haylen when she had finished speaking.

“Proctor Ingram,” Haylen answered, tearing open the paper packet and shaking a few miniscule black seeds into her hand. “She confiscated everything else, but I asked her to let me have these. She understood.”

Danse nodded, and dug a small hole in the soil with the shovel. Haylen placed the seeds carefully inside, showering them with purified water before patting the dirt back down over the spot.

Murphy crouched down next to her. “What are they?”

“Golden poppies,” Haylen explained. “So the story goes, Captain Maxson and his men passed through a field of the flowers as they arrived in Lost Hills. In full bloom, welcoming them to their new home.”

“Principium,” Danse murmured.

Haylen nodded. “Principium. Everywhere the Brotherhood goes, the Scribes carry the seeds. They plant the flower. The soldiers wear its colors and they remember.”

She and Murphy straightened up, and the three turned toward the setting sun. To Murphy’s surprise, Danse and Haylen began to recite a verse she had heard before, in her old life. It was something she had seen on the wall of Fraternal Post 115 when Nate had been invited to speak there, inscribed beneath a photo of a field of blood-red flowers. She repeated them quietly, as best she could remember, and something warmed in her when she realized that somewhere, Elder Arthur Maxson and hundreds, thousands of others, were probably doing the same.

“Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.”

Murphy looked at the other two curiously when they stopped. “There’s more. You’re missing the first two stanzas, I think. ‘In Flanders fields the poppies blow…””

Haylen nodded. “It’s in the Brotherhood records. Today is about honoring the fallen by pressing on, so most people just skip to the end.”

“Typical Brotherhood,” Murphy said, looking down at her boots with a smile. “Cutting down to the core of the issue. Don’t stray from the path, or your ancestors will be displeased.”

That got a half-hearted chuckle out of Haylen, but Danse was silent. When Murphy got up to leave, she gripped his shoulder momentarily in understanding. The last rays of sun fell heavily on his conflicted face.

As far as Murphy could tell, Danse got along with each of the other synths on the settlement just fine, but he avoided speaking about his pre-Brotherhood past with any of them. Marina confided in Murphy while they gathered firewood one morning, explaining that Jules had thought he recognized Danse from his time in the Institute, but when he brought it up, Danse had withdrawn to his bunker for a few days.

“He has a long way to go, if he’s trying to accept himself,” Marina said, her tone hushed despite their distance from the little farm. “It’s like he’d rather he didn’t exist at all, before the mind wipe.”

“He just needs time,” Murphy said, wrestling a branch out of a nearby bush. “Honestly, I think he’s more hurt by his banishment from the Brotherhood than he is by his… identity.”

“Screw those bucket-heads,” Marina replied. “We’re his people now. He doesn’t need them.”

Murphy wasn’t so sure, but she said nothing.

On December’s first morning, drab and laden with fog, Murphy found herself sitting in the southeast watchtower on the hill, petting Dogmeat and turning her Brotherhood holotags over and over again between her fingers. The little blue panel still glowed faintly with her demoted rank displayed- “MY-517A”- and the barcode which undoubtedly led Scribes to her personnel and medical files was shiny where the raised metal had rubbed against her clothing.

She had received the holotags during her first visit to the Prydwen, and Danse had stood proudly by as Elder Maxson slipped them over her head and promoted her to the rank of Knight. Despite her initial misgivings about the whole ordeal, the tags had been a comfort to her. In another life, Nate had worn a set of tags much like them. They were a reminder of what she had lost to the Institute, forgotten with the Railroad and remembered with the Minutemen. They were a pledge of allegiance not just to the Brotherhood, but to her husband and her missing son.

Now, though, they just felt like a weight around her neck. She wasn’t sure what they meant anymore, or who she owed allegiance to. There were promises she had made to Danse and Maxson, of course, and promises she had made to herself about the future of the Commonwealth and the Minutemen, synths, people in it. Pledges that had replaced the one she had made to find Shaun and avenge Nate. Promises that called out to her from across the wastes, to find her way to the ocean of problems besetting her broken city and soothe the storms that came forth.
Danse felt that call, too, she could tell. Being relegated to a northern outpost wasn’t something he would be able to stand for long, no matter how busy he kept himself. Murphy had no doubt that Danse would take the secret of Maxson’s mercy to the grave, as he had been asked to do, forced to do, but it would wreck him in the process. News bulletins on the radio, the tone of the DJ’s voice on Radio Freedom, the long looks on the faces of the synths and the settlers at Greentop Nursery called to him. They called to her. The promises around her neck called to her. *Come back. We need you.*

But did they? MacCready’s words to her, from the boat ride to Far Harbor, floated through her head. *You should try telling the Commonwealth to fix its own problems, once in a while.*

There was a rustle in the grass behind her, and Murphy turned in her seat to look. Nate’s eyes stared back from the fog, and she immediately put a hand to Alpha at her hip.

“Mom?”

Murphy froze, and the vision sharpened, revealing a scared boy, pulling up nervously at her defensive motion. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Shaun. I… I’m sorry, I’m jumpy today.” She immediately took her hand away from the plasma gun’s grip. “What are you doing awake so early?”

“Haylen’s on the radio,” he replied, watching her now with a wariness that cut into her skin. “She said to come get you.”

Kasumi was on the other end of the radio, somewhat agitated.

“*General Garvey asked me to read this to you, but it doesn’t make sense,*” she said, crackling paper next to her microphone. “*It says, ‘chip,’ with a big space, then ’summit.’ And after that there are some coordinates. That mean anything to you? Over.*”

“Just give me the coordinates, Ohm’s Law. Over.”

Kasumi rattled them off, and Murphy punched them into her Pip-Boy. It beeped and pinpointed a location on her map, and Murphy’s eyes widened. “Okay. Got it. Anything else? Over.”

“Yeah,” Kasumi said after a beat. “*Dad radioed last night. He heard from MacCready. Over.*”

“And? Over.”

“He’s not coming back, Captain. Over.”

Murphy froze. “10-9, Ohm’s Law, what did you say? Over.”

“He’s decided to stay in Canterbury Commons, for now anyway. Dad plans to leave Rivet City today. Over.”

“Did he say why he was staying? Is everything okay? Over.”

“Everything’s fine, Captain, he just thinks it’s best, apparently. He gave Dad a message for you. Something about having a whole year to make up for? Over.”
Murphy fell silent, staring at the radio in front of her. Eventually, she clenched her jaw and nodded. “10-4, Ohm’s Law. I guess I understand. Thank you for telling me. Over and out.”

Thankfully, Kasumi didn’t argue, and Murphy stumbled out of the shack, suddenly in need of fresh air. Shaun followed her out.

“What’s going on, Mom?” he asked, tugging on her sleeve.

Murphy eased herself down onto a bench in front of the fire pit. “Shaun, remember when I promised you I wouldn’t leave again unless you wanted me to?”

He sat down next to her, watching her face intently. “Yes.”

“I want…” She stopped, searching for the words. “I want you to know that I meant it. Do you like it here?”

“Yes,” he said firmly, nodding with enthusiasm. “I like it here.”

“Do you want to stay here?”

He wrinkled his little brow and tilted his head to the side. “Forever?”

“For however long you want, kiddo.”

Shaun thought a bit, kicking his legs back and forth under the bench. “I don’t know. I just want to be with you.”

Murphy took a deep breath and let it out. He looked so much like Nate. He looked so much like her. Hers. “Okay. Then we’ll stay. I’ll… I’ll stay.”

Shaun nodded and got up to go eat breakfast. Murphy stayed by the firepit for a while longer, before returning to her post at the watchtower. When Danse came to relieve her a few hours later, there were tears on her face and her sleeves. The former Paladin said nothing, but he gathered her up into a hug, the way he had when she had first returned to him in the bunker to offer him a job with the Minutemen.

“Tell me this will get easier,” she mumbled into his jacket.

Danse didn’t reply.
Sacrificing One

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy hits the road again.

Whatever summit Preston had invited Murphy to came and went, and nothing changed except the weather and the height of the razorgrain stalks. There was no notice on the radio, no news from the caravans at Greentop Nursery, no runner in the night from the Railroad or Brotherhood vertibird in the sky. Murphy stared past the outskirts of the settlement as she kept watch or tended fields, wondering if her report from Far Harbor had helped. Wondering what had been discussed, what Preston and Maxson and Desdemona had argued about without her, what progress had been made toward finding the survivors of her attack on the Institute.

MacCready’s birthday went by too, and the sudden memory of it as it was ending stirred something in Murphy, made her put pen to paper. She wasn’t sure what to say at first, but the letters, words, phrases, came eventually, as the sun sank into the west. She told him about the razorgrain. She told him about the men and women she was living with, their wonder and their fear. She told him about Haylen, but not the looks she had seen her giving Danse. She left out Danse.

Mostly, she wrote about Shaun. And, surprisingly, about Nate. How, now that she was living something resembling a domestic life again, her dreams of her late husband were more frequent but less poisonous. Flashes of her past, or things that might have been.

There’s one in particular, she wrote. We’re driving down the interstate, somewhere sunny. I know that’s not something you can picture, but when I dream it, it’s the most vivid thing. He’s got one hand on the steering wheel, the other out the window. I’m wearing sunglasses, and the world is tinted red around me. My hair’s ginger again, and I put my hand out the window too, to feel the breeze. I close my eyes and when I open them I’m on top of that overpass with you, surrounded by dead Gunners. It’s quiet. The world’s still red, but my hair is white.

Murphy paused, then added, Maybe I’ll pay Mama Murphy a visit, see if she can figure this shit out. She shook her head and crossed out “shit.”

I guess I’ve followed YOUR lead, for once. I’m glad you listened to me, all those times I told you that your son needs to come first. I’m glad I finally listened to myself, too.

There were a million things she wanted to add, after that. Maybe I’ll see you again, someday. Maybe I’ll meet Duncan. Maybe we’ll live in the same neighborhood, down the street from each other, and the world will fix itself without my involvement, and we’ll see the return of milkmen and post offices and afternoon coffee. Instead, she just signed her name and folded it up, stowing it away in the coat she had borrowed from Rei.

A couple of caps to Lucas Miller bought the letter passage to Daisy in Goodneighbor. The armor merchant paid his first visit to the little farm at Breakheart Banks, and Danse shelled out most of his savings in order to buy two beat-up sets of extra combat armor. They were Gunner green, and one of the chest pieces still had some dried blood on it.

“Reminds me, got a letter for you, too,” Lucas said in his lazy drawl while Murphy and Danse
examined the straps and buckles of the combat armor. He fished a grubby piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and handed it over. “Some gal. Didn’t know her.”

Murphy waited until the merchant’s caravan had departed before she unfolded the note. She didn’t recognize the handwriting. *You and the boy will find the answers you seek, for a price, on the longest night at the headquarters of the Silver Shroud.*

“Goodneighbor,” she said later to Haylen and Danse. “Shaun and I need to go to Goodneighbor. God, why did it have to be…”

“How soon?” Haylen asked.

“The longest night.” Murphy handed over the note, and Haylen turned it over, looking for anything beyond the sentence written on it. “Longest night means shortest day. The winter solstice.”

Haylen frowned. “Would that be the night before or after the solstice?”

“For a price’ is the part I’m worried about,” Danse said, crossing his arms. “I don’t suppose the Railroad is in need of caps?”

Murphy shook her head. “I wouldn’t know, but I doubt it. I don’t know what their price might be.”

“Then my opinion is that you should stay.” Danse took the note from Haylen and read it over once more before handing it back to Murphy. “Going alone with a child into hostile territory in search of a spy organization with ulterior motives is a fool’s errand.”

“What ulterior motives could they have that I wouldn’t be on board with?” Murphy asked, glancing around to make sure none of the other synths were listening in. “We’re all on the same team now, Danse. Don’t forget it.”

“Be that as it may, that doesn’t mean the Railroad- or the Minutemen, or the Brotherhood, for that matter- wouldn’t be above sacrificing one individual, even one so valuable as yourself, for the greater good.”

Haylen elbowed him. “Lighten up, Danse. They probably just want her to clear some ferals out of a high rise or some mirelurks out of a sewer. You know, like what we used to ask her to do.”

“Is the boy going to accompany you on that excursion as well?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or are you going to entrust him to the Railroad operatives while you do their bidding?”

Murphy sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t have a choice but to trust them, Danse. It’s what Shaun wants. What he needs. I need to know if he’s going to be…”

She couldn’t finish the sentence, and she turned away, closing up before any of the pain could escape.

“You do have a choice,” Danse rumbled behind her. Murphy felt his hand on her shoulder. “You can trust me. I’m coming with you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Haylen crossed her arms. “Have you forgotten why you’re out here in the first place? You’re supposed to be dead.”

“No, I’m not.” Danse’s voice was sharp, sharper than it had been in some time. Murphy turned to find him staring angrily at the ground and Haylen looking mortified.
“I’m sorry,” the former Scribe said. “I didn’t mean-”

“I might be dead to Maxson, to the Brotherhood, but I’m not dead,” Danse interrupted. “And I owe that to Murphy.”

He looked up at her. “I’m coming with you, and that’s final.”

Murphy didn’t argue, but Haylen fretted for the full week and a half before they left. Danse was somewhat cold to her, but Murphy could see what his silence was doing and practically shoved him in Haylen’s direction whenever she could. This was his problem to solve, not hers- she was more focused on convincing Shaun that he would not be able to take either of the dogs or the cat with him when they left, and on getting as much sleep as she could before she would have only Danse to split night shifts with.

Her dreams grew broader, wider, stretched out into slow motion like a Nuka-Cola commercial. Waking up left her empty. It was during one of her midnight stretches of consciousness that she overheard Danse and Haylen talking outside by the fire, and she inched closer to the shack’s window to try and figure out if they had reconciled. Instead, she realized with a jolt that they were talking about her.

“No, that’s not right. I mean… like that fight was inconsequential. Like she knew there were bigger battles ahead of her, and taking out the largest swarm of ferals you and I had ever seen was nothing, absolutely nothing.”

“I remember.” Danse’s voice had an edge of sadness to it.

“She’s been like that ever since I’ve known her. And then we come out here, and it’s like she’s… fading. I heard a bit about what happened on their trip, from her reporter friend, Piper. And Nick Valentine, when I took them back to the Castle. It sounds like it was rough, not to mention everything else that’s happened this fall. Do you think it’s weighing on her?”

“I’m sure it is.” Danse shifted on the bench outside, the fabric of his jeans scuffling against the wooden seat. “Her desire to bring the Institute to justice propelled her forward, before. It still does. I had hoped that coming here would bring her something resembling peace, if only for a little bit, but it appears I was wrong.”

“You and me both.” Haylen sighed. “At least Shaun likes it.”

They fell silent. Murphy had almost decided to try to sleep again when Danse spoke up.

“I suppose I understand it,” he said.

“You do?”
“If you think about it, it makes sense. Ever since she woke up, ever since she set foot in this world, she’s been running, fighting, surviving. It’s all she’s known after the ice. What if you woke up one morning and the entire world was turned on its head? Would you want to keep going? Keep pressing ahead, hoping that all your troubles would somehow work themselves out? Or would you pack it all in, tell yourself it was a good run, and then close your eyes and wait for the inevitable?”

Now it was Haylen’s turn to shift in her seat. “I guess I don’t know.”

“Let’s say you take the first option,” Danse went on. “You set aside the life you had, the things you knew, and you try to move forward. You try to build a new life out of the rubble, make things as good as you can. But sooner or later, what you set aside sneaks up on you, and the weight of it hits you one day, hard enough to knock a behemoth on its side.”

“Danse,” Haylen said gently. “Are we… are we still talking about Murphy?”

“And you realize that you can’t stop, you can’t ever stop to rest because when you do, you have time. Too much time. You’re forced to think about it, about the old life, the changes you’ve had to make to yourself, and you just… you don’t know if you can keep going.”

“Danse…”

“But you have nothing but time, now.” Danse’s voice was dangerously loud, and Shaun shifted in his sleep on the mat next to Murphy. She smoothed down his hair and pressed her head against the shack’s wooden wall. “There’s no… there’s no escape anymore.”

“Is it so terrible here?” Haylen replied, her own voice rising in pitch. “When I told you to run, you didn’t have to stay in the Commonwealth. You could have gone anywhere. Maybe you should have gone somewhere else. Started a life where you wouldn’t have to worry about the Brotherhood, or the Institute, happening upon you and… and…”

“And what, Scribe?”

“I’m not a Scribe!” Murphy had never heard Haylen this upset before. She was practically shouting. “And you’re not a Paladin! We’re free, Danse. You’re free. So why are you still here?”

The other synths in the shack were stirring now, their sleep disturbed by the voices outside. Rory grunted and turned over, pressing deeper into his straw pillow. For their sake as much as Haylen’s and Danse’s, Murphy made a big show of getting up, sliding her mat across the floor, shuffling her feet toward the stairs, stomping down to the ground outside. The voices around the firepit immediately hushed, and she swished through the grass to the outhouse, throwing in a yawn for good measure. She waited a believable period of time before returning to the shack and pretending to lie down.

Haylen and Danse were quiet, and the fire outside crackled merrily. When Haylen spoke again, it was in a voice so low, Murphy barely caught it. “I’m sorry. About everything.”

“I am too,” Danse replied. “But our circumstances…”

“Yes, I know. They’re different. You didn’t have a choice, and I did.” Haylen sniffed. “I understand that. I understand why you’re restless. But do you have to put yourself in harm’s way? Do you have to go to Goodneighbor?”

“She can’t go by herself, Haylen.”

“I could go, instead.”
“I know you could.”

Murphy stared at the ceiling. She could feel him struggling with the words.

“I need this as much as she does,” he said finally. “Haylen, I... I want to be a Paladin.”

There was a long pause. Murphy closed her eyes, tears stinging around her lashes.

“I know.”

Departure day dawned bright, clear and cold. Marina fussed with Shaun, tying and untying a scarf around his neck until she was satisfied it was perfect. Haylen similarly tugged at Danse, straightening his clothes, pulling her old field hat down lower on his head, loosening the buckle of the goggles perched atop its brim.

“Just put them on if you have to go through any settlements or you spot a Brotherhood patrol and you’ve got no cover,” she insisted, trying in vain to tuck his black hair entirely underneath the cap. “And slouch. It’ll buy you some time to get away unnoticed.”

Briar giggled. “I don’t think he’s capable of slouching.”

“We should be alright in Goodneighbor,” Murphy assured her. “The people there aren’t Brotherhood fans, and the few soldiers I know who took leave there were usually too drunk or too high to notice anything except when their glass was empty.”

Danse frowned at her. “High? Chem abuse is strictly against Brotherhood protocol.”

“Uh-huh. And how often did Knight-Captain Cade’s supply of Addictol disappear after a bunch of Lancers came back from a week off-duty?”

Haylen bit her lip and looked up at Danse. “Just... be careful.”

Danse studied her. There was something intense in his eyes. “I will. Take care of this place for me.”

“Kiss her already!” Jules joked.

The two of them jumped and gave the synth a pair of reproachful glares. Jules just laughed and scratched Dogmeat behind the ears.

Murphy shot him a dirty look, took Shaun’s hand and led the boy toward the dirt path that wound out to the pavement of the highway. “We should go.”

Danse looked down at the woman in front of him. Hesitantly, he took each of her shoulders in his hands and pulled her into a hug, pressing a kiss against her red hair. “Be safe.”

Haylen’s head bobbed against his chest. “I’ll be fine. You come back in one piece.”

Danse released her, and Haylen and the synths followed the travelers to the road, calling out farewells and waving. Dogmeat barked and Nine whined, wriggling in Rory’s arms. Danse waved to each of them before turning back toward Murphy and Shaun.
“Ready to continue our mission, soldiers?” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Murphy grinned. “Ready.”

Shaun snapped into a salute. “Ready!”

Danse nodded. “Outstanding.”

Traveling the Commonwealth in December was a lesson in both the death and persistent life of the Boston municipal area. Everything was brown now, the trees and shrubs more shriveled than usual. The air was chilly, and the nights were downright cold. Murphy was glad of Rei’s leather coat now, and resolved to buy some fabric and thread from Daisy to sew patches onto her jeans where holes had worn through the knees.

The radstags were in a late rut, and Murphy and Danse kept Shaun between them as they walked the roads south, lest one of the bucks decide they were a threat. Shaun held their hands in turn, swinging their arms in time with their step and asking questions about anything and everything, but especially his impending doctor’s visit.

“Are they going to crack open my head and look at the inside?” he asked, rather casually.

Murphy winced. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“How does it work?”

“I don’t know. But I’m guessing they might put you in a memory lounger.”

Shaun screwed his face up. “What’s a memory lounger?”

Danse chuckled. “It’s like a big chair, and it connects to your brain and lets you look into your past, or into the memories of others. You can even run simulations on it. The Brotherhood has a few.”

“That PTSD treatment? The Virtual Reality Exposure program?” Murphy asked. He nodded. “Did you ever try one?”

“Once or twice, but not for VRE,” Danse replied. “Many of the Lancers begin their pilot training in virtual reality, and there are combat programs as well. It saves the soldiers from making expensive mistakes, until they’re ready to operate in the field.”

“Cade said something about a company in D.C. when he was telling me about VRE,” Murphy said, nodding. “The Outcasts had the tech, and they handed it over?”

“They did,” Danse said, surprised. “Part of their peace deal. Supposedly it had been buried in a part of the city ruins for some time, along with a sealed locker of state-of-the-art military equipment. Completing one of the company’s virtual reality programs was the key to opening the locker, and cracking it had stumped the Outcasts until just after Elder Maxson brokered a deal with them. Something about needing the correct neural interface.”

“Huh.”

The three skirted around the settlements along their path, avoiding the Slog, County Crossing and
Bunker Hill. Shaun begged to go inside the walls of the latter and visit the Savoldis, but Danse managed to distract him with an offer of a piggy-back ride as they worked their way to the Charlestown Bridge. Murphy made him get down before they went across, in case a raider with a sniper rifle was looking for target practice.

Down the alley behind the house with the sentry bot and Mister Handy out front, around the dilapidated offices of the Boston Bugle, past the doors into Mass Fusion and there it was: The tell-tale glow of the neon signs marking the entrance to Goodneighbor, blinking in the growing shadows. Danse wrinkled up his nose in distaste at the sight, and Shaun jumped up and down with glee. “We made it!”

Murphy shushed him and stepped up to the metal door. She swallowed and knocked three times. The watchman’s panel slid back, and gray eyes in a freckled face peered out.

“Murphy,” Fahrenheit said in surprise. “And here I am without a welcome-home gift. What’s your business?”

“Business,” Murphy replied.

Fahrenheit’s eyes narrowed, and she looked over Murphy’s shoulder at Danse and Shaun. “Isn’t he Brotherhood? And who’s the kid?”

“Does it matter? We have caps to spend.”

The head of the Neighborhood Watch raised her eyebrows. “Suit yourself.”

The panel slid shut, and Murphy heard the sound of locks clicking. The door swung open, and Fahrenheit ushered them in with her assault rifle. “Welcome to our fun and games.”
Twenty caps to Clair Hutchins bought Murphy, Danse and Shaun a room for two nights. The aging property manager scrounged up a few extra pillows for the three travelers and showed them up to their room, grumbling the entire time.

“Last on the right,” she said, ushering them down the third floor hallway.

“Thank you.” Murphy fished a few extra caps out of her pockets and pressed them into Clair’s hand. “We’re not here. You hear of anyone looking for us, let me know.”

Clair grimaced at the measly offering in her hand. “Back in our heyday, it took ten times this to buy my silence. Sure, whatever, kid.”

Shaun, who was tired from the trip, fell asleep on the worn mattress almost immediately, his head in Murphy’s lap. Murphy stroked his hair, watching his little chest rise and fall. She wondered what he was dreaming about.

Danse unpacked the rest of the food they had brought- a meager supper of mirelurk jerky and cornbread muffins- and shared it with her. “If you want to sleep, I’ll keep watch,” he offered.

Murphy shook her head. “I’ll be fine. You rest.”

At some point that night, Murphy fell asleep, and when she woke again it was morning. Danse was awake, peering through a crack in one of the boarded-up windows.

“I don’t like the look of this place one bit,” he said, noticing her stirring in the bed next to him.

“Mmm.” Murphy rubbed her eyes, careful not to disturb the boy sleeping next to her. “Goodneighbor’s not trying to win any awards, Danse. It’s a scary town, and you have to be a little scary to make it here.”

His eyes narrowed, and he peered out through the crack again. “I believe that man is trying to pickpocket passersby.”

Murphy rolled out of bed and joined him. Sure enough, there was a lanky ghoul on the street below, just visible around the hotel’s corner, casually moving through a crowd of drifters and bumping into a few as he went.

“Want me to go stop him?” she asked. “The crowd will probably make him pay for it, if I do.”
“Leaving the hotel before nightfall would be unwise,” Danse replied, glancing back at Shaun on the bed. “But he’s going to be hungry when he wakes up. I don’t suppose this establishment offers room service?”

“Not that I know of.” Murphy yawned and straightened out her Hubris Comics t-shirt. “You can stay here. I’ll go get us some food from Daisy.”

She moved for the door, but Danse stopped her before she could open it. “Your hair.”

“Right.” Murphy grabbed her green scarf and wound it up over her head until her tell-tale white locks were covered. “Don’t open up unless I give you the password.”

“What’s the password?”

“How about ‘outstanding?’”

Danse looked unimpressed, and Murphy giggled as she shut the door behind her. She made her way down to the street and stepped out into the sunlight, breathing in the aromas of smoke, alcohol and urine that perpetually clung to the town of Goodneighbor. It was rank, but it was a familiar smell, and it was a modicum of comfort to her.

Daisy confirmed that she had received the letter Murphy had sent to MacCready, and gave her a discount on mutfruit, some carrots and a few boxes of Dandy Boy Apples.

“Let’s hope that kid’s enjoying his time back home,” the ghoul merchant said cordially as she wrapped up Murphy’s purchases.

Murphy smiled and tucked the meal supplies under her arm. She was rounding the corner of KL-E-0’s weapons shop when she found her way blocked by the mayor of Goodneighbor himself.

“So,” Hancock said with a cocked eyebrow, leaning casually against the worn brick of the Old State House. “Fahrenheit tells me you think you can sneak back into my town without so much as a ‘hello’ for your old pal Hancock? Damn shame, Murphy. I thought we were closer than that.”

Murphy gave him a look of skepticism. “I’m a busy woman, Hancock. If I was here for you, I would’ve looked you up.”

“Heh, now that I believe.” Hancock crossed his arms. “I’m not trying to pry into your business or anything, but next time, give me a warning, yeah? Could’ve put you up at my place. No need for the Rexford. You know the kinda people that go through there.”

“Remind me to kick Clair’s ass,” Murphy said with a scowl. “We’re trying not to attract attention.”

Hancock shrugged. “Gotta pay her more if you want discretion.”

“Apparently.”

“I mean it though,” Hancock said. “You can trust my guys. They won’t squeal on you, if you’re hiding.”

Murphy considered for a moment, but she shook her head. “Maybe next time. Danse would hate it, and I’m not up for playing the diplomat right now. You know how he is.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Hancock smirked. “Bring MacCready next time, he’s more fun.”

He dug around in the pockets of his red coat and produced a skeleton key. “Here. Special delivery
for you. Irma said you’d know what to do with it.”

“Thanks.” Murphy slipped it in with her supplies and headed down the alley. A thought struck her, and she turned around again.

“Are you just trying to get me to take another bath at your place?” she asked.

Hancock laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it, sunshine.”

Murphy grinned and resumed walking.

Murphy ensured that Shaun had a nap that evening, but the synth boy was still yawning profusely by the time she and Danse decided to head for the Memory Den. It was a Friday night, and the street was still busy with drifters, chem dealers and patrons of the Third Rail. Many faces were bathed in the glow of the neon signs scattered across the town, but more than a few were wreathed in shadow beneath hats, hoods, scarves.

Danse peered around suspiciously while Murphy fitted the key Hancock had given her into the door of the Scollay Square building. It opened with a creak, and they quickly slipped inside.

“Behind me,” Murphy murmured. Danse took Shaun’s hand, and she tiptoed ahead into the velvet-draped lounge, her feet muffled by the ragged, red carpet.

The Memory Den’s owner was recumbent in her usual spot, at the center of the old vaudeville theater. As the three emerged, Irma took an antique cigarette holder out of her mouth and held it delicately between two fingers, the smoke curling lazily into the air above her chaise lounge.

She looked Murphy up and down. “Welcome back, sugar. Last I heard, you were retired.”

Murphy put a hand on her hip. “Last I heard, you were a broken hearted woman.”

Irma smiled. “Hardly. People so easily forget that I used to be an actress, in another life.”

She took a drag from the cigarette holder. “The object of my affections and her other guest are downstairs, waiting for you. Best not keep them waiting. I closed up just for the occasion.”

Murphy frowned. “Other guest?”

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart.” Irma waved them over toward stage right. “He’s a friend.”

Murphy and Danse exchanged a worried glance, but they ushered Shaun toward the stairs in the back. Murphy led the way, and the first thing she saw when she emerged inside the red-and-white tiled basement was a familiar figure in a fedora and trenchcoat.

“Nick!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around the detective.

He chuckled and hugged her close. “Good to see you again, doll.”

“Mr. Valentine!” Shaun said happily, letting go of Danse’s hand to rush over to the two of them. “Mom didn’t say you were going to be here!”
Valentine released Murphy and patted Shaun’s ginger hair affectionately. “Well, I didn’t know I was going to be here myself, kid.”

He looked over the boy’s head, and his golden eyes narrowed. “Danse.”

Danse returned the wary stare. “Valentine.”

Murphy gathered Shaun to her side. “What’s going on?”

“Quite a lot, and yet not enough.” Doctor Amari crossed the room to shake Murphy’s hand. “A pleasure to see you again, though I wish it was under happier circumstances.”

“Why?” Danse asked. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing nobody else is dealing with,” Valentine replied, his tone a little harsh.

“I just mean that when the Minutemen executed their attack, I had hoped we had seen the last of the Institute,” Amari said. “Instead, we find ourselves still seeking answers. Answers which I am hoping Murphy and Mr. Valentine can help us find.”

Murphy nodded. “The price. What is it?”

Amari walked over to one of the basement’s memory loungers, which was humming quietly, ready for its next occupant. A small table next to it held a storage drive, and the doctor ran a hand over the shiny metal cylinder. “First, Desdemona sends her regards. She wanted me to let you know that the report you provided was more than helpful. But our focus today is on what Mr. Valentine discovered on your journey.”

“What I was given,” Valentine corrected her.

Murphy’s eyes widened in recognition. “The storage drive DiMA gave you. What did you find?”

“We’re not sure,” Amari replied. “When Mr. Valentine brought the drive to Irma, a majority of its contents were expected. Your friend appears to have downloaded what he could remember of his time inside the Institute, however fragmented the memories were. But there was one memory that could not be accessed.”

Valentine nodded. “And what’s more, it doesn’t match.”

Danse frowned. “ Doesn’t match?”

“It does not appear to be DiMA’s memory,” Amari explained. “But the memory is encoded, so there was no way to know for sure.”

“I don’t know if I can help with that,” Murphy said. “That holotape Faraday gave us to get at DiMA’s other memories is buried in the Nucleus. The terminal wouldn’t give it back.”

Valentine caught her grim look, and he shook his head. “It’s not like that. This memory is locked up in the same way Kellogg’s were locked.”

“Kellogg?” Murphy stiffened. “You mean you just need a second person to hook up to in order to see it? Why do you need me?”

“It’s not that simple.” Amari plugged a cable into the storage drive and ran her hand along its length, checking the connection to the humming memory lounger. “The encryption requires an individual who shares an existing mental connection with a prototype synth to crack it. Because you and Mr.
Valentine have already shared such a connection, you are the most viable test subject.”

“Test subject,” Murphy said weakly. “Right.”

“What sort of risks are involved?” Danse asked, stepping up next to her.

“Relatively few,” Amari assured him. “As I said, Murphy has been through this process before. Her mind should be accustomed to the connection with Mr. Valentine. The bulk of the risk lies in the stability of the memory. I am unsure how it will react to their combined attempts to unlock it.”

Danse frowned. “How do we know this memory is of any value to the Railroad? You don’t know what it is.”

“If DiMA saw fit to hide this on the storage drive, then I’d be willing to bet it’s important,” Valentine said. “But we won’t know until we crack it open.”

Danse turned to Murphy. “Are you comfortable with this?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Like Amari said, I’ve done it before. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“Perfect.” Amari turned on the second memory lounger and plugged another cable into the storage drive. “We were expecting another representative from our mutual friends, but I would rather get started so we can move on to examining your son. I suppose they’ll have to hear the results later.”

Valentine nodded thoughtfully and crossed the room to take a seat in one of the loungers. “Whenever you’re ready, Murphy,” he said, leaning back.

Murphy crouched down next to Shaun. “I guess I’m going first. It’ll be like I’m taking a nap for a bit, and the doctor over there is going to be watching what Nick and I see on that screen. If you have any questions you can ask her. Okay?”

He nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

She straightened up again and looked Danse in the eye. “If things get scary, take him upstairs.”

Danse’s jaw was set. “Affirmative.”

Another deep breath, and Murphy climbed inside the second memory lounger. Amari eased the glass dome with the inset screen down around her, and she clenched the arms of the cushioned seat tightly. It felt like she was returning to the cryogenic chamber that had held her prisoner for hundreds of years. It felt wrong.

Shaun came up on the left side of the lounger and pressed his little hand against the glass. “It’s okay, Mom.”

Murphy put her hand up to the glass, spreading her fingers out to match his. The machine began humming loudly around her, and her line of vision narrowed until all she could see were their hands, pressed together. Slowly, she relaxed, and fell backward into the void of remembrance.

Can you hear me?
It had been a lifetime since Murphy had heard anyone. She stirred, and dim lights around her in the darkness flickered in and out of existence.

*Okay, this should be just like the last time. Mr. Valentine is hosting the memory, and you will be our navigator. So far, everything looks intact.*

The last time. Yes. A chain of electrical pulses ran through Murphy, though she had no substance. She looked around, but there was darkness in every direction. She couldn’t be sure if she was moving at all.

*Let me just connect you to the beginning... over there.*

There. Murphy looked, instinctively, and the lights around her brightened, coalesced into a scene in the distance. She reached toward it, willing it to move in her direction, or perhaps to move herself closer to it.

The scene grew in size, in detail, and in no time she was at the center of it. Figures, frozen inside a room, vast and high-ceilinged. Murphy drifted around, examining the space, taking it all in.

It was an atrium, of sorts, though smaller than the one she had found in the Institute. Potted plants. Benches. The room was square, and there were a number of open doorways leading off in different directions. She peered down one, but there was nothing beyond it except the darkness.

In the center of the room was a square fountain, and Murphy circled around it. The water was still in midair, an eternal, sparkling spray. The fountain itself was made from white stone. Flecks of black, with gray veins.

This is exactly what we need, Murphy. *Keep going.*

Murphy followed the stone down to the fountain’s base, but the veins were not interrupted when they met the floor. They continued out, across the room, up the walls, around the ceiling. It was as if the entire atrium was hewn out of one rock.

Excitement filled Murphy, but she wasn’t sure why. She abandoned the room itself and turned to the figures, searching their faces. Some were blurry, half-remembered. Others were clear, but unfamiliar. She stopped when she found one she recognized: A young man with a weak beard, blue eyes and a wide-set face and ears.

*Begin,* she thought, and the figures around her began to move. Inch by inch, at first, then quickly, shadows engrossed in their past routines and pathways. The man before her looked around surreptitiously, like he knew he was not supposed to remember this room but was trying his best to do so anyway.

“What are you doing, M6-83?”

M6-83 jumped and turned around. Another man in a long, black, leather coat was watching him intently.

“I’m sorry sir,” M6-83 said quickly. “I was waiting for instructions.”

The eyes of the man in the leather coat narrowed. Something about this made Murphy uneasy. “You have been given your instructions. You are to report to the sanitation team in charge of cleaning the quarters for Coursers and Dr. Zimmer. Do you need to report to Robotics for reprogramming?”

“Negative,” M6-83 said, his tone smoothing out. “A momentary lapse in memory. I will report to
sanitation immediately."

He turned, and the man in the leather coat faded away. Murphy followed M6-83 across the room, watching his eyes wander over the other figures. There were only a few of them, but they walked with purpose. Many of them also wore black, leather coats.

M6-83 appeared to be heading for one of the open doors, but his way was blocked by two men in Institute lab coats. One was rather advanced in age, nearly bald with a thoroughly wrinkled face. A pair of thick spectacles was perched on his pointed nose. He was clearly upset.

“So this is how the Directorate treats those who dare to dream,” he was saying, waving his hands furiously about. “I spend how much time outside the Institute, tracking down their mistakes and bringing them back to fix, and this is how they repay me? Exile?”

“It’s not an exile, Hermann,” the other man said. He was younger, of Asian descent, with a shaved head and a dark mustache. Murphy knew his face, and a pair of syllables sprang to her mind, unbidden. Ayo.

“Well it damned well feels like it!” Hermann threw his hands up in exasperation before putting them on his hips and pacing around restlessly. “This is the work of that upstart, I know it. It was a mistake to put him on the Directorate, mark my words. Just because he was the source of everything doesn’t mean he knows what’s best for us all.”

“Hermann, you did this to yourself,” Ayo said firmly. “I know Gabriella’s death hit you hard. It hit all of us hard. But what you did…”

“What I did could have been the future of synths,” Hermann argued. “The future of us. Imagine the possibilities, Justin! Just try to imagine!”

Ayo ran a hand down the right side of his face and sighed. “I’ve done all I can for you. I’ve absorbed the remaining Y-lines into the current Courser run. Just try not to get yourself thrown out, Hermann. What would Gabriella have wanted?”

“Don’t you dare try to tell me what Gabriella would have wanted!” Zimmer shouted, jabbing a finger at Ayo. “You’re in on this too, Justin. Don’t think I didn’t hear who the Directorate decided to replace me with.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Ayo turned and walked away. “Settle in. You can return to the field as soon as you’re ready.”

Hermann grumbled angrily and strode off, his edges disintegrating as he left M6-83’s vicinity. Ayo passed on M6-83’s left, and Murphy watched the synth shudder at the man’s proximity. The room quieted, save the footsteps of the other synths passing by and the sound of the water splashing down in the fountain.

_Did that make any sense to you, Doctor?_

_No, but that’s why I’m recording this. When she wakes up, she can give us the context we need._

M6-83 resumed his path toward the sanitation department. Just before he stepped through the doorway, he paused, looking over toward a door at the end of the smooth, white wall. There was a sign above it, which must have been illuminated at some point in the past, but no longer. It read, “EMERGENCY EXIT.”

M6-83 considered it.
“Faraday,” he mumbled under his breath. “My name is Faraday.”

“You say something?”

M6-83 turned around, and the air around Murphy sizzled with electricity. Balding head. Cruel, narrow eyes. Scars running angrily down across his face.

*Odd. Murphy, can you hear me?*

M6-83 was saying something now. His mouth was moving, but whatever was coming out of it was drowned in the energy Murphy was throwing off. She advanced toward the man with the cruel eyes, willing that energy to erase him. He was drawing her in, and she went gladly, reaching out to touch, to push, to pull apart the man piece by piece.

*This can’t be part of the memory. Is this normal?*

There was no sound now, no sound except the angry buzzing of the tension Murphy held in her mind’s eye. She stretched, past M6-83 to the cruel man, intending to snap his neck. She was a breath away, and it was still an eternity.

Kellogg slid his gaze away from M6-83 and looked directly into Murphy’s eyes.

“Just gonna stare?” he said, and grinned.

*Oh my god.*

Murphy lashed out with every ounce of energy she had, and the scene was sucked away around them. White, black, light and dark, swirling into a drain with no bottom, and she was locked in a struggle with a dead man’s mind. She thrashed, twisted, screamed noiselessly, and the pain of it bit into her in ways that she thought she had numbed to long ago.

*Pull her out.*

*But the memory-*

*It’s too late. Pull her out.*

The darkness was ripped upward and away, but she was in another nightmare. Kellogg was still staring at her, studying her through a thick pane of glass. She pounded on it, willed her voice to life, but she was tired. So tired.

He turned away, to the pod across from her. “Open it.”


*I said pull her out!*

*I’m trying, but her mind- it’s locked onto this. She needs to let go.*

*Murphy, can you hear me? You need to wake up. That’s an order.*

She was awake. This was real. She could hear Shaun crying, and the sound awakened something primal in her, something deep down that ran through her limbs, ignited every nerve in her body.

Kellogg pointed a gun at the other pod. “Let the boy go. I’m only gonna tell you once.”
Nate was shaking his head, his beautiful head, pulling their baby closer in to him, shielding him. “I’m not giving you Shaun!”

True to his word, Kellogg fired, and Nate’s beautiful head was thrust back unnaturally, lolling into the darkness. Another figure took the screaming child, and Murphy screamed with him in anguish. The sound attracted Kellogg’s attention, and he peered back inside her pod.

“Murphy,” he said.

Murphy threw herself against the door and it hissed, opening suddenly. Kellogg stumbled back, his footsteps loud on the floor, echoing around her. She fell to the ground, the tiles cool against her hands. She didn’t remember tiles.

“Murphy, you need to let go,” Kellogg said above her, his face, voice, silhouette distorted.

She snarled and lunged for him, pushing him back into the second figure. He countered her easily, deflecting her hands as they clawed at his wrists, his chest, and she fell again, her knees scraping on the floor.

“Mom!”

Shaun was calling to her, and she lurched back to her feet, her attention now focused on the second figure. He was holding her son, her son, clutching him almost as close as Nate had before the bullet that cut him from the world. Her hands went to her hips, and to her surprise, she found guns there. She pulled one free of its holster and flipped off the safety.

Shaun screamed again, and Murphy whipped her gun up, pointing it at the man holding him. “Let him go.”

“Murphy, it’s me,” the figure said. It was an attempt at an even tone, but she could hear the waver in his voice. “You know me.”

“Let go of my son!” she screamed, her arms shaking.

Kellogg stepped between her and the man holding Shaun, his arms out in a stance of surrender. “Murphy,” he said, in an overwhelmingly familiar voice that didn’t belong to him.

There were tears in her eyes. Murphy blinked rapidly, unwilling to wipe them away. Slowly, the room around her came into focus.

Shaun was crying against the back wall in the arms of Danse, who was looking at her with fear plain on his face. The boy’s gulps and wails rang out against the walls of the Memory Den basement, and the rest of the room was silent except for the hum of the memory loungers. Murphy could hear her own heart beating in her ears, and she followed the length of her arms down to the nose of the gun she was holding.

Staring down the barrel of her plasma pistol was Arthur Maxson.

“Murphy,” he said again, his blue eyes locked on hers.

She felt a needle in her neck, and knew no more.
Murphy opened her eyes. She was staring at a wooden ceiling with red curtains criss-crossing its rafters. Heavy chain links held the fabric in place, and she felt a spiraling sensation, as if she, too, would rip away unless secured.

The feeling of weightlessness fled as Arthur Maxson leaned over her, anchoring her to the earth once again. “Aspirant.”

She blinked and grimaced. “Still?”

Maxson lifted her wrist into the air and felt her pulse. Murphy watched him, feeling the surface she was resting on with the other hand. Irma's chaise lounge.

“Are you…” She could barely bring herself to say it. “Are you real?”

“I am.” Maxson's face remained neutral, stoic. There was something profoundly sad about that, Murphy thought.

She tried to sit up, but her body protested the sudden movement, pain lurching awkwardly across her spine. Maxson reached to steady her, ease her into a more comfortable position. Murphy held her head, hissed, and patted the piece of furniture beneath her.

“Fainting couch,” she said. “Like some… some… pulp fiction heroine.”

“You didn't faint, kid.”

Nick Valentine emerged from over by the backstage passage that led to the basement stairwell, looking particularly grim. It came rushing back to her, then. The memory that had clung to her, even in the waking world. The gun.

“Jesus Christ.” Murphy groaned, leaning back against couch. “I was… I was going to… Shaun…”

She sat up again, ignoring the pain. “Shaun. Danse. Where…?”

“They’re still down below.” Valentine exchanged a look with Maxson. “They’re alright. You should get your bearings, before you try moving. Amari will want to see to you when she can.”

“When she can? I didn’t… god, I didn’t hurt her, did I?”

Maxson shook his head. “Rest. The doctor is merely preoccupied at the moment.”

He nodded curtly to Valentine, and the synth detective disappeared back down the stairs.

Murphy studied the Brotherhood Elder. He looked out of place here, in the soft reds and violets of the Memory Den. The candlelight from a nearby table was glowing on his face, throwing his features into sharp relief. He was trying to put up a brave front, yes, but she could see his concern creeping in
at the edges. He looked tired.

Maxson was studying her too, as if searching for an opening, something to break the silence. She smiled weakly. “You were the representative.”

“The what?”

“Doctor Amari. She said she was waiting for another representative from ‘our mutual friends,’ before she put me under. You were late.”

He nodded apologetically. “I was. Some raiders in the Lexington area were giving our troops some trouble. I overStayed my official visit in order to assist.”

“I take it this isn’t part of your official visiting schedule,” Murphy guessed.

“Not exactly. My officers are aware of my involvement in a Railroad matter, but are not privy to the details. At our last meeting, I insisted on personal access to the Railroad’s investigations, and Desdemona insisted on some level of secrecy.”

Murphy raised her eyebrows. “How’s Lancer-Captain Kells taking that?”

Maxson frowned. “I’m disinclined to say.”

“Iron everything out, with the whole Litany business?”

He stared at her. “How did you…”

“I hear things.” Murphy rubbed her forehead, massaging her temples. “I get around.”

Maxson smiled at that. “So your report indicated.”

“My report. Right. You saw that.”

“We all did.” He shifted in his seat, again taking her hand to feel her pulse. His fingers were cool against her flushed skin, and she tried to breathe evenly. “It was the subject of much discussion at the most recent summit, as you were absent.”

“I was.”

Maxon’s eyes flickered away from her arm, up to hers. “May I ask why? General Garvey was unsure. His demeanor suggested he knew your whereabouts, but he did not seem concerned.”

Murphy considered telling him, but the safety of the residents of Breakheart Banks stopped her. It wasn’t her secret to share.

“Were you worried about me?” she deflected.

“I was not,” he said quickly. “Your will to survive and your ability to do so are impressive. However…”

“You’re worried now.” Murphy sighed. “Yeah. I am too.”

“Has…” Maxson gestured with his head toward the basement stairs. “Has this happened before?”

“No.” Murphy let her head fall against the back of the chaise lounge. “No it hasn’t. Hallucinations, yes. Dreams, yes. But nothing… nothing that ever…”
“Nothing that ever threatened those around you,” he finished for her.

She shook her head and looked down at his knees. He was wearing jeans under his battlecoat, and a black t-shirt she recognized as the one she had loaned him for his visit to Diamond City, the one with “Starlight Theaters” printed on it. His holotags hung over the logo, a pinpoint of blue glowing against the dark fabric.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For stopping me.”

“The doctor’s sedative stopped you.”

“You got in between us. Me and Danse.” Murphy bit her lip and looked up, over his shoulder, anywhere but his face. “I don’t know… I might’ve killed him. Hurt Shaun. God, I… I was so sure I was back there, in the vault again. I thought he was… I thought you were…”

Kellogg’s face flashed in her mind once more, and she tensed. It was an echo of the sheer rage she had felt in Faraday’s memory, but it was enough to make her grit her teeth.

Maxson hadn’t let go of her wrist, and he must have felt the change. He shifted his chair closer to the couch, leaned in and rested his left arm on his knee. Hand out, palm up.

The familiar gesture, the openness of it, was beyond what Murphy had expected. Whatever stiffness, whatever formalities she had imagined in seeing him again faded. She hesitated for an instant, but she laid her own hand over his. Slowly, they intertwined, his thumb tracing a small circle over the knuckle of her ring finger. She leaned in until her forehead was resting against his, closing her eyes.

They stayed like that for a moment, their knees, heads, hands connected. Silent, except for their breathing.

“If I had known you were coming, I would have arrived sooner,” Maxson said, his words low and heavy.

Murphy took a deep breath and let it out. “If I’d known you were coming, I might have questioned showing up.”

She opened her eyes and pulled back, watching him. “Or at least lost Danse’s invitation in the mail. And after the Castle, Shaun… well.”

“I know.” Maxson leaned back as well, releasing her hand as he did. “What I said when last I saw you… it was unfair to you, and to the boy. I let my own beliefs and upbringing cloud my perception of you, of what choices you had made, and you paid a price for it. I forced you down a single path, when there might have been more. For that… for that I am sorry.”

“Arthur.” Murphy’s chest tightened, and she smiled appreciatively. “Did you practice that?”

He cast his eyes downward. “If it sounded rehearsed, I apologize. It was sincere.”

Murphy felt an overwhelming urge to wrap him in a hug, but she resisted it. “Thank you. I accept your apology.”

She pushed herself to the edge of the chaise lounge and steadied her feet on the floor. “You can apologize to Shaun yourself. Come on.”

Maxson caught her, his hands on her shoulders, keeping her from rising. “Murphy…”

She pushed them away and tried to get up, but he did it again. “What?”
“Pala-Danse suggested you remain up here for the time being.” Maxson’s face hardened at the mention of his former officer. “He was concerned that your presence might frighten the boy.”

Murphy stopped pressing forward at that. “Frightened? He… I… fuck.”

Maxson nodded. “He was beside himself, until I carried you upstairs. Danse remained with him to calm him and, as I understand it, convince him that the memory loungers would not harm him. Doctor Amari recommended you take the time to rest while she helped prepare him for her examination.”

He eyed her curiously. “Though the nature of the examination was not made clear to me. The detective said it was ‘none of my damn business.’”

“Shaun…” Murphy’s throat was dry. “What’ve I done?”

The curiosity left his face, and Maxson leaned forward, taking her shoulders in his hands again. Gently, this time. “Murphy. It’s not your fault.”

Murphy sniffed, tried to hold things together. “I’ve heard that before.”

A single tear escaped her eye and rolled down her left cheek. Maxson’s eyes followed it. He slid a hand up, soft beneath her ear, and wiped it away with his thumb.

“Arthur, what are you doing.”

Murphy and Maxson both froze upon hearing the voice from over by the backstage passage. Murphy turned, and saw Danse standing there, a look of confusion on his face.

As he looked between the two of them, Danse’s confusion twisted into realization, then anger. He took a step forward, then another, until he was striding over with his eyes fixed on the young Brotherhood Elder.

Maxson stood up. “What sort of…”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence. Quicker than Murphy thought possible, Danse’s fists were up, and he slugged Maxson in the jaw.

“Danse!” Murphy cried out, struggling to her feet.

Maxson staggered back from the blow. He looked just as surprised as Murphy, and he put a hand up to feel his face, coming away from his lower lip with the sheen of blood on his fingers.

Danse glowered at him, his fists at his sides. “Keep your hands off of my Initiate, Elder.”

“Danse.” Murphy stepped between them. “It’s okay. He and I- we-”

He shook his head. “I don’t care. You’re in no state of mind for… whatever you two have going on, and he should know better.”

“Danse-”

“Sit back down, Murphy.” Danse jerked his head at the couch, never taking his eyes off of Maxson.

“No.”

“Sit,” Danse ordered her. “How long, Arthur?”
“Danse, *stop it.*” Murphy put a hand square on his shoulder, pushing back against the mass of muscle. Though he wasn’t moving, it felt like he was straining forward, leaning into his verbal attack.

“How long?” he demanded, shrugging her off. “It had to have been after Knight-Captain Cade’s diagnosis of her, so *how long, Arthur?*”

Murphy drew herself up to her full height, forcing the former Paladin to look at her instead. “Drop it, Danse.”

Danse sidestepped her. “Was it before or after you arrested her for insubordination? Did you wait until she was falling apart before you swooped in?”

“Enough,” Maxson growled. Murphy glanced back to find him curling his own hands into fists.

“Was that what you were thinking about, that day when you spared my life?” Danse asked, livid. “Not about the officer and friend you were casting out, but about the pre-war beauty with the pert-”

Murphy slapped him, and he sputtered in surprise.

“*Drop it,*” she said coldly. “But if you must know, I started things. *Me.* If you’re looking for someone to blame.”

“You’re not the one with all of your faculties about you,” Danse argued.

“No, I guess I’m not,” Murphy admitted. “But Arthur has been nothing but a gentleman about this whole, fucked-up situation. If you want to debate the Brotherhood’s policies on synth members, then by all means, go ahead- I might even join you. But if it’s about my broken mind and how I can’t handle whatever this is, then I don’t want to hear it. Just let me have control over this one bit of my existence.”

Danse looked as if he disagreed with every word she was saying, wanted to tear apart her argument. She stared him down.

“Shaun’s in one of the loungers,” he said finally. “The doctor is reading his brainwave activity and assessing the situation. I don’t know how he’ll react when he wakes up, but I think you can safely come downstairs now.”

With that, he turned and stalked back off toward the stairs. Murphy took a few deep breaths, nodded to herself, and followed. Maxson stayed put, rubbing his jaw.

“It’s remarkable,” Doctor Amari said, running her finger along a nearby monitor that was drawing green lines and spiking here and there. “The activity I’m seeing here is unique, unlike anything else I’ve seen in a synth so far.”

Murphy crossed her arms, hugging her torso tightly. Valentine, who had been seated at the side of the memory lounger that held Shaun, rose and squeezed her shoulder.

“How so?” Danse asked. He was actively avoiding looking at Murphy.

“I wouldn’t say it’s more advanced, exactly, but the amount of programming that must have gone
into creating this…” Amari trailed off, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “He’s different from other synth. The neural connections have been set up differently, the networks organized by proximity. It’s almost as if his brain is primed for learning processes, similar to the brain of a typical child.”

“That’s good, right?” Valentine asked. “If he can learn, he can age. Mentally, if not physically.” Amari shook her head. “Not exactly.”

She turned around and tapped a finger against her temple. “Mental growth is not entirely based on the accumulation of knowledge. The brain itself changes, develops new neural pathways and functions. It switches from processing by proximity to processing by functionality, which is rooted in physical growth as much as mental growth.”

Danse furrowed his brow. “What are you saying?”

“She’s saying that Shaun’s brain can’t change because it wasn’t built like an adult brain,” Murphy replied. “I think.”

“Correct.” Amari picked up a nearby clipboard and jotted something down. “Which brings us to your inquiry about a possible transfer of consciousness. I don’t want to say it can be done, as there are quite a few unknowns involved, but I will say that it is possible.”

Murphy released a breath she wasn’t aware she had been holding. “It’s possible? What do we- what do I need to do?”

“We,” Danse corrected her. She shot him a look of thanks, but he was still avoiding her gaze.

“It’s difficult to say.” Amari frowned down at her clipboard before looking back up at the three adults standing around the memory lounger. “Obviously, the logistical part of it will be tough. The Railroad may still have a few brain dead synths under their care, but I have no idea how many are within the Commonwealth, let alone how many have caretakers who would be willing to consent to the procedure. Since Curie, I’ve lost contact with a majority of them, presumably because of Glory’s regrets about the situation.”

Valentine nodded. “I can see why they’d be cautious.”

“Beyond that, there’s the question of transferability,” Amari went on. “With Curie, I had my doubts about the procedure, but it turned out to be fairly straightforward. The adjustment period was lengthy, I understand, but moving a robot’s mind to a synth’s was, essentially, an upgrade. With Shaun, I’m not sure how it would work. His consciousness, because it was built with different neural pathways and programming, may lose something in the transfer. Speaking plainly, it would be a system downgrade for his mind.”

She frowned at Murphy. “Do you have anything, know anything at all about Shaun’s system and programming that might shed some light on the way he was built? On his development as a prototype?”

Murphy nodded. “I might.”

She crossed the room to where her pack had been left to lie and fished a holotape out of it. “This is the last thing my… my son gave to me. He delivered it with Shaun, at the end of things.”

The tape slid easily into Murphy’s Pip-Boy and began to play, whirring the same way it had dozens of times before.
"If you are hearing this, then whatever conflicts you and I have endured are over," the old man’s voice crackled over the Pip-Boy’s speakers. "I have no reason to believe you’ll honor the request I’m about to make, but I feel compelled to try anyway. This synth, this... boy. He deserves more. He has been re-programmed to believe he is your son. It is my hope that you will take him with you. I would ask only that you give him a chance. A chance to be a part of whatever future awaits the Commonwealth."

The holotape clicked and shut off. Amari frowned. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Murphy took the holotape out and handed it to Amari. The doctor turned it about, as if searching for a hidden program or message. She popped it into a terminal, but it merely cued up the audio recording again, which she shut off.

“Programmed to believe…” Amari muttered to herself. “Additional layering. Let me see…”

She moved to another monitor and pressed a few buttons. The line that was tracking Shaun’s brain activity spiked suddenly, then stabilized, making different shapes than it had been before.

“What is it?” Murphy asked.

Amari ignored her and tried another button. Again, the monitor’s line spiked, then stabilized. The doctor’s eyes narrowed, and she shook her head.

“Doctor.”

Murphy’s voice snapped Amari out of her concentration. “Yes. Your son’s programming. I’m afraid it could complicate the procedure significantly.”

“How?” Danse pressed.

“It appears that the extra programming of the boy’s brain has been wired to his hippocampus, which deals in short- and long-term memory,” Amari replied. “His long-term memory system is tethered to a single truth: That Murphy is his mother. But this truth is artificial, and it is fragile. If we tried to transfer his consciousness to a new body, I am certain it would disintegrate and do irreparable damage to his ability to retain long-term memories.”

Murphy’s heart stilled. “You mean… because he’s… programmed to think I’m his mother, this won’t work?”

Amari bowed her head. “I am sorry. I cannot do this, not with the technology currently at my disposal. Not without ripping his mind and memories apart in the process.”

Valentine whistled, low and sad. “Well, you tried, kid.”

“What if we could find better equipment for you?” Danse asked, casting about for something to salvage the situation. “The Brotherhood has plenty of memory technology at its disposal. There has to be a way.”

“You might have the Elder of the Brotherhood of Steel upstairs right now, but I’ve never known them to hand over their tech for anything less than the end of the world,” Amari replied. “And asking them to do it for a synth child…”

Murphy shook her head. “It wouldn’t fly. I know it wouldn’t.”

She looked down at her boots, weighing the options in her head. “What if… what if we erased that
“Erased it?” Amari’s eyes widened. “I suppose it could work. It would most likely leave the memory storage processes intact. Are you sure?”

“Murphy.”

Danse was finally looking at her again, but now she was the one who couldn’t meet his eyes. “I’m sure,” she said.

Amari took a deep breath. “To be clear, this would only delete his belief that you are his parent. There may be some collateral damage to memories of you, as well. I could do it now, it wouldn’t take more than a few minutes, but Murphy… you should think about this.”

Murphy moved over to stand beside the memory lounger, looking down at the boy. She could see his eyes moving rapidly beneath his eyelids, and his little mouth was slightly open, his chest rising and falling delicately with each breath.

“What’s he dreaming about?” she asked.

In answer, Amari switched on another monitor. A grainy, black-and-white image danced across it, and Murphy recognized it as the floor of the Castle armory. Between the table legs and ammunition containers wove the tangle of Madison’s puppies, rolling over each other and barking silently as they crawled across Shaun’s legs.

Something drew the boy’s attention and he looked up. To Murphy’s surprise, the distraction was herself. Clipboard and pencil in hand, Minutemen general’s tricorn perched over her white braid, speaking noiselessly with a smile. Relaxed. Happy.

Murphy watched herself on the monitor until the video’s focus shifted back to the puppies. She looked down at Shaun, and put a hand over the glass dome of the memory lounger.

Part of her wanted to tell Amari to pull the machine’s plug, wanted to gather Shaun up in her arms and cradle him, hold him as he awoke and tell him that she was always, always going to be there for him. Take him by the hand, take Danse by the other and walk straight out of Goodneighbor and back to the little settlement in the northern woods. Give up on being anything but his mom, and damn the call in her head to go back to being the Commonwealth’s savior.

Another part of her knew that was impossible.

The room was silent around her. As she looked from face to face, she could already imagine what each of them would say, if she asked their opinion. Amari would give her a rundown on the Railroad’s mind wipe program, the success stories and the integration of synths into society, blissfully unaware of their traumatic pasts. Valentine would offer to take Shaun in either way, introduce him to Diamond City society and give him a home while Murphy was off chasing raiders or mutants, consign him to a life of ignorance or a life of loneliness as everyone else grew up around him. Danse would tell her in that judgmental monotone of his that it was ultimately her decision, but she should consult the boy about what he would want.

And Shaun… Shaun would wrap his little arms around her and tell her that he would stay small forever, if it meant remembering that she was his mom. And she would cry and smile and hug him back, and know that any decision he made was based on the lie her real son had woven into his mind. His last cruel act. His finale.

She turned, instinctively, to ask MacCready what he would do, and was struck all over again by his
absence. It settled into her, then. In this decision, she was truly alone.

Murphy took a deep breath and spread her fingers out, pressing a little harder against the glass. “I’m ready. Do it.”

"Murphy," Danse tried to reach out to her, put a hand of support on her shoulder. She shrugged him off, put a hand out until he stepped back. Valentine met her eyes for an instant and gave her the slightest of nods.

Amari typed a sequence into the bank of computers she was standing next to. The image monitor went black, and Murphy watched between her fingers as the memory of a mother drained away from Shaun’s mind.
Memorable Forays

Chapter Summary

In which Maxson reflects a bit on his own regrets.

Things blurred, then.

Doctor Amari was talking, stringing words together into sentences that Murphy could comprehend, but didn’t want to understand. Cognitive development stimulation. Damage the connections. Best to keep a distance, for a while. Wait and see.

Nick Valentine’s eyes seemed dimmer. Sadder. Like he was dedicating energy to something else at the moment. Danse was standing up tall, taking charge like Murphy had always known him to do, nostrils flaring, eyebrows knitted together. He nodded as Amari went on, glancing over to Murphy at every other statement.

She tapped her fingers against the glass of the memory lounger, counting the breaths of the boy inside. He slept, still. Blissfully unaware of what transpired above him, what had occurred inside his own head.

There were strands of white hair sticking to her face, and when Murphy brushed them back, her fingers came away wet.

She blinked, and Danse was leading her upstairs, their steps echoing against the brick. Through the dilapidated dressing room with the cracked mirrors against the stage backdrop, out into the red velvet lobby. Maxson was there, still, and he rose from the chair next to the chaise lounge when they entered.

Danse shot him a look of mistrust, then put a hand on Murphy’s shoulder, turning her gently until she was looking up at him. Through him, really.

“Stay,” he ordered her.

She blinked again and he was gone. Silence took hold of the room.

To his credit, Elder Arthur Maxson didn’t say anything. Whether that was out of confusion or respect, Murphy wasn’t sure. She cast her eyes around, spotted an empty couch along the far wall and stumbled forward.

He caught her before she could get to it. Murphy let him, but he was as much a part of the storm she was swept up in as the boy lying downstairs. Still, she clung to him for dear life, her face pressed into his coat, grateful for his fingers in her hair and the warmth of his chest.

When her knees gave out, Maxson swept her up effortlessly. He carried her to the couch and held her there, crushed against him. Bearded chin resting on the crown of her head, his breathing slow, easy, while the pain poured out of her in gasps and wails.

Eventually her sobs slowed, hiccups rising to replace them. Murphy wiped her eyes on her sleeve and tried in vain to wipe the tears from Maxson’s battlecoat, but it was as he had said, that night in
the rain outside the Castle. It really did soak up moisture like no other.

Maxson caught her hand, gently, as she tried to scrub the evidence of her grief away. “Leave it. It’ll dry.”

Murphy sniffed and rested her head against his shoulder. He smoothed her hair back from her face and wiped a few stray tears from her cheek, frowning down at her as he did.

“What happened?” he asked.

Before she could answer, there were footsteps in the backstage area. Maxson stiffened, but he didn’t move. Murphy worked her fingers under his lapels and held on, turning her face away, back into his shoulder.

Danse and Valentine emerged from the entrance to the stairwell, both wearing grim expressions. Between them, Shaun skipped lightly, his head swinging back and forth between the two synths with excitement.

“She said it could work!” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe it! Wait until I tell Curie, and Preston, and Rory and the-”

He stopped dead in his tracks, wide-eyed with sudden concern when he caught sight of Maxson cradling Murphy on the couch. Maxson furrowed his brow and stared back.

Danse took Shaun’s hand and urged him forward. “Come on, soldier. You need your rest.”

“Is she…” Shaun gulped. “Is your friend gonna be okay?”

Maxson looked down at Murphy, then back at Shaun. She felt his bewilderment, before understanding settled into him like sand trickling into the bottom of an hourglass. His embrace tightened slightly.

“She’s gonna need some time, kid,” Valentine answered, his glowing eyes flitting between the two figures on the couch and the boy. “Listen to Danse. You’ll need your strength, if we’re going to Diamond City in the morning.”

That shook off Shaun’s curiosity. “Diamond City,” he said, wonder sparkling in his eyes. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Danse steered him toward the front entrance, casting one last look over his shoulder before disappearing down the hallway with Valentine. Murphy heard the door open, the sounds of Goodneighbor filtering in for a brief moment, then a heavy thud and the heels of Irma’s boots against the tiles.

“Hate to lose all this business, just for the sake of a memory or two,” the Memory Den’s proprietor said in a dry tone of voice, when her shoes had clicked to a stop in front of the couch. “No idea why Amari couldn’t just see you at her new lab. Finish up whatever you have to with her, then I need to start opening up for clientele again.”

“Danse… Danse said to stay put,” Murphy replied, her voice hoarse.

Irma put her hand on her hip. “Danse doesn’t run this show, sweetheart.”

“She stays until she’s ready to leave,” Maxson rumbled.
Irma pursed her lips and sized the Brotherhood Elder up. “Fine,” she said with a sigh, her tattered skirt swaying as she turned back toward her dais. “But you’ll be the one explaining to Kent why he got kicked out of his nest this evening.”

“Kent can wait a little longer.” Amari emerged from behind the stage, her posture apologetic. “Whenever you’re ready, Murphy. There are a few questions I need to ask you.”

Murphy kept her answers to Amari’s inquiries short. Yes, she knew the man- the synth- in the memory. No, she hadn’t seen the room before. Yes, she had known Ayo by name and face before, but Zimmer by name only until now. Maxson stood with her during the questioning, a protective arm around her shoulder, listening silently while the doctor drew conclusions and took notes on a clipboard.

When she had finished, Amari looked at the paper under her pen and frowned. “Interesting. I’m sure P.A.M. and Desdemona will be able to fill in a few gaps in their intel with this. But there’s one more thing.”

Her eyes slid up to Murphy’s again, concerned. “Kellogg.”

Murphy took in a sharp breath, but said nothing. Amari studied her for a beat before continuing.

“What you experienced in there… I believe it was merely an echo of the man’s consciousness, perhaps preserved somewhat in Nick’s own memory systems,” she explained. “Mnemonic impressions left behind from the brain augmenter. It’s not unheard-of, but the way your own mind reacted… well, it wasn’t healthy.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I doubt this is the first time you’re hearing this. You need medication or treatment, and the only ones in the Commonwealth equipped to give you either of those are the Brotherhood of Steel. Elder, has this woman seen your medical officer about an examination?”

“She has,” Maxson replied. “Currently, however.”

“Yes.” Amari cut him off with a wave of her hand. “Even I’m aware of the tempestuous relationship she has with your order. But based on what I saw, and this…”

She picked up an empty syringe from a nearby surgical tray and waved it in the air. “Addressing this problem cannot wait. Murphy, what happened tonight will happen again, if you don’t confront it. So I suggest you make peace with the Brotherhood, for your own sake.”

Murphy nodded, eyes down.

Danse was waiting for them in the Memory Den’s main room when they came back upstairs. Back straight, looking anywhere but at Maxson. As soon as Murphy lifted her head enough to meet his gaze, he strode forward and enveloped her in a hug.
“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I promise I’ll do my best to see… see that he…”

He couldn’t finish the sentence, but the sincerity of the vow hung in the air. Murphy believed him, even if the necessity of the belief broke her into pieces and scattered her to the wind. Danse’s resolve was iron, his word steel. He would see it through, if she couldn’t.


Danse released her from his embrace, but kept his hands on her shoulders. He glanced at Maxson, who was hanging back, also avoiding his former Paladin’s eye.

“You take time,” he replied. “You find forgiveness, in yourself and others.”

Recognition dawned on Maxson’s face, and he turned to look Danse in the eye.

“And you go on,” he added softly.

Something passed between them, in that instant, and Murphy felt some of the tension drain away between the two Brotherhood men.

Danse looked down at her again. “In the immediate sense, we should leave, before Irma ushers us out at gunpoint. The synth detective booked another room at the Rexford for you and…”

He trailed off. Maxson grimaced, struggling with some internal decision. Finally, he nodded and straightened his battlecoat.

“I can spare a night,” he said. “I’ll rendezvous with air support in the morning. Lead the way.”

Danse nodded. Not with approval, exactly, but with acceptance.

The room Valentine had secured turned out to be on the third floor of the hotel as well, the first door on the left. Murphy could hear Shaun’s voice bubbling excitedly from behind the closed doors of their original room, with the detective’s warm, gruff tone cutting in here and there. She stopped outside her door and stared longingly down the hallway.

Danse put a hand on her shoulder. “He’s alright. Full of questions for the syn… Valentine. I can’t imagine why, but Shaun loves him already.”

He produced a key and unlocked the second room, swinging the door open wide. Murphy shuffled in, Maxson on her heels with her pack. The two of them took in the twin desks, king-sized bed with the faded mattress, couch with end tables, dim lantern. On a different day, Murphy might have called it cozy. Now it just looked bleak.

“If you need anything, come knock,” Danse instructed her. “I’ll be by at 0800 to discuss our travel arrangements. The doctor had some suggestions.”

Murphy nodded, and he gave her a look of regret before placing the room key on the nearest desk and shutting the door behind him. Maxson waited until his steps faded down the hall before he crossed over to set down her things, pick the key up and turn it in the rusty lock.

Murphy sat down on the bed. “You still don’t trust him.”
“I don’t trust anyone in this establishment,” he replied, slipping the key inside his coat.

Murphy crossed her arms and hugged her torso. “Even me.”

Maxson turned to her, remorse plain on his face. He said nothing, just stood there. Out of place again, in surroundings and in circumstance. Her fault.

“Why are you here?” she asked, wiping away another tear that threatened to fall.

“Aspirant, you are under an inordinate amount of-”

“Not- not here, here,” Murphy interrupted. “I mean, what are you doing running around on field missions? You never… you didn’t used to do that, when Danse… when we were…”

She gulped and collected herself as well as she could. “You were always up in your observation deck, or your quarters, running things from a distance. What changed?”

Before he even said anything, Murphy was sure she knew the answer. The “snow-haired gal.” The woman in the vault suit, trampling over boundary lines and mirelurk queens. Undercover agent one minute and war general the next. Endangering everything in her path, and everyone at her side.

Maxson sighed heavily and sat down on the couch across from her, hands clasped. “I suppose I changed. Am changing.”

She looked at him in surprise. He caught sight of her expression and his own face lightened a tad. “Did you seek to blame my newfound agency on your own influence?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.” Murphy loosened her grip around her own rib cage slightly. “I was at Covenant, you know. That’s how I heard, about Kells and the Litany. Some of your Knights were gossiping, and they thought I might have had something to do with it.”

“Covenant.” Maxson frowned. “I’ll have to have a word with Paladin Brandis about the importance of attentiveness on investigative missions.”

“He was attentive,” Murphy said with a weak smile. “That’s why he didn’t notice me. I spent most of that trip hiding in the bushes.”

Maxson began shrugging his battlecoat off, freeing his muscled arms from the heavy, leather garment. “I suppose there is some truth to their assumptions. You persuaded me to negotiate with the Railroad, rather than force cooperation, certainly. And your usual *modus operandi* when interacting with the people of the Commonwealth serves as a compelling blueprint, for those who would follow in your footsteps.”

“But?”

“But.” He extracted a combat knife, two .44 pistols and his flask from inside the coat before folding it with reverence. “My desire to stray further afield has always existed, much to the chagrin of many of my mentors. Only lately have I had the chance to indulge it, and in doing so, have discovered its value.”

“The deathclaw.” Murphy’s smile widened a fraction. “Old Olney.”

Maxson put a hand up to trace the deep scar on his right cheek. “Yes. One of my more memorable forays.”
“I really did have you pegged, that night on the Prydwen,” Murphy said, somewhat wistfully.

They sat in silence for a bit, their breaths loud in the small space. There was a bit of blue light shining in between the boards of the window, falling delicately on the room and the two figures within. It got caught up in Maxson’s hair, mingling with the lantern’s glow to make a warm, smoky violet color.

When he looked at her again, there was hesitancy in his eyes. “Would you rather be alone tonight?” he asked.

Murphy blinked, and an image of Nate sprang up in the darkness, unbidden. “No.”

He glanced at the bed. “Then you should rest.”

“I don’t know if I know how, anymore.”

Maxson set his coat and weapons aside and patted the couch cushion next to him. “Come.”

It wasn’t an order, really, but Murphy took it as one. Slowly, she stood, disentangled herself from her own coat, undid the pistol holsters around her waist and left them on the mattress. She sank onto the couch, tucked herself under Maxson’s arm and put her legs up, over his lap.

He shifted, slightly, easing her closer, running a hand over her outside knee. Murphy let her head fall back against the crook of his elbow and sighed deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“For attacking you, after…” Murphy trailed off. “I thanked you for stopping me, but I didn’t apologize. So, I’m sorry.”

“You were delirious,” Maxson murmured. “What you were reliving… your reaction was extreme, but understandable.”

Murphy closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You saw. On the monitor.”

“I did.”

She let the breath out again, keeping her eyes shut. “Third time I’ve lived it. It hurts… it’s worse, every time. Sometimes I dream it, and it gets hazier, or little things change, but I can’t forget the…”

She felt his fingers on her chin, and she opened her eyes to find him staring down at her with those piercing blues.

“Don’t,” he said, so low it was almost a whisper. “Don’t breathe life into it, if it pains you so.”

“It breathed life into me,” Murphy replied, inclining her head slightly, pressing back against his hand. “Everything that I am today is because of that moment. I should’ve died a long time ago. I should’ve suffocated in cryostasis, been shot or stabbed, fucking starved in the wastes, but the look on Nate’s face when that bastard shot him, when they took our son, wouldn’t let me. And Shaun…”

She took another deep breath. “Shaun made me become what I wanted to be, over 200 years ago. A… a mom. God, I wanted that so badly, once. I still… I still did. But you… goddammit, you were right. He wasn’t… he wasn’t mine. Not really.”

There were tears running down her cheeks again, and Murphy shrugged Maxson’s hand off and turned her face away, toward the blue light streaming in over the bed. “I wasn’t at the summit
because I was… with him. I was ready to give it all up, start over, be the protector he needed. And he wanted to grow up, so I contacted the Railroad, and we… Doctor Amari… it wasn’t going to happen unless I gave that fantasy up. Gave him up. So I… I did.”

Maxson said nothing, but she felt his hand go to her knee again, thumb rubbing a circle around the bump of the joint. Murphy took a few more breaths, faster, shallower.

“Arthur, that part of me that wants vengeance for Nate, for the Commonwealth, she’s still in there,” she said. “It’s like I’m at war with myself, the woman from the 21st century, and the killer from the 23rd. And what if… what if the wrong one made the decision?”

She turned back to him and found his eyes full of sorrow.

“So now,” Murphy went on, wiping tears away as they fell. “I get to wonder whether I drained away his memories of me as his mom because it would help him grow up, or because I wasn’t actually up for the task of being his mom.”

Maxson studied her for a bit, before he reached up to smooth her hair back over her ear. “You already know the answer to that, Aspirant.”

She sniffed. “Enlighten me.”

“Your life isn’t a dichotomy,” Maxson said carefully. “There may be two distinct parts to it, but they are still one and the same. All that you are isn’t due to your husband’s death. If it were, I believe you would have died long ago.”

He sighed. “As for your decision regarding the boy, I don’t doubt there is some truth to your fear of selfishness. But you are still the woman who berated me ferociously in the general’s quarters of the Castle when I suggested you were anything other than his mother. If there was another way to give him what he wanted, you would have sought it out.”

“I wish…” Murphy bowed her head. “I wish I could’ve given him more. I spent so long running around, trying to find the remnants of the Institute, and I could’ve been…”

What could have been didn’t need to be said, she realized. What was, what had been, was already gone. What use were the what-ifs?

“What will he go?” Maxson asked.

“Diamond City,” she answered. “Doctor Amari thought he should be in school, like a mental stimulation prep for the consciousness transfer. If she can get the Railroad on board, anyway, like they were with Curie. Nick offered to foster him, and Danse… Danse said he would take over, for me, as much as he can.”

Maxson frowned. “And you?”

“I’m supposed to fade into the background, for a bit.” Murphy swallowed. “Give his mind time to adjust to the change, try not to strain his memory centers.”

She tugged on her t-shirt, straightening the Hubris Comics logo out. “I don’t know what I’ll do. I thought about hanging around Diamond City anyway, keep an eye on things, but I might… I might need some space.”

Maxson nodded. “Understandable.”
“Guess I can devote more of my time to saving the Commonwealth, again,” Murphy said flatly.

In reply, Maxson reached over to the nearby table and handed her his flask. She took it and drank deeply, coughing at the tart taste of the whiskey.

A thought struck her, and she looked up at him curiously. “That thing Danse said, in the Memory Den. You recognized it?”

“I did.”

“What was it?”

Maxson ran a hand through his undercut, rumpling his hair. It was longer than the last time Murphy had seen it, wilder. “Something I said to him, once.”

Murphy took another drink and waved the flask around. “Elaborate.”

He frowned, like he didn’t want to humor her, but couldn’t refuse because of her current state. “Five or so years ago, a soldier stationed aboard the Prydwen went missing while on a ground mission. He was a friend of the Paladin’s, and… Danse… came to me, asking for permission to form a voluntary recon squad to track him down.”

Murphy’s eyes widened. “Cutler.”

“Cutler.” Maxson looked at her in surprise. “He told you this?”

She nodded. “Long time ago.”

“Hmm.” Maxson scratched his chin. “Then you know I granted his request, and he tracked them to a hive some super mutants had reformed inside a ruined vault, at the back of a cave system populated by children.”

“Little Lamplight.”

“Indeed.”

Murphy shook her head. “He told me about the FEV. How he had to…”

“Grant his friend peace.” Maxson nodded. “Or what was left of him. The act, while necessary, left Paladin Danse despondent for some time. After we had evacuated the children from the caves and buried the vault with explosives, he said he wished he had never joined the Brotherhood with Cutler.”

“And you told him the good he and Cutler had done with their service in the Brotherhood of Steel weighed more than Cutler’s death,” Murphy finished.

“I never knew Danse to be so forthcoming, under me,” Maxson said, furrowing his brow.

Murphy smiled faintly. “He wasn’t. But I pried it out of him, eventually.”

She raised an eyebrow at Maxson. “He also said you told him that when you came looking for advice from him.”

“Did he.”

“Spill.”
There was an internal debate raging in Maxson’s features. Finally, he took a deep breath and nodded.

“I was 16,” he said quietly. “Shephard and his mutant army lay dead at my feet, and the Brotherhood was rallying around me as its next leader. They named me provisional Elder, after the uprising, and the Western leadership, the Council of Elders, had reached out to our Scribes for the first time since my arrival at the Citadel. The future was bright, they told me. It was time to heal old wounds, mend the cracks in our foundation. They saw a chance to reconnect with the soldiers Elder Owyn Lyons had cast out, when he turned from the Brotherhood way to help the people of the Capital Wasteland. The ones he labeled Outcasts.”

Murphy nodded. “And you did. You absorbed them.”

“I didn’t want to, initially.” Maxson looked away, over her head. “I struggled with the decision, even as they pressed me. Beyond the fact that the Outcasts spent the super mutant uprising hiding in their Fort Independence, I was conflicted. Elder Lyons, Sarah, Paladin Titus, they had seen something more for the Brotherhood, a higher calling they felt we had forgotten in our search for technology and self-preservation. I wanted to see what they had seen, then. I felt I hadn’t been granted the chance.”

Titus. Murphy’s heart jumped into her throat, and she nearly stopped him there, but something in the tone of his voice gave her pause. There was anguish in his words, perhaps even as deep as hers.

“When I made this clear to the Scribes, the Proctors, they dismissed it as the idealism of youth,” Maxson went on. “I sought out Paladin Danse because he had seen the end of the Lyons succession, seen the departure of the Lone Wanderer, the fall of the East Coast Brotherhood chapter. I wanted his opinion, on how best to move forward.”

He glanced at the door. “And I sought him out because he was my friend.”

“What did he tell you?” Murphy asked quietly.

Maxson didn’t answer, for a minute. When he did, his voice was stronger, more confident. “He told me that if I ignored the Council of Elders, the Brotherhood wouldn’t survive. We had been handed an air base with untold amounts of Enclave technology, a purified water basin, a chance to start over anew- but none of that mattered, if we weren’t able to maintain it, grow it, defend it. There were too few of us, then. We needed the Outcasts, and they were ready and more than willing to negotiate.”

He looked down at her again. “So, I did as I was advised. I welcomed them back into the Brotherhood, with several conditions. To strengthen our numbers, I opened the doors to the people of the wasteland. And we grew strong again.”

Murphy offered him the flask, and he took it and drank. “It bothers you,” she guessed. “Not knowing what might have happened, if you’d taken a different route.”

“Only when I’m alone.” Maxson swished the contents of the flask around and peered inside. “But Paladin Danse was right. We would not be the force we are today if I had not come to terms with the Outcasts.”

He shot another look at the door. “I was not expecting… him to remember that conversation.”

Murphy frowned up at him. “He wasn’t replaced, Arthur. He’s been a synth since the beginning.”

Maxson grimaced and took another swig of whiskey. “Perhaps.”

Murphy took the flask away from him and tapped its side thoughtfully. “I didn’t know you’d known
each other that long. I guess he told me once about his old Paladin… Krieg, was it? Died at Adams? But it didn’t really occur to me that he was around for… all that.”

“He was.” There was a faraway look in Maxson’s eyes. “And I was glad of it.”

They drank until the whiskey was gone and Murphy’s eyelids grew heavy. Maxson laid her out on the bed and curled around her, a reassuring presence at her back and an arm across her waist. Before she nodded off, Murphy considered telling him about her own encounter with Titus, not so long ago, but she decided against it. There was someone else, now, who might be able to give her an idea of how the Elder might react to the resurrection of the Lone Wanderer.
Chapter Summary

In which Danse gossips.

When Danse came for her in the morning, Murphy was waiting. She had woven in and out of sleep through the night, jolting awake with the feeling that she was falling. Each time she opened her eyes was another realization, another knife in her heart.

Maxson had shifted behind her, adjusted to her tossing and turning, pulling her closer into the vast heat that was his chest. She let him. The ends of her limbs and fingers were like ice, and he was a welcoming furnace. Only once did she wake to find him gone, sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. She rolled over and reached out, her fingers finding the crook of his elbow, questioning. He grasped them familiarly and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She drifted off again not long after that.

Murphy rose at dawn and pulled on her traveling clothes, buckled her plasma pistol holsters, shouldered her pack. She sat on the desk nearest the door and stared at the wall, tossing the room key up in short arcs, watching the clock on her Pip-Boy tick forward in time with Maxson’s relaxed breaths.

When the digits read 7:59, Murphy opened the door and closed it silently behind her. True to his military form, Danse emerged from the room down the hall less than a minute later, Haylen’s old field hat and goggles already perched atop his head.

Murphy led the way out to the landing by the stairs. Danse peered down the stairwell before turning to her, arms crossed. There were bags under his eyes.

“Didn’t sleep well either?” Murphy guessed. “You should’ve. Nick doesn’t need to sleep.”

“I am aware,” Danse grumbled. “There may be no choice for me but to trust him, given the current situation, but I refuse to do so until it’s absolutely necessary.”

Murphy sighed and leaned against the wall. “Okay. I don’t have the energy to argue with you today. What’s the plan for getting to Diamond City?”

“The detective knows a route,” Danse replied, reaching up to adjust his hat. “He suggested we go ahead of him and Shaun, scout out any threats and neutralize them. If we leave before noon, we should be there just before the sun begins to set.”

Murphy nodded. “I know the way he usually takes. We should be there sooner than that, if he took Swan’s eviction into account.”

She pushed away from the faded marble and took a step back toward the rooms, but Danse blocked her. “Murphy. You don’t have to do this. What occurred… it would be perfectly understandable if you—”

“Cut and run?” Murphy asked, bluntly, looking down at her feet. “No. What I decided is going to haunt me, and it looks like I’ll have plenty of alone time to contemplate… all of that… in the
future.”

She took a deep breath and met his eye again. “He might not know it, but I’m still… I owe him this. If he wants to grow up, then I’ll make sure he does, even if it’s from a distance. Don’t… don’t fight me on this.”

He studied her, then smiled sadly. “I thought you didn’t have the energy to argue with me.”

“For him?” Murphy glanced down the hall behind Danse. “I’ll find it.”

Danse pursed his lips and nodded. “Understood. Now, about Maxson.”

“He’s not coming with us,” Murphy said, furrowing her brow. “Don’t worry about it.”

“That’s not what I want to talk to you about.”

There was a lecture coming her way, Murphy could feel it. She put a hand up before Danse could get any more words out. “It can wait until we get on the road again, unless you wanted to talk to him about what a colossal mistake we are, too.”

Danse frowned. “Not particularly. I doubt the Elder would appreciate any advice I have to give, in that regard.”

“You did punch him in the face,” Murphy said with a half-hearted smirk. “I’ll send him on his way, and then we can get going.”

Maxson was up when Murphy re-entered the hotel room, pulling on his own boots and stowing away his guns. He rose from the bed and faced her.

“Thank you,” he said.

Murphy was taken aback. “Come again?”

He shook out his battlecoat and put it on. “While circumstances were not kind to us, I wanted you to know that our time spent together… I value it. Immensely.”

“Oh.” Murphy leaned up against the desk, unsure where to look, how to feel. Maxson noticed her response, and he straightened his lapels before approaching her cautiously.

“I imagine you will have much to think about, in the coming days,” he said, his voice soft. “I would hope that I’ve not added to the weight you carry.”

Murphy looked up at him and smiled. “I carry you, too. But you’re not as much of a weight as other things. I… I think about you a lot.”

Her face fell, and she looked away again. “That’s the bulk of it, though. Thoughts, feelings, and…”

“Short, unexpected nights spent in dusty hotel rooms,” Maxson finished for her, in a tone that suggested he wanted more, too. Wanted it, but knew not to expect it.

“This is it,” Murphy said with a sad shrug, gesturing around the room. “Loving me… if you still do,
anyway… this is all I can offer you. Short nights, long absences and a never-ending stream of problems.”

Maxson chuckled at that. “I’m more than familiar with two of those. You’re much more than that, Murphy.”

He took a deep breath. “As for the long absences, I can offer you an alternative. Return to the Prydwen with me.”

Murphy stared at him. “What?”

The expression on her face gave Maxson pause, but he kept going. “You value your autonomy, and I respect that. But the doctor believes- I believe- that your best chance at handling what difficulties you face is with the Brotherhood.”

Murphy blinked and looked away. “Yeah. That’s… I appreciate it. But I’d be…”

“In custody.” Maxson nodded. “I understand your hesitation. I must confess, even I’m unsure how it would play out.”

“You have enough going on.” Murphy smoothed a stray lock of hair back over her ear. “I don’t want to add to your worries, either. Kells would want a trial or something, and I doubt even you could delay it until we find the Institute, anymore. Not with him trying to start a Litany, or whatever.”

She pulled her Brotherhood holotags out from beneath her t-shirt and slipped them over her head. They were heavy in her hand, their blue glow spreading over her palm. “Which is why I think I should give these to you.”

Maxson stiffened. “Aspirant.”

“No.” Murphy shook her head. “Just Murphy. If I quit, then maybe you can put some of the rumors about us among your troops to rest. Maybe you can win Kells back, convince him you have the Brotherhood’s best interests at heart. Hell, maybe I can visit the Castle without worrying about being reported and arrested by some hotshot Knights.”

The corner of his mouth, purple and swollen where Danse’s fist had caught him, curled up at that. “As if you would allow them to.”

“Well, they could try.”

Maxson’s mirth disappeared quickly. “I cannot accept your resignation, Aspirant.”

Murphy clutched the tags in her hand and thrust them out in front of her. “You don’t have a choice. It’s my decision. Arthur, I haven’t exactly been the best soldier, ever since the beginning, and now I’m just a criminal on the run that your troops think is influencing your decisions. It’s time.”

She took a deep breath, her hand faltering in the air a bit. “I… I made up my mind a long time ago that I wouldn’t be taking your oath. Even before you offered to take me back to D.C., with you. Even… even after us.”

He opened his mouth, closed it again. Smoothed his undercut out and looked around the room, searching for the words until his eyes landed on her again. “If you do this, there will be no course of treatment for your post-traumatic symptoms available to you through the Brotherhood. You would be as any other civilian, in our eyes.”
“I know.” Murphy shrugged. “I’ll figure something out. You can’t be the only people out there with PTSD treatment programs, and right now, the Commonwealth needs you in charge of the Brotherhood. You’re making progress, with the Railroad and the Minutemen and everything else. I’m… I’m proud of how far you’ve come.”

She sighed. “What did Paladin Titus say, when she left the Brotherhood? Something about how the people didn’t need a broken war hero, they needed a leader?”

Maxson gave her a long, hard look. Outside, there were voices in the street, the residents of Goodneighbor calling to each other in the early December sunlight. That same sun was streaming in over the bed they had shared in the night, dust motes dancing in its rays, silent as the man in front of her. She could see the arguments forming and breaking on his face, dancing like the dust, but they fell away until there was one left. One she knew well.

“What if I asked you to stay?” he murmured.

Murphy looked up at him and repeated what he had said to her, what felt like a lifetime ago when she’d asked him the same thing. “That would be unwise, Elder.”

She reached out and took his hand. Silently, she placed her holotags in it and closed his fingers shut over them. “Maybe in my next life.”

He sighed, defeated, and wrapped the chain around his fingers, looking down at the thin pieces of metal. “It might alleviate some tension among the officers, to know you’ve made your departure. Lancer-Captain Kells and Proctor Quinlan may be pleased, but Proctor Ingram and Paladin Brandis will be disappointed.”

“I know there’s another Paladin who will be more upset than all of them put together,” Murphy said, jerking her head toward the door. “Though he won’t be surprised.”

Maxson held the holotags up, their blue glow reflected in his equally-blue eyes. “I suppose I can match him, in those feelings.”

Murphy hooked her thumbs under the belt of her holster. “I know it’s not what you wanted. But, thank you.”

He lowered the holotags and slipped them inside his battlecoat. “What for?”

“For everything. For being the leader I can’t be.”

Maxson straightened his coat out and took in her apologetic stance. “Straighten up, soldier.”

She did, instinctively, and was surprised when he stepped forward and wrapped her in a hug, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“You are every bit the leader I am, and in ways I continue to learn,” he murmured into her hair.

Murphy squeezed her eyes shut. “I don’t know if I’ll see you again. Maybe that’s best.”

“Best for whom?”

She squirmed a bit in his arms and looked up at him again. “I told you from the start, Arthur. This was doomed.”

Maxson smoothed her hair out, running a hand down over her back like it was the last time he would
He kissed her, and for a split second Murphy forgot her sorrows. The sadness deepened when it came rushing back, but she held onto that moment of sweetness, all the way down the stairs of the Hotel Rexford and out into the light of the new day. She clung to it, even as the resigned back of the man who had gifted it to her disappeared around the Old State House. The sound of his boots on the cobblestones and the thump of her heart were like muted thunder, rolling away into the distance.

Danse met her in the street a couple hours before noon, after she had bummed a cigarette from a drifter and collected her thoughts a bit. The little rush of nicotine was a blessing. She’d dropped the habit while she was up at Breakheart Banks with Haylen’s help and a small dose of Addictol, partially to be a better role model for Shaun but mostly for lack of supply.

Danse eyed the butt she crushed beneath her heel and gave her a reproachful look. “We should get moving. Valentine and Shaun will be leaving within the hour.”

She nodded and followed him to the gate, giving each of the neighborhood watch a salute as they went. The gate watchman grunted a greeting and unlocked the door for them, holding onto his hat as a gust of wind swept in from outside the walls.

“Watch yourselves out there,” the scarred ghoul warned. Murphy nodded and stepped out, Danse close behind.

She led the way through the city that slumbered late, the odd bird cawing and singing among the skeletons of skyscrapers. In Murphy’s experience, raiders didn’t frequent this area, preferring to stick closer to the river in hopes of rattling a caravan. Still, the two kept an eye out for any stray super mutants or ferals. Down Washington, up School until it turned into Beacon, and they had just passed Somerset Street when Danse decided he was going to rekindle the discussion he had tried to have with her in the Rexford.

“About Maxson,” he said, pointing the nose of his laser rifle around the corner of a burnt-out deli.

Murphy stopped walking and gave him a look of exasperation. “I know you still think of me as your Initiate, after the stunt you pulled in the Memory Den, but really? I’m a grown woman, Danse. I can make my own decisions.”

“I am aware,” Danse said sternly. “However, as I said last night, I also think you have more important tasks to manage without also trying to balance a… a… secret romance with Arthur.”

Murphy chuckled at that. “Secret romance, sure. Balanced, no.”

“And his own responsibilities don’t allow him the freedom to pursue things with you,” Danse went on. “Even if you were of sound mind, now is not the time for either of you to be swept up in the… the senselessness of love.”

“God, Danse, you’re terrible at this,” Murphy said, shaking her head. “Senselessness of love? Really? Everyone I’ve met in this post-apocalyptic wasteland tells me that life is too short to worry about the proper order your major life events should be happening in. The only people who gripe about it are the Brotherhood, because you have the luxury of being able to expect to see another sunrise. Everyone else says live and let live.”
She holstered Omega and tilted Alpha, holding the gun up to the light to check the chamber. “But I
don’t think you have to worry about him getting ‘swept up in the senselessness’ of me and whatever
the fuck is going on in my head for the time being. I ended it. I quit the Brotherhood. Officially.
Gave Arthur my holotags.”

As she expected, this cowed Danse immediately. “You… oh,” he said.

They kept walking in silence, until Boston Common and the Massachusetts State House were behind
them.

“How did he take it?” Danse asked eventually.

Murphy shrugged. “About as well as you did, just now. I think he knew deep down that it was an
inevitability, like you said back at Breakheart. Even with our ‘secret romance’ thrown into the mix.”

He nodded, staring at the pavement and rusted cars ahead. There was a feral half-underneath one of
them, and Murphy tiptoed forward until she was close enough to dispatch it with a blast of plasma. It
shuddered and died, its head dissolving into a pile of green goo.

“That explains last night,” Danse remarked, giving the rest of the cars a wide berth.

Murphy frowned and looked up at him. “I didn’t quit until this morning. What happened last night?”

“That detective went out for a cigarette,” Danse explained. “When he returned, he said ‘the kid
Elder’s out there pacing like a caged lion.’ I went out to make sure it wasn’t some issue with you,
and found him on the landing.”

He tipped Haylen’s hat up to scratch his head. “He wasn’t pleased to see me, but he must have seen I
was concerned. He asked me if you and I were still as close as we had been, before he exiled me.”

“What did you tell him?” Murphy asked.

“I told him the nature of your travels kept you busy, but we had reconnected recently, over Shaun’s
upbringing,” Danse replied. “That I still valued you as a friend, and that I hoped you saw me in the
same light.”

“And?”

Danse fiddled with the safety on his laser rifle. “He thanked me. He thanked me for supporting you.
And he asked me to keep doing so.”

Murphy’s eyes narrowed. “How so?”

Danse sighed. “He was… the most distraught I’ve ever known him to be. Every problem he’s faced
since becoming Elder, before becoming Elder, and I’ve never seen him like this. He and you… you
and him…”

He shook his head. “He charged me to keep you safe. Protect you with my life, and make sure your
condition didn’t pose a threat to others. And, if I was able, use my training as a Paladin to start you
on a course of acceptance and commitment therapy.”

Murphy stopped walking. “He what?”

“Was I unclear?”

“Danse, you’re not a therapist,” Murphy said, gesturing with her gun. He glared at this flagrant
breach of weapons handling protocol, so she holstered it and went on. “But besides that, he can’t expect you to follow me around forever, or until I find a neurologist or a psychologist or whatever-ologist that can fix me. You have a life now. You have Breakheart, Rory and Briar, Marina and Jules. Haylen.”

She sighed and resumed walking. “And Shaun. Thanks to me, you have Shaun to watch over.”

“He’ll be safe in Diamond City until the consciousness transfer,” Danse replied. “I won’t be. Maxson said there are no patrols scheduled to be passing through for the next week, but eventually there will be a Scribe, a Knight, someone from the Brotherhood that will recognize me. And if you were worried about Maxson’s status as leader being undermined by you, I can guarantee you it would be a thousand times worse if they find out he lied about my survival.”

“I…” Murphy didn’t have a response. He was right. “Well, if you can’t stay to watch over him, then I will.”

Danse shook his head. “Doctor Amari said you should keep your distance.”

“I will.” Murphy squared her shoulders and held her chin a little higher. “I can join the guards for a bit, or run errands for the shopkeepers. I’ll earn some caps and keep Shaun fed and clothed until Amari finds a caretaker willing to work with us. He can live with Nick, or they can have my house and I’ll bunk with the Minutemen. Easy.”

“Diamond City isn’t that large,” Danse said gently. “You’re bound to cross paths eventually. And Doctor Amari meant that you should keep your distance for your own sake, as much as for Shaun’s.”

Murphy’s shoulders slumped forward again. “I know. But I promised him. I can’t break that promise.”

She looked over at the former Paladin. He was looking at her sympathetically, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to sink into the ground.

“Can we talk about something else for a bit?” she asked quietly.

Danse nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

Maxson sprang up in Murphy’s mind again. She pushed him aside, grasping for something else, and the figure of the mysterious woman in Far Harbor settled in his place. “Paladin Elizabeth Titus.”

Danse’s eyebrows shot up. “What about her?”

“Did you know her?”

It took a while before he answered the question. “I did. Or at least, I thought I did.”

Murphy glanced over at him curiously. “What do you mean?”

Danse scanned the street and buildings ahead, his hands clenched around his rifle. “I suppose you’ve heard the stories about her. Vault 101, Project Purity, her exploits in the Brotherhood-Enclave War.”

“Right.” Murphy nodded. “She’s a big hero for you guys.”

“She is,” Danse admitted. “Her story is one of the successes Brotherhood soldiers reference when trying to attract recruits from the wasteland. The ‘kid from Vault 101,’ as Three Dog calls her.”

“Three Dog?”
He smiled. “The DJ for Galaxy News Radio, based in the Capital Wasteland. Travis has a long way to go, toward reaching Three Dog’s level of news and entertainment.”

Murphy smirked. “Give him time. Back to Titus. You said you thought you knew her?”

“Titus.” Danse rubbed his chin. “Even I couldn’t deny her prowess in battle and her popularity among the people of the D.C. ruins. She earned her place in the Lyons’ Pride- that was the elite unit of soldiers chosen by former Sentinel and Elder Sarah Lyons, the best of us- but after the Battle of Adams, after the Enclave were routed, her loyalties began to stray from the Brotherhood.”

Murphy kicked a pebble out in front of her, pinging it off the brick of a nearby building. “How do you mean?”

“She focused for a while on the distribution of purified water to the communities around the Capital Wasteland, the movement of water caravans,” Danse replied. “Carrying out her father’s wishes. Everyone understood, and the roads were still dangerous then, so her supervision was welcomed. She had the support of the Pride, and together they carved paths for the brahmin drivers to all the major settlements in the region.

“But then Elder Owyn Lyons died, and Paladin Titus’ attention began to be diverted to other, farther-flung projects and missions that had nothing to do with the Brotherhood, or its operations. Instead of rooting out the raiders and super mutants in the immediate ruins of D.C., she wanted to take recon squads north to fight slavers, or south to investigate rumors of cultists in Broken Banks. When Sarah denied her requests, she would disappear for weeks on end, and when she returned she would refuse to report on her activities. The two had been close before the death of Sarah’s father, but Titus’ activities and secrecy drove a wedge between them. We all saw it happening, and it was affecting the whole chain of command.”

“I bet,” Murphy mumbled. “What happened after Sarah died?”

A cloud fell over Danse’s face. “Chaos, in secret at first. There was no clear line of succession, with Maxson underage, and the Citadel Paladins fell to infighting. Nominations for Elder were made, then went unsupported, so new ones were made. Amid all of this, a group of Paladins decided that they were going to nominate Paladin Titus as the new Elder. They agreed with her visions, her eclectic style of leadership and departure from the traditions of the Brotherhood, and they were very vocal about the chapter’s need to adapt to the changing wasteland. Another group who were disappointed in Titus’ recent conduct- primarily traditionalists, those who felt the Elders Lyons had already taken us too far in the wrong direction- swore they would end this campaign before it got off the ground. Those supporting Titus outnumbered those against her by a slim margin, and when she returned to the Citadel, we were poised to vote.”

Murphy’s eyes widened. “What? She wasn’t even there, during all of it? Where was she?”

Danse waved his hand around. “Some southern backwater. She returned to the Citadel a few weeks after Sarah’s death, to find the place in an uproar. Half calling her to lead, half calling her to step aside.”

_Nadine. Point Lookout._ Murphy swallowed. “And she left.”

“She did.” Danse’s expression hardened even more. “She scolded all of us for even considering her, and disappeared into the wastes. She left us without a leader again.”

He stopped talking abruptly. Murphy waited a few beats before prodding him. “And?”
“That’s the end of the story.”

Murphy eyed him suspiciously. “No, it isn’t. Come on, Danse, what else happened?”


“What kind of rumors?” Murphy pressed.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I…” Murphy reached around to rub the back of her neck. “I’ll tell you if you tell me what you heard. Promise.”

Danse took a judgmental breath and let it out slowly. He shouldered his laser rifle and trudged forward, eyes on the road. “Very well. There were stories being told around the Capital Wasteland, even before her departure, that could only be about her. A woman in power armor helping settlers, stamping out slave trade operations, pulling brahmin out of mud pits. When she left the Brotherhood, they stopped for a year or so. Then they started to crop up again. There was never any explicit indicator that Titus was involved, but those who knew her could recognize her style, her choice in weapon.”

Murphy smiled faintly at him. “Never knew you to be a gossip, Danse.”

“I wasn’t,” he replied sharply. “I… most of the stories I heard, I heard from Cutler. He swapped them with traders whenever he could, and he was especially pleased whenever news of a slave trade operation’s destruction made it to D.C. When the slaver haven of Paradise Falls was overrun, he was certain Titus was involved, somehow.”

“Good for her.”

Danse grimaced. “Eventually, even those stories of her disappeared. People would claim they’d seen her, especially Initiates looking to impress their superiors, but there was never any evidence. Most concluded she had left for good, or died.”

“But?”

“But.” Danse eyed her for a beat before continuing. “Years later, after the super mutant uprising, Maxson’s rise to Elder and Cutler’s death, I heard a story from a Brotherhood soldier that suggested she was something much more dangerous than the misguided Paladin I had thought her to be.”

“Dangerous? How?”

Danse lowered his voice. “Maxson had just chosen me to lead Recon Squad Gladius into the Commonwealth, and a group of my closest colleagues held a gathering to celebrate. Most of them grew inebriated past the point of discretion, and they began bragging, mixing truth with tall tales to try to outdo each other. Knight-Commander Rockfowl was finishing a story about the time he seduced a woman who could speak to and control giant ants, when his stomach turned and Paladin-Commander Tristan had to help him to the facilities. Paladin McGraw said he had a story that could top all of ours, and when I asked him to elaborate, he blurted out that he had personally kept the Lone Wanderer from usurping the Eldership during Shephard’s uprising.”

Murphy frowned. “You guys were drunk, though.”

“I wasn’t, really,” Danse admitted. “I called him a liar, because he and the rest of the Outcasts hadn’t re-joined our numbers until after the uprising, and he protested. Before he realized what he was
saying, he told me that he had been stationed at an outpost in D.C. until 2283, and that Titus had been imprisoned there at the request of the Citadel, for treason."

“Usurping the Elder? Treason?” Murphy stopped walking and turned to him. “Well what happened? Please tell me you got more out of him.”

“He clammed up when I pressed him for details,” Danse said, halting next to her. “He and I were the only two at the table at that point, but he had the look on his face of someone who had said too much. He was quiet for the rest of the night, and I left soon after for Boston.”

He put his rifle on his back and crossed his arms. “Now why did you want to know?”

“I…” Murphy hesitated. “I met her. Elizabeth Titus. She was in Far Harbor, spending time with her... partner.”

Danse’s face went blank. Murphy kept going. “Arthur had talked about her a bit before, like he idolized her, and when I met her she seemed like she was more peeved by the Brotherhood than fond of them. I thought it was weird, but when I tried to ask her about it, she made me promise not to tell him I’d seen her, and I... I don’t know what to do.”

“You…” Danse was struggling with the words. “You met her. Elizabeth Titus.”

“Yes, she’s working with a mercenary group now, or something, and-”

Danse put his hands up. “Stop. Start from the beginning.”

Murphy took a deep breath and resumed their path down the wrecked street. She unraveled the story for him as she went- the attack of the island’s creatures, the woman with the rifle and the other one with the steamboat, the flying boat and the argument aboard it and the promise she had made in order to listen to a forgotten holotape. Danse listened silently, taking it all in without a sign of how he felt about it, what it meant.

“And then we left,” Murphy finished. “And Nadine gave me her radio channel, if I need to contact her or Elizabeth. ‘Just in case,’ she said.”

“Just in case,” Danse said faintly. “Murphy, why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I was trying to figure out if I should ignore the promise I made and tell Maxson about her anyway,” Murphy replied. “Then last night he reminded me that you were around for everything that happened with her, so I figured I’d ask you, and... and... I don’t know.”

“Did you consider what he might do, if given that information?” Danse asked quietly. “What others might do?”

“Him, yes,” Murphy said. “Others, not really.”

She paused at an intersection before picking a street and directing them down it. Their footsteps were loud on the concrete, and she pulled her plasma pistols out again.

“I didn’t want to distract him from all the good he’s doing,” she said, sweeping the blocks ahead with the barrel of Alpha. “Bobby thought, if I told him about her and the holotape of the other Elders, he might try to chase her down, or start second-guessing himself. And then he changed his mind and said I should tell Maxson anyway, because he thought Elizabeth might be trying to reach out and reconnect. But if your Paladin friend was telling the truth about the treason…”
“Hmm.” Danse put a hand up to grip the stock of his rifle, shifting it on his back. “Then reconnection could prove disastrous.”

“Would it?” Murphy looked at him. “We don’t have any evidence that she wants that, aside from a drunk Paladin’s say-so. How much of the Brotherhood would actually rally behind her, anyway, if she suddenly popped up and claimed she was the rightful Elder? She’s been gone so long.”

“She has,” Danse agreed. “I find it hard to believe she would attempt an outright takeover, even if that was her ultimate goal. But her mere presence would disrupt things. You said she doesn’t support Maxson’s policies, that’s enough for many in the Brotherhood not to trust her. But she also holds a special place in our history, and there are just as many whose belief in the Brotherhood tenets would be shaken if she returned and voiced her disapproval with Maxson.”

They walked in silence for a bit, both lost in thought. As the walls of Fenway Park rose in the distance, Danse shook his head and put a hand out on her shoulder, stopping her in the middle of the street.

“This goes against everything I was taught, but I don’t believe you should tell Arthur about Titus,” he said. “Let her make her own reappearance, if that’s what she wants. Don’t let her put that on you.”

“Yeah.” Murphy looked down at her feet. “I guess I’ve got enough to worry about, huh?”

No more words passed between them until they came up to the great, green gate of Diamond City, where they waited in the square until a figure in a trenchcoat and a boy in a striped shirt emerged from the same street they had come down.

Shaun stared up at the walls of the stadium in awe, and Valentine chuckled. “Yeah, I remember my first time, kid. Ready to go inside and meet everyone?”

“Yes,” Shaun replied, his eyes sparkling.

Murphy turned away, struggling to hide her emotions. Danse patted her on the shoulder before striding forward and crouching down to speak to the boy.

“You’ll be safe here with Detective Valentine, Shaun,” he said. “I need to go.”

“Why?”

“I need to get back to Haylen and Rory and the rest, so you listen to him and stay out of trouble. Understood?”

Shaun nodded and pressed his little fist to his chest, in the Brotherhood salute. “Understood. Sir.”

Danse smiled and pulled him into a hug, ruffling his ginger hair before holding him out again at arm’s length. “I’ll visit when I can. Your… Murphy, over there. She’ll be watching over you, since I can’t. Okay?”

Shaun glanced at her curiously. “Okay.”

“You can’t spend one night?” Valentine asked with a smirk. “Help him get settled in?”

Danse looked like he wanted to protest, but Shaun clutched his arm and pleaded. “Pleeeeeease?”

“I…” Danse glanced back at Murphy. She nodded encouragingly, and he sighed. “Alright. One
night.”

Shaun jumped for joy and led the way into the stadium, skipping as he went. The guards didn’t even give them a second glance. Anyone with a child had to be human. Murphy did her best to put on a worry-free face, but even when they made their way down to the field amid a surprising sea of Christmas lights, she couldn’t shake the unforgiving gloom creeping up into her heart.
Adjusting

Chapter Summary

In which some rays of sunshine finally emerge.

Ellie Perkins looked beyond exasperated when she emerged from the little detective agency in Diamond City, slamming the door behind her. Murphy had stayed outside while Danse and Valentine took Shaun in to meet the secretary and explain the situation, and she straightened up, away from the wall she had been leaning on.

“Walk with me,” Ellie ordered her, and Murphy fell in step beside her as they made their way out to the market. The other woman marched right down to Fallon’s Basement, banging the clothing shop’s door open so hard that Becky Fallon glared at them.

“Shoes,” Ellie said. “Anything that might fit a 10-year-old boy, if you have it.”

She cast her eyes around the room and pointed to a stack of shirts. “Any of those that would fit a skinny kid, too. And some Abraxo, we’re running low.”

Becky raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. She plunked a pair of sneakers and a box of detergent down on the counter and pulled a few t-shirts off the stack. Ellie threw down some caps, scooped everything up and deposited the pile in Murphy’s arms before turning on her heel and leaving, in as much of a huff as when she entered.

Murphy followed her as she made her rounds of the marketplace. Towels, canned food and toothpaste from Myrna, a stimpak from Doctor Sun and some chicken thighs from Polly. At each stand, Ellie tossed her caps down with increasing fervor, and she looked like an angry tiger on the prowl by the time they made their way back to the neon sign shaped like an arrow with a heart piercing it.

Before she opened the door, Ellie turned and accepted the haul of items from Murphy.

“You owe me 88 caps,” she said curtly. “That was a good chunk of my savings. I’ll start a tab.”

Murphy nodded, but didn’t meet her eyes. “I’ll come up with it.”

Ellie ducked back inside the agency, and Danse emerged, a grave look on his face.

“Can you trust the Minutemen in Diamond City to keep a secret?” he asked.

“Not big ones,” Murphy replied.

Danse nodded. “We don’t think Shaun could keep up pretenses if we tried to go with a new identity for him, and they would recognize him anyway, so we’re just going to tell people he’s an orphan Valentine is caring for since he was displaced by the Institute. I think he understands well enough to hide his true nature in this place, thankfully. Valentine believes the Minutemen will respect the need to keep that piece of information quiet, but they will need to be told about-”

“Me.” Murphy swallowed. “Got it. I’ll take care of it.”
Danse saw the look on her face and put a hand on her shoulder. “Tomorrow.”

Even in the one night that he was in town, Danse attempted to be the mentor Maxson had charged him to be. He ignored Murphy’s protests about being tired and interrogated her about her methods for dealing with her traumas when they surfaced in the form of dreams, of Nate, of feelings only, while they ate supper together in the living room of Home Plate.

“I don’t know,” Murphy said, between mouthfuls of BlamCo Mac & Cheese. “If I have bad dreams, I do my best to wake up. Or I put off sleep. And when Bobby was around, he would come to bed with me.”

Danse’s eyes widened in surprise. “I didn’t know you two had that close of a relationship.”

“No, not like that.” Murphy smacked him on the arm. “Just the contact helped. I don’t know why, but it was reassuring. Somehow.”

She sighed and looked down at her unnaturally-orange bowl of cheesy noodles. “Sometimes Shaun would snuggle up in bed with me. That helped, too. And Arthur…”

She trailed off, and Danse scraped at his own bowl of macaroni with a thoughtful look on his face. “You do better when you aren’t alone,” he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “Understood. But you need to learn how to function when you are alone, for your own sake as much as theirs. Speaking as someone who’s witnessed it, when you lean too much on another for support, you can wind up dragging them down with you.”

“I know.” Murphy set her bowl aside and ran her hands through her hair, massaging her scalp. He pointed at her with his spoon. “You told me you were practicing meditation. Do you, still?”

Murphy shook her head. “I lied. I was too embarrassed to tell you Bobby and I were sharing a bed.”

Danse looked scandalized. “You didn’t think you could trust me?”

“It wasn’t about trust, it was about…” Murphy sighed again. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

“Well, I can teach you to meditate, for a start.” Danse scooped the rest of his BlamCo into his mouth and set the bowl down, wiping his mouth with relish. “Right now, soldier. Let’s go.”

Murphy groaned. “Now?”

“Now.” Danse rose, stretched, and picked up their bowls, depositing them on the kitchenette counter. He pulled the coffee table to the side and sat down on the floor cross-legged, facing her.

Murphy slid down off the couch and inched closer to him a bit, crossing her own legs. “You’re not my superior officer anymore. If I want to be sad and sleep for days, you can’t stop me.”

“That’s your own prerogative,” Danse replied. “Rest your hands on your knees and close your eyes, Paladin.”

Murphy didn’t bother correcting him. She shut her eyes and tried to relax, leaning from side to side until her back cracked and her spine felt a little less weighed down.
“Breathe naturally,” Danse said in a low voice. “Focus on your breath. In, and out. Get to know it, like the way I told you to get to know your rifle, at the beginning of your training.”

_In, and out._ Static swam behind Murphy’s eyelids as she tried her best to breath normally. Chest rising, falling, shoulders following suit. Stomach swelling, sinking, wrist itching, feet sore.

Danse was silent, save his breath in the space between them. Murphy tried to focus on his breath instead, the sound of his lungs filling and emptying along with hers. It reminded her of that night she had lain awake, listening to him and Haylen talk outside, muttering about the way she used to be.

“How long do we have to do this?” she asked, opening her eyes to squint at the man across from her.

“A few minutes at a time, at first,” Danse replied, keeping his own eyes closed. “Try to push everything but your breath out of your mind. It’s harder than it sounds, but it’ll come to you with time.”

Murphy huffed impatiently and shut her eyes again. Push everything out. Okay. She’d done that in real life, how hard could it be to do it in her head?


_Strawberry._

Her eyes flew open and she scrambled backward, her back thumping against the couch. “Danse, I can’t do this. Not right now.”

He opened his eyes, worried. “What is it?”


The look on Danse’s face was painful to see. He scooted over and put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

She didn’t respond, but Murphy got the feeling he was apologizing for all of it, everything that was jumbled up in her mind and in her world. It wasn’t his to apologize for, and she knew it, but they sat there anyway, staring at the staircase for what felt like days.

Things got worse, after Danse left.

Murphy called in her favors from Paul Pembroke, who began giving her a chunk of his profits from selling chems in the Colonial Taphouse. Murphy kept about a quarter of it for herself and gave the rest to Ellie, who warmed up considerably when the caps began to number in the hundreds. Valentine shot suspicious looks at Murphy whenever she dropped in with a new delivery of funds, but he said nothing.

The Minutemen and the Diamond City guards welcomed her back with open arms, though things appeared to be strained between the two groups. Theo informed her that Ann Codman’s anti-synth, anti-cooperation rhetoric had made its way into the minds of quite a few guards around the stadium.

“She’s gonna kick us out, if she wins,” he said grimly, after Murphy delivered the news of Shaun’s
arrival and her decision to let him go.

All Murphy could do was shrug. The Diamond City Council still hadn’t rescheduled the second debate or the election, despite Valentine’s increased calls for action on both. Piper was also calling for an election in Publick Occurrences, writing column after column about things like “the integrity of a community,” and “civic responsibility.”

“It’s absolutely ridiculous!” the reporter insisted one night at Power Noodles, after Ann Codman had written a particularly scathing reply to one of Piper’s thinkpieces. “You think she’d be pressing the issue, since she wants to be mayor so bad. But no no no, I’m the terrible person, for wanting my city government to actually function.”

“It’s probably deliberate,” Murphy replied, swirling her chopsticks in her broth. “I bet if she draws it out long enough, Nelson will lose interest and she’ll be the only one left. Win by default.”

Piper swore and slurped up a noodle. “I bet that’s it. Don’t suppose you’d want to run for mayor, Blue?”

That actually made Murphy laugh, something that was only happening around Piper, increasingly. The reporter had brushed off the news of Shaun’s intentional amnesia with a few words of comfort, then proceeded to barrel forward with her own worries and challenges. They shared cigarettes and talked shop, and Murphy swore she could sometimes forget her troubles for a minute or two when they were ripping apart the latest letters to the editor.

Christmas came and went, and Ellie took Shaun to Moe Cronin’s shop and gifted him a baseball bat of his very own. The boy swung it around with gusto, and Moe clapped him on the shoulder and corrected his stance enthusiastically while Ellie laughed. Murphy watched, red-eyed, from the roof of her house, flicking cigarette ash into an overflowing tray.

Shaun took to school like a fish to water, and spent most of his weekdays in class with the rest of Diamond City’s children. Nobody questioned his presence in town, much. Caravan hands and merchants from across the Commonwealth often sent their kids to be fostered in Diamond City, in hopes of them getting a better education than they would in the wastes, and Shaun blended right in, even if he was a little strange. Murphy made excuses to walk by the schoolhouse when it was emptying, hoping to catch a glimpse of the ginger-haired boy with the freckles. Most of the time she ducked down an alley before he appeared, ashamed at her own behavior.

He was making friends, she saw. He bugged Nat until she let him sell papers with her, dangled hooks in Sheng Kawolski’s pond in hopes of finding a piece of junk or a minnow, chased Erin Reische and Paul’s son, Pete, around the market after his homework was done. Murphy watched him, usually from the roof of her house, flicking cigarette ash into an overflowing tray.

She sought distraction with the city guards, and Danny Sullivan happily installed her on the force. Shifts were dull and cold and the pay was meager, compared to Paul’s offerings, but it was better than lurking around corners and avoiding Valentine’s worried gaze. Murphy kept up with the outside world a bit that way, too, checking in with the caravans and listening to the people gossip while they bartered over ammunition and cobs of corn.

It was during one of these shifts that she had her first encounter with a group of Brotherhood soldiers since her resignation. When Murphy heard the tell-tale sound of power armor on pavement marching up to the gate where Carla was peddling her wares, she tensed at first, half-tempted to pull the hood of her jacket up and duck inside the wall on break. Instead, she readied her pistols and stood her ground.
Two Knights and a Scribe made their way into the courtyard, heading straight for Carla and her spread of junk. One of the Knights paused when they caught sight of her, but the female Scribe slapped the figure on the arm and pointed toward the merchant and her brahmin.

“We need gears and some cabling,” she said.

The Knight nodded, gaze still fixed on Murphy. Murphy stared them down, and eventually they turned away to speak to Carla.

Murphy kept her stance, but internally, something fell apart. He did it, she thought to herself. I’m free.

She cried for hours that night, twisted up alone in bed, her sobs muffled by her pillow.

Brotherhood patrols were coming around the city more frequently, and they made the guards antsy. There were multiple rumors flying around about their increased activity in Boston, including sightings of them making their way through dilapidated office buildings, mowing down ferals in the south, even getting into minor skirmishes with the Gunners that had seized control of Quincy. The recon squads often stopped to resupply at the gates of Diamond City, milling around the caravan outpost with wary expressions and few words for anyone outside their own groups.

“They’re sizing us up,” said Cathy scornfully, while Murphy got her split ends cut off by John at the Super Salon one afternoon. “Gonna storm in and take the place over, Johnny, mark my words.”

“I ain’t havin’ this conversation again, Ma,” John said with a sour look on his face. “You got no proof. You ain’t even been talkin’ to any of them. Had one in my chair yesterday, and you hid in the house the whole time.”

“Well I’m not gonna waste my breath trying to hold a conversation with one of those tin cans,” Cathy shot back, waving her cigarette around to punctuate her words. “And if they ain’t in town to kill us all, what the hell are they hanging around for?”

“They’re looking for something,” Murphy murmured.

John paused his scissors. “Didn’t catch that, Murph.”

“Never mind.”

The barber shrugged and resumed his work. Murphy kept quiet for the rest of the trim.

An unexpected letter from Haylen confirmed Murphy’s hunch, and revealed that the Brotherhood wasn’t the only group on the hunt. What they were looking for, however, was still unclear.

“Had a visit from Glory last week,” Murphy read out loud, curled up on her couch while Valentine and Ellie shared a box of Fancy Lads Snack Cakes and listened. “No new additions, but she did ask me some questions about my time researching the Commonwealth before I arrived here. Not sure what she wanted, but I told her our records were incomplete, and the latest info would likely be aboard the Prydwen. She seemed disappointed.”

Ellie chewed thoughtfully. “Why would she be disappointed? Aren’t they working together, now?”

“A working relationship might be necessary, right now, but trust isn’t,” Valentine said with a frown. “I’m surprised Desdemona let Maxson into her inner circle, as much as she did. She doesn’t trust anyone.”
“D. made it back alright, and filled us all in on Shaun’s progress. Rory, Briar and Jules send their love, while Marina had some choice words about the situation,” Murphy read on. “I’m sure she sends her love as well, though. We all miss you, and hope to see you again soon, especially Dogmeat, Nine and Joan. Best wishes, Haylen.”

Murphy folded the letter up again and handed it to Valentine. “Here. I’m sure Shaun would love to hear they’re doing okay.”

Valentine tucked it inside his coat and nodded. “Thanks.”

“How’s…” Murphy took a deep breath and let it out. “How’s he doing?”

Ellie and Valentine looked at each other, him with concern, her with sympathy. “Really well,” Ellie replied. “He’s been spending a lot of time at the Science! Center, with Doctor Duff. He loves her, and she’s too scatterbrained to notice if he’s a little more advanced in his knowledge about cell biology than he should be.”

“He misses his puppy,” Valentine said bluntly. “But other than that, he’s fine. Bright kid.”

Murphy nodded and looked away before she could tear up.

Days grew longer and nights shorter as January waned, but when Murphy was lying alone in her bed, each evening stretched out into an unbearable ordeal. She slept restlessly, and her visions and nightmares crept in with the silence after midnight. A few times she stirred and swore she wasn’t alone, the weight of someone’s arms wrapped around her in the space between sleep and consciousness. Whose, she didn’t know. She didn’t care. Arthur, MacCready, Nate, Shaun, anyone... but the feeling disappeared as soon as her eyes adjusted to the velvety gloom.

Murphy shirked sleep, when it became too painful. After a day spent manning the gate or patrolling the wall, she trailed the guards and Minutemen into the Dugout Inn and ordered whiskey, tossing it back until the sting of existence didn’t bother her as much. Vadim kept the liquor flowing for her, even after she should have gone home to rest, and slowly she began to slip away. Late to shifts, at first. Sideways looks and jokes from her fellow guards followed, then complaints and glares. After her second missed shift, Danny took her aside in his office.

“I know you’re going through a rough patch,” he said firmly. “But if you wanted to go on a bender to try to fix it, you should’ve gone to Goodneighbor.”

Murphy just stared at the floor. Danny stepped back and sighed, taking her disheveled appearance in. “Go home,” he said, a touch more gentle this time. “Don’t come back until you figure it out.”

Murphy obeyed, after spending the last of her allowance from Paul that week on a bottle of Bobrov’s Best and toting it back to Home Plate. She dragged herself into the armchair on top of the house and drank until she passed out under the sun.

A sudden splash of water interrupted her sleep hours later, and Murphy awoke with a gasp, reaching frantically for her guns.

“Forget it, kid,” an irritated voice said above her.

Murphy rubbed her eyes and the world slid begrudgingly into focus. Nick Valentine was standing over her chair, holding a now-empty water pitcher.

“God, Murphy, you’re a mess,” he said, shaking his head. “I was expecting the worst. Guess I was
Murphy coughed and unstuck her hair from her face. “Thanks. How’d you get up here?”

“When Solomon- Solomon- comes knocking on your door to say the vault dweller’s lying dead drunk on her roof, you find your way in,” Valentine answered, peering over to the marketplace below. “Lucky for you, only half the town noticed. Should be a couple of hours before the other half hears about it.”

He made shooing motions to someone below, before turning back to her. “You look like a ripe tato. Didn’t think to put on sunscreen, beforehand?”

Murphy lifted her arm to find it raw and red. “Never did tan well,” she mumbled. “Curse of the gingers.”

A breeze blew across the roof, right through her frame. She shivered, the sunburn and the dousing of water chilling her instantly.

Valentine offered her a hand. “Get up. You and I need to talk.”

Murphy rubbed the skin on her hand experimentally and winced while Valentine puttered around her kitchenette, shooting looks of disgust at the piles of dirty laundry and empty Potato Crisps containers that littered the floor and furniture. He waited, stony-faced, for the kettle to shriek before pouring out the boiling water into two mugs and dropping a mix of dried, red leaves into each.

When he handed her a mug, Murphy eyed it blearily. “What is it?”

“Bloodleaf and fern tea,” he replied. “Let it sit for a while, then drink it. Solomon said it would help with the hangover you’re going to have, in an hour or so.”

Murphy grimaced and set the mug down on the coffee table. Valentine sat down on the couch next to her and swirled the contents of his cup.

“Is this what you did, in Goodneighbor?” he asked gruffly. “After our first adventure in Far Harbor? Just hang around the Third Rail feeling sorry for yourself, popping pills with Hancock and Cait and getting too drunk to stand?”

“I didn’t pop pills,” Murphy said quietly.

Valentine sighed. “It’s a wonder you’re not dead. It was already a wonder you hadn’t died up until that point, but if anything was going to kill you, I knew it was going to be your own conscience. You’re carrying too much for one person to handle, Murphy, and you’re coming undone.”

“I have to handle it.” Murphy stared down into her mug, watching the tea leaves stain the water the color of blood. “Or I have to leave. And I can’t leave.”

“Then handle it.” Valentine’s voice level was rising slowly. “When people aren’t ogling at you, wasting away on your roof, they’re talking about you in the Dugout or the Taphouse, about the savior of the Commonwealth and how she’s turned into the town drunk. You know Ann Codman tried to push Geneva to reclaim your house and kick you out of town? Thank god that girl’s not right.”
stupid enough to try.”

The news should have shocked her, but Murphy couldn’t summon the energy to be upset. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe I should go.”

Valentine shrugged. “Maybe. You got a plan?”

Murphy shook her head. She sipped her tea, ignoring the burn on her tongue. “Could go back to Goodneighbor. Hop in a memory lounger and stay there. Take up with Hancock again, or go down to the Combat Zone and go a few rounds with Cait, until I feel something.”

“Or you could clean yourself up and start taking an interest in current events again,” Valentine suggested, annoyed. “This isn’t just about you, you know.”

“What’s the point?” Murphy murmured. “Everything I do ends in disaster. All of it. People dead, people angry, people mind-wiped and thrown out and exiled. I can’t fucking win, Nick, and I’m tired of it.”

She took a gulp of her tea and swallowed hard. “At least if I’m getting blackout drunk, it’s because I want to be.”

“So you do?” Valentine asked harshly. “Do you really?”

“Yes,” Murphy lied.

Valentine nodded and stood up. “You don’t want this, and you know it. I understand you’re upset, kid, and I understand it’s gonna take time to get back on your feet, but you’re headed for a short sermon and a shallow grave, as it is. From one overburdened person to another, get your shit together.”

He put his mug down next to her and inclined his head toward it. “Drink them both. And come talk to me when you decide what you’re gonna do.”

Shame and regret washed over Murphy as he turned and left, the door clicking shut behind him. She drank the tea, then washed it down with the rest of the bottle of Bobrov’s.

Murphy stayed in her house, after Valentine’s visit, emerging only to drop off caps at the agency and purchase food and liquor from Percy after the market had closed for the night. The robot didn’t judge, or at least not in a way that Murphy cared about, and she developed a permanent case of bedhead and bloodshot eyes.

She was sliding out into the quiet of dusk one such night, caps in her hand and her vision swimming with Nuka-Cola and vodka. There was a song stuck in her head, a new one that Travis had picked up from some drifter, and she sang it quietly to herself while she locked the door of Home Plate, trying her best not to slur the words.

“I made wine from the lilac tree

Put my heart in its recipe
It makes me see what I want to see
And be what I want to be…

“Ma’am?”

Murphy stopped singing. She turned around stiffly to find Shaun a few paces away, looking at her shyly.

“It’s Murphy, right?” he asked, shuffling his feet.

She nodded.

Shaun took a deep breath. “Is it true? Did you really blow up the Institute?”

Murphy stared at him, her heart racing. “I… I did.”

“Why?”

She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, the bottle caps in her hand digging into her palm. “Look, isn’t it late? Where’s your… where’s Nick? Ellie?”

“Why did you do it?” he demanded.

For the Commonwealth. For you. For who you should have been. For Nate. Murphy struggled to come up with an answer that made sense to her, but nothing made sense anymore.

Shaun waited a minute, watching her face. “Are you okay, ma’am?”

Murphy sighed and sank back against her front door. “No. No I’m not.”

“Do you need help with something?”

She smiled sadly at him. “I don’t think you can help me, kiddo.”

He smiled back. “Everybody needs help, sometimes. That’s what my friends and Miss Edna say, anyway. There’s gotta be something you need.”

“I need…” Murphy looked over his head, toward the Mister Handy that was whizzing idly outside Diamond City Surplus. “I need something to eat.”

Shaun snickered. “Well that’s easy. You got caps? I think I can get some snacks out of Percy over there, for cheap.”

Murphy allowed him to lead her over to the robot, who fixed one of his bobbing eye stalks on them. “Oh, I do hope you’re here to make a purchase,” he said jovially. “It’s what I live for.”

Shaun looked around conspiratorially and leaned in close to Percy. “Code 8764229, execute discount protocol 0.5, limit 15,” he whispered.

Percy beeped a few times before answering. “New protocols engaged. Prices for the next 15 minutes are 50 percent lower. Now, shall we get back to your shopping needs?”

“Shaun!” Murphy gasped. “How did you do that?”
Shaun shrugged his little shoulders. “Myrna likes to reprogram him every few weeks, and she brings him to the Science! Center to test him out. I just listened in, last time. His commands weren’t hard to figure out.”

“That’s stealing,” Murphy said with a frown.

“No it’s not, it’s a discount,” Shaun argued. “You look like you need one. No offense.”

Murphy chuckled in surprise. “None… none taken. Okay, Percy, I guess I need some Potato Crisps.”

The robot glided over to the shop’s display and plucked a can of chips off the shelf for her. “Four caps, please.”

Murphy counted out the caps, then paused. “One more,” she ordered.

Percy obliged, and she handed her money over. Shaun accepted the can of Potato Crisps she offered him gleefully.

“Did that help?” he asked her.

She paused, taking in his hopeful expression. Nate’s smile. Her eyes.

“Yes.”

Shaun nodded. “Good.”

He took off running across the marketplace. Murphy watched him go, squeezing the rest of the caps in her hand hard enough to cut through the skin. When he was out of sight, Percy tapped her on the shoulder.

“Were you going to make another purchase this evening?” he inquired. “Perhaps a bottle of Old Appalachia?”

Murphy shook her head. “No thanks. I think I’ve had enough, for a while.”

The next morning, Murphy gathered up all the trash in her apartment and deposited it in a pile by the door. She shelved the bottles of booze, piled armfuls of laundry by her bathroom sink and washed all of it, piece by piece. She strung a line on the roof of Home Plate, paid Myrna a small fortune for a bucket of clothespins and hung her shirts up to dry in the breeze. On the street below, Valentine strolled by on his way to Takahashi’s counter. He paused, watching her for a beat, before nodding decisively and continuing on to the Power Noodles stand.

Murphy slowly put her house in order again over the following days. She mended the holes in her jeans, swept her floors, counted out her ammunition supplies and paid Sheng for her water bill. She still didn’t go out much, except at night, and Percy’s robotic tone seemed more welcoming when she emerged now to pick up a box of bobby pins or a pack of cigarettes.

Valentine didn’t pay her any visits, but one afternoon, Murphy found a manila folder slipped under her front door. The words, welcome back, were penciled on the front of it.
Murphy smiled when she surveyed the contents- a file from the detective’s caseload, regarding a missing wedding dress and a bickering family. To celebrate, she pulled out the little vial of coffee grounds Curie had gifted her for her birthday, a cloth napkin and a pot, and put a kettle of water on her stove to boil.

She had just settled down on the couch to read through the file when there was a knock on the door. She got up to open it.

“I only just started reading it, Nick, but it looks like the daughter might have run off to get married with the boyfriend,” she said as she unlocked the deadbolt and swung the door wide. “Can you give me a minute to get into-”

She stopped abruptly, when she realized the man outside wasn’t Valentine.

MacCready smiled at her and hoisted the boy on his hip up a little higher. “Hey, boss.”

Murphy stared at him, then looked in wonder at the child he was carrying. Duncan rubbed a little fist across his face and stared back, brown eyes set in a tan complexion under a bird’s nest of black hair.

“Hi,” he said, with a cautious smile.

“Hi,” Murphy breathed.

They stood there staring at each other for a moment. MacCready eventually cleared his throat.

“Can we come in?” he asked. “Someone told me this place might be for sale, and we’d like to look around.”
When MacCready joined her on the roof of Home Plate, Murphy had two mugs and her pot of precious coffee at the ready, with a few extra supplies.

The mercenary sank into a lawn chair with a sigh, exhaustion evident on his face. “He’s gone to sleep. Traveling with Doc Weathers wore him out. Wore me out.”

“Not surprised,” Murphy said with a smile. “The only one who can stand listening to the Doc for more than an hour before needing a break is Idiot.”

“You’re telling me.” MacCready rolled his eyes. “First Duncan made the mistake of asking how he became a doctor, then Weathers wanted to know about how Duncan was sick and how we cured him, then the caravan hands jumped in and started trying to one-up each other on their longest recoveries. One of them didn’t believe me when I said I knew someone with a scar from a Glowing Sea deathclaw across her back, said no one could survive that. You should’ve seen the look on his face when I said it was you, and Weathers confirmed it. Shut up real quick.”

“New guy? I thought we knew all the Doc’s guards.”

“Yeah, young guy, hadn’t seen him before.” MacCready shrugged. “Knew well enough not to question his boss, anyway.”

“Well I’m glad you made it in one piece,” Murphy replied. “ Wouldn’t want you tearing your own ears off- or someone else’s- just before you made it to your destination.”

He half-smiled at that, but didn’t respond. They studied each other, and Murphy noticed a touch of concern in his eyes.

She looked away. “If I’d known you were coming, I’d have… I don’t know, cooked or something. Bought or built another bed. Kasumi said you weren’t coming back.”

MacCready nodded. “Yeah. I wasn’t going to.”

There it was, out in the open. The words hung in the air between them like summer storm clouds, heavy and full of electricity. Murphy let them hover there for a minute, debating whether or not she should pry. Eventually her inquisitive nature won out.

“What changed?” she asked.

In answer, MacCready pulled some pieces of paper out of his coat and handed them over. “These.”

Murphy unfolded the papers and shuffled through them, her eyes widening at the familiar lettering. “Nick, Haylen… they wrote to you?”

He nodded again and pointed at one of the sheets. “And Danse, at the end of Haylen’s, there. Go on,
Murphy’s eyes flew over the lines, zig-zagging across Valentine’s attractive scribble, looping along the tails of Haylen’s lowercase ‘g’s and slowing down at Danse’s blockier, utilitarian letters that looked almost like a printing typeface.

Words, phrases, jumped out at her. Hate to bother you, merc, but I need your help. … RJ, it’s Hales. I know we didn’t part on great terms, but… Soldier, I have to ask you a favor. … not the sort of thing I normally send through the mail, but you’re the one who moved to Timbuktu…

She’s going through a rough patch- well, rougher than normal, anyway… find myself charged with a mission that I can’t carry out alone, without great risk to myself and those I protect… trying to be a mom… Shaun wanted… didn’t go as expected. …

It’s piling up on her, to the point where her back’s gonna break, but she keeps… RJ, I’m worried about her, I’ve never seen her like that, and Danse said… I had my doubts about your allegiances in the past, but she always… any other way, any other person, I’d find…

I’m scared for her, kid.

You two are closer than you and I ever were.

The Commonwealth needs her. We need her.

Murphy folded the letters up and handed them back. “You didn’t need to drop everything and come running,” she said quietly.

“I didn’t,” MacCready agreed.

Murphy glanced at the trap door, still unable to let go of her misgivings. “Bobby, I’m okay. I… it must have cost you a fortune to come back without the Nakanos to ferry you, and everyone says the Capital Wasteland is safe, safer than the Commonwealth. It was nice of them to write you, and tell you about… me. But why would you throw that safety away and drag your five-year-old north?”

He smiled. “I didn’t drag him. Duncan wanted to go on an adventure with me. And he wanted to meet you.”

“He’s five, Bobby. He could’ve waited. So could you.”

“Thought you’d be happy to see us, boss.”

“I…” Murphy put her head in her hand and sighed. “I am. Don’t think for a second I’m not. But I’m not the most important person in your life.”

MacCready furrowed his brow. “I know. You never let me forget it. But that wasn’t the point.”

He held the letters up. “I know you, and so do these guys. And if what they said about Shaun is true…”

Murphy stared at him, realization sinking into her head and shoulders. “They guilted you into coming back. That’s…”

She stood up violently, nearly upsetting her lawn chair and one of the mugs. “That’s just fucking perfect. I don’t need this right now, I don’t, I… goddammit, Bobby, you had your own life and they told you to leave it. Because of me.”
She was tearing up again, salt stinging her lashes for the first time in almost a week. Murphy blinked rapidly, tried to wipe the tears away before he saw them, but MacCready was in front of her in an instant, scarf undone, blue eyes full of understanding.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I already had a few offers on the farm, property values were up because of the water, the schools in the Commonwealth don’t make the Brotherhood out to be untouchable, shining heroes… things worked out. And I’m not the type to abandon my friends when they’re in need. I’ve got too few of them, to begin with.”

“Just once,” Murphy mumbled, unable to meet his gaze. “Just once, I’d like it if you didn’t drop everything to come save me from myself, Robert Joseph MacCready.”

He pressed the scarf into her hands. “I didn’t. I brought everything along, this time.”

Murphy wiped her eyes with the worn, green material before twisting it around her own neck. “I’m gonna hang onto this for a day or so. I might need it later.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him again. “I missed you.”

He smiled down at her. “I knew you couldn’t live without me.”

Murphy threw her arms around him and squeezed him as hard as she could. “Shut up.”

He squeezed her back. “Valentine says I’m incapable.”

They talked for over an hour, laying out the stories that had been woven in their time apart. Murphy offered MacCready a mug of coffee, which he accepted with some trepidation.

“Smells… interesting,” he said, sniffing it experimentally. “Good, though.”

Murphy poured a dash of the dark liquid into her own mug. “I don’t want to color your first impression, but I have a feeling you’ll like the smell better than the taste.”

She drank, savoring as she did. It was familiarly bitter, with a bite that made her mouth water and a warmth that settled into her chest, awaking memories of early mornings, Sunday comics and the smell of donuts. The bite faded quickly, likely a side effect of the coffee’s age, but the warmth remained. Murphy resolved to track Curie down the next time she was at the Castle and weasel the origins of the birthday gift out of her.

MacCready was less impressed. Upon tasting the coffee, a look of disgust flooded his features, and Murphy dissolved into giggles.

“What in the-” MacCready caught himself before his profanity squeaked out. “Boss, this is poison. You used to drink this?”

“Daily,” Murphy wheezed. “Bobby, your face!”

He shook his head violently and squinted at her in disbelief. “You’re joking. You have to be. This is a joke.”

Murphy could only answer with more laughter, but she reached beneath her chair and fished out the
bag of sugar and bottle of brahmin milk she had gotten from Polly that morning. She poured a generous helping of each into his mug and produced a spoon from her pocket to stir the mixture.

“Here,” she said. “Try that.”

MacCready eyed her suspiciously, but he took another sip. When he didn’t recoil, Murphy raised her eyebrows and grinned.

“It’s fine,” he said begrudgingly.

Murphy’s grin widened. “Well, if you don’t like it, I’ll have it. I drank it both ways. Funny, I’ve seen you throw back moonshine and centuries-old beer without any complaints, but this grossed you out too much?”

“Been drinking since I was six,” MacCready said, scraping the spoon around and grimacing at the cup’s contents. “Never looked back. This tastes like the water in the caves where I grew up, before we ran it through the purifier.”

“Boo.” Murphy drank deeply from her mug and sighed. “Acquired taste, I guess.”

She added some milk and sugar to her own coffee and swirled it around. “You’d better not be letting Duncan follow in your footsteps, with the drinking. Alcohol stunts brain development, or so Curie says.”

“Well, I can’t speak for what happened when Derek and Machete were watching him, but I’m not about to take him for a weekend at the Third Rail,” MacCready replied. “I cut back, when I made it to Canterbury Commons. Didn’t want to miss anything. I’d missed enough.”

Murphy smiled. “What’s he like?”

MacCready’s eyes lit up. “He’s amazing, boss. He’s so bright, he just soaks up everything around him and asks questions if he doesn’t understand something, and he can fish and shoot and set snares and fall asleep anywhere, like I could at his age, and he can swim, like his mom.”

“You can swim,” Murphy pointed out.

“Yeah, but not like he can,” MacCready explained. “I swim when I have to. Duncan grew up with purified water around him. He’s good at it, like Lucy was. He likes it.”

“Why was Lucy so good at swimming?”

“She came from somewhere far up in the northwest,” MacCready said, with a faraway look in his eyes. “Said it was part of her tribe’s upbringing, being one with the water. It didn’t have as many rads as it does here. She missed it. When she got pregnant, she wanted to go to D.C. so she could teach our kid to swim, too. I was looking for a way out of the Gunners, so I agreed.”

“She never got the chance to teach him,” Murphy said sadly.

“No.” MacCready looked down at his mug and smiled faintly. “But he learned anyway. All the Capital Wasteland kids do, now. She’d be so proud of him.”

Murphy thought back, to the night she’d ended his time in the Memory Den early, the scared face of the woman on his lounger’s monitor. “He looks a lot like her. But I can see you in there, too. Chin, nose.”
“He’s got my teeth,” MacCready said, nodding. “Lucky thing, too. Lucy’s were pretty crooked.”

“I’m sorry I never got to meet her,” Murphy said softly.

He looked up at her. “She’d have liked you, I think. But she had a jealous streak, so who knows.”

Murphy chuckled. “Jealous, of me? The pre-war heroine with the dangerous lifestyle and hallucinations?”

“The woman who gets to spend time with her son, instead of her.”

“Oh.” Murphy swallowed hard. “Yeah. I guess I know what that feels like.”

MacCready nodded apologetically. “It’s been rough, I take it. Valentine made it sound like you were about to…”

“Fall from grace?” Murphy smirked. “Too late, I already did. But it’s thanks to Nick I didn’t fall off this roof, so there’s that.”

“I’m surprised he agreed to take Shaun on,” MacCready mused, scratching his goatee. “Never saw him as the fatherly type.”

“He’d surprise you, then,” Murphy replied, downing the rest of her coffee with relish and wiping her mouth. “I think he mostly did it because he feels like he owes me, still, for a lot of things. But he doesn’t, really. In the end, he feels for Shaun. Trying to figure out who he is, what he is… they’re more similar than Nick would admit.”

“Yeah.” MacCready sighed heavily. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, for either of you.”

Murphy shook her head. “Don’t be. You were exactly where you needed to be.”

She set her mug aside and leaned back in her chair. “And I bet Duncan agrees with me.”

MacCready grinned and sat up straight. “Want to help me wake him up? He’ll never get to bed on time tonight if he naps much longer.”

“I…” Murphy suddenly felt self-conscious. “You sure? We can let him sleep.”

“Nah.” MacCready bounced up out of his chair. “He wanted a tour of the city, anyway, and I need to see if I can’t get him started in classes with Miss Edna, introduce him to everyone. Parenting stuff.”

Murphy stood up too, still unsure. “Parenting stuff. Okay.”

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Duncan groaned a little at MacCready’s insistence that he wake up, but he brightened up once he noticed Murphy standing shyly in the background.

“Are you a vault dweller?” he asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes and blinking in wonder at the white-haired woman. “Dad said you’re a vault dweller.”
“I used to be,” Murphy said with a smile. “Now I live outside, with everyone else.”

“Why is your hair white?”

“She was frozen, for years,” MacCready answered, his voice a tad theatrical. He straightened the boy’s shirt out and shuffled him to the edge of Murphy’s bed, where he had been cozily ensconced in the blankets. He fitted Duncan’s feet into a pair of worn-out sneakers. “Remember how to tie them? You make the rad rabbit ears…”

“Derek says you have to be careful with frozen things, or they break,” Duncan said to Murphy, rather matter-of-factly. His little fingers joined his dad’s, looping the shoelaces with care. “Cross the ears, then bring the rad rabbit up through his hole.”

“And pull,” MacCready said with pride, as Duncan finished tying the knot. “Okay. Now the other one.”

“Are we gonna be walking some more, Dad?” Duncan asked, lacing up his other shoe with extra enthusiasm.

“Only around town,” MacCready promised. “Just to meet some people, maybe get supper.”

Duncan looked up when he had finished tying his shoes, kicking his little legs to test the snugness. “Are we walking again tomorrow?”

“Nope.” MacCready stood up, took a deep breath and let it out. “This is it. We’re home.”

As MacCready had said, Duncan asked questions about anything and everything that caught his eye as they wandered around Diamond City together. What was the big smokestack at the center of town? Why was there a robot serving food next to it? What was that yellow thing doing on top of that house? Why did that doctor look so annoyed?

MacCready answered the logistical questions as best he could, and constantly pulled Murphy forward to tackle the interpersonal ones and the ones about pre-war tech or decor. She did her best to explain that Doctor Sun was pulling double shifts to cover what used to be Doc Crocker’s responsibilities because he was too picky about taking on a new assistant for his practice, and that the yellow bus used to be something children would ride in to get to school from far away, but she struggled to put together an explanation that made sense for why one of the seats in the stands was painted red, unlike its companions.

“They played games here, before the Great War,” she said, wracking her brains. “And the games involved hitting a ball with a bat. That chair is red because it’s the farthest anyone ever hit the ball from home plate.”

“They got the ball all that way, from your house?” Duncan asked, eyes wide.

“Yes,” Murphy said, before backtracking. “No. My house wasn’t there then. It was just a plate, a base, and the players ran around it.”

“Why?”
Murphy laughed and threw her hands up in defeat. “I don’t know. It was fun.”

“It sounds weird,” Duncan remarked. “I think catching frogs is fun.”

“Frogs?” Murphy glanced over at MacCready, who nodded. “I didn’t know there were frogs in the Capital Wasteland. What do they look like?”

“They have two legs, big legs, and they jump around,” Duncan said, hopping around the two adults to emphasize his description. “They’re green, but some of them are blue, and they glow, like Quantum. And they have big, red eyes, and they croak at night in summer. Sarge and Oliver like catching them with me, and auntie Machete cooks their legs.”

“Who are Sarge and Oliver?”

“Oliver is Derek and Machete’s son,” MacCready explained. “He’s three. And Sergeant RL-3 is a Mister Gutsy that some trader offloaded in Canterbury Commons back in the day. Derek’s friend Scott fixed him up to help protect the town. He’s got a bit of a personality, though, so he shirks his routines a bit. Calls the frogs and mole rats ‘Commie bas-’”

He cut himself off when Duncan shot him a look of disappointment. “Sorry, Dunk.”

“Don’t be such a mungo,” Duncan scolded his father. “You promised.”


Murphy raised an eyebrow at him. “Mungo?”

“Us Little Lamplight kids used to call adults that,” MacCready replied with a sheepish grin. “He picked it up. Took some convincing to get him to stop calling everyone that, but he still uses it for me.”

Duncan crossed his arms and nodded. “When you’re bad.”

“When I’m bad.”

The boy relented and took his father’s hand, and the three went into the Dugout Inn to meet the Bobrovs and the regulars. Vadim rounded the bar joyously, and Murphy could swear there were tears of happiness welling up in his eyes.

“Malen’kiy tovarisch!” the bartender exclaimed, scooping Duncan up in his arms and swinging him around. Duncan looked surprised, but not as surprised as MacCready.

“Easy,” the mercenary warned, and Vadim set the boy down again gently with a laugh and a pat on the head.

“Your son, yes?” he said, striding over to shake MacCready’s hand. “And Lucy’s? He’s as beautiful as her.”

He caught sight of Murphy behind the mercenary and let out a cry of delight. “And Murphy! Better and better. Back to your old habits? Yefim just ordered a new shipment of whiskey.”

She shook her head. “Not yet, Vadim. I need a break from drinking.”

“Bah, you’ll come back someday. Those caps in your pocket are mine.”

It was MacCready’s turn to raise an eyebrow. Murphy looked away. They stayed for a bit, catching
up with Hawthorne and Scarlett, but Murphy hung back and withdrew, realizing there was one stop left on their citywide tour that she wasn’t sure she should attend.

MacCready noticed her hesitation, and when they had stepped back out into the afternoon sunlight, he put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey. You okay?”

“Yeah.”

He shook his head, unsatisfied. “You’re not. Duncan, go tell that man in the letterman jacket about your favorite songs. His name’s Travis.”

“Okay!” Duncan skipped over to where Travis was sitting at one of the Dugout Inn’s outside tables, humming “Grandma Plays the Numbers” under his breath. When the DJ caught sight of the boy, he paused, narrowed his eyes and looked rapidly between Duncan and MacCready.

“Is he gonna be okay?” Murphy asked.

“Yeah,” MacCready said with a wave of his hand. “Travis, not so sure. He gets enough Elvis requests as it is. Boss, you look like you’re about to throw up.”

“It’s nothing.” Murphy lied. “Actually, I should probably go home and try to sleep. Maybe drink some water. I’ll see you guys after you finish up, grab something to eat.”

MacCready nodded thoughtfully. “It’s Shaun, isn’t it? You’re worried about seeing him.”

“No, it’s… I should…” Murphy sighed. “Yes. And technically I’m not supposed to.”

He looked like he wanted to encourage her to set her fears aside, like he normally did, but something in his face suggested that he knew this time was different. Slowly, he nodded. “Okay. Go home. I’ll take him ‘round the agency by myself.”

Murphy was in bed when she heard the door downstairs open and close hours later, Duncan’s voice bubbling up the stairwell excitedly.

“… and he said there’s experiments there we can do, and bugs, and maybe I can tell them about the frogs…” he was saying.

MacCready chuckled. “Okay, we’ll go sometime soon. Take your shoes off and put them by the door, then you can unpack your toys.”

“Yes,” Duncan agreed.

Murphy heard the wooden stairs creaking, and she rolled over to see MacCready ascending with a bowl in his hands. He set it gently on the nightstand and sat down on the bed next to her. “How’re you feeling, boss?”

“Hungry,” Murphy admitted, shifting up onto an elbow to look at his offering. “Power Noodles? You shouldn’t have.”

“You can knock it off the mountain of caps I’m planning on forking over to buy this place,” MacCready replied, sweeping an arm out to indicate the interior of Home Plate.
Murphy sat up and grabbed the bowl, slurping at the rad chicken broth noisily. “It’s yours. Free of charge. Just let me crash on the couch whenever I want.”

“No,” MacCready said firmly. “You paid 2,000 caps when it was a wreck—”

“It wasn’t a wreck, it had character—”

“-and now you’ve stuffed it to the brim with furniture, books, supplies, heck, rigged up plumbing—”

“-just because the previous owner left all his worldly possessions lying around and I rearranged them doesn’t mean I built everything in here myself.”

“Murphy.” He put a hand over hers, cool against the warmth seeping into her from the bowl. “Let me buy it. I worked my a… my you-know-what off to scrape together the caps to buy a farm for Lucy. By some miracle, I got that all back and then some. I’m good for this, and I don’t want—”

“Another debt on your hands.” Murphy nodded. “It’s just hard for me to think of us in terms of transactions like you do, okay?”

“Look lady, I just want to buy a house,” MacCready said with a grin. “I didn’t come here to be psychoanalyzed. That alright?”

“Okay, okay.” Murphy looked down at her bowl. “How was… everyone?”

“Everyone was fine,” MacCready said, picking up on her change in tone. “Everyone and Duncan hit it off, actually. Wanted to take him to the Science! Center, but it’s closed today. Something about a minor chemical spill.”

“Hope Doctor Duff’s okay,” Murphy murmured. “And Nick and Ellie?”

“Valentine wants you to take that case file back to him when you can so you can go over it together,” MacCready replied, but before he could go on there were little footsteps on the stairs behind him.

Duncan emerged, carrying a stuffed dog with floppy ears and a plastic dinosaur toy. The boy flung himself and his companions onto the bed, wriggling up while Murphy tried to keep her soup from spilling. “This is Twig,” he said proudly, holding the dog up. “And this is Rex. They’re friends.”

Murphy smiled. “Are they? Tell me about them.”

Duncan launched into the origin story of the toys while she finished her noodles and broth, and MacCready brought their packs up and began pulling out their contents. Murphy noticed that he was more careful than he usually was, not flinging his belongings every which way like he used to when settling into a base for a night or two.

She raised her eyebrows when he finished folding what looked like his entire wardrobe and shoved aside the contents of her top dresser drawer to make room for the meager helping of shirts and pants. He caught her look, smiled and moved on to Duncan’s things, while the boy regaled Murphy with stories about adventures the dog and Tyrannosaurus Rex had been on together over their lifetimes.

Eventually, the night wound down, and Duncan’s eyelids and yawns grew heavier. When he could barely keep his eyes open, MacCready and Murphy tucked him into the loft bed and shut the lights off before retiring to the living room downstairs.

“I’ll sleep down here,” Murphy offered. “You two can share the bed until I can get another one in
“Thanks,” MacCready said, a little absentmindedly. He had sunk into an armchair to fiddle with his rifle, loosening and tightening the screws that held the scope in place.

Murphy let herself fall back into the couch cushions and put her feet up on the coffee table. “I missed this.”

“Missed what?”

“Just… hanging out. With you,” Murphy admitted, crossing her arms. “Danse spent the night in town, when… after Goodneighbor. He said I do better when I’m not alone. He was right.”

She sighed. “But, he was also right when he said I need to learn how to function by myself, or I’ll just drag everyone else down into my pit with me.”

MacCready paused and looked up from his gun. “That why you broke up with Maxson?”

“How-”

“Nick.”

“I didn’t-“

“He’s a detective, boss.”

Murphy blew a perturbed breath out through her nostrils. “No. It’s not why I ended things. The Brotherhood needed him, and I knew I was… in the way.”

MacCready frowned. “In the way?”

“Long story.”

“Gotcha.” He began breaking his rifle down into pieces. “Guess you’ll have to see if Danse is available, if you’re on a Brotherhood streak.”

“Or Haylen,” Murphy joked, though she could feel her cheeks reddening. “What happened there?”

A look of regret came over MacCready’s face. “Nothing. She just decided it was over.”

“She did?” Murphy said in surprise. “The way she was acting, I thought… never mind.”

“She did the right thing,” MacCready said, a tad mournfully. “I just wasn’t what she needed.”

“Yeah,” Murphy murmured. “I can relate.”

The two of them fell silent, save the mechanical clicks of the gun under MacCready’s care. A wave of emotions swept over Murphy in the silence, jumbling up together in her head and filling the space with fears and doubts. Her shoulders tensed. Her fingers turned to claws, digging fervently into her elbows, scrambling for purchase.

Amid the waves, Danse’s voice emerged. Focus on your breath. In, and out. Get to know it, like the way I told you to get to know your rifle.

“Can I try something?” Murphy blurted out.
MacCready glanced up quickly. “Sure? What do you need?”

“Nothing, just… just sit there.” She shoved the coffee table forward with her feet and slid off the couch onto the floor, cross-legged.

Murphy shut her eyes, and the sea of doubt was alive, words and feelings flying around her mind in dizzying spirals. Faces, moments flashed by, and she struggled to shove them aside.

*Push everything but your breath out of your mind.*

How, though? There was the ceiling of the Breakheart Banks shack, Danse and Haylen’s voices outside wondering what happened to their savior, their rock. There was Maxson’s back, shrinking into the distance over the Goodneighbor cobblestones. Deacon, bleeding out in the Diamond City street. Nate in the fog. Shaun asleep in the memory lounger. Her son, dead in a hospital bed, a bullet hole in his face.

There was a thump on the floor in front of her, and Murphy opened her eyes. MacCready was across from her, cross-legged as well, rifle parts abandoned on the armchair.

“Breathe,” he said.

“I can’t,” Murphy whispered. “I keep trying, and I just can’t.”

He reached out and took her hands. “Try again.”

His fingers were warm, and hers were cold. She held onto him lightly at first, unsure, but he gave her permission with his eyes and she crept into the open space he offered. Murphy took a deep breath and let the wave fall over her again.

It was all there, still, the pain, anger, the murkiness of the world she moved through. Marvelous in some strange ways, frightening to behold. Murphy tensed, but MacCready held her down, anchored her, kept her from being flung away into the surf or the void.

*Breathe. In, and out.*

*In.*

*Out.*

The waves crashed in time with her breaths, and Murphy watched. Piece by piece, the wreckage disbursed, pulled apart in the crash of her ocean and washed up on the sands of her shore. Still visible. Still painful. And, as she realized slowly, very much a part of her- but not all of her.

She opened her eyes. MacCready was watching her.

“World’s problems on my back,” Murphy said, apologetic.

He disentangled one hand from hers and reached out, tucked an escaped lock of her hair behind her ear.

“I know,” he said. “I’m here, boss.”
A Jewel in the Gathered Dust

Chapter Summary

In which there is more dancing.

March came in like a lamb that year, as if MacCready and Duncan had brought the sun with them when they set foot in Diamond City. Murphy found herself stepping outside more, soaking in the afternoon rays on the roof or shielding her eyes as she perused Myrna’s wares in the morning.

Along with the sunshine came noise, glorious sounds that filled Home Plate and spilled out into the street. MacCready waking Duncan in time to go to school, pouring out bowls of Sugar Bombs and latching the door on the way out. Belt buckles and leather straps cinching together, a puddle of .308s clicking against the coffee table as the mercenary counted his ammunition. The cry of the teakettle at night, the soft stirring of a spoon against a mug, the man on the floor of the living room, sewing patches onto one of his shirts and mumbling to himself while his son played with toys next to him. The mundanity of it soothed her, eased her into a role she was both new to and familiar with.

Duncan didn’t take to school as well as Shaun had. He was younger than many of the children in Diamond City, and while he was quick to ask questions of the adults he knew, he became shy around his peers. Miss Edna and Mr. Zwicky were patient with him, and individually he opened up to each, but in class he clammed up and his grades suffered.

It pained MacCready, Murphy could tell. One night, he confided in her that he was worried it was his fault.

“Give him time,” she said quietly, as they lounged together on the couch, looking through some new magazines Hawthorne had found on an excursion. “Everything here is new to him. He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but what if he won’t be?” MacCready pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. “When I was a kid, I was usually the loudest in the room, the one who spoke up first if something was wrong, or if I had a better idea for what to do, or if I didn’t understand something. I know I can’t expect Dunk to be exactly like that, but maybe if I’d been around more, some of that might have rubbed off on him.”

He peered at her over the top of Tales of a Junktown Jerky Vendor. “I should’ve listened to you and gone home sooner.”

“You did what you had to do,” Murphy said firmly, setting her copy of Live & Love aside. “And you’re here now. Worry about going forward, not what’s already happened.”

Easier said than done, she knew, but she did her best to help out. MacCready had taken up a spot on the Diamond City guard again, and on the nights he was manning the gate, Murphy cooked Duncan dinner and asked him about his homework. He was still a little shy around her, too, but once there was food in his belly their conversation flowed easily from school to friends to other things.

“Sometimes I just can’t make the numbers work,” he said one night, after he had made a bowl of InstaMash and radstag bourguignon disappear. “Shaun said he could help me with math after class, if I wanted, but Mr. Valentine said I’d have to ask my dad if it’s okay.”
“Did he.” Murphy looked down at the dirty bowl she was holding and placed it on the kitchenette counter. “Well, do you think it would help you?”

“I don’t know,” Duncan said with a shrug. “Shaun’s good at math. I’m not. But maybe we could try.”

“Okay.” Murphy nodded. “I’ll talk to your dad and Mr. Valentine.”

“No,” Ellie Perkins said the next day, crossing her arms defensively.

MacCready crossed his own arms and leaned back against the wall of the detective agency next to Murphy. “Why not? Shaun’s willing, Duncan’s willing, Miss Edna said Shaun’s one of her brightest students and it’s worth a shot.”

Valentine inclined his head toward Murphy. “You know why not. Doctor Amari specifically said to minimize contact.”

“Duncan can come over here,” MacCready said, sweeping his arm out at the agency office. “I’ll supervise, if you’re busy.”

“How much room do you think we have?” Ellie retorted. “We’re already overbooked by one, let alone adding two more.”

“What about outside?” Murphy suggested. “There are plenty of picnic tables over by the orchard, they can study there in peace.”

“You don’t think MacCready might be too much of a reminder of you?” Valentine asked.

“Why would he be?”

MacCready and Valentine shared a look. “Never mind,” the detective said.

Murphy looked between them, then to Ellie. The secretary looked down at her desk.

“What is it?” Murphy asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“He’s been… asking questions about you,” Valentine said, finally.

Murphy swallowed. “What kind of questions?”

“Nothing harmful, yet,” he assured her. “When the merc here brought Duncan around that first night and he said he was staying with you, Shaun got pretty excited. Wanted to know what your house looked like on the inside, if you were doing okay, if you’d bought any more Potato Crisps, whatever that meant. Ellie steered him back to talking about school, but since then, he’s been trying to come up with excuses to go visit you.”

“It’s getting harder to shoot them down. At the rate he’s going, he might just sneak out one night and come in through the trap door on your roof,” Ellie said, shaking her head. “I have no idea why, but he’s drawn to you.”

“You know why,” MacCready replied, leaning his head back against the wall. “She’s his mom.
Doesn’t matter if you erased it. Somewhere deep down, he knows.”

Murphy sighed. “Maybe. But that’s still dangerous, for him. You haven’t heard anything from Doctor Amari? The Railroad?”

Valentine shook his head. “Zilch. Whatever they’re up to right now, I can bet they’re not prioritizing one synth kid’s desire to grow up.”

“Okay.” Murphy nodded. “I suppose I can leave-"

The door behind her swung open and Shaun burst into the room with Duncan on his heels. “Ellie, Mr. Valentine, they let us out early today and there’s something I wanted to ask you about-”

He stopped when he realized there were four adults staring down at him instead of two. His eyes locked on Murphy’s.

“Hi,” he said, and stuck his hand out. “Remember me? From the marketplace?”

Murphy shook it hesitantly. “Yeah, kiddo. I do.”

Ellie cleared her throat and looked wildly between the two of them. “Something you came to ask us about, Shaun?”

“Right.” Shaun straightened up and pulled Duncan out in front of him. “Duncan needs help with math. Can I go over to his house tonight and study? Please?”

“We?” Duncan echoed, rocking back and forth on his little feet.

Before anyone else could say anything, Murphy blurted out, “Yes.”

“Murphy,” Ellie said sharply.

Murphy jerked her head toward the door. “Bobby, do you want to…”

“Right.” MacCready grabbed the two kids by the hand and steered them back out into the afternoon sunlight. “This way, guys.”

“She’s not coming, too?” Shaun protested, looking back at Murphy. The door shut before anyone could reply.

Murphy sank into the chair for clients and buried her head in her hands. “Shit.”

“Why would you say yes?” Ellie hissed, leaning over her desk. “We were literally just talking-”

“Ellie, can you go make sure they have enough school supplies?” Valentine asked, cutting her off.

Ellie looked like she might explode, but he shot her a look of warning. She gave him the sharpest of nods instead, picked up a pad of paper, a ruler and some pencils, and disappeared out the door after the boys.

Valentine sat down in Ellie’s vacated chair and lit up a cigarette. After a few puffs, he handed it to Murphy. She took a drag and stared at the glowing end, unsure what to say.

“I’m sorry,” Valentine said, breaking the silence.

Murphy scoffed. “You’re sorry?”
“I am.” The detective took his hat off and set it on the desk. “I’m not sure I ever said it, after Goodneighbor and everything that happened there. You were the one doing all the apologizing, never occurred to me that you might need to hear some as well.”

“Why?” Murphy asked, incredulous. “I’m the one who ripped myself out of his head, dumped him on you and Ellie, fell apart very publicly, the whole shebang. This is all my fault. *I’m sorry.*”

“It’s not, though,” Valentine said, shaking his head. “Aside from the last one, you were doing what you thought was best for him. After the sacrifices you’ve made to make sure he’s safe, he’s happy, I think anyone could excuse a bit of a mental breakdown.”

The hint of a smile played on Murphy’s lips. “Why didn’t you say that when you found me up on the roof of Home Plate?”

“Because that’s not what you needed to hear, then.” Valentine settled back into his chair. “But I’ll say it now. I’m sorry all this has happened to you.”

“Yeah.” Murphy took another pull on the cigarette. “I guess I am, too.”

She looked up into his golden eyes. “What do I do, Nick? Should I leave?”

He chuckled. “You could. MacCready might not forgive you, if you do. Kid comes all the way back from D.C. for you, just for you to walk out on him? Nah.”

“He wouldn’t be happy, but he’d understand,” Murphy replied. “Any other options?”

Valentine lit up another cigarette and bobbed his head from side to side. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t leave eventually. Sooner or later the Minutemen or the Brotherhood or the Railroad are going to pull you into their search for the Institute again, and I doubt you’ll be able to say no. But when that happens, I’d rather you had your wits about you and nothing to distract you from what has to be done. I think you need to stay put for now, for your own sanity.”

He winked. “I can keep Shaun distracted on my end, but not indefinitely. Some of it will come down to you jumping out the window when he comes knocking.”

Murphy smirked. “Would’ve thought Nick Valentine would have a better plan than to play a long game of keep-away.”

“Hey, if you’ve got other ideas, I’m open to them.”

Murphy thought hard for a minute, smoke curling around her fingers and the files on Ellie’s desk. Finally, she looked up.

“Tell him about me,” she said. “But don’t tell him about me the way *you* would. Tell him about me the way a wastelander parent would. The good… and the bad.”

Valentine cocked an eyebrow at her. “You sure? He might come away scared of you, if I do that.”

Murphy put out her cigarette in the ashtray and stood up. “That’s the point.”

Whatever chat Valentine had with Shaun about her, Murphy wasn’t privy to. Ellie informed her, the
next time she dropped funds off, that Shaun had stopped asking questions. Murphy didn’t press her for more information.

She did feel a little hurt when Shaun’s feelings briefly leaked over to Duncan, though. Their supper chats during MacCready’s night shifts became more sparse for a week, and Murphy tried not to let it get to her when she caught him staring at her somewhat fearfully as she cleaned Alpha and Omega. She didn’t tell MacCready, and it didn’t last long. Duncan was a forgiving kid.

Valentine had been right, she realized. The routine of life in Diamond City was good for her, and her nightmares waned with each passing day. Sometimes she glimpsed Nate’s cinnamon-colored hair in the marketplace as she drank tea on the roof of Home Plate, but more often than not, now, it was just a tanned traveler with a grim expression.

The grim expressions themselves were becoming fewer and farther between. Caravans were coming into the city laden with the spring harvest, much of it from Spectacle Island and the combined efforts of the Minutemen and the Brotherhood. Caps were flowing, and spirits were rising. Piper wrote more than a few articles on the extended reach the bumper crop of razorgrain was having across the Commonwealth, and the Diamond City Council finally began to breach the subject of their suspended mayoral election.

“Things couldn’t be going better,” Eustace Hawthorne said with a beaming smile at the council’s March meeting. “Face it, Ann- it’s time to schedule the second debate.”

“Things could absolutely be going better,” Ann Codman said with a sniff. “Though I must admit, business at Choice Chops is booming so far this year.”

“Exactly,” Malcolm Latimer said, punctuating his statements with a jab of his cigar. “Let’s set a date and get it over with already.”

Valentine nodded. “Agreed.”

After some mild debate, the council announced it would be holding its next mayoral debate on April 20. All were invited, and all city guards would be expected to be in full uniform, on duty for the event.

Ann Codman poked a finger at Murphy when everyone filed out of the mayor’s office following the meeting. “You had better make yourself scarce,” she sneered. “Don’t want a repeat of last time.”

Murphy cried that night, after MacCready had gone to bed with Duncan. She tried to keep it quiet, was sure she hadn’t let so much as a squeak out, but it didn’t matter. In a few minutes, the mercenary was downstairs again, holding her, drying her tears with his scarf.

“Thanks,” she said when her hiccups slowed. “Ann’s a bitch.”

“She is,” he agreed.

As a way of sticking it to the Codman matriarch, Murphy began accompanying the Diamond City Minutemen squad on their rounds, taking shifts after she proved to Theo she was ready for action again. It felt good to put on a wide-brimmed hat and stroll around the city’s perimeter, sniping the odd feral that wandered in and scaring off any wild dogs. Theo kept her on the same shift as him for a while, probably to supervise her, and she learned a lot about the young officer as they walked the broken streets. He was from a swampy little settlement south of Quincy, someplace called Murkwater. It had been overrun by mirelurks when he was a kid, and his parents had bounced him around from place to place in the Commonwealth ever since, until he left home at 16 and took up
with a caravan. Theo missed his initial home, but had lost hope of reclaiming it after the Quincy Massacre.

“Then you came along,” he explained at Power Noodles one night after their shift. “And then General Garvey, and Doctor Curie, and the Minutemen came back. Someday I’ll go back to Murkwater and chase the mirelurks out, like we did the Castle.”

Murphy smiled and stirred her bowl of rad chicken soup. “I’ll help you, when you do.”

He nodded. “It’s an honor to be working with you, ma’am. I’m happy you’re back.”

Piper had kind words to say, too, the next time Murphy dropped in on her in Publick Occurrences.

“I’m working on a book,” the reporter said happily, plunking a box of typed papers down on Murphy’s lap. “About DiMA.”

Murphy paged through a few of the papers. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m not going to publish it now,” Piper said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Maybe ten years out, at the earliest. I couldn’t just sit on it, Blue. His life, his experiences, they should be shared. All his accumulated knowledge is astounding, it really fills in a lot of the gaps about the Commonwealth’s history, how it came to be. Don’t worry, I’ll change everyone’s names. Well, everyone who isn’t a prominent figure, anyway.”

She plopped down on the couch next to Murphy and stretched out leisurely. “And it’s all thanks to you. I’m always telling Nat, traveling with you is how you find the best stories.”

“Thanks.” Murphy set the box aside. “Maybe someday you can write a book about me.”

Piper’s eyes widened. “Really, Blue? You’d let me do that?”

“Sure.” Murphy shrugged. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. I don’t know that it would be a bestseller, but—”

“Pfft, don’t worry about that,” Piper said with a laugh. “Your story would sell, no problem. It’d probably have to be a collaborative effort though. You, me, Nick, MacCready, the whole lot of us. Come to think of it, we could write a series.”

Their musing was interrupted by a knock on the door. Murphy got up to open it, and Theo stuck his head inside.

“MacCready said you were here,” he explained, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “You got a minute? General Garvey wanted a word with you on the radio. He says it’s important.”

“They call it ‘Citadel Day,’ over.” General Preston Garvey’s voice crackled over the radio set in the Minutemen barracks. Theo frowned and fiddled with the dials a bit, trying to lose some of the static.


“Is that what they called it in your day?” Preston asked. “And here I thought the Brotherhood were
Murphy chuckled. "Yeah, well, at least we didn’t name everything in Latin. So what are the Brotherhood doing for Citadel Day this year?"

"Basically? Throwing a party." Preston sighed. "It didn’t start out that way, though. A couple of things came together at the right time, and it’s blown up into something a little bigger than we originally intended."

"What’s this ‘we?’"

"That’s right, ‘we,’" Preston replied. "God help me, it was my idea to begin with. Spectacle Island had a remarkable harvest at the end of the winter growing season- you’ve probably been seeing a lot of it coming through town, over there. I suggested we celebrate the Brotherhood-Minutemen partnership with some kind of ceremony for morale, and the Elder informed me that the Prydwen was expecting an important visitor for Citadel Day. He proposed we combine the events into a celebration at the end of the month, invite all the leaders together for it as a show of good faith in each other, treat it as an opportunity to share our advancements and triumphs."

"It’s not a popular idea among everyone involved. You know the Brotherhood, they close ranks when it comes to traditions. There’s been a lot of that going around, even with this uneasy alliance we’ve got going on between the big three. We’re not so much working together as we are… tolerating each other. There’s barely any trust between the Brotherhood and the Railroad, and trying to get Desdemona to even respond to my questions and requests is like trying to get tatoes to grow on asphalt. At this point, I doubt she’ll even send anyone to show up to the party."

"Wait, wait, slow down," Murphy said, leaning over the desk in thought. "So this was also Maxson’s idea? Who’s the visitor?"

"From what I hear, the one in charge of all the Scribes, all the Proctors," Preston answered. "Their Head Scribe, Rothchild."

"Why’s he coming?"

"Word is he’s got intel the Brotherhood and the Railroad have been searching for for some time. Institute-related intel."

Murphy sat up straight again. "The Head Scribe is personally delivering intel on the Institute? Why not just transmit it?"

"Maybe it’s too valuable, or not formatted for transmission," Preston replied. "Other than that, you know as much as I do. Ronnie has a theory that he’s also here to conduct some sort of inspection, make sure the Brotherhood’s following its Codex ‘the right way.’"

"Makes sense," Murphy muttered. "So what do you need from me?"

"I need you to come to the celebration, if you can. Even if the Railroad doesn’t show, having the savior of the Commonwealth in attendance could turn some heads, and maybe some minds, in our favor. Maybe we can come out of it with a little less bickering and a little more cooperation."

"Savior of the Commonwealth. Sure." Murphy sighed. "I don’t have the best reputation anymore among the Brotherhood, and if this Rothchild is really here to figure out if Maxson is running things the way the rest of the Brotherhood wants them run, me being there might be a bad thing."

"Yeah, Captain, I hear you." Murphy could hear the smile in Preston’s voice. "But I trust you to
keep things diplomatic. And if I know you, what someone might think of you, personally, has never stopped you before. Over.”

She smiled, too. “No. No it hasn’t. Give me the details, Preston. Over.”

The general laid out the timeline and a rough list of the expected guests while Theo listened and Murphy jotted it down on a pad of paper beside the radio. When he had finished, she looked it over and nodded.

“Sounds like a fun time,” she said. “I’ll see you at the end of the month, General. Over.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Preston replied. “I expect the Brotherhood will be in uniform, but we’ve told our soldiers that they can wear what they want, as long as it looks impressive. Curie and Rylee have dresses picked out already, from what I hear. What you want to wear is up to you. Over.”

“Fancy dress.” Murphy tapped the pencil against the paper pad thoughtfully. “Got it. Over and out.”

An idea sprang into her mind, and her smile widened.

The next morning, after the children of Diamond City had gone off to school, Murphy and MacCready strapped on their holsters, ammunition pouches and combat armor and walked out from under the stadium gates into the March sun.

Murphy threw her head back, closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Shifts with the guards and the Minutemen took her into the immediate ruins, but today the air felt cleaner, the sunshine warmer. MacCready glanced over at her and smiled.

“You miss this,” he guessed.

She swept her white braid over her shoulder and stretched her legs, one at a time. “I suppose I do.”

MacCready nodded and took a deep breath of his own. “Me too,” he admitted.

When all of Murphy’s joints had cracked, they set out south, Ipswich to Boylston, then Jersey until it came up against Park Drive. There were radstags grazing around the track that led into the Back Bay Fens, but they scattered as soon as they scented the two humans intruding on their pasture.

MacCready kept his rifle at the ready, head on a swivel, but Murphy moved forward somewhat carelessly. She had walked this track before, an age ago with Curie and Preston. During their wandering days, the Minutemen trio had swaggered through the overgrown park, taking potshots at bloatflies and making more noise than they should have. Nothing bigger than a giant insect had bothered them then, and nothing reared its head now, either.

Once across the bridge over the dry creek bed, Murphy led MacCready up to the edge of Fenway and paused, pointing at the building across the street. “There.”

The columns of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts stood as resolutely as the last time she had visited it, before the war and after the war. The banners above the door were ripped, hanging by a thread in places, and the colors had faded in the sun over the centuries. Murphy only needed the vague shapes and shades of black and white to stir the memory, though. HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR: FASHION
“Come on!” she cried gleefully, breaking into a jog across the street and up the steps to the front door. MacCready followed, bewildered.

The glass doors of the museum had long since been broken in, and the two visitors stepped carefully through the frames and into the dusty, marble interior. The museum lay silent, its contents in ruins. A feeling of regret gripped Murphy, and she made her way over to what used to be the ticketing desk. Broken glass crackled under her boots, and the small sound echoed against the cream-colored stone.

There was nothing left of the ticketing station but two ragged office chairs and a protectron, all broken and cast aside. Murphy sighed and tapped her chin, before heading forward, toward the grand staircase. “I think it’s this way.”

MacCready fell into step beside her. “You’ve been here before?”

“A long time ago,” she replied. “And an even longer time ago. This is where I got all the paintings that are hung up in the Castle.”

They came up to the second level, where they were greeted by a smashed bust on the floor. Murphy bent down and picked up a piece, an alabaster nose. “I think this place was looted right after the war, there are a ton of pieces missing. Most of the staff must have legged it, locked up the place and gone home to their families or elsewhere. Over in the ancient world section, though, on the other side of the building, Preston found a skeleton, and a bunch of piled-up furniture. Looks like someone tried to make a stand there, protect the exhibits.”

She shook her head. “It didn’t work. All of the Egyptian stuff is missing, and the rest is either broken or ruined. Someone with a sense of humor spray-painted over the Sumerian carvings, it was awful.”

“What makes you think the Hollywood exhibit isn’t gone or wrecked, too?” MacCready asked.

“Because,” Murphy replied, tossing the nose aside and continuing on. “It was still locked up, the last time I explored here, tighter than the section of the American arts that we broke into was. I thought maybe it had been preserved and moved, but then I remembered the exhibit probably didn’t have any of the originals in it to begin with. Most of the stuff in here isn’t the real deal. The really rare, expensive things were all packed off in case the nukes fell a long time ago. There was a whole initiative, fundraisings, even a celebrity auction or two, and the originals are scattered all over the country. All over the world, actually.”

She led him down a hallway of ripped paintings and paused in front of a bronze cast of a ballerina, the little girl’s right foot eternally extended in the fourth position. “Like this one. It’s not real. Know how I know?”

MacCready reached out as if he wanted to touch the statue, but drew back at the last second. “How?”

“Because the real one’s in a vault in Far Harbor,” Murphy said with a mischievous smile.

He looked at her in surprise. “There’s a vault in Far Harbor?”

Murphy nodded. “Yep. Degas’ real statue is down there in the collection of one Bert Riggs. His late wife bought it before they packed everything away in 118. Nice guy.”

“There’s a vault in Far Harbor,” MacCready repeated, furrowing his brow. “And you were inside it?”
“It’s a good story,” Murphy said, smirking. She pointed at a hallway off to the right and resumed moving through the museum’s debris. “You should ask Nick sometime. We had an interesting case there.”

“Nick was there, too?” MacCready said faintly. He stared, frozen, at the statue for another second before half-running to catch up with her. “Wait. Did you say there was a pre-war guy living in it, still?”

“A couple, actually.” Murphy found the sign she had been looking for and started toward it. “Sort of. They’re all robobrains now, including the Gilda Broscoe, actress extraordinaire. I’m actually here to see if I can borrow something that used to belong to her.”

The section of contemporary art was still locked down with a steel grating across the entrance, like it had been when Preston and Curie had found it. They hadn’t bothered trying to get in, then, as they lacked the tools and Preston had been antsy to get to the American art exhibit to see what masterpieces remained. This time, however, Murphy was prepared.

MacCready offered her the sack of supplies they had borrowed from the Minutemen, and Murphy extracted a claw hammer and a pair of bolt cutters. She gave the grating an experimental whack with the hammer, but it merely rattled ominously before settling in place again. The bolt cutters quickly did away with the rusty padlocks at the bottom, and Murphy slid the metal back into its ceiling receptacle with some industrial screeching.

“After you,” MacCready said, accepting the tools with a jaunty wave of his hat.

Murphy giggled and stepped into the dusty interior of the corridor they had opened. There were fewer windows in here, and damage from the elements was less visible. Murphy’s chest swelled with hope.

Through a pair of cracked glass doors was a room of moth-eaten black velvet. A half-spiral of wide stairs descended from the room’s far right corner, and on each platform a pair of feminine mannequins was posed. There were twelve in total, long, slender figures with arms cast out as if in delight, in balance, in pride. A dozen headless ghosts, wearing the tatters of a long-dead civilization.

Murphy approached them in awe, gazing up at the remains of what used to be goddesses. That must have been the gold lamé sheath she had seen on the news, now so full of holes it looked like a swimsuit made of netting. Over there was the black-topped, white-tulled gown from Rear Window. The tulle had yellowed considerably despite the lack of sunlight, and the velvet top was as moth-eaten as the curtains lining the windowless room. The caped green Civil War velvet with the gold brocade, the deflated pink gown that used to be as round and sparkly as a bubble, the timeless white pleats that adorned Marilyn Monroe herself. A flood of memories swept over Murphy, and her breath caught in her throat.

As if in a dream, she drifted toward the back of the room, toward the mannequins on the highest stair. One had fallen over, a mess of black threads and sequins, but the other still stood erect, hands on its hips. Its dress was dark, pine green, with wide, off-shoulder straps that wrapped around into a petite waist and a full-length ball gown skirt. Absolutely perfect, just the way she remembered it.

Murphy glanced at the plastic plaque at the mannequin’s feet. Evening Ensemble by Casazza (Italian, founded 1917) c. 2075. Originally worn by Gilda Broscoe for red carpet premiere of “Trials by Fire.” Satin.

MacCready moved up next to her. “That’s the one?”
She nodded. Hesitantly, she reached out to touch the fabric.

With barely a sigh, the cloth came away in her fingers. Murphy watched in horror as the entire skirt rapidly began to tear away from the bodice under its own weight, set free by the first touch it had felt in centuries. In an instant, the dress was in pieces on the floor.

The two trespassers stared at the mannequin in shock. Murphy let out a chuckle. “Damn.”

MacCready shook his head and offered his own, tentative laugh. “Yeah.”

In less than a minute, the two were leaning on each other, crying with laughter at the absurdity of it all.

Finally, Murphy wiped tears from her eyes and pushed some braid flyaways out of her face. “Guess I’ll just have to try some other pre-war fashion exhibit.”

MacCready snickered. “I guess. I’m sorry, boss.”

“Nah, don’t be. It was a long shot to begin with.” Murphy let out a sigh and sank down to sit on the nearest riser step, looking back over the other dresses. It didn’t take a close inspection to see that not a single one would survive being taken from the display. “I can make do with what I’ve got at Home Plate. Or maybe Becky Fallon has something in her store that would fit me, besides t-shirts and jeans.”

“Maybe.” MacCready strolled around the room distractedly, inspecting the black curtains as he went. He poked one along the back wall with the butt of his rifle, before drawing it back to reveal a hidden door. “This lead anywhere?”

Murphy jumped up again. The door’s latch was padlocked, but another assault from the bolt cutters laid it open to reveal a narrow room lined with shelves and drawers, one flickering fluorescent light hanging down to illuminate the interior. In disbelief, Murphy read the drawer labels, picking up the pace until she reached the end of the aisle. There, on the last shelf to the left, she found the correct plaque and pulled open the corresponding drawer.

Inside were several plastic, vacuum-sealed packets, all bearing the same label as the mannequin in the exhibit room. MacCready handed her his pocket knife, and she cracked one open carefully. Pristine green fabric poked through, a jewel in the gathered dust.

More tears sprang to Murphy’s eyes. She smiled and brushed them away. “Never thought I’d come to a museum and be happy to see display replicas.”

She removed the rest of the shell and shook the dress out in front of her. It was heavy, crumpled, misshapen from time spent stowed away, but it was whole and cool and the exact color of the pine trees that had shaded the house she grew up in. The satin was smooth against her fingers, and a shimmer of silver peeked through the garment’s back, revealing a zipper.

MacCready grinned and shouldered his rifle. “You want to try it on?”

Murphy immediately started stripping off her gear and boots, and the mercenary disappeared back down the hallway, leaving the door open to allow a little more light to stream in. In no time, Murphy had shimmied out of her coat, flannel shirt and jeans, set her Pip-Boy aside and pulled the dress on with care.

It was a little long and a little big in the front, which she had expected. Gilda had been willowy and well-endowed in the chest area, but Murphy had never been either, even before the Commonwealth
had played a role in her physique. She felt around her back, fingers tracing the deathclaw scar that was now partially exposed to the open air.

“Guess I won’t need jewelry for a conversation piece,” she muttered, trying in vain to zip up the back. When her attempts failed, she picked the ball gown skirt up around her as best she could and stepped carefully out into the main room.

MacCready paused shuffling mannequins around on the risers and turned to look at her. His eyebrows shot up.

“What?” Murphy asked, suddenly self-conscious. She let the skirt go and tugged at the off-shoulder sleeves. “Too much? I can pick something else.”

“No,” he stuttered. “You look…”

“Like I’m drowning?” Murphy lifted the skirt again and fluffed it out a bit around her. “Yeah, I think Becky can help with that a bit. Otherwise, I’ll just be holding the front up all night to make sure I don’t flash the guests.”

She turned around, pulling her braid to the side as she did. “Zip me?”

“Sure.” MacCready’s voice sounded a touch strangled. Murphy looked down at her feet and smiled when she felt his hands on her back, holding the two sides of the dress together, sliding the zipper up into place carefully. She tugged the bodice a bit to make sure it was secure, before twisting back around to look at him.

Disbelief. Delighted disbelief was how she would have classified the expression on his face, if she didn’t know any better. They took each other in. For once, Murphy was acutely aware of the blue of his eyes, the curve of his brows, the crook of his smile.

“Damn,” MacCready said.

“Mungo,” she retorted.

“I-I just mean, you look… good. Sorry. You look good, boss,” he said, dropping his gaze.

“Thank you.” Murphy released him from her own stare. “I just hope I can move in it alright, even after any alterations.”

“Do you…” he swallowed. “Do you want to try?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, boss.”

Murphy retrieved her Pip-Boy from the storage room while MacCready shoved display cases out of the way until there was a wide enough space to dance. Murphy turned on Diamond City Radio and adjusted the volume. Roy Brown was singing up a storm about Butcher Pete, and she made a face. “Not exactly music for a fancy dress party,” she said.

MacCready laughed and kicked some shards of glass out of the way. “You should tell Maxson to play it anyway, I bet it’d kill with the Minutemen.”

He fished around in his pockets until he extracted a worn holotape and tossed it to her. “Try this.”

Murphy turned it over, but the label was missing. Curious, she popped it into the Pip-Boy’s tape
player. Her eyes widened when she recognized the piano introduction. A legendary male voice
followed, almost floating out of the speakers.

“Wise men say only fools rush in

But I can’t help falling in love with you.”

She held the Pip-Boy up while Elvis Presley continued singing. “Bobby, where did you get this and
why haven’t you given it to Travis yet?”

“Because it’s not mine to give away,” MacCready replied, crossing the room to join her. He looked
lovingly at the Pip-Boy. “That holotape was Lucy’s. Machete gave it to me, when I came back for
Duncan.”

“Oh.” Murphy cranked up the volume and set the Pip-Boy down on the ground, speakers up. She
held her hands out, and MacCready took them. His palms were rough against hers, but the hand he
put to her waist was soft, gentle in a way she both had and hadn’t expected.

They spun, lost in the velvet of the song and the velvet of the room around them. Timeless, but aged
in ways not immediately visible to anyone who might have snuck a peek at the two figures waltzing
between the dust motes and faux actresses of yesteryear.

“Like a river flows surely to the sea,

Darling so it goes;

Some things are meant to be.

Take my hand, take my whole life too,

For I can't help falling in love with you.”

It reminded Murphy of the dance she had shared with Maxson beside a chapel and a campfire half a
year ago, and she was blushing by the time the song was finished. She and MacCready broke apart
sheepishly, once again unable to look at each other.

“You’re gonna be fine, I think,” MacCready said quietly.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” Murphy scratched the back of her neck and tugged the bodice up a few
inches higher on her. “Got anything livelier we could try dancing to?”

He shrugged. “I’m fresh out of holotapes.”

“Hmph. Bummer.” Murphy took the holotape out of the Pip-Boy and handed it back to him before re-tuning the radio.

“-Brown’s alter ego? You make the call, folks,” Travis was saying. “Here’s another one for you
listeners, by the Isley Brothers. Almost makes you wanna… shout!”
Murphy shook her head at the joke, but she and MacCready immediately began bouncing along to the undeniable call-and-response rhythm. The dress slipped repeatedly, but she hiked it up each time, laughing and singing along with abandon.

“I want you to know

I said I want you to know right now, yeah!

You been good to me baby

Better than I been to myself, hey! Hey!”

MacCready spun her around once or twice, and somehow his hat wound up on her head by the end of the song. They leaned on each other again, out of breath in the rapidly-warming exhibit room.

“Yeah,” MacCready wheezed. “You’re gonna be fine. That dress looks a mile better on you than it would on a robobrain.”

“You sure he can’t come with you?” Piper asked later that afternoon, over a Nuka-Cola with Murphy outside Publick Occurrences. Nat was bundling newspapers with them on the sales crate, while Murphy cut twine and Piper counted out stacks for circulation.

“As much as I’m tempted, I couldn’t do that,” Murphy said, sipping her soda and grimacing. “I can’t ask him to drop everything and go on adventures anymore.”

“You just did that today, though,” Nat pointed out.

“Yeah, on his time.” Murphy sighed. “While Duncan’s in school and we’re not working shifts on the wall, that’s one thing. But he can’t disappear for days on end anymore and dump his son on other people. I’m not going to enable that.”

Nat raised her eyebrows. “I’ve seen the way he-

Piper elbowed her, cutting off her train of thought. “Drop it, Nat.”

Nat shrugged and filled them in on the schoolyard gossip instead- who was behind in their grades, who had a crush on whom, a prized pencil case that had gone missing and the prime suspects in its theft. Piper eyed Murphy curiously the whole time, stopping once or twice while she counted and folded as if she wanted to say something. By the time the papers were all stacked, though, the reporter had said nothing.

“You excited to see Maxson again?” she asked, shouldering two stacks of papers to take down to the Dugout Inn.

Murphy grabbed a stack of her own. “I don’t know if ‘excited’ is the right word. I cut things off, remember? He’s probably moved on.”
Piper scoffed. “Doubt it. That man was smitten.”

Murphy smiled. “Smitten or not, it had to happen.”

“Sure it did.” Piper winked. “Just like you have to go to this soirée.”

“Preston sounded desperate,” Murphy argued. “If there’s something my presence can do to help the cause, then I owe it to him to shower, put on something nice and show up.”

“Whatever you say, Blue.”
The Common Denominator

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy and Maxson get all dolled up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Murphy and the dress arrived at the Castle before the Citadel Day celebration intact, though she and Theo were a little worse for wear. A pack of mutant hounds had surprised them that morning in the ruins, and while Murphy had flung her pack aside at the first sight of the slobbering mongrels, her traveling clothes had been covered head to toe in dog guts thanks to one of Theo’s grenades. Theo also received a splattering of entrails over his uniform, and though Piper had emptied her canteen of water over them to try and get the chunkier bits off, they were both crusty and less-than enthused by the time they made it up the hill to the Minutemen fort.

Ronnie Shaw didn’t even say hello when they arrived. The newly-promoted Colonel shook her head, pinched her nose and pointed Murphy and Theo toward the communal washrooms. Murphy practically ran in their direction, eager to be rid of the grime and gore.

When she re-emerged from the showers, some of the guests of honor were already changing into their outfits for the evening. Preston Garvey had on the Minutemen general’s uniform and was leaning over the desk of the Radio Freedom DJ, instructing him on the importance of relaying missives to the island despite the formal occasion. The navy blue coat, leather tricorn hat and combat chestplate with a star emblazoned on it suited him, and it brought a smile to Murphy’s face.

Piper had borrowed the red sequin dress Murphy had stowed away ages ago in Home Plate, but had staunchly refused to wear the dress on its own. Murphy had persuaded her to at least get her overcoat patched up by Becky Fallon before they left, and the edges of it were a little less tattered now, though still a bit dusty from the walk to the Castle. Murphy had to admire the reporter’s resolve when it came to maintaining an image. Her hair was brushed for once, and her legs looked fantastic under the hems of the red overcoat and dress, but she still had her press cap on her head and a pencil tucked behind her ear.

Curie was attempting to brush some of the dust off Piper’s coat while the reporter posed questions to a group of Minutemen recruits in dresses and suits, muttering to herself in French the whole while. The doctor had on another sequined number, silver, with an off-shoulder wrap draped artfully around her shoulders and a matching silver-feathered headband. She was wearing makeup, to Murphy’s surprise, pearly eyeshadow with dark mascara and lip stain the color of red wine.

“Is Bethany attending?” Murphy asked, when the synth straightened up with a huff to wipe her hands.

“Malheureusement, non,” Curie replied, shaking her head. “Mon amour was called away last week with Sturges to Sanctuary, to fill in for their ailing physician. She will be missed, tonight.”

“So will Sturges,” said Rylee, coming up on Murphy’s right side. She patted Curie on the arm, and the doctor covered the trader’s hand with her own.
“Ne t’inquiète pas,” Curie said reassuringly. “When do you two plan to dress? The new recruits are eager to ferry us to the island, so as not to be late.”

Rylee flapped her hand dismissively. “It’s not starting until six, and the Brotherhood officers aren’t showing up until seven. I’ve got plenty of time.”

“Don’t cut it too close, caravaner,” Piper said with a grin.

Rylee shrugged. Curie focused on Murphy instead. “Et vous?”

Murphy took her pack off and went to unzip it, but she hesitated. “I might need some help. I have no idea what to do with my hair, and I didn’t have any makeup or anything…”

“But of course I shall help,” Curie replied excitedly “Come, avec moi.”

Murphy followed Curie obediently to the infirmary, leaving Rylee and Piper to chat with the recruits. She ducked behind a privacy curtain to change before emerging hesitantly, tugging on the newly-altered dress she had unearthed with MacCready’s help.

Curie clapped her hands to her cheeks and squealed. “Belle, magnifique, superbe,” she cried.

Murphy giggled and twirled a bit. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Of course not.” Curie offered one of the patient chairs as a seat. “Where on earth did you find this piece of art?”

Murphy smiled and sat. “I’ll tell you if you tell me where you found that coffee.”

Curie smirked and rummaged around in a nearby cabinet drawer, unearthing a comb, brushes, a handheld mirror, some bobby pins and a tiny makeup kit. “Belle extorsionniste. Very well.”

Under the doctor’s careful hands, Murphy relaxed. The feel of the brush through her hair was therapeutic, and Curie’s voice was bubbly as ever, full of stories from the Castle and questions about Murphy’s time at Breakheart Banks and Diamond City. It pained Murphy to tell her about Shaun, but Curie was understanding, even as she wrapped cloth from an old shirt around Murphy’s head and twisted the ends of her hair up in it, to dry the dampened strands into curls.

“It was what he wanted,” she said quietly, tilting Murphy’s head with a soft hand under her chin. “What any synth would want, if they found themselves in the shoes de la petite ombre, though they may not admit. Prendre courage, mademoiselle. It was not your fault.”

Murphy nodded sadly. “He likes the city. He’s still making friends with everyone he meets, Curie. He even tried to be friends with me, for a bit. He’s so trusting, it’s…”

Curie smiled. “Inspirant.”

“Innocent,” Murphy corrected.

“Oui. Perhaps.”

When Murphy stepped out into the courtyard again, activities had shifted toward the south gate, save
the DJ giving an evening news report at his desk. As she passed him, he paused for an instant before stammering on.

Becky Fallon had shortened the length of the green dress a fraction more than necessary for mobility, and Murphy was glad of it when it came time to climb into a boat. Even with her boots on underneath and Preston steadying her, it was a chore to pack it all away in the watercraft and keep from getting wet.

Once she was settled, Preston hopped in with Curie and Piper. He took a deep breath and shoved off, puttering slowly away from shore over the mild ocean.

“You three look great,” he said over the motor’s rumble.

“So do you, General,” Piper said with a wink. Preston blushed and looked away.

The boat glided easily over to the reconstructed pier of Spectacle Island, which its female passengers were delighted to see had been hung with lanterns. Preston grinned as he helped hoist Murphy up, settling her safely on the new wood of the boathouse dock.

“Actually, the decorations were mostly Knight Lucia’s idea,” he said as they made their way up the path. “She’s spent so much time out here, I think she wanted a change of scenery. Citadel Day was the perfect excuse.”

The porch of the once-grand house rose into view as they crested the hill, its railing and columns wrapped in strings of tiny white lights. Murphy picked up her skirt and climbed enthusiastically until the rest of the house was visible. The dilapidated walls of the manor had been taken apart entirely, and various pieces had been used to reconstruct the porch and fill in the gaps in the wooden floor. A stack of lumber over by the island’s headquarters looked like it was destined to rebuild the house’s walls and roof, but for now the ground floor was open to the sky, a few frames sticking up to mark where rooms and doors would one day be sectioned off.

The sun was setting in the west over Boston, but everywhere little lights and lanterns twinkled. Wrapped around wooden frames, dangling from the eaves of the headquarters shed, winking through the windows of the former greenhouse— it looked like the stars had descended early and landed on Spectacle Island that night. Out toward the east, harvested plots of razorgrain and silt beans stretched under a grid of power lines, some fields tilled and waiting for the next crop. There was music floating over the scene, a record player blaring jazz from the corner of the manor’s porch, and small groups of Minutemen and Brotherhood Scribes were already laughing and talking in the brilliant dusk.

Murphy wandered up to the open floor with Preston and Piper, staring in awe at the beauty around her. The island had transformed completely since the first few times she had visited. From mirelurk-infested waters to the tense summit with the Brotherhood, the first steps of cooperation to a thriving hub of agriculture. Pride swelled in her chest.

Preston must have seen the look on her face. He paused next to her, pointing out past the fields to the beached barge on the horizon. “We finally got our vertibird landing platform cleaned up and painted, and there are plans to put another, makeshift dock over there for easier access and crop transport,” he said. “It’s really coming together.”

Murphy nodded. “And the sonic speaker system? Wouldn’t want any mirelurks to crash tonight.”

“Still working, as far as we know.” Preston turned to point along the coast of the mainland. “Thanks to the blueprints Haylen put together, we’ve installed copies of it at Warwick, the airport, Nordhagen, Nahant and Kingsport. The folks at Nordhagen Beach and the old house in Nahant are
warming up to the idea of joining us, thanks to our help and Kasumi’s recommendation.”

“How’s she doing?” Murphy asked. “Did her parents come to collect her when they got back?”

Preston laughed and scratched the back of his neck. “They did. She put up a fight, though. Tell you the truth, Captain, I doubt we’ve seen the last of her.”

“She’s a stubborn one,” Murphy said with a smile. “Maybe one day her dad will cave and she’ll take over Radio Freedom for good.”

The general excused himself to go greet the Spectacle Island workers, and Murphy strolled idly toward the shed. The table that the Minutemen and Brotherhood leaders had sat around to bang out the details of their alliance was right where she had left it, now laden with trays of razorgrain flour scones, mirelurk cakes and cornbread slabs, jars of mutfruit jam and brahmin butter, rows upon rows of purified water cans, liquor bottles and glasses and a roasted shank of radstag. The Minutemen workers greeted her with sticky smiles and offered plates of delicacies, which she accepted gladly. She wandered back out into the evening with a plate of jam and cornbread and narrowly missed bumping into a familiar face on her way in.

“Murphy,” Knight Lucia said in surprise.

Murphy inclined her head. “Knight.”

The Logistics division coordinator smiled and took Murphy’s dress in, before looking down at her own olive-and-black uniform. “You look… well, quitting the Brotherhood suits you.”

Murphy winked. “You should try it sometime.”

“Pfft.” Lucia shook her head. “I’m happy here. And Clarke’s sentence is nearly up, so I’ve got to stay put if I ever want to get him back on my crew and out in the sunlight again.”

“No kidding?” Murphy’s eyebrows shot up. “He’s almost home-free, huh? That’s great.”

She followed the Knight into the shed, and the two chatted while Lucia loaded up on radstag, scones and jam.

“Happy Citadel Day,” Lucia said with a smile, bumping a scone against Murphy’s cornbread in a mock toast. “And to all, a good night.”

Murphy laughed. “I hear you guys are expecting a visitor. What’s going on?”

“Eh.” Lucia shrugged. “There’s a shipment of stuff coming in from D.C. via air convoy, and the Head Scribe decided to hitch a ride. I don’t know much other than that. Politics, probably.”

“Politics,” Murphy mumbled. “Right. What kind of supplies?”

“Oh, you know. Ammunition, spare parts, seeds for planting, a bee hive or two.”

“Bee hives?”

“Yes.” Lucia cracked open a can of purified water and took a gulp. “The mutfruits will be flowering soon, and Senior Scribe Neriah wanted to see if we could get a hive to take on the island.”

“I thought bees were extinct,” Murphy said in surprise.

“Not in the Capital Wasteland. Well, not anymore.”
Before Murphy could inquire about the bees, a soft drone of vertibird rotors floated into the shed. Curie entered with it, looking around in earnest before she spotted the two in the corner.

“There you are, mademoiselle. Vos cheveux! Rapidement!”

Lucia ducked out and Curie took her place, unraveling the wound-up curls on Murphy’s head with deft fingers. They spooled out around her shoulders one by one, and Curie tugged and smoothed out the braid she had woven around the crown of her head. “Tu es le clair de lune,” she pronounced, when she had finished.

Together, the two of them went outside into the lantern light. The vertibirds soared past overhead, dropping down one by one on the barge before shooting off toward the airport again. Someone turned down Peggy Lee’s “Them There Eyes,” and the guests began lining up - the sea of Minutemen along the side of the house, the smaller host of Brotherhood along the shed headquarters, forming a wide aisle in the middle. Curie and Murphy joined the Minutemen next to Rylee, who was wearing a flowing white cocktail dress with a sweetheart top, and who assured them their makeup was holding up.

Preston made his way down the Minutemen line, tightening ties and refolding collars. Lucia did the same on the Brotherhood side, adjusting buckles and brushing crumbs off some of the Scribes. “Straighten up,” she told one of the Initiates. “The officers are here.”

Murphy’s breath caught in her throat. Suddenly, she was nervous. She melted backward instinctively, let some more curious Minutemen fill her space at the front. Piper didn’t notice, but Rylee and Curie did and cast her looks of surprise and reassurance, respectively.

There were a couple of Knights in power armor flanking the Brotherhood party as it moved, and they took up watch positions around the perimeter. The officers came up the hill after them, and Murphy peered between the heads and shoulders to get a look. Proctors Teagan and Ingram were absent, unsurprisingly. Maxson had told her once that Ingram was great at wiggling out of almost every ceremonial event, and Teagan had a habit of getting absolutely wasted at them and running his mouth. Proctor Quinlan was among those arriving, though, wearing a new set of orange-red robes and looking more nervous than Murphy had ever seen him. Beside him was Paladin Brandis, beard immaculately trimmed and black officer’s uniform shining, and behind them were an impassive Lancer-Captain Kells and, to Murphy’s surprise, Knight-Sergeant Gavil and Knight-Captain Cade, both looking thrilled.

Bringing up the rear of the officers were Elder Arthur Maxson and an elderly man Murphy didn’t recognize, wearing the same set of robes as Quinlan. Head Scribe Rothchild, Murphy thought for an instant, before she caught sight of Maxson and everything else fled her mind.

He had on his black officer’s uniform, as always, but what he was wearing over it could only be the full regalia of a Brotherhood Elder. A set of sleeveless, flame-colored robes hung over the flight suit and down to his knees, cinched at his waist by an enormous leather belt with a heavy metal gear at the center in lieu of a buckle. A two-toned cape was draped across his shoulders, a heavy pin holding the orange-red and tan fabric in place. The pin itself had the Brotherhood insignia stamped on it, shining like a standard in the lantern light, and the cape fluttered with his every step.

As he ascended the hill, the Minutemen fell silent and the Brotherhood Scribes and workers from Logistics snapped into salute. Preston and Lucia stepped out to greet him.

“Ad victoriam, Elder,” Lucia said, curling her fist over her heart.

Preston looked a little star-struck for a second, before he, too, saluted, hand to his forehead.
“Welcome back to Spectacle Island, Elder. Officers.”

“General Garvey.” Maxson put his fist across his chest. “Thank you to you and your forces for their work and attendance this evening. Spectacle Island’s fields are an invaluable asset to our troops and our mission here in the Commonwealth, and our alliance makes both the Brotherhood and the Minutemen stronger. I look forward to a partnership for years to come.”

Suddenly there was a hand on Murphy’s shoulder. She turned to find Theo there, spruced up in a leather hat, vest and a colonial duster he must have borrowed from Preston. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m…” Murphy looked down at her feet. “Should I be here? I shouldn’t be here.”

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Theo whispered.

Murphy whipped her head up again and stared at him. “How did you…”

He gave her a guilty smile. “I was in the Dugout, that night you brought him in wearing civvies. I saw the way you danced, how you looked at each other. He’s a lucky guy.”

“He…” Murphy lowered her voice. “That’s not why I’m nervous. We… he and I… it’s…”

Her stuttering was enough to tell the story, and Theo nodded. “You need anything, I’ve got your back, Captain.”

Murphy sighed. “Drinks. And maybe dancing. Probably more drinks. After the fanfare.”

The formalities were over quickly, and the guests began to mingle again, still somewhat sticking to faction lines. Someone turned the record player back up, and some Minutemen began pairing off, spinning slowly around in front of the horn as it blared Etta James. Murphy took Theo’s arm and they joined the throng, her dress cutting a wide circle across the floor.

The pair shared three dances before Theo disappeared to grab drinks and was replaced briefly by Rylee. The two women twisted along to Jimmy Soul, laughing together and encouraging Minutemen officers and soldiers until they joined in. They found one of the new recruits could do a mean impression of the King of Rock and Roll, and Murphy was almost sad to take a break when Theo returned after “All Shook Up.”

“They loosened up fast,” he remarked while she drank deeply from the glass he had brought. It was mutfruit juice and vodka, more juice than alcohol, which Murphy was thankful for. Even if she was nervous, she needed a clear head.

“I don’t think they get much opportunity, but when they do, they sure know how to,” she replied with a grin. “What are the Brotherhood officers up to?”

“The Lancer-Captain, Paladin and Knight-Captain are over by the food,” Theo said, gesturing toward the shed. “That Proctor, Quentin, was it? He’s hardly left the shadow of the Head Scribe, and they’re off on a tour of the nearby fields and irrigation systems with the Elder, the two from Logistics and General Garvey.”

“Quinlan,” Murphy corrected him. “Not surprising. The Proctor’s probably worried he’s about to be demoted or something.”

“General Garvey wanted to introduce you to Rothchild, when you have a chance.”

Murphy took a deep breath and blew it out her nostrils. “Right. Okay.”
Most of the Brotherhood attendees were still munching on trays of food, spectating shyly while the Minutemen danced. Murphy spotted Cade leaving the shed and decided to seize the opportunity, planting herself strategically in his path.

“ Paladin. Aspirant.” Cade shook his head, embarrassed. “Murphy. I can’t say I’m surprised to find you here, in the middle of the fray, as usual.”

“Knight-Captain.” Murphy gave him a slight curtsy, then held her hand out. “Long time, no see. Care to dance?”

He laughed and accepted her hand. “Happy to.”

She led him onto the floor, and a couple of Minutemen followed her lead, extending invitations to nearby Scribes and Knights. Curie grabbed Kells, who stiffened up but didn’t immediately reject the woman he had once labeled an “abomination.” The doctor took advantage of his surprise, and before he knew it, the two were in the middle of the dance floor next to Cade and Murphy.

“Come on, Kells, move your feet!” Cade encouraged him. Kells shot all of them looks of disgust, but found he could not escape and was forced to finish out the song. Behind his back, Curie smiled at Murphy and rolled her eyes.

Cade took over dancing with Curie as soon as Kells stalked off, and Murphy waded through the lively crowd to the edge once again, cheeks flushed with exertion and delight. She saw that Lucia and Gavil had returned, and Piper was cozied up between the two of them, deep in questions about crop yields and plans for trade route expansions along the Commonwealth coast.

“Murphy!”

She turned at the sound of her name to find Preston waving her over. He was next to the greenhouse, with Quinlan and Rothchild, but Maxson was nowhere to be seen. She took a deep breath and headed their direction, consciously trying not to trip.

“Head Scribe Reginald Rothchild, I have the honor of presenting Captain Murphy with the Commonwealth Minutemen,” Preston said warmly, when she joined them and settled her hand under the crook of his elbow. “Maybe more commonly known by a few other titles.”

“Of course.” Rothchild inclined his head slightly. “Ad victoriam, vault dweller. Even we in the Capital Wasteland have heard of you and your exploits.”

Murphy curtsied in return, ignoring Quinlan’s judgmental sniff. “Head Scribe. It’s my pleasure. How was your trip up from D.C.?”

“Long, cramped, and altogether too dull,” Rothchild answered with a faint smile. “Not that I’m eager for a mutant attack, I suppose. I was glad to stand on solid ground once again.”

Quinlan cleared his throat. “If you’re feeling as if you need to sit down or have something to drink, I can-”

Rothchild put a hand up and cut him off. “Enough, Proctor. I may be 76, but I’m not about to keel over. Go get yourself something to drink, if you’re so eager.”

Quinlan’s mouth flapped open and closed a few times, but in the end he drifted off toward the refreshments table. Rothchild watched him go, shaking his head. “He means well, but he always slips back into the nervous Squire he used to be when I’m around. Pity.”
He turned back to Preston. “Might I have a word with the Captain alone, General? I promise I’ll return her in one piece.”

Preston glanced at Murphy. She nodded, and he stepped back and gave a salute before disappearing off toward the dance floor.

Rothchild offered Murphy his arm, and she took it hesitantly. The Head Scribe led her down the hill toward the nearest fields, humming along to the record player’s strains of Billie Holiday as they went. His head was bald, his skin wrinkled and pale from time spent indoors, but his eyes were lively enough to belong to a younger man and he held himself proudly.

“You’ve caused quite a stir in our Commonwealth contingent,” he said finally, as they passed rows of harvested razorgrain stalks.

Murphy swallowed and kept her eyes forward. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” he replied with a chuckle. “I’m an old man, Captain, but I’m not deaf yet, and there are voices around me that aren’t quiet about their feelings toward you. Not to mention those who would rather whisper.”

“And?” Murphy steadied Rothchild as they stepped over some uneven ground. “I may have been Brotherhood for a while, but I’m not now. Whatever internal affairs you’re dealing with are your own.”

“Indeed they are.” Rothchild sighed. “Resigning was an intelligent move on your part, I must admit. Selfless, even. I commend you for it.”

Murphy stopped walking abruptly. “But?”

“But the damage you hoped to avoid has already been done.” He stopped as well and turned to her. “The seeds of doubt have been sown, the façade cracked. How would you suggest fixing it?”

“If it was only a façade, then maybe it’s a good thing it’s been cracked,” Murphy countered.

He laughed out loud at that. “You are a sharp one. I can see why he likes you. Captain Murphy, you crawled into this world through the rubble of your old one. Surely you’ve learned by now that life has a delicate balance in it, one that is easily disrupted by even a single individual. It was a single person on either side who launched the nuclear warheads that ended the life you knew and created the next. Just as it was a single man who led the Brotherhood into the Capital Wasteland 35 years ago, a single man who purified the water in the Potomac basin, a single man who beat back a tide of super mutants and made the sacrifices necessary to bring our chapter back into the fold.”

Rothchild paused and looked at her sideways. “A single woman who united the Commonwealth behind one purpose.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes. “None of them did any of those things alone.”

“Precisely.” Rothchild sounded more and more pleased with her every passing second. “Owyn had Sarah, myself and his chapter, James had his daughter, his scientific team and the Brotherhood. Arthur had all of us, the cumulative strength that we could summon, and with time, the support of the Council of Elders. You had all of that and more.”

“With all due respect, Head Scribe, what is your point?”

“While each of you served as a beacon, a symbol for the combined powers and dreams of the people
at your back, such support is hard-won and quickly lost,” Rothchild remarked, looking up at the stars and moon above them. “Additionally, that power could very easily have been pointed in the wrong direction, or misused. Perhaps, at times, it was. It is the duty of those such as myself to ensure this doesn’t happen. It is my duty to ensure that my people endure.”

He turned back to her and spoke more plainly. “Arthur cares for you. He can’t deny it, and the conclusion of the Elders is that, because of this weakness, he is losing sight of what the Brotherhood of Steel stands for. Whether you agree with them or not, whether this was your intention or not, that is what they have decided, and an Elder called into question is one who treads on shaky ground. You know this.”

Murphy drew herself up to her full height. “Do you speak for them?”


“Then what do you want from me?”

“I want you to consider my advice.”

“Then by all means, give it.”

He gestured at the fields around them. “All of this. The alliances built, the shared labors, could easily be lost if the Elders believe you are the common denominator in the decisions Arthur has made. At the very least, each of his choices will be reevaluated through the eyes of the Council, and at worst, he will be stripped of his command. I know you don’t want this to crumble, and neither does your General, or any of the others dancing away on that hill back there. I’ve seen nothing from you so far to indicate you have a hand on the scale, but I’ve known Arthur since he was a boy, and I know his heart. You are not the first to draw his attention, and you will not be the last- you are simply the latest in a line of distractions that he has overcome in his years as our chapter’s leader. I have every confidence in him to move beyond this, just as I have every confidence in you to do the right thing and step back when you need to. You’ve already taken the first step. I’m asking you to be ready to take a few more.”

“You…” Murphy caught herself and lowered her voice. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were threatening the Minutemen and the alliance, Head Scribe.”

“Hardly, Captain.” He smiled, not unkindly. “But I feel I’ve taken up enough of your time, and you have much to consider. Shall we rejoin the festivities? It’s not often I get to tell the story of Elder Owyn Lyons and his sweep across the continent to a crowd who hasn’t heard it before.”

Murphy smiled sweetly in return and walked him back up the hill. When they reached the edge of the celebration, he patted her on the arm. “Thank you for your time, child. Think about what I’ve said.”

She waited until he walked out of earshot before muttering, “I’m older than you,” and turning on her heel, heading back down the hill.

Chapter End Notes

I may regret this, but I made a Tumblr blog to partner with this fic, at nightingaelic.tumblr.com. Come follow, or don't, I'll keep posting here, of course.
Our Calling

Chapter Summary

In which Knight Lucia really gets into planning out Spectacle Island’s mutfruit orchard.

Piper must have caught the huffy look on Murphy’s face as she abandoned the Citadel Day party, and the reporter followed Murphy down along the lantern-lit path that snaked over the fields toward the beached barge now serving as a vertibird helipad.

“Slow down, Blue!” she called out, tugging the hem of the red sequin dress over her knees as she skittered down the hill. “Where are you going? You haven’t pointed out anyone who might be a Railroad agent yet, and loverboy-”

Murphy stopped short to turn around and Piper ran smack into the front of her, sending her press cap and pencil flying. Immediately, Murphy felt terrible, and she steadied the girl before stooping down to retrieve the hat and writing utensil.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I just lost my head for a second back there. Needed to get away.”

Piper put a hand on her hip. “What’s up?”

They resumed walking, a bit slower this time, and Murphy gave her the short version as they went. Piper’s eyes hardened considerably. “What a jackass. You want me to whip up an exposé?”

Murphy sighed and hugged her torso, goosebumps prickling along her arms. “What good would it do? Even if the whole Commonwealth believes that my conversation with Rothchild actually happened, at best it would lend the rumors about me and Maxson legitimacy, and at worst it would throw the whole alliance into chaos. Probably both, if I’m lucky.”

“I know, Blue.” Piper made a face. “I wasn’t being serious. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

She pointed toward a rest bench along an empty field, and the two sat down after brushing some dirt off the seat.

Piper looked up at the stars and chuckled. “Your life is really something else, you know that? If I wrote about even half the things you’ve gotten up to, I’d have been run out of Diamond City for spreading lies a long time ago.”

Murphy looked up at the night sky as well. It was a marvel as always, a steady stream of sparks in a vast, indigo expanse. Views like this were hard to come by, in pre-war Boston.

“Yeah,” she admitted, nostalgia creeping into her voice a tiny bit. “Just wish it was a little less complicated, sometimes.”

Piper glanced over at her with a smirk. “Do you, though?”

Murphy chuckled and ran her hands over her skirt. “Back in 2077, I would have given anything to be at a party like this, wearing a dress like this. Rubbing elbows with the people of the day, eating jam and scones, drinking and laughing. I just wanted the simple things.”
“Was life really that much simpler 200 years ago?”

Murphy sighed. “No. It really wasn’t. The world was falling down around me, and I knew it, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was happy in my little bubble of life.”

She looked over at Piper questioningly. “Is it wrong to miss that, every now and then?”

Piper thought for a bit. “I think it’d be stupid to say it’s wrong,” she said finally. “And I know you’ve had more than your share of hardships, since you woke up. But think for a second, Blue. Does your life right now, however complicated it is, have happiness in it?”

Murphy didn’t need a second. “Yeah. Yeah, it does.”

“Do you want to keep it?”

Murphy could hear the real question behind that one. Are you willing to give up some of yours so that the rest of us can keep ours?

“Yes.”

The reporter shrugged. “Then you already know what you’ve got to do.”

There was a beetle making its way up Murphy’s dress, enamored with the green satin and its stark contrast to the crisp grass of the island. Murphy picked it up and studied it, watching the little black dot scurry across her palm, her knuckles, then her palm again.

“Do you ever think it’ll be over?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“The sacrificing. The endless fighting, bickering, disagreements.” Murphy let the beetle escape into the grass at her feet. “I thought maybe the bombs would be a wake-up call, if they ever fell. Humanity would stop, realize they’d done wrong, and try to keep life from consuming itself over and over again. Maybe we wouldn’t be so hungry for death, wouldn’t be so afraid of the people on the other side of the ocean, or the other side of the street. Maybe there wouldn’t be any more husbands, sisters, parents, anyone going off to fight and not coming back, wouldn’t have to give up the things we love so we could assure ourselves we would see another sunrise.”

She raised her head again, toward the stars. “I thought maybe it would be the last war.”

Piper bit her lip and put a hand on Murphy’s shoulder. “There’s no such thing as a last war, Blue.”

The music atop the hill stopped a short while later, and Rothchild began to relate the great journey of Elder Owyn Lyons from Lost Hills to the Capital Wasteland. Piper left Murphy alone on the bench and went to listen. Murphy didn’t mind. She was more than happy to watch the stars shift overhead and focus on her own breathing, remembering Danse’s instructions on meditation. In. And out.

It didn’t calm her mind, but her heart slowed for a few minutes. There were other figures drifting down off the hilltop, away from the Head Scribe’s story. Most of them looked like Minutemen taking smoke breaks, and a handful of Knights headed down to the western beach to dip their toes. A couple or two snuck off, giggling, toward the mutfruit orchard, and Murphy cast sour looks at them.
after they passed her. Must be nice, she thought.

When she was sure she was ready, she stood up from the bench and smoothed out her gown.
Rothchild’s voice rang out, and she picked up the story as she ascended the hill.

“It was as we feared,” he was saying. “The old government’s great bastion of order, of warcraft, lay in ruins. Its great walls were broken, its halls host to all manner of creatures, and they threw themselves on us as we set foot in there. They should have known better than to challenge the defenders of the West, the scourge of the Pitt, and they met fire and fury at the end of our guns.”

Murphy approached the back of the crowd that was gathered around the Head Scribe, standing in the lantern light to listen. She could make out Rothchild at the center, his back against the porch that overlooked the island’s pier.

“We thought our journey might have been for naught,” he went on. “But the people of the old world were clever. Clever enough to hide many of their best secrets deep, deep underground, and bold enough to bury them just beneath their centers of politics and policy. It was there, in the sub-levels of what they called ‘the Pentagon,’ that we found the technology that was our calling and our salvation.”

“Prime!” A Scribe in the crowd raised a fist in the air, then brought it down over her heart with a thump.

Rothchild chuckled. “Yes, yes, Prime. But more than that, we found the beginnings of a lifetime of study, in subjects across the board. It was there that our chapter began, and it is there that our chapter endures.”

He brought his own fist up to his chest. “Ad victoriam, brothers and sisters. Elder Lyons would be proud, to see how far we’ve come.”

Half the crowd echoed him and straightened up to return the salute. Murphy scanned them, and found Maxson doing the same, next to Preston at the corner of the porch.

The Minutemen opted for applause, and Rothchild spread his hands out in a gesture of thanks. “I appreciate you all humoring an old man, but this night is not just for me. Eat, drink, celebrate- but most importantly, celebrate the good you can do for each other, as our alliance endures.”

The crowd began to break up, and Rylee put another record onto the record player. “This I Swear” by the Skyliners began to play, and Murphy let Curie pull her into a waltz.

Halfway through the song, the doctor’s eyes began to sparkle. “Maxson,” she whispered. “Ses yeux errant. He’s watching you.”

She spun Murphy around, and for the first time that evening, Murphy and the Elder of the Brotherhood locked eyes.

It was over in an instant- her whisked away into the dance, him pulled back into the conversation he was having with Preston, Paladin Brandis and Knight Lucia, but that look crossed continents, spoke volumes, whispered things Murphy didn’t dare put voice to that night. Things she wasn’t sure she’d ever get the opportunity to say, now.

“Shit,” she muttered.

“Quoi?”
“Nothing.” Murphy shook her head, before an idea struck her. “Actually, can you do me a favor?”

She jerked her head toward Rothchild, who was still talking and laughing with some younger Scribes and curious Minutemen. “Can you get him to dance with you? Distract him?”

Curie frowned. “Perhaps if Rylee will put on a song slower than this… but I fear we are already running short on records containing waltzes and serenades.”

“He seems spry enough,” Murphy replied. “Just don’t break him, or we’ll be in a world of trouble.”

“Très bien.” Curie nodded. “Though I don’t think it is possible to break the Brotherhood, if Monsieur Rothchild’s story is anything to go by.”

“Let’s hope not.”

When the Skyliners had finished crooning, the doctor glided over toward the Head Scribe and offered him a winning smile and her arm. Murphy made a beeline in the opposite direction, toward the four officers. Brandis caught sight of her first and inclined his head slightly. “Captain.”

Murphy nodded back, avoiding eye contact with Maxson. “General, Paladin, Knight. Elder. Enjoying yourselves? Whoever put together the spread in the shed needs to cater my next party.”

Preston smiled and held his beer up. “And what are we celebrating? Housewarming, birthday, engagement?”

Maxson, who had been taking a sip of his own drink, briefly choked on it. Brandis slapped him on the back with vigor, and his cheeks turned an attractive shade of red.

Murphy raised an eyebrow at them. “Victory, hopefully.”

Brandis smiled. “Indeed. Ad victoriam.”

She smiled sweetly back. “Would you two be willing to give me a moment alone with the Elder and Knight Lucia? There’s something regarding the power source for the island I’d like to ask them about.”

The Paladin frowned and Preston looked surprised, but they both nodded and moved off toward the food again. Murphy stepped in close to Maxson and Lucia and looked around suspiciously.

“‘There’s a radio tower on the other side of the orchard,’” she murmured. “Can you two get to it, within the hour, without drawing too much attention?’”

Lucia narrowed her eyes. “What’s this about, Murphy? Is there something wrong with the boat?”

Maxson cleared his throat. “Would you do me the honor of sharing this dance, Knight?”

Momentarily flustered, Lucia let him pull her out onto the dance floor. Murphy went to grab a drink before heading down the hill toward the copse of mutfruit.

Maxson and Lucia were climbing up the hill with the sonic signal emitter on it within 20 minutes of Murphy’s departure from the party. Lucia had slipped into proud Logistics management mode again,
and was explaining the amount of space the Scribes had planned for between the rows of mutfruit to allow for future growth.

“Oh, obviously, we can prune them back if need be,” she was saying as Murphy rounded the corner of the little shack beneath the radio tower. “Senior Scribe Neriah is looking to try and graft some of the crunchy variety onto some existing trees, to see if they take better than the ones we tried to plant. I think if we-”

She stopped when she caught sight of Murphy, waiting patiently next to a tree in the shadows.

“What’s this about the boat?”

“Thank you Knight,” Maxson said, a smile dancing around the corners of his mouth. “If you wouldn’t mind, I feel the Captain has something she needs to tell me in confidence.”

Lucia looked back and forth between the two of them, before shaking her head in exasperation. “As you wish, Elder. I’m sure the Head Scribe will be looking for you before long, however.”

“I have no doubt,” he murmured. Lucia saluted the pair of them and took her leave.

Murphy crossed her arms and took a step out into the starlight. “Elder.”

He took a step forward as well. “Captain.”

She sighed. “Your Head Scribe tossed a threat my way tonight.”

Whatever traces of a smile Maxson was hiding disappeared. “Did this threat have something to do with a supposed relationship between you and I?”

“It… it did.” Murphy looked at him suspiciously. “You knew about this?”

“Knew, no.” He stepped over to the nearest mutfruit tree, felt the unfurled leaves along one of its branches. “I had my own theories about Head Scribe Rothchild’s intentions for an official visit. Following the attempted challenge of Litany from the Lancer-Captain, it was only a matter of time before he moved to a misguided escalation.”

Murphy joined him beside the tree. Lucia had been right. There were little buds forming on it, promising a lacing of white flowers and the eventual growth of plum-like fruit. The bees would probably love it.

Maxson abandoned the branch and instead ran his fingers hesitantly up her cheek, sank them into the waves of her hair. “You have no reason to fear him, or those above us. Trust me.”

She looked up into his eyes and found them as brilliant as the stars, the storm in them momentarily calmed. He was confident, he was earnest, and in his own way she could see he was pleading with her- but it wasn’t enough, and her heart broke.

“I can’t take that chance, Arthur,” she said, taking his hand away. “You know this is too much to risk.”

She gestured at the orchard, the party on the hill, the island. “Look at this. When you flew into the Commonwealth, would you ever, in a million years, have imagined this being possible? God, did you even know the lengths we would have to go to make this a possibility? You can’t throw this away for… for us. I won’t let you.”

“Murphy.”
“I said it was doomed.” She turned away and marched into the middle of the aisle between the trees. “Months ago, now. I shouldn’t have led you on, I shouldn’t have given over to what… what we…”

“Murphy.”

“Christ, I put everyone in danger, I put you in danger, because I couldn’t-”

“Murphy.”

His tone was insistent enough to turn her head back. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t tried to argue, didn’t even have the courtesy to look betrayed or as lost as she felt right now, just stood there with acceptance on his face.

“I understand,” he said softly.

The music on the western hill changed to something a little jazzier, and Murphy stared at him as the voice of Frank Sinatra floated over to where they were standing.

“Blue moon, you saw me standing alone,
Without a dream in my heart,
Without a love of my own.
Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for,
You heard me saying a prayer for
Someone I really could care for.”

Maxson held his hand out to her. Against her better judgment, she took it. Out between the mutfruit rows they danced, the woman out of time and the man who, against all odds, had managed to win her.

“What did you and Danse say?” Murphy asked, head against his heart, feeling it beating beneath her ear. “You take time…”

“You find forgiveness, in yourself and others.”

“And you move on.”

She lifted her head up to look at him. “If you’ve got any other ideas about what to do, I’m willing to hear them.”

Maxson thought for a minute, eyes watching the far-off hill over her head. “We could announce our intentions to wed.”

A burst of surprised laughter escaped Murphy’s mouth. “I’m sorry, what? No.”

“Does the idea offend you?”

“No, it’s-” Murphy backtracked. “Arthur, I had a marriage. A good one. I’m not ready for that, and I
don’t want to be… whatever title an Elder’s spouse gets. You know that.”

She smiled apologetically. “Besides, I thought you said the Council of Elders needed to approve your wife before you married her. I think we can safely say they don’t approve of me.”

“True.” He spun her out over the grass, then wrapped her up in his arms again. “Your turn, Captain.”

“We could… run away.”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know.” Murphy shrugged. “North, maybe. Try and find where I grew up, in Minnesota. Or west. You’re from the west, you could take me back to where you were born. Show me California today.”

He smiled at that. “The desert and life in a bunker would not agree with you.”

“Try me.”

Maxson chuckled. “You could never leave the Commonwealth before the work you set before you was finished, and neither could I.”

“No,” Murphy admitted. “Fine, that’s fight or flight covered. Got anything else?”

“I confess I’m at a loss, Captain.”

She studied him, and he returned her gaze.

“Was it enough?” she asked. “What we had?”

“Does it matter?” he replied.

“It does to me.”

His kiss took her by surprise. For a split second, Murphy was willing to fight, to run, whatever it would take to keep him pressed against her, his hands on her hips, in her hair, curving around her neck in a way that showed he knew her, had known her, wanted her, her.

He pulled away.

“Captain,” he said with a slight bow, before offering her his arm.

She declined.

Back at the Castle, Murphy carefully shimmied out of the green dress and bundled it safely away. She wasn’t sure if she would ever get another chance to wear it, but it had served its purpose admirably all the same.

As there were currently no overnight patients in the infirmary, Curie had offered Murphy one of the patient beds for the evening. Murphy had accepted gratefully during the daytime, but now that night had fallen, the laboratory and surgical equipment lying about on various darkened tables was a little
unsettling. The atmosphere and the events of the evening were weighing on her, and once she had changed into her comfy clothes, Murphy sat down on the edge of the infirmary bed and tried to push it all out of her mind.

With MacCready the stillness came easily to her, but the doubt, despair crept into her as she tried it now, alone. *In. And out. In, and out. In and out. In. Out.*

*Strawberry.*

“Fuck.” Murphy opened her eyes. “You’re not real. It’s not real.”

As if exasperated with her disbelief, Nate crossed his arms. He was the same as the last time he’d spoken to her in the waking world. Easy smile, raised eyebrows, sitting cross-legged on the bed across from her.

Murphy scooted back from the edge of her bed, then sprang forward again just as quickly. There was anger, guilt, heartache running through her veins tonight, and she balled her hands into fists, furious with the figure that dared to appear in front of her.

“What are you here again?” she demanded. “I told you to leave. I killed you, I pushed you back into my dreams. You’re not him, you’ll never be- him. He’s…”

She looked away, resisting the tears that were welling up. “I thought… I thought I was getting better.”

*I told you, strawberry.*

She could feel the hand on her cheek, she could *feel it-*

*He has to choose. Or you must choose for him.*

“Nate, I don’t *fucking* know-”

*It’s time.*

“-what you’re-”

Nate wasn’t there anymore, and neither was the bed he had been sitting on. The walls of the Castle were gone, the infirmary, the medical instruments, even the night. There was sunshine beating down on her, rays ricocheting off a broken world of concrete and rebar and silent high rises.

Blinded, she spun around. A bullet whizzed past her shoulder. It took her a second to register, until another glanced off a chunk of cement to her left. Murphy instinctively dove for cover, but there were already two people behind the nearest pile of rubble- a severe-looking woman with graying blonde hair and what looked like black Brotherhood Scribe robes on, and a woman with a long, dark braid down her back and an enormous rifle.

“Heart!” Murphy stuck out a hand to get their attention, but it wasn’t there. She wasn’t there.

“Get down!” The blonde woman forcibly pulled the other one around, and Murphy gasped. The woman with the gun was Elizabeth Titus.

“Check your goddamn six,” the blonde woman said in a harsh tone. “They know you’re out. Our chances of survival are dwindling by the second. Are you even planning on using that gun?”

“I don’t even know who you are, *Outcast,*” Elizabeth shot back, spitting the last word out with
considerable venom. “Why should I be taking orders from you?”

The blonde shook her head and grabbed Elizabeth, digging her fingers into the woman’s shoulders. “Listen to me. They will kill you. You need to get out of here, take that knowledge you absorbed and use it to survive. Get out of the crossroads and get as far away from here as you can. Don’t come back.”

Elizabeth pushed her back, her face a mix of anger and fear. “Tell me what’s going on. The last thing I remember… I can’t…”

“You don’t know what we were doing,” the Outcast hissed. “They wanted you dead, Titus. Now get your ass to the metro station over there as soon as-”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence. A bullet tore into the crown of her head as it bobbed above the safety of the rubble, and her blonde hair disappeared under an explosion of red. Elizabeth Titus screamed, but Murphy could only watch, horrified, as the concrete world dissolved and red swam up to coat her eyes.

The vision was over as quickly as it had come, and Murphy fell back into the bed of the Castle infirmary. She panted, open-mouthed, as the world stilled and a wash of blue chased away the film of blood in her mind’s eye.

Strawberry.
Too Far Gone

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy gets her feet wet.

Despite the late hour, Murphy fairly sprinted out to the desk beneath the Radio Freedom broadcast tower, a small piece of paper clutched in her hand. She fidgeted, barefoot, in the courtyard until the DJ had wrapped up his middle-of-the-night newscast and put on some more violin music. As soon as he switched off his microphone, she practically shoved him out of his chair.

“Take a break,” she ordered when he protested. The young man grumbled, but he sauntered off to have a cigarette by one of the guards.

Murphy jammed the headset on over her ears and switched over to the non-broadcast equipment. She fiddled with the dials until it matched what was written on the paper scrap—Channel 72-A, 156.625 MHz—and switched the microphone back on.

“Come in, Catherine, this is the Captain, location Beantown, over,” she hailed. “10-33 everyone else, if there is anyone else on this channel. Over.”

Nothing but static. Murphy hunched over, counted the seconds until it had been half a minute, then tried again. “Catherine, come in, this is the Captain, from Far Harbor? You got your ears on? Please say you copy, it’s important. Over.”

Static again, then a gruff, male voice took over the line briefly. “Nadine, get your ass up, I ain’t spendin’ all night listenin’ to a cherry from the ‘wealth whinin’ on the CB. Over.”

Before Murphy could respond, the sleepy voice of the redheaded steamboat captain crackled through the headphones. “Alright, alright, Zed, I’m awake now. Happy? Next time I see you, I’ll look like an old hag, seeing as I’m losing all my beauty sleep. And the rest of you, scat, you heard the Captain—10-33 on all of ya. Over.”

At least three more distinct voices chimed in to say “10-4, Captain,” and “10-7, Captain.” Murphy wasn’t sure if they were talking to Nadine or her.

“There you go, love,” Nadine said kindly, when the line was supposedly clear. “Where’s the fire? Over.”

“N-no fire,” Murphy stammered. “I just, I had… you know, I can’t really explain, I just need to know—have you heard from Eli- Lizzy, lately? Over.”

There was a short stretch of silence before the woman on the other end responded, much more awake this time. “Yesterday, actually. Why? Over.”

“And… and she’s okay? Over.”

“You’re spooking me, icicle,” Nadine replied. “Yes, she was okay. Radioed in from some place in Appalachia, said she was picking through a cave system looking for a vault that’s up that way. Terrible reception, hilly as all hell and covered in trees. Now what’s all this about? Over.”
Appalachia caves. Hills. Trees. Murphy shook her head. “She’s not in a city somewhere? Someplace called the… the crossroads? Over.”

“Well, not unless she was flat-out lying to me, and she knows that’s not something I take kindly to. Captain, all due respect, but what the fuck are you doing, calling me up in the middle of the night to ask me about Lizzy? You lost your mind? Over.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Murphy said quickly. “I, um… I heard… something, tonight, when I was in a… a bar. This guy was telling a story about some woman that matched her description getting shot at in a place called the crossroads. I just wanted to make sure she was okay. Over.”

“Aw, you’re plum sweet as a cinnamon roll.” She could hear the smile in Nadine’s voice. “Lizzy’s a big girl. Lots of folks shoot at her, and she’s yet to meet one who can put her down and keep her down. But you knew that. You just lonely or something? I can send one of the boys who was on earlier to come keep you company down in the Commonwealth, if you’re aching for a breaking-in. Actually, your merc would probably be happy to take care of you, in that sense. Over.”


Murphy glanced across the courtyard at the DJ, who was tapping his foot impatiently. He signaled her to wrap it up.

“Sorry, Catherine, I’ve got to go,” she said. “Again, thanks. Over and out.”

“Boo. Aye-aye, Captain. Over and out.”

Murphy, Piper and Theo made their way back to Diamond City the next morning. Murphy had some impressive bags under her eyes. Neither of her traveling companions asked why.

Preston and Curie had seen them off, the former with a grateful salute and the latter with a peck on the cheek. Murphy hadn’t spoken to either of them, about Rothchild or Maxson or what had possessed her during the night. She hadn’t said much of anything to anyone, and no one had questioned it. A lot of the Minutemen were hung over, and she blended right in.

Strawberry.

Murphy tried not to jump at every little noise as the three travelers made their way up Summer Street, glancing around in the shade of the 90 and eyeing the Common suspiciously as they passed it by. Nate wasn’t visible, but he was there, all the same, in every oblong shadow, every cry of a crow overhead.

When she froze, heart hammering, at the glimpse of a stray cat rounding the corner of a dilapidated bank in the Back Bay, she stopped and shook her head. It was a dream. It wasn’t real. Nadine had confirmed it. The long-lost Paladin was fine, and bad dreams could be chalked up to stress and the demons that followed her.

Piper paused and reached out to touch her shoulder. “You okay, Blue?”
“Yeah.”

The reporter pursed her lips and nodded, probably drawing her own conclusions about Murphy’s distracted state of mind. “Okay. Not far now.”

It was raining by the time they made it back to the stadium, and all three were drenched to the bone from the spring shower. Murphy shook the water in her coat out before approaching Danny Sullivan’s desk. “Is MacCready on duty?”

The gatekeeper jerked his head to the northwest. “He and a handful of the boys went up to Flagon Tunnel an hour or so ago with that kid who lives there, Isaac? He came through yesterday complaining about raiders moving in nearby, then said he wasn’t going to run goods through here unless we helped clear them off.”

Murphy nodded and pulled her collar up again. She saw Piper safely to the front door of Publick Occurrences and said goodbye to Theo. He gave her an encouraging smile, rain dripping off his hat on either side, before disappearing into a nearby alley.

Home Plate was empty, Duncan likely at school. Murphy set her pack down by the door and stood, listening to the silent house for a minute. Muffled sounds of the marketplace outside. Rain beating lazily against the corrugated metal roof and walls. The wooden slats of the floor creaking as they stretched, shifting with the change in humidity. The Nuka-Cola clock Piper had gifted her ticking on the book case, over the books and magazines where she had stood not so long ago with Arthur and talked about poetry.

Strawberry.

She shook her head and went back outside.

It was just a short walk north to the waterlogged thoroughfare. Murphy approached its east end cautiously, Alpha and Omega at the ready. The rain had washed away anything that could indicate the Diamond City security guards had come through, but there was a dim light flickering against the side of a rusty van blocking the entrance.

Murphy held her breath for a second as she waded into the scummy water that lapped at the sides of the tunnel, biting her tongue as it rushed into her boots. Her Pip-Boy crackled for a second, but she silenced it and pulled her coat sleeve down to mask the Geiger counter’s blinking indicator. She dragged her feet and hoped the rain would cover the sound of splashing.

The light cast on the van was coming from a campsite that had been jammed inside the tunnel’s right wall, where a small fire was fading in a circle of concrete blocks. The camp was full of electronics that were occupying every available surface—chair, table, mattress— and there were wet boot prints in the few open spaces of floor that Murphy could see. She bent down and examined the closest. Three separate treads. No signs of struggle. The trader and guards, probably, and planning to return soon if they felt comfortable enough to leave the fire going.

The pavement sloped further up the tunnel, and Murphy took cover behind a car once she was clear of the water. She crouched down to confirm there were no ferals waiting to grab her ankles before removing her boots one by one and wringing out her socks. Once finished, her toes still squelched unpleasantly, but not too loudly.
She followed the trails of rain that were running from uphill and hugged the undercarriage of an overturned truck, eyeing the street outside. There was a female corpse lying face down in the middle of it, blood running away from her ponytail and chest into the rain. Judging by the sleeve tattoos and rusted metal armor, she was a raider.

Murphy flattened herself against the cracked tires and took a few deep breaths. She had always hated fighting raiders. Since the first group in Concord and the hell that had been the Corvega factory, she avoided them when possible. Most of them were kids, grown bored with or cast out of their settlements, addicted to chems they couldn't afford. They wound up wrapped around the finger of some older man or woman who used them as cannon fodder and fed them just enough scraps and lies to string them along. Ruthless and sadistic, or too far gone to even realize they were pointing their guns and knives at other people.

She swallowed hard and sprinted up the hill to the next bit of cover, vaulting over an ancient railing to duck into an alcove between an apartment building and a boarded-up café with an orange awning. Breathing fast, she pressed herself into the concrete corner.

The tunnel entrance remained silent. Painted advertisements for the Boston Bugle and Grey Tortoise cigarettes glistened under the sheen of rain across the street. An enormous bust in the art deco style looked down over the dead raider, a taciturn observer.

Suddenly, a piece of brick clattered to the ground at Murphy’s feet. The sound echoed around the walls of the tunnel, loud over the rainfall. She looked up just in time to see a head and arm disappearing behind the roof lip of the building across the road, followed by frantic, muffled voices and the unmistakable war cry of a raider at street level.

Murphy had her guns up by the time the first figure rounded the corner, but he led with his blade and Omega went flying. Bloodshot eyes set in tattooed diamonds glazed over when Alpha's shot caught him in the throat. He dropped his machete and fell to his knees, screams turning to gurgles.

The second one tripped over her friend. When her pipe pistol skittered away, she reached for the machete. The bones of her hand and shoulder disappeared under puddles of glowing plasma, and the sound that left her was barely human.

Gunfire tore at the corner of the alcove, and Murphy kicked the still-writhing bodies out into the street. Her stomach turned, and she tasted acid. She spat it out and crouched against the wall, leveling shots at the heads of the two who had rushed her. “No, no no no, no! What the fuck?!” someone screamed.

The rain in the alley was running red and green now, the glow of the plasma mixing and fading in the water. Murphy was vaguely aware of some figures popping up over the lip of the building opposite her, and the squish and thud of another body hitting the ground somewhere nearby. There was blood dripping on her jeans, running down her arm.

Strawberry.

Her hair was plastered to her face. She wiped it away, and the whole world turned red.

“They’ve got us pinned down!”

The man’s voice was right in Murphy’s left ear, and she whipped her head toward it. A figure in power armor was crouched there, behind a metal barricade with a familiar crest of wings, gears and a sword on it. The rain was gone, but the bullets were still flying.
“I can see that, Vargas!” a woman responded on the right. Murphy turned in time to see her jam another fusion cell into the chamber of her laser rifle. “Where the hell is Dusk? Wasn’t she supposed to be covering us?”

“Negative,” Vargas replied, bobbing his head up momentarily to look over the barrier at a skyline that wasn’t familiar. “She had to fall back when Kodiak took a grenade. Glade too.”

“Colvin?”

“He’s gone.”

The woman cursed. “Just you, me and Gallows? Well, we’ve had worse odds. What do you think, Knight-Captain?”

Another figure in power armor on the other side of her gave a thumbs up before slapping his own laser rifle. “Hooah.”

Murphy couldn’t see her face, but she could swear the woman was smiling under her helmet. “Hooah it is. Let’s show the Enclave who they’re dealing with.”

As one, the three rose, yelling, from their cover and vaulted over the barricade. Even though Murphy screamed, none of them saw the incoming missiles until it was too late.

The dust began to settle, and though she knew it wasn’t real, Murphy swore she could feel it coating her lungs. Hesitantly, she stood and looked over the barrier.

Through the fog of war, two figures emerged, stepping carefully among the wreckage of the three Brotherhood soldiers. They were wearing spotless uniforms- knee-high leather boots, dark officer’s caps and pressed jackets with three brass buttons down the left side. As they drew closer, Murphy tensed. The hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood up. Something about them was eerily familiar, and at the same time viscerally terrifying.

Before she could make their faces out, dust obscured them once again, and the rain and the buildings of Boston returned. Acid was still stinging Murphy’s mouth. Alpha was gone, somewhere on the ground with the mess of bodies. More screaming, and wild footsteps pounding down the street toward her. Two sets. “You’re mine now, motherfucker!” Gunshots from the roof. Another body falling.

Murphy picked up the machete and gripped it with both hands as hard as she could. Pain shot up her arm. It was heavier than she expected.

She stepped out into the street to greet the remaining raider. This man’s eyes were bloodshot too, sunken in, premature wrinkles from the sun and the chems lining his face. Mouth open, teeth broken, shrieking incoherently. Empty gun with a bayonet held high.

Murphy leaned forward and shoved the machete through his stomach. The shrieking stopped, but the raider kept going, pushing all the way up to the weapon’s handle, howling noiselessly into Murphy’s face as he went.

Just as he ran out of blade to push against, his face changed, twisted, and it was Nate looking back at her mouthing one word. Strawberry.

She pulled the machete out and used every ounce of her strength to cut his head off. It fell to the ground, and the body followed, splashing blood and water all over her knees.
Murphy let the machete fall from her hand. The street was silent, save the rain.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, but eventually she heard footsteps running up to her, scattering the puddles as they went. Heavy, panicked breathing.

“Murphy!”

Hands, grasping either side of her face. She blinked, and MacCready was staring back at her.

“Murphy, what the hell?” he asked.

“There’s something wrong with me,” she whispered, and fainted.

“The absolute idiot.”

Murphy’s eyelids fluttered. She was no longer wet, or outside. A dim light was shining nearby, and she was nestled in a warm crush of blankets. Her arm stung.

“Please tell me you boxed him on the ear or something,” Nick Valentine was saying overhead. “She could’ve died. This is the kind of thing common sense comes in handy for.”

A cool hand went to her forehead, then disappeared.

“A slight fever, but nothing life-threatening,” Doctor Sun’s voice interjected. “Keep her warm, feed her fluids. You can change the bandages yourself if you think they need it.”

“You don’t think she needs a stimpak?”

“I don’t. The wound is shallow, it would be a waste. Tetanus is the main concern now- booster shots are hard to come by in the Commonwealth. I’ll stop in again tomorrow to check the wound myself.”

MacCready swam into view, nodding at the receding back of the physician. “You got it.”

Valentine nodded next to him. “Thanks, Doc.”

Murphy waited until she heard the door shut downstairs before trying to sit up. “He shouldn’t worry. I had my shots before we went into the vault. I think I’m good for another seven years.”

The men standing over her jumped, and MacCready pulled some pillows over to put behind her back. “Don’t scare me like that, boss,” he scolded.

“Just now, or…” Murphy gritted her teeth as a wave of pain shot through her left arm. It was swathed in bandages, running from her wrist all the way up past her elbow. A dark spot was forming along the inside of the joint, where the raider’s machete had caught her.

“What happened?” she asked, holding the limb as still as she could.

Valentine and MacCready glanced at each other. “You don’t remember?”

“I think I do,” Murphy clarified, choosing her words carefully. “Just had a bit of a different… perspective, I think.”
Valentine sat down on the bed. “Yeah, lay it out again. I want to know how she wound up on the killing floor by accident.”

MacCready took off his hat and sighed. “Let’s see… Danny was asking for guards on duty to help take care of some raiders out by Hangman’s Alley that were bothering one of the local traders. Kid named Isaac. I volunteered, me and three others, and he took us back to his camp to do some scouting.”

“Camp in the tunnel?” Murphy asked. “I found it.”

He nodded. “It didn’t look good when we got there, though. The kid said there were maybe three of them, but it was more like seven or eight, and they were on edge, like they expected an attack. They were watching the west entrance to the tunnel, so we decided to come at them from the rooftops on the south side. We take out the initial guard silently, get in position up above, and all of a sudden you show up.”

Valentine grimaced. “Couldn’t have left someone behind at the other end of the tunnel to warn people the street was closed?”

“We needed every gun,” MacCready retorted. “She would’ve been fine- she was keeping to cover, she had her eyes open, but Isaac decided he needed to warn her, somehow, that she was walking into a bunch of raiders and his bright idea was to throw a rock and get them all excited.”

“Then they rushed me, I dropped my guns, got this beauty…” Murphy pointed at her arm. “Okay. I see what happened. It’s alright, guys.”

“It’s not alright,” Valentine argued. “You were stabbed, and you passed out. Next time I need spare parts, I’m buying exclusively from Carla.”

MacCready nodded and glanced at Murphy’s arm. “I still say we stick her with one of the stimpaks.”

“I’m okay,” Murphy insisted. “Really. I’ve just, I’ve had a long day. Days. Life, really. I’d like to rest.”

Valentine patted her knee and stood up. “Sure thing, doll. Shaun’s done with school soon, anyway, and Ellie is threatening to make baked bloatfly again if I don’t clean my desk by the time he gets home. MacCready, you come find me if her fever gets worse. I’ll try to keep Piper from badgering you, once she gets wind of what happened.”

Murphy smiled. “Thanks, Nick. Tell Ellie I always liked her baked bloatfly.”

He smiled and made his way out, the door banging shut behind him in a gust of wind. The rain had picked up into more of a storm, and Murphy could hear it howling around the walls of Home Plate, searching for cracks to get in.

“You guys carried me back in this?” she asked, gesturing at the ceiling. “I’m really sorry.”

MacCready chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. “It wasn’t this bad, but it was still raining pretty hard. The guards and I made Isaac come back with us to make sure you made it to the doctor safely. The little bast- um- well, he complained once along the way. Tried to. One of the older guards, he snapped at him. Said, ‘don’t you know who this is?’ The look on his face was priceless.”

“I guess I’m lucky they didn’t leave me in the gutter,” Murphy replied softly.
“Nah. Scoot.”

Murphy obliged, and MacCready climbed into bed next to her, over the covers. His hair was still wet, his clothes damp, but she didn’t mind. She leaned her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes.

“They don’t hate you, you know,” he said. “Well, maybe some of them are still sore about that guard who died. But when you came back after Shaun and kind of… imploded, I think half of them saw you weren’t untouchable, or unfeeling, and the other half were just impressed you could toss back a drink like you did with them. You’re human, and the good and bad that comes with that. They wouldn’t have left you to die, and even if they did, I’d have dragged you back myself.”

“Thanks.”

He shifted slightly, eased her into a more comfortable angle for her neck. “Murphy, you just… your face, when you… and after it was over, you just stood there…”

“Yeah.” Murphy opened her eyes again and stared at the wall. “What I said. I wasn’t kidding. There’s something wrong with me, Bobby.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things at the Citadel Day celebration… didn’t go well.” She sat up, rested her head in her right hand. “And something happened after, then again in the fight with the raiders. I don’t know how to explain it.”

MacCready sat up with her. “Try.”

So she did. Rothchild, Maxson, the stars over the island and the apparitions of Nate in the infirmary, it all came spilling out. He listened, expressionless for most of the description of the party, but he was clearly rattled by the recounting of her visions.

“Enclave?” he said when she had finished. “You’re sure she said Enclave.”

“Yeah.”

“Like, the Capital Wasteland Enclave?”

“I… I guess.” Murphy shrugged. “Maxson told me about them, when we were… once. Remnants of the U.S. government that attacked D.C., over a decade ago. Right?”

“Yeah, but why are they in your head now?”

“Fuck if I know.” Murphy thudded her head against the bed’s headboard in defeat. “Though typically speaking, my hallucinations don’t make much sense. They’re just…”

She dropped all attempts to be strong for a second and looked over to him, searching. “Bobby, I’m really scared. First the mess in the Memory Den, now this… not to mention that time in Mass Fusion and the Glowing Sea. I can’t go on like this, I might…”

“Hey.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulled her head into his chest reassuringly. “You’re gonna be okay, boss.”

“You don’t know that.”

MacCready didn’t reply. They sat like that for a while, listening to the storm outside. She could feel his breathing, the pattern steady but the speed betraying his worry.
“How did you know all that, about what the guards think of me?” she asked, changing the subject.

He shrugged. “We talk. They ask about you, sometimes.”

“They do?”

“Yeah.”

Murphy twisted to look up at him. “What do you tell them?”

He smiled. “That you’ve got a lot going on.”

She snorted at that. “Understatement of the year.”

“What else should I say?” he asked, grinning. “You want them to stop asking questions, then give Piper an interview here and there.”

“Not a chance. She might be forgiving, but the letters to the editor wouldn’t be. ‘Vault dwellers shouldn’t play God with the Commonwealth and should never become involved with anyone, ever.’ Or maybe, ‘local woman is clearly addicted to chems, and Piper Wright is feeding this addiction so she has something to write about.’”

MacCready laughed, but stopped suddenly, his brow furrowing. Murphy nudged him. “What’s up?”

“Chems,” he said thoughtfully, then shook his head and stretched. “It’s nothing. I’m going to make sure Duncan gets home from school okay. Stay in bed?”

“Where else would I go?”

He replaced his hat and raised an eyebrow at her. “Come on. I know you better than that. Stay put.”

Murphy fell asleep while MacCready was gone. When she awoke, sounds of cooking were emanating from the kitchenette downstairs and Duncan was warbling away about school. She lay there and listened as he told his dad about what had been covered that day.

“Miss Edna does that for every day of the year?” MacCready asked over the noise of a spoon scraping the inside of a pot.


“Sure.”

“She said today was the day they made it legal to vote in the Capital Wasteland.” Murphy could practically hear him ticking the facts off on his little fingers. “They found a whole army made out of clay in China, somewhere underground. Like a vault, I think? And the last soldiers came home from vee… vee…”

“Vietnam!” Murphy called from the loft above.

“Yes! Vee-nam.”
She could hear the smile in MacCready’s voice. “Anything else?”

“Oh, the first Vault Dweller’s Survival Guide, I think. But that’s it.”

“Okay.” The spoon stopped stirring. “Go take this up to Murphy.”

“Okay.” This was followed shortly after by little feet on the stairs and a head of mussed, black hair bobbing up next to the bed. Murphy sat up, and Duncan offered her a bowl of thick razorgrain stew with carrots in it.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting it graciously. She patted the bed next to her. “Want to come up? I want to hear what else you guys learned.”

Duncan made a face, but he clambered up by her side. “Mostly math. I hate math. Shaun’s helping me, though. He’s usually done before everyone else, anyway, but I’d rather do reading.”

Murphy blew on her bowl of stew. “What are you reading in class?”

“Peter Pan,” he replied.

“Do you like it?”

“I do, but Shaun doesn’t. He says it’s unrealistic, that people who can’t grow up don’t run away to islands and kidnap kids.”

MacCready, who was ascending the stairs with two more bowls of stew in hand, cleared his throat loudly. “We eating up here tonight, Dunk?”

“Yep,” the boy said happily. He accepted his own bowl and dug into it hungrily. “I’d run away to an island. Just for a little bit.”

Murphy glanced at MacCready and smiled. “What would you do there?”

“Live in a cabin with a pet wolf,” Duncan answered without hesitation. “And if they bothered me, kill pirates.”

“You and Old Longfellow would get along swell, Duncan.”

“Who’s Old Longfellow?”

“Never mind.”

MacCready returned her smile. They all sat together on the bed, eating stew and listening to Duncan’s descriptions of how he would build a house out of leaves and twigs, and for a little while Murphy believed that everything was going to be okay.
It took awhile for Murphy’s arm to heal, and she was okay with that. Between fighting off MacCready’s attempts to stick her with a stimpak, she took the opportunity to rest seriously. It wasn’t the worst wound she had sustained, by far, and her fever was gone within a day or two, but she was still tired in ways not immediately apparent to those who came to visit her in Home Plate.

And visitors she had. Danny Sullivan dropped by the day after the incident in the tunnel with a bag full of plasma cartridges and a guilty look on his face. Murphy’s smile encouraged him though, and he stayed a spell to let her know that the Diamond City guards were repurposing the bits of the raiders’ gear that they were able to.

“They fortified that alley they were hiding out in,” he informed her. “Better than I would’ve expected. Once it’s cleaned up, we might be able to use it as a northern outpost, and Isaac might shut up for a while about trade route safety.”

Isaac himself didn’t show his face, but Nick Valentine stopped in after Danny left with a brand-new toaster that he said he had acquired “from a concerned party.”

“No speck of rust on it,” he said proudly. “Must’ve taken years to slap together.”

“You’d better not have scared that kid too much,” Murphy replied reproachfully. “It’s not his fault the raiders were jumpy enough to rush me.”

“Yeah, yeah, and it’s not his fault he’s too thick to realize a bunch of jet-addled delinquents might react poorly to a brick toss.”

As much as she wanted to pick the detective’s brain about her most recent hallucinations, Murphy kept quiet about the spectres of Paladin Titus and the ill-fated recon squad. Valentine’s usual advice to her had been to work with the Brotherhood, but that wasn’t an option anymore. In fact, just the thought of the power armor-clad faction made her feel like retiring to bed in the loft and sleeping for another century.

Instead, she nodded while he filled her in on the Diamond City Council’s most recent actions. Ann Codman was renewing her charge to the mayor’s office, though the Latimer family was giving her a run for her money when it came to advertising. Both had paid someone with a working printer to make up posters and plaster the town in them, and the detective produced a copy of each for Murphy’s amusement.

“Safety Above the Rest,” she read, the words arching over a detailed drawing of the sun rising behind Fenway Park. “Not hard to guess what platform she’s pushing.”

“Isolationism,” Valentine agreed grimly. “Though I’m not sure if I prefer hers or Nelson’s.”

“Any Time, Any Place, Opportunity. Hmm.” Murphy screwed her mouth up in thought. “Honestly, his sounds better. I might’ve voted for him, if I didn’t know the ‘opportunity’ he was talking about.
was a mandatory friendship with the Triggermen.”

She handed the posters back. “Did you and Ellie ever get that far? Think up any slogans?”

“Oh, sure,” he said with a smile as he rolled the papers up. “She had a few favorites that she threw out here and there. ‘Forward to the Future,’ ‘Nick Valentine: The Original Neighbor,’ even ‘The Right Make and Model,’ which I thought was too corny.”

“Which one was your favorite?”

Valentine chuckled. “I don’t know. Shaun had a pretty good one, when he found out I had been in the running. Said I should’ve gone with ‘Solving Diamond City’s Problems for Nearly 100 Years.’”

“That is good,” Murphy said in surprise. “Shame you never got to use it.”

“Yeah, well.” Valentine looked wistful for a second. “What’re you gonna do? That’s just how things shook out.”

She didn’t press him on the topic in case it was a sore spot, but by the time he left, Murphy was sure her innocent question had gotten him thinking. What good it might do, she didn’t know.

Piper did wiggle her way into Home Plate eventually, with a jar of mutfruit jelly she had nabbed from the Citadel Day celebration and the red dress she had borrowed. They ate toast together and the reporter passed on the tidbits of information she had picked up while she was asking questions of the Brotherhood and Minutemen at the party.

“So Rothchild wasn’t just there to bug you and Maxson,” she said, chewing on a slice of toast with relish. “He had some important stuff with him, too. This Lancer I talked to said he came with five vertibirds. God, I’d give anything to see what kind of factories they’ve got operating, or that airfield they’re running in the Capital Wasteland.”

“Lucia mentioned he had stuff for Spectacle Island,” Murphy replied. “Including bees.”

Piper made a face. “Not big ones, I hope. The Lancer mentioned supplies, but this one Scribe kind of hinted that they had boxes and boxes of files on the Commonwealth that they didn’t think were necessary to bring when they first flew in. She clammed up when I asked what they were.”

“Preston said he suspected they had something on the Institute,” Murphy mumbled through her own piece of toast. “Did anyone say how long Rothchild was staying?”

“I asked him!” Piper said brightly. “He said, and I quote, ‘until it’s done.’”

She nudged Murphy curiously. “About that. You still going to go back and help the Minutemen with that whole situation? Preston seems a little lost without you as a liaison, and no one knows what the Railroad are up to anymore. You’d think they could just talk to each other, once in a while.”

Murphy didn’t have a good answer for her. She’d been thinking about that, too. She knew she wanted to be involved—her stay at Breakheart Banks had proved she was still heavily invested in the future of the land and the people in it. But the fact that none of the factions could manage to cooperate unless she was there to mediate was disheartening. Obviously, stronger bonds between them needed to be built, but with Rothchild and the Council of Elders actively discouraging that, would her presence even matter? And was she even in the right state of mind to be worrying about any of that, anyway?

Even aside from that, Shaun was still in Diamond City, and though she was already being forced to
parent from a distance, she didn’t want to stray too far. When Ellie Perkins stopped by to pick up Murphy’s usual contribution of caps, she asked whether there had been any word from Doctor Amari.

Ellie sighed, in a more compassionate mood than usual, and crossed her arms. “Nothing. Nick thinks they might not even risk contacting us again until the Institute’s dealt with for good. I guess we’d better get on that.”

“How’s Shaun?” Murphy asked instead.

Ellie sat down, perhaps taking pity on the exiled mother before her, or maybe just delaying going out in the rain again for a while. She spent over an hour talking about the synth boy, laying out his recent homework and grades, the projects he had been excited about at the Science! Center, even the gift he had given Nat that had made the reporter’s sister blush and avoid him for two days.

“He mixed her up some new printing ink,” Ellie said, a fond look on her face. “Silt bean oil, salt, hubflower extracts and a few other minerals and compounds Doctor Duff had lying around. Apparently Nat knows how to make the basic stuff, but Shaun said his mix would dry faster so she wouldn’t get ink on her hands after printing new issues.”

She smiled. “He’s so thoughtful. You should be proud of him.”

Murphy smiled and looked down at her lap. “You should be, too.”

Their conversation must have soothed some of Ellie’s worries, and one night she and Shaun came over to help Duncan with his math homework while Murphy was home. Respecting that he was still a little wary of her after his talk with Nick, Murphy mostly stayed up in the loft, coming down only once to grab a can of water. He eyed her as she crossed the room, then whispered something to Duncan.

“He said you look sad,” the younger boy announced.

“Dunk!” Shaun cried out.

Ellie shushed them and shot Murphy an apologetic look. Murphy shrugged before making her way back to the stairs. “He’s not wrong.”

Sad. Was that the right word? It felt more like lead, poisoning the bones in her body and weighing her down. She was comfortable, her arm was healing, and she tackled little projects to stay occupied, but like her spiral at the beginning of the year, she seldom left Home Plate. If the world outside was a dance, then she’d forgotten the steps, so she became a wallflower for fear of stepping on someone’s toes.

Still, the world went on outside. March may have come in like a lamb, but it left like a lion, and the stadium was battered with storms for at least a week into April before the sun came out again. MacCready blew in and out with the wind to guard shifts and to walk Duncan to and from school. Now that Murphy was back, he started taking night watches where he could. He tried to get her to rejoin the guards and the Minutemen as well, but she declined. She could tell this troubled him, but she avoided talking about it.

Once her arm allowed, Murphy cooked dinners again and cuddled up with Duncan in the loft to read a worn volume of fairy tales together. For some reason, he became rather attached to the story of Cinderella, so much so that Murphy began to recite it from memory to see how far she could get before having to read from the book. MacCready caught her at it one morning, after he came home
from a shift atop the gate.

“You will soon see that the prince, in whose honor the ball is being held, will be enchanted by your loveliness,” she was muttering while she scrubbed dishes in the kitchenette. “But remember- you must leave the ball at midnight and come home, for that is when the spell ends. Your coach will turn back into a pumpkin, the horses will become mice again and the coachman will turn back into a mouse, and you will again be dressed in rags and-”

“Boss?”

She dropped the pan she was working on and spun around, soap suds all over her hands. “I, um, nothing.”

“Uh-huh.” He gave her a weird look, then went upstairs to change. Murphy was finished with the dishes by the time he came back down, wearing a General Atomics t-shirt and jeans.

“Duncan’s favorite story,” she said, by way of explanation.

He nodded, but still looked like he was lost in thought. “I guess I never asked,” he said finally. “Is that what it was like for you, with Maxson?”

Murphy stiffened up. He hadn’t asked her about Maxson at all, since she had returned from the Spectacle Island celebration. “What do you mean?”

“Did he, uh…” MacCready scratched his head and turned away. “Did he make you feel like… like you were…”

She realized what he was struggling to say, and a laugh escaped her, harsher than she intended. “Like a princess? Bobby, no.”

“I don’t know,” he said defensively. “You and him really clicked, it seemed. I couldn’t figure it out, for the life of me. He’s, well, him, and you were a mess, ever since I met you.”

“A mess?” Murphy bristled. “Excuse me?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He shook his head and stalked over to the couch, throwing himself down on it. “I mean, you were blackout drunk in the Third Rail the first time I met you. Christ, you stumbled into the VIP section and nearly knocked over Winlock and Barnes on their way out. You didn’t even remember hiring me the next day, and then you just charged into a group of super mutants that afternoon and obliterated them. You weren’t looking for high society or whatever the Brotherhood has to offer. Structure, I guess? You were just looking for a distraction.”

Murphy took a deep breath before she said something stupid, then a few more. She went and sat down next to him. “If this is your attempt to talk to me about bottling up my Maxson-related emotions, you’re doing it wrong.”

He ran a hand over his face and sighed. “I’m sorry. I had a rough shift. I guess some of it’s spilling over.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Can we come back to it when I’ve taken my foot out of my mouth?”

Murphy relented and leaned back against the couch. MacCready took a minute to collect his thoughts, then turned to her again.
“I guess I want to know what I can do to help,” he said carefully. “I know you’re upset, and there’s a lot on your mind, but you’ve been really distant lately. And yeah, there’s not much I can do about PTSD, but what happened with Rothchild and everything… I don’t know what you were getting from Maxson, and I want to know if there’s something I can do for you. Talking, anything.”

Murphy nodded. “Okay.”

She stood up again, using the time it took her to think to start some tea. MacCready watched her cautiously while she filled the kettle with water and set it to boil. Once she had the stove going, she grabbed the container of dried bloodleaf tea mix, a spoon and a mug and sat back down.

“Remember when we were having dinner with Haylen that night at the Castle, and you said Maxson didn’t have anybody to relate to, except me and maybe Desdemona?” she asked.

He nodded. “And the Silver Shroud.”

“Right.” Murphy took a deep breath and let it out through her nose. “You weren’t wrong. He definitely needed a friend, an actual friend on the same level as him, not just Brotherhood colleagues or underlings. So did I. I mean, I had friends, have friends, but not ‘leader of the free world-level’ friends.

“And then friends turned to something else because he was so… I don’t know. Charming, maybe, but in a way that people really aren’t anymore today. There are a lot of things I don’t like about the Brotherhood, and a large portion of that is how ‘old world’ they are. But I’m old world, too.”

“Is that why we went to all that trouble to hunt down that dress?” MacCready asked.

She sighed. “Partially, yeah. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to describe what it feels like to walk around this city, looking at the crumbled bones of people I used to pass on the street, used to buy coffee from, maybe used to know. Sometimes I need a reminder that it’s not really dead… that I’m still here, and as long as I am, Boston is alive in me. It’s so strange. I’m not really a Bostonian, but I’m all that’s left of it.”

Murphy shook her head. “Sorry, that’s a different tangent. Maxson. He doesn’t look like it from the outside, but he’s got a wild streak. He trained himself to hide it, but I let him indulge it, and that’s part of why Rothchild wanted me gone, I think. Can’t have the chosen one making deals that don’t put the Brotherhood over everyone else, much less dancing with random harlots in bars.”

MacCready snickered at that. “You’re not just some random harlot, though. You’re the Mother of the Commonwealth.”

“Yeah, and Elizabeth Titus was the Lone Wanderer, but the way Danse talks about her, some of the Brotherhood still see her as a random harlot that just wandered in and infiltrated their leadership. That’s what you get for purifying the Capital Wasteland’s water table.”

She frowned. “Also, don’t call me that. ‘Mother of the Commonwealth.’ It makes me sound old.”

“You are old. Technically.”

The kettle started to whistle, and Murphy jumped up to take it off the heat. “Anyway, Arthur didn’t see me as a savior or a harlot. He just saw me. It was so unexpected. I thought he was going to be this uptight, decorum-filled stuffed-shirt, but as soon as I let him be himself, he opened up into this sweet, sensitive…”

She trailed off as she poured hot water into her mug. “You get the picture. He surprised me. And
then he… he loved me. And I needed that.”

MacCready raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you mean ‘loved you’ in the sense that you took him home, or…”

“I mean he loved me.” Murphy sat down and watched the steam rising from the mug. “And I think I loved him.”

“You don’t know whether you loved him or not?”

“Love is a bit of a bitch for me at the moment,” Murphy replied. “Every time I think I have it nailed down, it kicks me in the balls. I loved Nate, and now he’s haunting me. I loved my son, and then the Institute turned him into a monster. I love Shaun, and now…”

She looked at him sadly. “Love sucks. If I say I loved Arthur, then I’ll probably wind up having to kill him or something. That’s my life. And now it doesn’t really matter anymore anyway, because if I told him how I felt, the Council of Elders would depose him, and this fragile alliance between the Minutemen and the Brotherhood and the Railroad falls apart. Kablooey.”

MacCready picked up the tin of bloodleaf tea and handed it to her. “If you loved him, it matters. It always matters. Nate, Shaun, all of them… it might be painful now, but if they made you happy back then, isn’t that worth something?”

Murphy turned the tea container over in her hands, listening to the leaves inside sifting against the sides. “You tell me.”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “My wife died four years ago in a metro tunnel full of ferals. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t wonder what I could’ve done different. I used to obsess over the details, and it killed me. But since I don’t want to trap myself in a memory lounger again the way I used to, I just try to remember how it felt to be with her, not the specifics. When she was dancing in the Dugout, when she held Duncan for the first time, when we moved into the farm in Canterbury Commons. I loved Lucy, she loved me. It happened, and I was lucky enough to live it. Don’t dwell on it. Just accept it, and try to move on.”

They sat in silence while Murphy took a spoonful of tea leaves out and stirred them into her mug. The water darkened, color leaching into it until it was as red as a summer sunset.

Murphy held the cup in her hands and stared down into it.

“I loved Elder Arthur Maxson,” she said, then looked up at MacCready and smiled. “How many people can say that?”

He smiled back. “Not many.”

She took her time about it, but eventually Murphy started going outside again. The early rains of April passed, and the hubflowers and mutfruit in the Diamond City orchard bloomed. The ones on Spectacle Island did as well, Theo informed her, and Knight Lucia’s bees were busy building up their new home and scaring all the Minutemen recruits when the odd one wandered over to the Castle.
After some rounds of target practice and a stress test or two, Murphy rejoined the Minutemen on their rounds. With MacCready firmly established on the city guard force, she hoped to rebuild some of the trust between the two groups, especially now that Ann Codman was trying very hard to drive in an anti-Minutemen wedge before the next mayoral candidates’ debate.

Ann was also hammering her anti-synth stance pretty hard, and it was riling up residents and making Valentine very nervous. By extension that made Ellie and Shaun nervous, and the former started coming around to talk to Murphy more often while the latter became quiet and withdrawn in school.

“He’s terrified,” Ellie confided in Murphy one afternoon. “There was a woman in the marketplace yesterday, talking to Myrna about how if she found a synth, she was going to crack their head open until the computer parts were visible and then nail their head over her door. Thank god Shaun wasn’t with me. When he first came here he had a few slip-ups when introducing himself. What if someone remembers? Or what if one of the Minutemen spills the secret, and we get run out of town? I can’t go back to Goodneighbor.”

“It won’t come to that,” Murphy replied firmly. “Nick won’t let it, and I won’t let it.”

She and MacCready had a similar conversation with Valentine, and the three decided that if things became too heated, they would take Shaun to Sanctuary. The Minutemen settlement had recently seen its first open synth couple move to town, Theo had told them, and there were now enough children there to necessitate the building of a school. Valentine, however, was adamant that he would remain in Diamond City until the bitter end, and wouldn’t hear Murphy’s concerns about the idea.

“This city took a chance on me when it had every reason to be scared of what I was,” he argued. “I’m not going to give up on it when it needs a reminder that not all synths are the enemy.”

“It’s not you they’re afraid of,” Murphy pointed out. “They’re afraid of the ones they can’t see. I don’t like it. This is how witch hunts get started.”

Valentine shook his head. “It won’t come to that. Once Piper starts speculating about which of the regulars at the Taphouse is a synth, you can skip town. I’m staying put.”

Murphy threw her hands up. “Fine. But you get to tell Ellie.”

Though they weren’t privy to the results of that conversation, Ellie did start bringing Shaun around Home Plate more often, to Duncan’s delight. Again, Murphy kept out of their way, sticking to the loft and the roof. Ellie may have abandoned Doctor Amari’s advice in her state of worry, but the last thing they needed was for Shaun to suffer a literal identity crisis while so many tensions were high.

MacCready, to his credit, took it all in stride. To Murphy’s surprise, he had a frank conversation with Duncan one day about what synths were and why everyone in town was worked up about it.

“So, not all synths look like Mr. Valentine?” the boy asked after MacCready’s brief description of the Institute and its creations.

“No they don’t,” MacCready replied. “Just remember they’re people too. Not everyone thinks that, but they’re wrong. Synths should be able to live their lives, same as us.”

Duncan nodded solemnly, then looked between Murphy and his dad curiously. “Do you know any synths? Besides Mr. Valentine?”

Murphy smiled. “We do. But it’s not polite to ask, or to tell others that you know someone is a synth. They might not want to talk about it.”
Duncan nodded again, more vigorously this time. “You got it.”

He ran off to play with his toys. Murphy sighed and crossed her arms. “I wish it were that easy to explain to everyone.”

MacCready shrugged. “He’s young. No reason to be scared of synths, yet.”

The worries and stress began to eat away at Murphy a bit, particularly when she was alone at Home Plate. She turned back to meditation, waiting until MacCready was home to plunk down on the floor, shut her eyes and try to push it all out with each breath. The phenomenon she had experienced when he had arrived back in the Commonwealth with Duncan, the calm that came just from the reassurance that he was nearby, was a huge help, and her dreams were strangely untroubled.

“I don’t know what acceptance and commitment therapy in the Brotherhood looks like, but maybe I stumbled into it by accident,” she said to Piper one day, looking over the reporter’s shoulder while she typed up a list of caravan schedules for the coming week. “He might be the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“That so?” Piper replied, somewhat distracted. “You two finally stopped beating around the bush, huh?”

“Sorry, what?”

Piper paused for a second, then resumed typing furiously. “Did I say that out loud? Forget it.”

Murphy cleared her throat. “Beating around the bush?”

“Oh come on, Blue.” Piper abandoned her list and swiveled around to face her. “Don’t play dumb with me. It’s obvious to anyone with eyes.”

“I’ve got eyes, and I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Piper shrugged and swiveled back to her screen. “Uh-uh. If you can’t see the forest for the trees, I’m not getting involved.”

She stuck to one-word answers for the rest of their visit, and eventually Murphy left, puzzled. It was too early to pick Duncan up from school, and MacCready was on his watch shift for another hour or so, so she walked home slowly, kicking pebbles over the street slats as she went. She tore down another Ann Codman for Mayor poster someone had taped next to her front door, crumpled it up and threw it in the trash.

A minute later she fished it out again and smoothed out the crinkles, intending to use the back of it to write a letter to Danse and Haylen. Duncan had taken the living room pencil case with him to school, and Murphy felt a little too lazy to go find the one upstairs, so instead she dug her traveling pack out from under the stairs and felt around in it for a writing utensil. Her hand came up against a small, wooden object, and she pulled it out.

It was the wooden soldier toy MacCready had gifted her, once at Med-Tek and again at the Nakanos’ house. Olive-green uniform, upturned rifle. Steadfast.

Something in Murphy’s head clicked.

“Oh,” she said.
MacCready was posted above the gate again for watch, but when Murphy clambered up, one of his fellow guards informed her that he had gone to their break room for something to drink. She fairly sprinted there, up to the roof and around the orange storage crates, the little wooden soldier clutched in her hand.

She skidded to a stop on the rubber mats just inside the tucked-away entrance. MacCready was at the bar, bent down behind it with his sniper rifle on the counter, the only one there at the moment.

At the sound of her footsteps, he popped his head up. “Oh, hey boss. I thought you weren’t on duty until tonight. Did I read the schedule wrong? I keep telling Danny his handwriting sucks.”

Wordlessly, Murphy crossed the room to the bar. She set the soldier toy down on the counter between them.

“After Far Harbor,” she said quietly. “You said this little guy was mine. That he had been for a long time.”

His eyes narrowed, then widened. “Y… yeah.”

“Is he still?”

MacCready swallowed. “Murphy, I…”

“Just answer the question, Bobby.”

He was turning red, squirming under her gaze. Finally, he nodded.

Murphy leaned in, over the bar. "Robert Joseph MacCready, is it okay if I kiss you right now?"

"You sure you want to do that, boss?"

"God, yes."

He shoved his rifle aside and met her in the middle of the counter. "Then do it."

Murphy grabbed him by the scarf and obliged.
In which cover is blown.

Despite the bar surface between them, Murphy sank into MacCready like a stone in water. The edge of the counter was digging into her stomach, the wooden soldier had tipped over and was rolling away from them, they were in a very public place where the chances of discovery and subsequent ridicule were high, and none of it mattered. His lips were on hers, and he was kissing her with the earnestness of a person who’d wanted to do this a long time ago.

Reluctantly but firmly, MacCready disentangled her hand from his scarf and broke away, searching her face. They stared at each other. Murphy could see there was a little bit of confusion in his eyes under the exhilaration.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean-”

“No, it’s fine, more than fine, really, but-”

“-it’s just, something Piper was saying, and then I was rooting around in my bag and found-”

He put a hand over hers on the counter and stopped her. “Talk? Later? Don’t know how I’m gonna focus, now, but I’ve got a shift to finish up here.”

Murphy sighed with relief. “Yeah. I’ll be at home. Sorry.”

“Hey.” He reached over, grabbed his rifle and grinned, that easy grin that Murphy had never been able to resist, the grin that had always been able to still her racing heart and mind. “Don’t be.”

Back at Home Plate, Murphy paced and worried anyway. She made tea and didn’t drink it. She flipped through the smattering of books on her shelf, fiddled with the radio on her Pip-Boy and re-folded all the shirts in her dresser. She even debated starting dinner for when Duncan came home, but decided it was too early and she was liable to chop a finger off in her current state of mind.

She picked the wooden soldier toy up off the coffee table where she’d left it and studied it. The woman MacCready had loved once had carved it for him, and the nicks and marks of a penknife showed the amount of care that had gone into its creation. The paint on it was thin, peeling in some places, and the wood beneath stained by the color above. Right in the center of the little man’s chest was a thumbprint, forever smudging the finish.

Murphy put her own thumb over the print. Hers was a little smaller, but for a second she could feel Lucy there, holding the toy carefully while she painted on its face and the pieces of the rifle.

She hadn’t even stopped to think about it, Murphy realized. She’d found the soldier and the idea had
flooded her, filling her empty spaces with a dangerous certainty. The way he’d kissed her back had confirmed it, even more so than his hesitant admission.

But why had she kissed him? Yes, there was love between them, but she’d never seen it before as the kind of love that warranted kissing. Never considered it. Some part of it felt spur-of-the-moment, a yearning left over for the lost Brotherhood Elder, she thought. Another part felt like this was an inevitability, like the road she walked was always going to cross with his, perhaps intertwine.

“Why did you do it?” Murphy mumbled, staring down at the soldier. “Why’d you kiss him?”

The soldier stared back, silent and resolute.

No answers there, she thought, and set it down. Up the stairs she went again, back to the dresser she had rearranged. She yanked a drawer open and pulled out one of MacCready’s shirts, ran the worn flannel through her fingers, pressed it to her face. It smelled like Abraxo, like gunpowder, rust and leather and tobacco and him.

Her chest tightened, and Murphy dropped the shirt in surprise. The scent was part of living with MacCready, something she’d gotten used to a long time ago, but now it crept into her, wound around her, made her want to shove him up against the wall and lose herself in him. Make him hers.

The thought both excited and terrified her.

After stowing the shirt away again, Murphy fished a lighter and a pack of cigarettes out of her coat and went up to the roof to wait. When an hour had passed, she craned her neck to watch the stadium entrance for MacCready’s familiar hat and duster. She ducked down again when they appeared, stamped out her cigarette and tried to look casual when he entered the marketplace beneath her.

MacCready caught sight of her sitting lopsided in the armchair and shook his head with a smirk. “Come down,” he mouthed, motioning toward the first floor.

Murphy made her way through the trap door, descending to sit halfway down the loft steps. She watched MacCready silently as he took off his ammo belts, hat, coat. If he was tense, he wasn’t showing it.

She’d left the tea sitting by the stove, and MacCready put two and two together with a glance and a raised eyebrow. He set it to warm up before leaning back against the kitchenette counter, arms crossed. “You’re panicking.”

“I am not.”

“You are.” He sighed. “I know that look. Same one you had on your face the last time we saw a deathclaw.”

“Ugh.” Murphy slid down another step and put her head in her hands. “Do you hate me? I’d hate me. I feel like I ambushed you.”

“What part of me kissing you back implied that I hated you? Seriously, tell me, I’ll work on it.”

“You…” Murphy’s head popped up again. “You don’t think that was a mistake?”

“Was it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.” She tapped the toes of her boots against the creaky wood of the staircase. “Okay, let me try to sort this out because it’s just a mess in my head. Can I ask you
“something?”

He nodded. “Shoot.”

“How long have you been… feeling, thinking, I don’t know… about me, like that?”

MacCready screwed up his face, as if trying to remember. “Not sure. Might’ve been Med-Tek, maybe after.”

Murphy stared at him. “A year. You’ve been hiding that for a year.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly hiding it, boss. Piper figured it out quick, when we came through Diamond City just before we attacked the Institute. Valentine and Curie did too, eventually, but I didn’t have to swear them to secrecy on pain of a printing press.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say something?”

MacCready grabbed a mug and turned it over in his hands, like what he wanted to say was written on it somewhere and he just had to find it.

“Because half the time I didn’t know if what I felt was real,” he said finally. “You’re one of the best things that ever happened to me, and I didn’t want whatever feelings I thought I had to put that in danger. I’d talk myself into telling you, then talk myself out again, or you’d say something about how you didn’t think you’d ever find someone again and I’d say to myself, ‘well, better not try to fit into that slot if she’s not ready for it,’ and then the Institute happened, your nightmares, everything with the Railroad and the Brotherhood, Maxson… Yeah. I’d kind of given up, honestly.”

“Maxson.” Murphy furrowed her brow. “What about… what about Haylen? If you were… what…”

Realization jolted through her, a painful possibility. “That night at the Castle, when I walked in on you two. You looked at me, and you… fuck, Bobby, did you throw yourself into things with her to try to…”

“No,” he said, interrupting her train of thought. “It wasn’t like that. Even before everything crazy happened, I tried to convince myself that it didn’t matter what I felt about you, you weren’t interested and you had bigger things to worry about. Haylen… we had our moment. Then it was over.”

Murphy fixed him in a look of misgiving. “I read that letter she sent you. What did she say, something like ‘you and Murphy are closer than you and I ever were?’”

He shrugged, looked at the floor. “I’m not saying she didn’t read the writing on the wall. Going in, we both had pasts. It was okay. In the end, though, she and I just wanted different things.”

“This is insane.” Murphy massaged her scalp, trying to make sense of everything. “I can’t believe this. How did I miss it? Am I going blind?”

MacCready set the mug back down on the counter. “In all that time, you never picked up on any of it?”

She threw her hands up in dismay. “I guess not? Figures, I’d be too wrapped up in myself or in other people’s problems to realize. I mean, you had to point out to me that Maxson might’ve been interested, why would this be any different? Ugh, I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” MacCready replied affectionately. “Maybe a little willfully ignorant. It’s okay.”
“I guess it explains some stuff.”

“Like what?”

“The soldier toy, us sharing a bed, you trekking out to the Glowing Sea, the song on the radio for my birthday, that dance in the museum…” Murphy ticked them off with her fingers. “I start having nightmares and you offer to start spooning with me. _God_, I’m dense.”

She slid all the way down the stairs, laid out on the floorboards and groaned. “Oh, this is such a mess.”

MacCready shut the stove off and laid down too, head next to hers, body stretched out the other way. “It is,” he agreed.

Murphy stared up at the ceiling. “All that time, you were holding that in, huh?”

“Yep.”

“A year.” She still couldn’t believe it. “The Institute, the alliances, Far Harbor, everything else… you don’t have to hide stuff like that, you know.”

“You had a busy year, boss. I didn’t want to add ‘mercenary develops feelings’ to your list.”

Murphy shook her head. “You’re not just a mercenary. You haven’t been for a long time, now.”

MacCready looked over at her skeptically. “If I’d told you earlier, would it have changed anything?”

Murphy thought about it. He had a point. Following the Institute attack, she’d have written him off as a man grappling with his own mortality and the prospect of being a lone parent, and herself far too loaded with responsibilities to reciprocate. Then came Maxson, a name and face that still brought a pang of heartache when mentioned or conjured. The Courser attack, Far Harbor, the dreams and visions and deaths before she pushed him on a boat and out of the Commonwealth- nowhere would there have been a moment- a _good_ moment, from his perspective- to step aside and air whatever he’d built up in his head.

She turned her head to look at him. He was watching her, hands clasped together over his chest, head tilted back with an air of carelessness. His eyes betrayed his real feelings, however. He was waiting, waiting for her to make whatever decisions she needed to, and she could hear hope in his measured breath.

“Why me?” she asked.

He didn’t answer her immediately, but he shifted and turned until he was facing up at the ceiling again. When he did speak, his voice was low, level, full of a yearning she didn’t often hear from him.

“You’ve been… everything I could want, for a long time,” he said. “Even before I considered you a friend, I think. You fought for me, for all of us and everyone to come, and you’re still trying to. You make anyone who travels with you feel like they matter, like they can make a difference- even me. With you at my side, I feel like I can take on the world.”

He took a deep breath. “When you took off for Covenant in that vertibird, I thought that was it. Whatever chances I’d had, whatever I might’ve felt, it was over. You called me on my bull, you packed me up with the Nakanos and you told me to get my sh- myself together and go be a dad. Most of the boat ride south, I was angry. Not at you, at me. You were right. I said I was going to be
the father Lucy would have wanted me to be, and I let her down.”

“Yeah,” Murphy agreed softly. “That was a little rough of me. I wasn’t exactly being a great role model, to begin with.”

“It’s fine. I had Duncan, and you had Shaun and the Commonwealth. You reminded me there were other reasons I was put on this earth, besides saving your… you know. I needed that.”

He smiled. “And Duncan… if I ever needed a reason to live, he’s it. As soon as I saw him, I knew I’d made a mistake and I was going to make up for it. Be the dad he deserved.”

Murphy chuckled. “And then everyone and their mother wrote to you about how I was losing my mind.”

MacCready smirked at her, then looked up at the ceiling again. “Yeah, they did. But they’re not the only reason I decided to come back.”

Murphy propped herself up on her elbow and raised an eyebrow. “They weren’t? Excuse me?”

He rocked his head from side to side noncommittally. “Well, they were part of it. Mainly, I decided to come back because of the letter you wrote to me from Breakheart Banks.”

Murphy’s eyes widened. “You got it? I never heard if… wait. You came all the way back here because of me?”

“Not just because of you,” he corrected her. “All of those reasons I gave you when I showed up on your doorstep were real, too. But your letter- actually, Duncan’s reaction to your letter- made up my mind.”

“What did Duncan say?”

MacCready sat up and faced her, cross-legged. “I got your letter, I read it, and Duncan asked me why I looked sad. I said I missed you, and you seemed like you were struggling with some things. He wanted to know what was the matter, so I told him about you.”

Murphy sat up too, her eyes narrowed. “What about me?”

He smiled. “Everything. Well, everything you’d call appropriate for a five-year-old.”

“And?”

“And he said, ‘Dad, we have to go help her.’”

Murphy grinned and looked down at her lap. She couldn’t help it. It was exactly what she would’ve expected from the boy. “So you did.”

MacCready nodded. “So we did.”

Murphy leaned forward and rested her chin on her hand, regarding the man in front of her. “I guess I can’t be mad at Dunk for wanting his dad to help his best friend,” she said. “I’ll have to thank him.”

MacCready bit his lower lip. “Is that all you want us to be?” he asked. “Friends? Because if what happened up on the wall was a fluke, or you regret the whole thing, that’s… that’s fine. I’ll just—”

She leaned forward and cut him off with a kiss, soft but insistent. It was less of a surprise this time, and he closed his eyes and pulled her into him until she was sitting in his lap, legs wrapped around
his hips.

Murphy ran her hands up his back, into his hair, down around his shoulders before pulling away. “You’ll just… what?”

“That’s not fair, boss.”

She nodded and leaned back, like she was going to stand up. “If you want, if it’s too weird or too much to handle, I can move out. This is your house now. Vadim owes me a favor or two, so I can-”

MacCready snuck his hand into the curve of her back and pulled her in again, playfully but with enough force to make her gasp.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked, his teeth at her ear, voice almost a whisper.

A shiver ran through Murphy’s core. She smiled. “No.”

She glanced at the Nuka-Cola clock on the bookshelf and frowned. “School’s out in seven minutes. We’d better get going.”

MacCready pulled back and glared at the clock. “Goddammit,” he said, rather passionately.

Duncan mustered a smile when he found Murphy and MacCready waiting for him outside the schoolhouse, but he was quiet on the walk home, one-word answers only to any of their questions about his day. MacCready didn’t press him until they were back inside Home Plate.

“Everything okay, Dunk?” he asked, hanging up the boy’s coat on the pegs along the side of the stairs. “You seem down.”

“Shaun punched Nat today,” the boy replied.

Murphy and MacCready froze and looked at each other.

“He what?” Murphy asked.

“He got really mad,” Duncan said, by way of explanation.

“What about, Dunk?”

“What about, Dunk?”

“Current events.”

“I thought Shaun and Nat were close,” MacCready cut in, confused. “You said he punched her?”

“It wasn’t that hard, I saw it,” Duncan protested. “And it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t know, I didn’t-”

Murphy knelt down and put her hands on his shoulders. “Duncan, it’s okay. You’re not in trouble.”

MacCready stepped up behind her and nodded. “Breathe, Dunk. Are you alright?”

Duncan nodded and gulped, rocking back and forth while Murphy steadied him. “Miss Edna was telling us about the thing that’s happening soon, for the mayor, and asked us what kinds of questions we had for the new mayor and what we wanted to know. So, Nina said she wanted to know how
they were going to protect us from synths, but I said synths weren’t scary, Mr. Valentine is a synth, and Shaun agreed with me and then Nat said the public had a right to know who was a synth and if there were any they should say who they are, and… and…”

Murphy nodded, her own breath speeding up. “And he hit her.”

“Not right away.” Duncan said. “He said that was a stupid idea, then Miss Edna said not to call people ‘stupid,’ then Nat called him stupid and said the only reason synths don’t say who they are is because they’re working for the Institute, otherwise they’d tell everyone, like Mr. Valentine.”

“Nat said that?” MacCready shook his head. “Jeez.”

Duncan frowned. “And then Shaun said there were lots of reasons for synths to hide, and then Nat said Shaun needed to tell the class the truth about him and Mr. Valentine. Then Shaun hit her.”

“I’ve heard enough.” Murphy straightened up and grabbed her coat.

MacCready nodded and picked Duncan up, shifting him over to his hip to balance his weight. Duncan watched, wide-eyed, as Murphy pulled on the leather duster.

“Where are you going?” he asked when she reached for the door.

“To check on Shaun,” she replied, before darting out into the cool afternoon.

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Murphy headed for the Valentine Detective Agency, but a pair of raised voices inside the schoolhouse caused her to draw up short. She listened at the door for a second before swinging it open and striding in.

Nick Valentine and Piper Wright were upstairs in the school room, pointing fingers and arguing while their protégés sat in opposite corners of the room looking guilty. Neither appeared to notice when Murphy popped her head up and took in the scene.

“Nat says he swung first, I don’t even know how you can say she’s at fault.” Piper was saying, gesturing wildly as she did. “Even Mister Zwicky and Miss Edna said that’s what happened, so we’re done here.”

The second of the two teachers in question was present, and Miss Edna bobbed up and down in an agitated pattern as the two guardians in front of her spoke. Murphy guessed that Zwicky had high-tailed it as soon as things got heated.

“She was instigating!” Valentine shot back angrily. “Piper, she nearly-”

He stopped himself, then continued in a tone that was level but still full of ferocity. “Piper, this isn’t just about Shaun popping Nat in the jaw. Yes, it was wrong, but your sister was ready to… humiliate Shaun in front of all of his peers. She’s not blameless here.”

“I don’t care if she’s blameless or not, he socked her in the mouth!” Piper shouted. “Look at her, she’s bleeding!”

There was a trail of dried blood coming from Nat’s lip, but Murphy only caught a glimpse of it before the girl buried her face in her crossed arms on the desk. Shaun looked similar, sporting a black
eye, mussed hair and a look of absolute betrayal.

“He trusted her!” Valentine roared.

“She’s 12!” Piper countered. “He should’ve known better!”

“He’s 10!”

“Mademoiselle Wright, Monsieur Valentine, could I perhaps ask that you keep it down? The entire street does not need to know this-”

Murphy cleared her throat, and the voices fell silent. All eyes in the room went to her.

“Maybe not here, guys,” she said quietly.

Realization flooded Valentine’s face, and he blinked, the fierce glow of his eyes diminishing slightly. Piper still looked ready to blow a gasket, or possibly one of Valentine’s, but she nodded stiffly and pulled Nat up out of her desk.

“We’re going home,” she said harshly, and pushed the girl past Murphy and down the stairs.

“Au revoir! Do not forget to do the homework!” Miss Edna called as the door slammed behind them.

Valentine sighed and tapped Shaun’s desk. “On your feet, kid. Ellie’s waiting at home.”

Shaun put his chin in the air, but said nothing. He stood up, and Valentine led him out. The detective paused as he passed Murphy and patted her on the shoulder.

“Dugout,” he said. “Tonight.”

Murphy nodded. She remained where she was until after they had exited as well.

Miss Edna bobbed over curiously. “Did you need something, Mademoiselle Murphy?”

“Yes,” Murphy said, letting out the breath she had been holding in. “Um. Reading lists. For some kids that are going to be coming into the new school in Sanctuary. Is that something you can help with?”

“But of course.” The teacher twirled one of her claws in excitement. “I can prepare a rough curriculum for you to pick up later. Do you know their ages?”

“Yeah. A 10-year-old and a five-year-old.”

Later in the Dugout, Valentine took a swig of his Gwinnett pale and sighed. “Damn it all to hell.”

“Yeah,” Murphy agreed, tilting her own glass around to catch the light shining down above the bar. “Matter of time, I suppose.”

“Ellie’s not talking to me,” he went on, after Vadim had drifted off toward the other end of the bar to refill some glasses. “Believe me, I’d come with if I could, but the next council meeting has a vote on
whether or not to seal the city for the mayoral debate. No outsiders, just residents.”

“I know,” Murphy replied. “Diamond City needs you.”

He looked over at her, face grim. “Diamond City doesn’t know it, but it needs people like Shaun too. Until they stop filling little Nat’s head with anti-synth notions, though, it’s not exactly the right environment for a kid like him.”

“She’s young,” Murphy argued. “Piper’s not wrong about that. She panicked, and then she took what she’d been taught about synths all her life and applied it to the situation.”

“Maybe I should start teaching the unit on synths,” Valentine said bitterly.

“Trust me, Piper’s probably feeling worse than you are. Nat’s in for the lecture of her life. Probably a year’s worth of extra paper deliveries, too.”

“He punched her,” Valentine said in disbelief. “Never thought the kid had it in him.”

Murphy shrugged and took a sip of her Nuka-Rye. “He’s mine. It’s in there somewhere.”

“Yeah, I guess. Still.” He sighed again. “I told him not to tell anyone, especially not his classmates. Kid thought he knew better, I guess.”

“Brought down by a schoolyard crush.” Murphy shook her head. “Well, regimes have toppled for less.”

She reached over and clapped a hand on the detective’s shoulder. “He’s young, too, Nick. It’ll be okay. We’ll leave in the next few days and head for Sanctuary.”

“Thanks.” Valentine clinked the neck of his bottle against her glass and drank deeply again.

“So,” he asked, “Anything else new with you?”

Murphy smiled. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

That night, Murphy dozed off while plotting the safest course to the town she had once called home, her Pip-Boy abandoned on the couch next to her along with a list of settlements along the way and Duncan’s T-rex toy. MacCready and Duncan had gone to bed long before, Duncan with a kiss for her on the cheek and MacCready with an unmistakable look of regret.

He'd been ready, when she'd come home to say they had to go north. He already had an idea of what to pack, what time to leave, what to buy before they left. Murphy was grateful for his understanding, but whatever time they might have taken to talk their feelings out further would have to wait. She wished it didn’t have to, for his sake as much as hers.

While she slept there on the couch, a vivid dream wove itself in her head. She watched, frozen, as a dark woman wearing a green jacket shuffled heavy mason jars around the shelves of a wooden room she was certain she had seen somewhere before. The room was dark, lit only by a flickering lantern on a nearby table and a pair of oil lamps bolted to the wall.

Suddenly, the door behind the woman flew open. She spun around quickly, hand to her holster, but
she relaxed as soon as she saw who it was.

The woman in the doorway, a familiar face with a shock of orange hair, laughed and leaned up against the frame, arms crossed. “Still a little jumpy? I don’t blame you. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep for a week.”

“Yeah.” The dark woman put her gun away and stepped into the light. It was Paladin Elizabeth Titus.

“Don’t worry, love.” Nadine smiled. “We’re out to sea. Not even tribals and swampfolk could reach us now.”

She gestured at the shelves of jars. “You find it yet?”

Elizabeth sighed. “No. Some of them have labels, some don’t. You’d think he would have catalogued them better, for a serial killer.”

“Aye, you’d think.” Nadine walked over to join her and studied the shelf nearest her. “How many do you reckon are still alive?”

“Not enough.”

“Mmm.” Nadine turned, looked past Murphy, revealing a swathe of hair that had been shaved down on one side but was regrowing around a wicked-looking scar.

“What about this one?” she asked, pointing at a jar on the table. “Maybe… nope, this one’s mine.”

She picked the container up and turned it from side to side. “Guess it wasn’t as important as the other bits I’ve still got. Sorry, by the way.”

Elizabeth walked over to stand next to her. The same section of her head was shaved, and a similar scar ran red and angry across her skull. She eyed the jar warily. “What for?”

“Running off.” Nadine sighed. “Mom worries, I know that. She was bound to send someone after me eventually.”

“It’s not your mother’s fault you were actually in danger this time,” Elizabeth replied. “If I hadn’t come…”

“Yeah, I know.” Nadine smiled sadly. “Still. You might not be missing a few parts, if I’d been smarter.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips, but said nothing. She cast another look around the room, doubtful.

“It’s here somewhere, don’t worry.” Nadine smiled wider and gave the jar she was holding a shake. The murky liquid inside bubbled, and a piece of gray matter floated up to touch the glass.

Murphy jolted awake. She barely made it to the bathroom in time to throw up.
They left Diamond City in the middle of the week, just three days before the town was set to conduct its second mayoral debate. Abbot and some of the city guard crew were hanging up patriotic bunting around the city gate when the five travelers passed beneath it- Murphy at the head, MacCready just behind and Ellie Perkins and the two boys bringing up the rear. Duncan was happily holding Ellie’s hand, swinging their arms back and forth enthusiastically, but Shaun had refused to be tethered and was walking slightly apart from everyone else.

*Still in a gloomy mood,* Murphy thought. *I’m sorry, kiddo.* She checked the map on her Pip-Boy and directed the group down a nearby street, waving goodbye to Danny Sullivan and the guards at the gate before ducking into the shadows of Boston.

Nick Valentine had given them his farewells next to the lift up to the Diamond City mayor’s office, which descended creakily in the background as he hugged Ellie and crouched down to offer Shaun his goodbye.

“Take care of them all,” he said with a smile and a sympathetic glint in his eye. “I want to see you and Ellie safe-and-sound when I come up there myself.”

Shaun nodded sullenly. “When?”

Valentine sighed. “Not sure, kid. We’ll see about it after this debate, before the vote. But if Doctor Amari gets a hold of me, I’ll be there quick as I can. Promise.”

“Keep the office radio system on,” Ellie ordered him, when he straightened up again. She stepped forward and smoothed out the lapels of his trench coat. “And don’t let Ann win this.”

“Can do,” Valentine said with a smile.

He stepped onto the lift, bound for the pre-debate Diamond City council meeting. Slowly, the platform rose into the air, and the group waved to the detective as it went. Ellie gathered Shaun to her side and pulled his head in, cradling it protectively for just a moment. Murphy looked away.

Piper had ducked out of Publick Occurrences as they passed, and she pressed the latest issue of the paper into Murphy’s hands. “Sorry,” she said quietly.

Murphy bit her lip and said nothing. She handed the paper off to MacCready, who stuck it in his pack.

Thanks to the new guard installation at Hangman’s Alley, Murphy and MacCready had agreed that the roads to the northeast were safe enough to travel with children. The sun climbed through the sky as they passed the Chestnut Hillock Reservoir, the road that led to Vault 81 and a dilapidated
vegetable stand that had wild corn and carrots growing all around it.

When they turned into the sparse forest to cut across to Oberland Station, MacCready hoisted Duncan up onto his shoulders in a piggyback ride, laughing when the boy tried to grab twigs from nearby trees. Murphy smiled, recalling Shaun and Danse’s similar behavior while they passed Bunker Hill on their way to Goodneighbor. She caught Shaun looking longingly at the father and son, and wondered if he was having the same thought.

Murphy fell back in step, until she was walking alongside Ellie at the rear. “Thanks for agreeing to come along,” she said. “I know you’d rather be with Nick right now.”

Ellie shook her head mournfully. “I shouldn’t leave Shaun, not when he’s like this.”

She checked to make sure that the boy was out of earshot, then looked over at Murphy a tad sheepishly. “You know, I really resented you, when you and Nick first arrived with him. I thought that you were just dumping another problem on Nick and I, that you were going to disappear and the only thing I’d hear of you for months would be in radio bulletins and Piper’s newspaper. Plus I can’t relate to kids. Never have.”

Ellie sighed. “I was wrong to feel that way. You were doing what you thought was right. And Shaun’s family, now, for all of us. He somehow snuck into our hearts, mine included.”

She nudged Murphy’s arm with her elbow. “Kind of like you.”

Murphy smiled. “Thanks. Still, I hate leaving Nick without any backup for the debate, and you’re the best backup he’s got.”

Ellie frowned. “Normally, I’d say Nick can take care of himself just fine, but this time, I don’t know. It’s not right. He’s been living in Diamond City practically his whole life, doing everything he can to get people to accept what he is, who he is, and some of them still can’t see past the metal parts. Never mind that he’s taken more cases than I can count for next to no pay, that he’s found people years after they’ve disappeared, that he cares about the city and everyone living in it because he’s worked with nearly every one of them at one point or another. He’s a synth, and that’s all he’ll ever be, to some.”

She glanced over at Shaun. “And the ones who are just like us… where’s the line? Man, machine… if you feel safer killing them, rather than risk trying to accept that they’re their own person, what does that make you?”

“I know.” Murphy grimaced. “Remember when I came back to Diamond City with Nick, after I rescued him from that vault? When that guy tried to shoot his brother in the middle of the marketplace?”

“Nick probably could have talked him down,” Ellie said angrily. “He knew Kyle. He knew he wasn’t doing well, was losing his grip. It’s unacceptable. If the person in charge that day had known that, he might still be alive.”

“I guess that’s what Diamond City needs,” Murphy said idly. “If they’re not ready for someone like Nick, we just need to find another person who knows everyone and their backgrounds well enough
to make decisions like that. Lord knows Ann and Nelson don’t fit the bill.”

“Definitely not,” Ellie agreed, before falling silent again.

The five paused to get drinks of water at Oberland Station, and Murphy received an enthusiastic welcome from the two sisters who had settled the railway check station. They had harvested a bumper crop of tomatoes that fall after accepting Minutemen support, and while they were still a little wary about the Brotherhood soldiers that sometimes came through, they remembered the woman with the plasma pistols and the overly-serious Paladin in power armor that had helped rid them of a nearby raider den, well over a year ago.

“How’s that surly pile of scrap metal doing these days?” the oldest sister, Minnie, asked while pumping water to refill MacCready’s canteen.

“Radio said he died,” Minnie’s sister, Maureen, chastised her.

Minnie waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t listen to the radio, listen to me. Death himself couldn’t stop a hunk of a man like that, ya hear?”

Murphy chuckled. “He’d be pleased to hear you say that.”

Minnie stuck her tongue out at Maureen. “Told ya so.”

The two bickered a while longer about Danse’s fate, but Murphy wouldn’t give any further hints, much to MacCready’s amusement. Shaun perked up mildly at the mention of the former Brotherhood soldier, but ultimately stayed quiet.

From Oberland Station, the five walked north in a single file along the railroad tracks, peering over the edge of the train bridge when they reached it to look at the Charles River below. Murphy brought up the rear, keeping an eye out for mirelurks and bloatflies.

Just up the hill from where the train bridge connected to the northern bank lay the modest greenhouse and fields of Graygarden, where a flock of Mister Handy robots were pruning mutfruit bushes and transferring a host of seedlings into larger pots. Shaun and Duncan stopped to stare, and the Minutemen who stuck around just to ensure the robots were unbothered in their agricultural endeavors waved at the passersby.

Murphy scanned the fields, but there were no Scribes in sight that day. “So this is where it all begins,” she said to herself.

MacCready, who was moving to take Duncan’s hand, paused next to her. “Spectacle Island, you mean?”

“Yes.” Murphy nodded. “Hope Neriah’s not giving the supervisors here too much trouble.”

The nearest robot in charge, Supervisor White, drifted over and bobbed her optical stalks in deference. “Darling! So good to see you. Did you come to escort some of our produce southeast?”

“No today,” Murphy replied. “Everything going well here?”

“Marvelous, simply marvelous,” the robot crooned. “Were you resting here tonight? It does get so dreary after dark, nothing to do but recharge and monitor hydration levels, and these Minutemen don’t know any of the stories from before the war that you do.”

Murphy smiled at that. “Sorry, supervisor. Maybe next time.”
Supervisor White sighed prettily. “Then farewell for now, darling.”

She drifted off, and MacCready grinned. “Even robots want to be around you.”

Murphy blushed. “Shut up.”

He laughed. “I told you, boss. I’m incapable.”

It was all Ellie could do to keep the two boys from charging in to talk with all of the robots, and she hollered more warnings as they ran up the hill to the northwest, ahead of the adults.

“Where are we?” Shaun called back down, from the crest of a grassy ridge.

Murphy checked her Pip-Boy map. “We’re passing between Rocky Narrows Park and an old junkyard.”

“Rocky Narrows Park? Bethany used to live around here somewhere,” Shaun said, a bit more brightly now that he and Duncan were on a looser rein. He took Duncan’s hand and the two ran along the top of the ridge, laughing as they went.

“Watch out for mole rats!” Ellie cried nervously.

Murphy decided not to tell her about the two yao guai she had encountered at the park the last time she came through, and they kept to a straight line between the two locations. Eventually they crossed the Cambridge Turnpike and found the highway that led north, the road that would take them up to the town Murphy had once made a life in.

As the Drumlin Diner appeared in the distance, MacCready moved up to walk next to Murphy. “How long has it been?” he asked.

Murphy thought back. “Not since just before I waded into the Institute’s water tunnels,” she replied. “Sturges was up here, making last-minute plans and playing around with my set of T-45. He painted it blue, but didn’t cover up the rusty bits. Said it would’ve been a waste of paint, it would just flake off.”

MacCready smiled. “I remember. You were easy to pick out, once we were all inside. You drew all the snipers’ fire so I could find them and pick them off.”

Murphy smirked. “Happy to help. Wish I could’ve brought you with for the tunnels, but you would’ve been useless, it was dark as hell in there.”

“I wouldn’t have been useless,” MacCready said, feigning offense. “Just less useful than I usually am. Besides, I had fun getting everyone at the Castle to loosen up before you relayed us in.”

“Oh yeah? What did you do?”

He shrugged. “Well, the violin music on the Radio Freedom speakers was bumming everyone out, so I got the DJ to turn them to Diamond City Radio, and one of the other guys pulled out his guitar. Started singing along to Dion.”

“Which song?”

“‘The Wanderer?’”

Murphy smiled. “Pretty upbeat, for right before an attack.”
“Sure,” MacCready agreed. “They needed it, though. Everyone already knew the words, and they all sang along.”

“Sorry I missed it,” Murphy said regretfully.

“Eh.” MacCready waved to Duncan, who paused his trajectory over toward a tree in the west and began skipping back. “That guy nearly lost his guitar, you know. He was one of the first few relayed in- the girl next to him vanished and it was all he could do to drop the guitar and grab his gun before he disappeared, too.”

Murphy laughed at that. “Whoops. Still, maybe he could’ve sung a battle hymn or something. Bashed some Gen 2s on the head with it.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Duncan ran up next to them. “Are we there yet?” he asked.

“Not yet,” his father replied.

“Where are we going again?”

“Sanctuary,” Murphy replied. “Where I used to live.”

“Is it pretty there, like back home?”

MacCready picked him up. “No, Dunk, remember I told you the water’s not pure here? Things don’t grow as well as they do in Canterbury Commons.”

“Oh.” Duncan thought hard for a second. “Can we make it pure?”

Murphy chuckled. “Do you know how to?”

“No,” Duncan replied honestly, shaking his head. “But we could figure it out.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” He nodded decisively, black hair bobbing as he did. “Sheng knew how to do it. But he could only do it in bottles.”

“Well,” MacCready said, nodding sagely. “It’s a good thing Sanctuary is just one big giant bottle.”

Duncan giggled. “No it’s not!”

“Is too, I’ve seen it.”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“Mungo.”

“Now why are you calling me mungo?” MacCready asked, pretending and failing to be bewildered and cross. Murphy shook her head, grinning, and left them at it, walking faster until she had caught up with Ellie.

“Not long now,” she said with a sigh. “Where’s Shaun?”
Ellie pointed down the road. “Went on ahead. It’s been a while since I’ve visited Trudy, but she’s never let anything dangerous around her diner, in all the time Nick and I have known her.”

“Never met Wolfgang, did you?”

“Pfft. Wolfgang?” Ellie looked at Murphy skeptically. “I used to live in Goodneighbor.”

“Fair enough.” Murphy picked up the pace all the same, scanning the landscape for Shaun. She found him at Trudy’s counter, where the boy had taken a seat on a worn stool and accepted a cold Nuka-Cola from the proprietor. He was sipping at it enthusiastically while Trudy rubbed the counter down, and he gave Murphy a small wave when she entered the diner.

Murphy immediately dug around in her pockets for caps, but Trudy waved her off. “On the house. Don’t get many young-uns around these parts no more.”

“One for me, then.” Murphy put a few caps down and took a seat next to Shaun. “Got a ways to go before we can sleep.”

Trudy opened her fridge and plunked another Nuka-Cola down on the bar, then swept the caps into her hand to count them. “Sanctuary?” she asked, without glancing up.

Murphy nodded. “How’s things with the boys at Starlight? Patrick still helping out over here, or has he moved there full-time?”

“Eh.” Trudy shrugged and pocketed the caps. “He and your Minutemen come around like a bad habit most weekends, but they keep the pests away- human-shaped and otherwise.”

“Carla still making her rounds this way?”

“Course. Couldn’t stop that bird from flying, no matter the weather.”

“Good.” Murphy drank deeply from the chilled bottle and sighed luxuriously. “I need to set my house in Diamond City up with a fridge.”

Shaun looked at her curiously. “Do you have one in Sanctuary?”

“I do,” Murphy replied. “But it hasn’t worked since… well, 200-some years ago. Like most things around these parts.”

“I could take a look at it,” Shaun offered quietly. “If we’re going to be staying a while.”

Murphy smiled at him encouragingly. “Would you? I’d really appreciate it if you did. Maybe we can get Sturges in on it, too.”

“Sturges is in Sanctuary?”

“Mm-hm.” Murphy took another sip. “And Bethany. The officers from the Castle come and go quite a bit. It’s a Minutemen-run settlement, you know.”

“I know.” Shaun nodded. “Mr. Valentine told me. He said I wouldn’t have to pretend anymore, up there, if I don’t want to.”

The prospect seemed to simultaneously excite and diminish him. Murphy resisted her urge to put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze it.
“What else did Nick tell you about Sanctuary?” she asked instead.

He screwed up his face, recounting. “It’s big. As big as the Castle, bigger, but not as big as Diamond City. It used to be a town before the war, and a bunch of the buildings and houses are still standing and people are living in them. He said we would be living in one of the old houses, but it’s been fixed up.”

Murphy nodded. “It was. Sturges, Preston and I did a lot of work on it, a long time ago.”

“Is it your house?”

“Yes.”

Shaun looked surprised. “Are you going to be living there too?”

She smiled. “No. I’ll be around though.”

“Where are you going to live?”

MacCready, Duncan and Ellie entered the diner on Murphy’s right, and MacCready jumped right in. “Yeah, boss, where are you going to live?”

“That’s my business,” Murphy said, pointing at him with the neck of her bottle. “Drinks all around, Trudy. On me. Shaun, I bet I can chug the rest of my Nuka-Cola faster than you can.”

The boy grinned. “You’re on.”

The sun was low by the time the five travelers crossed the bridge into the bustling settlement of Sanctuary, and Murphy paused at the center of the wood-slatted arch to take in the sight. Things had changed since she’d been there last, and the memory of Sanctuary Hills layered under the new reality of Sanctuary brought her a queer feeling of nostalgia and pride.

The house that used to belong to Mr. and Mrs. Washington had lights in all of its windows and strung up around its porch, and there were two Minutemen guards smoking cigarettes and leaning on its walls while they watched the bridge. A pen of brahmin, some bearing packs and some not, around the back of the building gave its new purpose as a boarding house away, and Murphy could hear laughter and music coming from within.

The Baker and Russell residences had been completely demolished by the years, and their rubble had been cleared to make way for new buildings on their old foundations— a guardhouse and barracks on the left, an armory and Sturges’ workshop on the right. The road between them was cracked and grassy, but the last of the rusted-out vehicles had been removed and Murphy could see beyond to the rest of the cul-de-sac’s homes, all with lights, gardens, signs of life similar to the ones she remembered.

It was peaceful, Murphy thought. Or as peaceful as the wasteland allows. Here and there, the trappings of the town gave away the undercurrent of survivalism. Machine gun turrets peeked out among the roofs across town. Weapons hung from the belts of everyone in the streets, forgotten for now but ready for the next fight. Sanctuary didn’t have a wall like Diamond City or the Castle, and its residents lived knowing they needed to be ready for anything.
Still, the sheer size of the town was enough to give any would-be attackers pause. How many lived here now, Murphy couldn’t say. Dozens, at least, maybe close to a hundred- and the town saw plenty of visitors, if the boarding house and the campsites next to the river were any indication. People from across the Commonwealth had flocked here, when Murphy, Preston and Curie had decided to recruit and rebuild the Minutemen, and now people from all factions, all walks of life passed through to trade, to negotiate, to stage operations and to join the fastest-growing settlement in the Boston area.

The thought made Murphy smile. She could remember when it was just her. Well, just her and Codsworth.

MacCready stopped next to her while she surveyed the town. “You ready?”

When she didn’t answer immediately, he put his hand out.

Murphy paused, then took it. Together, they led the others down into Sanctuary.

The faithful robot Codsworth was waiting for them on the front steps of her old house, bobbing anxiously in the air over the sidewalk.

“Miss Murphy!” he cried when he caught sight of them coming up the street, zooming out to the pavement. “My word, it’s been so long. I was starting to worry that I would never see you again.”

“Hey, Codsworth.” Murphy resisted the urge to reach out and hug the metal orb. “I missed you too.”

She put an arm out. “Can you help get the company settled? I assume Sturges warned you we were coming.”

“Of course, mum.” Codsworth’s middle optical stalk zoomed in on her. “I’ve washed and pressed the linens and vacuumed the entire house, and I stocked the cupboards with nonperishables, but I’m afraid our stove and refrigerator are still broken, and it’s so hard to get the repairman to come ‘round these days, he is so busy with other projects.”

Murphy gestured to Shaun, and he moved up to the front of the group. “Once he’s all moved in, Shaun here can take a look at them.”

“Hello there, young sir,” Codsworth said jovially, regarding the boy with what could only be delight. “Shaun, you say? I’m not sure why, but my processors are telling me that’s a good name for a boy.”

Murphy and MacCready glanced at each other over Shaun’s head. “And this is Duncan,” MacCready said quickly, nudging the younger boy forward. “Duncan, this is Codsworth.”

“Duncan! Of course!” Codsworth patted his head lovingly. “Mr. MacCready, thank you for taking care of my mistress. If harm should befall her, I would be most disappointed.”

“Quit worrying, Codsworth,” MacCready replied, rolling his eyes. “You’re gonna blow a fuse or something.”

“You look like Sarge,” Duncan said, examining the robot curiously. “Can you shoot lasers and bullets?”
“Well, I’m no Colonel Gutsy, but I’ll have you know I’ve fended off bloodbugs when necessary,” Codsworth replied proudly.

“And this is Ellie,” Murphy said, pulling the secretary forward.

“Charmed,” Ellie said, inclining her head. “What are our sleeping arrangements?”

“Allow me to show you, mum.” Codsworth floated off toward the front door, chattering as he went. “Miss Murphy, your king-sized bed is all made up in your old room, and Mr. Long brought over two new twin beds for the old nursery. That leaves us one short, I’m afraid, but I am aware that everyone these days is accustomed to sleeping on couches if necessary, and we still have one of those.”

The boys followed him eagerly, but the three adults hung back. “You’re sure Sturges did the wipe okay?” Ellie asked, under her breath. “He’s not going to suddenly snap out of it and realize who Shaun looks like?”

“I trust Sturges,” Murphy said firmly. “Go on, make yourself at home. If you need anything, and I mean anything, just ask Codsworth- he loves to help.”

MacCready nodded. “Dibs on the big bed.”

“Fine by me.” Ellie went into the house, switching on the radio on the bookshelf as she passed it. The mournful voice of Skeeter Davis began to float out into the front yard.

MacCready turned to Murphy. “You sure you don’t want to stay? Sleep on the couch, like Codsworth said?”

She looked past him, through the open doorway, the windows. The red couch was still there, and the red armchair, freshly re-upholstered. Where Codsworth had gotten the material, Murphy didn’t know. The fire in the fireplace was crackling, smoke pouring out the chimney on the roof. There was a bowl of hubflowers on the kitchen table, a basket of mutfruit on the kitchen counter, coffee mugs lined up neatly along the windowsill and a reverently-folded American flag on the bookcase.

Strawberry.

Murphy hung her head. “I wish I could. But even if Shaun didn’t need space from me, I don’t think I’m...”

She stopped dancing around it, looked him in the eye. “I don’t need to have PTSD to see Nate in that house. I don’t want to put that on Shaun. I don’t want to put that on you.”

“You’re not putting anything on me.” MacCready took her hands in his, one by one. “I’ve known you long enough to want to help carry what weighs you down.”

Murphy smiled, glanced down again. “I know. Maybe I’ll work up the courage soon. But not tonight.”

“Okay.” MacCready squeezed her hands. “I’ll be here when you do.”

“You’d better be.”

“Hey.” He put a hand to her cheek. “When have I ever let you down, boss?”

Without thinking, Murphy kissed his palm. It was enough of an answer, she felt.
The walk back out of town, over the bridge the way they had come, was brisk and quiet. A lazy breeze swept over the riverbanks, and Murphy was glad to see the telltale red rocket rising over the truck stop as the light began to fade.

She had used the gas station and garage as a second base in the wastes, once she felt brave enough to venture beyond the limits of Sanctuary by herself. The convenience store had been picked clean long ago, and most of the garage tools had been claimed by Sturges for his workshop, but there was a back office with a cot and a solid door that locked, as well as a fire pit and a commanding view of the countryside.

Rather than utilize either of those, however, Murphy shimmied up the ladder behind the building and made her way out onto the roof above the gasoline pumps. The sunset was beautiful, reds and oranges and pinks, and she settled in to watch it and listen to the bird calls on the breeze.

Some of the sounds of Sanctuary carried on it, too. Someone was hammering something metal. Probably Sturges, banging on a piece of armor or a bent fence post. Brahmin lowing. Music. People calling to each other. Laughter.

Murphy closed her eyes and imagined MacCready, unpacking his and Duncan’s clothes, putting them away in the dresser she used to share with Nate. Ellie doing the same with Shaun’s in the nursery, singing along with Diamond City Radio under her breath.

She imagined Valentine, alone in his office in Diamond City, probably fuming about something Ann Codman had said in the meeting and poring over a case file from one of his trails gone cold. Piper typing up a story on her terminal in Publick Occurrences, uneasily silent because she was still angry with Nat, unsure what to say to make the girl understand what had happened. Theo on guard rounds with the other Minutemen, sharing cigarettes and stories.

She imagined Preston, reading reports in the general’s quarters of the Castle, making notes in the margins and sighing. Curie and Rylee sharing drinks in the Shot Heard Round the World. Ronnie Shaw counting ammunition supplies and cradling the cannonballs for the heavy artillery with a careful hand.

Across the wastes, she imagined Danse and Haylen, staring into a bonfire together, holding hands. Joan the cat curled up on the bench next to Haylen, fat and happy once again. Jules on rounds with the dogs, Marina and Rory and Briar engaged in conversation across the fire, or maybe a game of cards.

Murphy was startled out of her imaginings by a sharp bark from the ground below. She got up and peered over the edge of the gas station’s roof carefully. Standing on the asphalt below, as if to prove her wrong, were two familiar canines.

“Dogmeat?” she said in disbelief. “Nine?”

Dogmeat barked again happily. Nine stared up at her and whined, stomping her oversized paws on the ground impatiently.

Murphy fairly flew down the ladder and let the dogs bowl her over. She giggled uncontrollably, fending off the slobberiest kisses, working her fingers into the thick ruff of the German shepherd and over the sleek back of the white mutt with black patches. Dogmeat looked roughly the same as when she had left Breakheart Banks, but Nine had grown considerably- she stood almost as tall as the older
dog, even if her paws and ears were still too big for her body.

“What are you doing here?” Murphy demanded, when they had worked off their excitement. “You’re supposed to be helping Danse.”

Dogmeat sniffed her over curiously, then whined. Nine whuffed softly, low and deep.

Murphy smiled. “I know, I know. You go where you’re needed.”

Dogmeat began to pant contentedly. Murphy threw her arms around his neck and hugged him close. “Thanks.”

The two dogs slept on the floor of the gas station by Murphy’s cot that night, and in the morning the three walked into Sanctuary with their heads high. Murphy let her white hair fall freely, wild and bright in the sunlight. The Minutemen she passed tipped their hats and murmured greetings, and Sturges leaned on the doorway of his workshop and chuckled when he saw her coming.

“Captain,” he said as she passed.

Murphy nodded and stood up a little taller.

Dogmeat stayed close to her side, but Nine sprinted full tilt toward her old house once they were in sight of it, throwing herself forward to scratch at the door. Codsworth opened it, and the dog skidded past him and inside. Murphy heard shouts of surprise and objects falling to the floor, until finally she heard Shaun cry out joyfully.

“Mum!” Codsworth said, ignoring the hubbub behind him once he caught sight of her. “Ready to begin the new day?”

Murphy smiled. “I am.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm still alive! I do, however, have a lot of life changes happening right now, so I'm not sure how frequently I'll be able to post during the next month or two. Hang in there, strawberries, I'll be back in no time. <3
Let You In

Chapter Summary

In which Dogmeat knows what's up.

Murphy, MacCready and Ellie took Duncan and Shaun to meet the town’s teacher and the rest of the school-aged children of Sanctuary that morning, dogs in tow. As all of the remaining houses in the suburb were occupied by permanent residents or were being utilized for some other purpose, Sanctuary’s schoolhouse was, for the time being, an open-air setup in the playground behind the former Parker residence. The teacher, a ghoul named Slim, was holding class over a handful of kids, but he paused when he saw the group coming and dismissed them to recess.

“Heard tell we had some new students coming into town this week,” he said warmly, shaking Murphy’s hand firmly. “Didn’t know they were coming with the Sole Survivor herself.”

Murphy introduced the boys and handed over the curriculum Miss Edna had prepared for her before leaving Diamond City. “Hope that helps,” she said.

“Absolutely,” Slim replied, paging through the sheets of paper quickly. “Always nice when you can get some idea of what a kid’s been taught before they get to you.”

“How did you wind up teaching?” Ellie asked him.

Slim tapped the papers together neatly on his leg. “Well, I used to do it back when I wasn’t so ugly. Been a rough couple hundred years, even sold chems for a bit down in the Theater District, but I joined up with the Minutemen a while back and that led me out here. Figured I’d put my degree to good use again, ya know?”

Murphy smiled. “Pre-war? I’ll have to pick your brain someday, Slim.”

He winked at her. “Sounds like fun, toots. You boys wanna go play?”

Duncan and Shaun scurried off toward the monkey bars, Nine in tow. Dogmeat sat down next to Murphy and watched the activity, whuffing softly to himself as if in jealousy. Despite Murphy’s prodding, though, he wouldn’t move to join them.

One by one, Slim pointed to the other kids on the playground and gave the adults a brief rundown. The girl with the golden blonde hair that was cooing over Nine was named Charlie, and she and her father, Clinton, had moved in during the winter following the death of her mother. That boy on top of the playscape with the buzzcut and oversized shirt was Donny Kowalski, an orphan the Minutemen had picked up on a patrol along the Boston docks, and who now tended the settlement’s brahmin with a woman named Kelly. The twins who were helping to hoist Duncan up to reach the monkey bars were Evan and Emily, both “Minutemen brats,” equally matched in noise level and freckles.

The oddballs of the group were easy to pick out. Sitting away from the rest of the kids was a preteen with a no-nonsense expression on her face, shadowed by an enormous sentry bot that bleepered in warning if anyone else got too close.
“That’s Kat,” Slim explained. “Near as we can figure, she’s been living by herself in the wastes with Gus there as her only company. Sold scrap, scraped by, didn’t need or want anyone else until two weeks ago, when she rolled into town and said she’d like an education and Diamond City wouldn’t let Gus in. The guards here weren’t about to look a gift brahmin in the mouth, told her to make herself at home.”

“What’s she living with?” Ellie asked.

“Herself,” Slim replied. “Camps out with the others down by the river. Keeps to her lonesome, and no one bothers her on account of the giant robot.”

Despite Kat being a strong contender, the standout member of the class- and the biggest surprise, it turned out- was a lightning-fast boy that was running laps around his peers. It wasn’t until he stopped right in front of Murphy and threw his arms around her waist that she recognized him.

“It’s you!” he said happily, and looked up at her in excitement, revealing a head as bald as Slim’s and a missing nose.

“Billy?” Murphy said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here,” the ghoul child replied proudly. “Mom and Dad decided Quincy was too dangerous, and Diamond City doesn’t allow people like us, and Dad said Goodneighbor was nothing but criminals, so we came here.”

“That’s right,” Slim said affectionately. “We’re open to all. Billy here’s one of our brightest. I wish I’d had him in my classes before the bombs dropped.”

Billy stepped away and looked shyly at the adults. “I like it here,” he said, by way of explanation, before taking off at a sprint again.

“You know young Mr. Peabody?” Slim asked Murphy, watching the boy go with a fond look on his face.

“Sort of,” Murphy said, rubbing the back of her neck. “Curie and I pulled him out of that fridge he was in and got him home. Over a year ago, now.”

“That’s great.” Slim grinned. “Carol and Matt told me it was a couple of Minutemen, but they didn’t elaborate. Billy doesn’t talk about it much, says he never wants to go through what happened in the fridge ever again.”

“Is he… okay?” MacCready asked warily. “I’ve never seen a ghoul kid before.”

“Remarkably, yeah. He’s got his claustrophobia and whatnot, but he’s a mostly-normal 11-year-old,” Slim replied. “Well, beyond not being able to grow up. Something one of yours has in common with him, I understand.”

Ellie, MacCready and Murphy looked at each other. Slim caught their glances and nodded. “Yeah, Sturges told me. Like I said before, though, we’re open to all, non-traditional and super-non-traditional students included.”

MacCready and Ellie asked the ghoul a few more questions about lunches and homework and after-school activities while Murphy hung back and petted Dogmeat idly. When they were satisfied, the three said goodbye to Slim and the boys before heading back out to the street.

Ellie shook her head. “That poor ghoul boy. It’s a wonder he’s still alive.”
“Never thought we’d find someone who’d have… *that* in common with Shaun,” MacCready added.

Murphy sighed. “To be honest, I’d given up hope on ever seeing Billy and his family again. Down in Quincy, there, they were surrounded by Gunners. Curie and I were only down there because of Railroad business, and his parents refused to move, even though we begged them to. They said they didn’t want to uproot their boy because they’d just gotten him back. Guess they changed their minds.”

MacCready nodded. “They’re lucky they weren’t caught by the Gunners and made into slaves. Some people shell out loads of caps for ghouls, because they live forever, you know? A kid like Billy would be priceless.”

Murphy pursed her lips. “I still can’t believe the world slid so far backward that slavery is a thing again.”

The three fell into silence, and their feet crunched over the broken asphalt of the town’s main road, until they were once again in front of Murphy’s old home. Codsworth was puttering away inside, sweeping the kitchen floor and humming happily to himself. The sight brought a faint smile to Murphy’s face.

Ellie moved to open the door, but MacCready put an arm out to stop her. “Was that here when we left?” he asked, pointing at a grubby package on the step, wrapped in newspaper and tied with twine.

Dogmeat sniffed it carefully, then looked up at Murphy happily, tongue lolling. She picked it up and unwrapped it, revealing a patched rubber ball with the Vault-Tec logo stamped on it.

“Huh,” she said, weighing it in her hands. MacCready took it from her and tossed it in his hand a few times.

“Sturges?” he asked, turning to Murphy with a look of mild curiosity.

She shrugged. “Probably.”

Dogmeat’s eyes followed the ball’s trajectory over MacCready’s palm with interest. When he held it out closer, the dog whined.

“Not in the house, Mr. MacCready,” Codsworth said disapprovingly, having drifted over to open the door for them.

MacCready threw the ball down the street instead. Dogmeat looked up at Murphy.

She smiled. “Fetch, boy!”

The German shepherd took off like a shot, and MacCready held onto his hat, chuckling as he breezed by him. He’d always had an easy laugh, and Murphy loved that about him from the beginning, but today she took notice of the little things that made up his mirth. The way his eyes crinkled up at the corners. How his sandy hair bounced along with his shoulders, the way he leaned confidently against the door frame, arms crossed in contentment. And his laugh bubbled infectiously, up, then down the scale, going on for half a beat longer than expected.

Murphy smiled and crossed her own arms, leaning back on her old mailbox. When his eyes met hers, she raised an eyebrow and looked away, after the dog bounding into the distance. She kept smiling, though.
Once the ball had been retrieved and stowed away in MacCready’s pack for Nine and the boys to discover later, he and Murphy left to go find Sturges and find out what the new arrivals could do to earn their keep around Sanctuary. Ellie elected to stay behind, complaining of sore feet from the prior day’s walk. Murphy didn’t argue. It had been a while since the detective’s secretary had been out in the field, and Ellie looked like she badly wanted to rest and listen to Travis’s radio newscasts for any updates on the Diamond City mayoral debate.

Sturges was in his workshop, welder’s mask on. Sparks flew around the knee joints of a protectron he was working on, and Murphy and MacCready hung back until he shut his arc off and pushed his mask back to wipe his brow.

“Well hey there, Captain,” the handyman said, grinning once he caught sight of his visitors. “MacCready, Dogmeat. What’s going on?”

“Same old, same old, Sturges,” Murphy said, grabbing a nearby grease rag and tossing it his way. “Just looking for something to do. Need any help?”

The Minutemen mechanic caught the rag and ran it over his face, then his mask before straightening up and setting his gear aside. “Well, unless either of you got really good at rewiring circuitry since I last saw you, not really.”

Murphy shrugged. “My apologies. Best I can do is basic plumbing.”

“Well, we might have need of that, eventually.” Sturges grinned and stooped down to pet Dogmeat, who was inspecting the protectron. “For now I’m set here, though I wouldn’t mind a visit from Shaun to point out what I’m doing wrong on this bot at some point. That boy’s got an eye for nuts and bolts.”

He scratched his head. “Let me see… Smiling Larry was complaining to me yesterday about how he doesn’t have enough time to cast ammo, what with all the guns he’s been repairing lately, you might run ‘round by him and tell him I sent you. Oh, there’s a new guy in town, name of Staples? Wants to open a bar in one of the market stalls, and he’s looking for a helping hand. And, of course, if you feel inclined you can go sign up for a guard shift. We can always use some more muscle around here.”

MacCready winked at the other man. “You’ve got that covered, Sturges.”

Sturges laughed. “I’m a committed man, MacCready, lay off.”

“What’s Rylee got that I don’t?”

Murphy dragged him out, shaking her head. “Thanks, Sturges!” she hollered over her shoulder.

MacCready shook her off and dug around in his pocket until he produced a spare bottle cap. “Flip you for the bartending job?”

“Oh come on.” Murphy crossed her arms. “I actually tended bar when I was in school, and you’re great at making bullets.”

“I’m great at making .308s,” MacCready corrected her. “Besides, maybe I want to serve beer and chat up lonely caravan hands for a change, huh?”

Murphy rolled her eyes. “Fine. Heads.”

MacCready tossed the cap in the air and let it clatter to the pavement. It landed with the Nuka-Cola logo up, and he groaned in defeat while Murphy pumped her fist in the air.
“Bad luck,” she said, allowing Dogmeat to sniff the bottle cap before picking it up and handing it back to him. “Guess you’ll just have to come visit me when I’m slinging drinks.”

His hand touched hers for an instant as he took it back. “Will do, boss.”

They parted ways, but the warmth of his fingers lingered on Murphy’s palm. She closed her fist over the warmth, willing it to stay, and wondered if he was doing the same.

Ron Staples was a former wasteland wanderer, Murphy discovered. He’d been north, south, east and west, and had friends in every corner of the Commonwealth and the settlements beyond. The stories spilled out of him while Murphy helped him hammer boards into a bar countertop beneath a stall canopy on the outskirts of the Sanctuary marketplace. Murphy didn’t mind the manual labor or the stream of tales. They gave her a chance to take in the bustling trade center that had sprung up in the town’s cul-de-sac.

Stalls for all kinds of goods encircled the giant oak tree that still twisted up at the center of the roundabout, sporting a variety of signs, counters, vendors calling out to potential customers. A few Murphy recognized as individuals she and the other Minutemen officers had recruited. There was Tina De Luca, the other former Vault 81 resident that Rylee had encouraged to set foot in the outside world, displaying baskets and baskets of tools and small appliances she must have fixed herself. Next to her was Anne Hargraves, the radio actress who had gone back to seamstressing at Curie’s request and was singing happily while she sewed patches onto a pair of jeans. Close to the center was a ghost from Murphy’s far past, a ghoulified Vault-Tec representative by the name of Clyde whose raspy voice lifted above the rabble and promised that his basic supplies would have you “prepared for the future!”

In between the stalls and next to Ron’s would-be bar were caravanners, hawking wares on blankets and straw mats and the backs of brahmin. Most of them were from just outside the Commonwealth, their faces unfamiliar to Murphy, but she did catch sight of Cricket and her posse haggling over the price of plasma grenades with a group of Brotherhood Scribes. Dogmeat watched them from her side with some interest before yawning, lying down and dozing off. Murphy took that to mean he didn’t see the Scribes as much of a threat, and she similarly relaxed.

“Got a friend named Evan, out past Nuka-World,” Ron said while they sanded the top of the makeshift bar together, polishing out the bumps and splinters in the wood. “Taught me a few ways to throw Nuka-Cola and liquor together, make something new. He and a few other buddies of mine can send me all kinds of stuff that you’d never find in the Commonwealth.”

Murphy paused and pushed her hair back. “Think he could get us some Nuka-Cola Dark?”

“Got a case of it scheduled to come with a caravan next week,” Ron admitted. “Along with a bunch of rarities- Cherry, Grape, Orange, even Quartz and Quantum.”

“If he can get some Victory, then I’ll be impressed,” Murphy said with a smile. “Or even Wild.”

Staples whistled. “You’ve got expensive tastes, Miss Murphy.”

“Eh, not really.” Murphy went back to sanding down the bar. “I can get by with whiskey and the original flavor. Nuka-Ryes are my go-to.”
When the bar surface was as dark and smooth as Ron’s balding head, they coated it with a smelly, waterproof varnish borrowed from Sturges’ workshop and installed a pair of cabinet doors underneath it to lock up the alcohol. While Murphy filled the cabinet space with well-traveled bottles of spirits, Ron cracked open a can of white paint and began brushing letters on the empty sign over the counter. When he was done, he tapped off the brush and stepped back to admire his handiwork. Murphy joined him.

“‘The Main Staples.’ I like it,” she said. “What do you think, Dogmeat?”

The dog raised his head from where he’d been napping and whuffed softly, as if in approval.

Ron smiled. “Always said I’d name my bar that, once I settled down for good. Now I just need some mixers. And stools.”

Murphy was surprised, upon departing the marketplace, to find that MacCready and Ellie had moved her old dinner table outside. Codsworth was setting up the evening meal beneath the overhang of her former garage while Ellie listened to the radio, frowning over the strains of music and tapping her fingers on the handle of her butter knife impatiently. MacCready and the boys were tossing the rubber ball for Nine, who was dancing like a dervish in the backyard, tongue lolling. Dogmeat began panting in anticipation, and an encouraging look from Murphy released him into the fray.

MacCready jogged over to her and doubled over, hands on his knees. “Rematch,” he said, breathing heavily. “Best two out of three cap tosses for the bartending job.”

“No chance.” Murphy chuckled. “Why are we outside?”

He gestured at Codsworth. “It was the robot’s idea. I mentioned something about you wanting to ease into this place again, and he suggested we start slow by hanging out in the backyard.”

“Garden parties used to be all the rage, Mr. MacCready,” Codsworth said proudly as he set out cups with one arm and lit candles carefully with the flamer on another. “And the weather has been rather forgiving, lately.”

Murphy looked down at the ground and smiled shyly. “Thanks, guys. It’s perfect.”

“You’re welcome, mum.” A bell rang inside the house, and Codsworth’s eye stalks swiveled toward the sound. “That will be the meatballs. Please excuse me, the pasta should be ready in a few minutes. Mr. MacCready, could you round up the children?”

“On it.” MacCready gave Codsworth a salute and Murphy a wink before running off again to try and steal the ball back. Murphy drifted over to the table, still smiling.

“Heard you found a job,” Ellie said, when she sat down next to her. “Bartending, huh?”

“Right now it’s more like a miniature construction project, but yes, eventually.” Murphy sighed and leaned back in her chair. “Did you pick up Dunk and Shaun from school?”

Ellie nodded absentmindedly. “I talked with Slim and some of the other parents. Might have a lead on something myself.”
“What’d you find?”

Ellie opened her mouth to answer, but the song ended and Travis Miles’ voice came back over the radio speaker. “And that, folks, was the Ink Spots,” he said. “Time for the news. The Brotherhood of Steel have wrapped up their operation on the Lexington thoroughfare for now, it seems, as a majority of their forces stationed there have returned to either the Cambridge Police Station or the airport. While multiple sources confirmed the movement of troops on foot or via vertibird, the Brotherhood is keeping a tight lid on why the change is occurring. Similar troop movements have been reported across the Commonwealth, at a variety of Brotherhood outposts.”


“Shhh,” Ellie said, turning the volume up.

“Meanwhile, the Minutemen have issued a statement saying that nothing about their alliance with the Brotherhood has changed. General Preston Garvey said today that the partnership on Spectacle Island ‘will continue for the foreseeable future.’”

A recording of Preston’s voice cut in. “The Spectacle Island agricultural hub, for both sides, is a work of passion and a source of pride,” he said. “No one at the Castle or the Prydwen has plans to abandon it.”

“Can you shed any light on why the Brotherhood are moving out of Lexington and other areas across the Commonwealth area?” Travis asked.

“I believe the Brotherhood have completed their primary mission in Lexington, which was flushing out the raider bases along the 95 that have harassed caravans moving through that area for far too long,” Preston replied. “It's my understanding that they're leaving a small force behind to maintain that stretch, with expected support from their recon base in Cambridge.”

“He doesn’t know,” Murphy muttered. “He doesn’t know why they’re on the move.”

She stood up. “I should go find Sturges. I had no idea that—”

“Shhh, wait.” Ellie waved her hand at Murphy and pulled the radio closer to her. “The debate.”

Murphy sat down again, while Travis’ voice crackled on. “General Garvey is visiting Diamond City for the second mayoral debate, the only thing on Diamond City residents’ minds this week. Following the tragic events of the first mayoral debate, during which a Courser attacked the crowd and killed three people, security around this Saturday’s debate has been increased to the maximum to prevent another attack.”

“All of our guards, save those guarding the gate and perimeter will be present and prepared,” Danny Sullivan’s voice came over the newscast. “Ground patrolmen, entrance checks, snipers, the whole she-bang. Council’s orders.”

“The Diamond City council decided earlier this week that it would not stop non-residents from attending the debate, and it would also accept the help of a contingent of Minutemen to deter any potential acts of terror,” Travis went on. “The decision was a split vote, with Eustace Hawthorne, Nick Valentine and Becky Fallon in favor and Ann Codman and Malcolm Latimer against. When asked, candidate Codman said she voted against accepting the Minutemen’s offer because she feels the city has become too reliant on outside help, a key portion of her campaign platform.”

“While I appreciate all the Minutemen have supposedly done for the Commonwealth, there’s just no way Diamond City can trust them to keep our community’s best interests at heart.” Ann Codman
sounded like she was chastising anyone who dared disagree with her. “The Minutemen’s open recruitment policy for all may seem admirable at first glance, but there’s also no way to completely trust the people who may be drawn to serve. They may not even be people, and the Minutemen seem to have no problem with this. A faction, or even a settlement, that opens its doors to everyone is inviting the enemy right to their front doorstep. Look at Covenant - the town was thriving, it was making a name for itself, and then it opened its gates to synths and they lost literally everything.”

“What?” Murphy exclaimed.

“Are you suggesting that the attack on Covenant was because the town began letting synths in?” Travis asked.

“I obviously can’t say for certain, but I think it was a lapse in judgment or in protocol that led to the town’s massacre.” Ann replied. “The details we know point to an attack orchestrated by synths working behind the scenes. How they got inside the town, we don’t know. And the Minutemen- or Diamond City, for that matter - could be next. We could already have Institute spies among us, tracking our movements, figuring out our weak points. We need to close ranks, we need to be careful how we move forward, and we need a leader at our head who is ready to put safety above the rest - no matter what.”

“They were dead in the street,” Murphy hissed. “Sure, the Institute came for them, but it’s because they were kidnapping.”

“Murphy, shush.”

“On the other side of the aisle, detective and former mayoral candidate Nick Valentine stood by his vote to accept Minutemen support for the debate, and called Codman’s theories about the attack on Covenant ‘an absolute pile of brahmin droppings.’”

“Sure, Ann loves to say we’re all in constant danger, but we’ll all be safe if we just shut the gate and rot away in here,” Valentine’s gruff voice said. “She conveniently forgets that closing ranks and refusing to cooperate with anyone else is how the Minutemen started to fall apart in ’82. If Diamond City wants to survive, wants to thrive, then we aren’t going to do it by burying our heads in the sand - we’re going to do it by working with everyone who’s willing to, and showing the Institute and whoever else that we’re made of stronger stuff than they thought.”

Ellie nodded. “Right.”

“Valentine withdrew from the mayoral race following the attack at the first debate, and public opinion has been mixed,” Travis went on. “While the move was widely regarded as the best decision at the time, some feel that Valentine’s departure left the city with fewer options, when it comes to leadership styles and policies.”

“I feel like I’ve gotta pick the lesser of two evils, man,” said a drawling voice that Murphy recognized as the town chem dealer’s.

“Ugh, he couldn’t interview anyone other than Solomon?” she said.

“Better than Myrna,” Ellie replied.

“Mrs. Codman and Mr. Latimer are both more than qualified to lead Diamond City,” a woman’s voice said. “Which one will have the honor is up to our fine citizens.”

“That’s interim mayor Geneva, who has her hands full handling the office while it waits for its new occupant,” Travis said. “Geneva, do you feel that two candidates for mayor is too few for the voters
“Absolutely not, Travis. For a city our size, it may be a benefit to see fewer candidates—it makes the voting process much more straightforward, for one thing, and it gives each person running more time during the debate to answer questions and lay out their plans to address Diamond City’s challenges.”

“One of our listeners asked recently, is there any way Nick Valentine can re-enter the race at this stage?”

“No, Travis, not following a withdrawal. Once he submitted his forms, he gave up his rights to run, either as an official candidate or a write-in.”

“You heard it here, folks,” Travis said happily. “Tune in this Saturday at noon for the debate, moderated by Publick Occurrences’ Piper Wright and myself. In the meantime, feel free to submit your questions for the mayoral candidates at Diamond City Radio. I’m Travis ‘Lonely’ Miles, and here’s a little bit of Frank Sinatra, singing ‘Come Fly With Me.’”

Having finally wrestled the Vault-Tec ball away from Nine, MacCready herded the boys and dogs over to the table and took off his hat. “What’d we miss?” he asked Murphy.

“A complete load of—”

“Dinner is served!” Codsworth interrupted, breezing through the door with an enormous bowl of razorgrain linguini, brahmin meatballs and tato sauce. “My cooking skills may be a little rusty, along with most of our appliances, so let me know if it needs salt. Everyone, tuck in!”

Murphy made a face and promised to tell MacCready later. The five accepted bowls of pasta from the robot, and Duncan and Shaun immediately began competing to see who could twirl up the most linguini on their forks. MacCready scolded them affectionately and dabbed at Duncan’s face with a napkin, while Nine begged at Shaun’s side until he gave her a meatball. She bounded away with it to eat in peace, though Dogmeat had fallen asleep at Murphy’s feet again and didn’t seem particularly interested in chasing her. Murphy snuck him a meatball too, and he snapped it up before sighing softly and rolling onto his side.

Throughout the meal, MacCready kept finding excuses to touch her. Passing her the pasta bowl, a napkin, the pepper shaker. Bumping her knee under the table with his. Leaning over to touch her shoulder when she described her time with Ron, gesturing so wildly with his hands that he caught her on the elbow while he laid out Smiling Larry’s gun shop setup and demanding list of customers. He did it so frequently that she couldn’t help but look down at her lap and crack a grin toward the end of dinner, thinking he must have noticed the blush in her cheeks when he touched her hand that morning and was trying to bring it out again.

Ellie, however, seemed too lost in thought to notice. She nodded along while Shaun told the table about their first school day in Sanctuary, but her eyes were unfocused, staring off at something no one else could see. She picked at her food, eating about half of it before excusing herself to the bathroom and disappearing entirely. Eventually, Codsworth cleared away her dishes and put her unfinished bowl on the ground, where Nine gobbled it down greedily.

“Is she okay?” MacCready asked, stacking plates after sending the boys to the backyard to play again.

“Bit of a rough newscast from Diamond City tonight,” Murphy said quietly, before explaining. MacCready’s face fell, and he nodded in understanding.
“I can go check on her,” he offered.

“Let her be,” Murphy replied, shaking her head. “If she needs something, she’ll tell us.”

The sky was darkening around them by the time Murphy and Dogmeat left that evening, the sun already below the horizon and the stars fast rushing down to touch where it had disappeared. Ellie emerged to bid her goodbye with the rest of the house’s occupants, but she was clearly still preoccupied with the fate of Diamond City. Murphy debated radioing Valentine to let him know about his secretary’s current state of mind, but decided against it on the walk back to the Red Rocket truck stop. Despite her worries, she was asleep as soon as her head hit her cot.

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“Hold it right there, lady!”

It was dark, and Murphy blinked profusely, trying to adjust to the dim light around her. She was standing at the top of what appeared to be a wall built out of junk, just behind a short figure in a combat helmet with goggles tied around its crown. She couldn’t make out his face, but judging by the voice, he was just a child.

“Don’t take another step, or we’ll blow your fucking head off!” he warned.

Instinctively, Murphy reached for her gun. It wasn’t there, and neither was she.

A soft laugh emanated from the darkness before the parapet, bouncing off the wet walls around them. There were stalactites hanging down and little strings of lights here and there, but all Murphy could make out was a black figure in the distance, just beyond the limit of her vision.

“You’re kidding me, right?” the woman in the darkness asked.

“I ain’t kidding,” the boy replied indignantly, hoisting his rifle up so the intruder could see it. “You’re not supposed to be here, so you better leave.”

“Who are you?”

The boy took a deep breath. “I’m MacCready.”

Murphy froze.

“I run Little Lamplight, because they made me the mayor. And I don’t like strangers. Or mungos.”

Murphy edged around until she could make out the boy’s profile. Even through the softness of youth, the familiar features felt like a blow to her stomach. Bobby.

“Well then,” the woman went on, shifting her stance slightly. “Mayor MacCready. I really need to get to Vault 87. Do you happen to know the way?”

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the FUCK.

Little MacCready looked taken aback. “You don’t want to go there. That’s where the monsters are.”

“Monsters?”
“Yeah.” He puffed up a bit taller. “We got pretty good at keeping them out. Probably better than you could do.”

Despite the bizarre scene before her, Murphy couldn’t help but smile at the cockiness she had grown fond of.

“So… you know the way to get there?” the woman prodded.

“Yeah, I do. But it’s through Little Lamplight, and you’re not getting into Little Lamplight.” MacCready shrugged indifferently. “Guess you better find some other way, mungo.”

The woman thought for a minute. “How can I get you to trust me?” she finally asked.

“Why should I trust you?” MacCready shot back. “I got no reason to. You mungos are nothing but trouble, and I ain’t gonna let what happened to Sammy and Squirrel happen to anyone else.”

Wait a minute.

“And… what happened to Sammy and Squirrel?”

Vault?

“Them and Penny got themselves caught. By mungos, just like you. Slavers from Paradise Falls.” MacCready shook his head. “I told them to watch out, but the stupid kids didn’t listen.”

“Uh-huh.” The woman took a step forward, and her profile sharpened slightly. She was wearing power armor, and there was something tall arched over her head. Custom helmet, maybe?

“What if I go and help Sammy and the others?” she offered. “Will you trust me then?”

“You’d…” MacCready hesitated. “You’d do that?”

He turned away, and Murphy could see the conflict on his youthful face, the cogs turning. He couldn’t have been older than 12, and here he was weighing the risk of letting a strange woman into his realm versus shooting her on the spot. Murphy’s heart twisted in her chest.

“Maybe,” he said softly to himself, before turning back and repeating it to the woman at the gate. “Maybe, if you bring them back, I might let you in.”

The woman took one more step forward, and the light shone fully on her, revealing bright eyes in another youthful face and textured hair teased up into a mohawk above it.

“I promise I’ll bring your friends back,” Elizabeth Titus said, studying the boy with pity. “See you around, MacCready.”

She turned and made her way back into the darkness, her power armor rumbling and echoing off the cave walls.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” MacCready said.

Murphy awoke to Dogmeat licking her arm and whining. She sat up and patted the dog, reassuring
him that she was okay, knowing the whole time that she wasn’t.

Eventually, she struggled to her feet and pulled on her boots and holsters. She was covered in sweat, and sleep wasn’t returning to her anytime soon.

Sanctuary was quiet, and moonlight bathed the buildings below her as she crossed the bridge into town. It got caught up in her hair as well, and the Minutemen guards posted at the barracks nodded and gave her casual salutes. “Captain,” one said.

Murphy walked down the empty road, Dogmeat at her side. For an instant, she felt the crushing loneliness that had fallen on her after her emergence from the vault. The feeling of being the only woman left in the world had once driven her mad in the dark hours of the night. A single set of human footsteps, echoing hopelessly against the pavement.

The defeated mindset left her once she saw Ellie Perkins sitting on her old doorstep, smoking a cigarette. Silently, she approached and sat down next to her. Ellie nodded but said nothing, and they stared up at the stars together in the quiet.

“I need to leave,” Ellie said finally.

Murphy sighed. “I know.”

“I have to.”

“It’s okay, Ellie.”

“Shaun…” Ellie offered Murphy the cigarette. “He’ll be okay. Bethany’s here, I found her today. And Sturges. MacCready.”

“I know. It’s okay, really.”

She smiled sadly. “And you. You’re here.”

“I am.” Murphy took the cigarette and held it up, watching the little ember on the end pulse and glow. “You’ve done more than I could’ve asked for, Ellie. Thank you, for everything.”

Ellie took a deep breath. “There’s a Brotherhood recon squad in town. They’re getting a lift out of here in a few hours, heading to Diamond City to attend the debate. I’m going with them.”

Murphy took a drag on the cigarette. “What’s your plan?”

“Not sure yet.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

They were silent, for another hour. When Ellie got up and grabbed her pack, Murphy hugged her and waved goodbye before taking a deep breath and turning to the open front door.

*Strawberry.*

She stepped over the threshold and paused. The house was silent, save Codsworth’s engine whirring in the laundry room as he recharged. Dogmeat padded in beside her and looked up, expectant.

Slowly, Murphy moved through the house. The corners of the windows, the curve of the kitchen...
countertop, the color of the walls called out to her, but she kept moving, holding onto Dogmeat’s fur, following her muscle memory until it carried her to the place where she and another used to lie together at night.

MacCready and Duncan were sleeping in her old bedroom, the former with one arm splayed out onto the second pillow and the other wrapped around his son, who was nestled in the curve of his stomach. Duncan was snoring softly, and MacCready’s eyelashes fluttered as a dream crossed his untroubled mind.

As carefully and quietly as she could, Murphy took off her boots and belts and got in bed.
In Pieces

Chapter Summary

In which MacCready buys drugs.

Despite every bone in her body begging her to stay in bed, Murphy rose with the sun and made her way out to the kitchen, leaving MacCready and Duncan and Shaun to sleep. Codsworth had left the house, probably to find brahmin milk for breakfast, so Murphy pulled out bowls for cereal and set the kitchen table herself. She found the coffeemaker in its usual place and plugged it in before remembering that morning coffee didn’t exist anymore.

Dogmeat, who had risen with her, nudged her limp hand with his wet nose. Murphy smiled and petted him, then set about making tea instead.

“Somewhere out there,” she muttered to the dog while examining the packets of dried bloodleaf and fern flowers Codsworth had stowed away in the pantry, “Is a Slocum’s Joe with bags and bags of coffee in storage that the radroaches and mole rats and raiders missed. You and I are going to find it.”

Dogmeat whuffed.

“We just need to bribe Curie into telling us where she found her little stash. Sound good?”

“Sounds good to me.”

MacCready emerged from the hallway, rubbing his eyes and yawning. “What are you doing here? Where’s Ellie?”

Murphy paused, turned. Most days, unkempt MacCready was a welcome sight. Blue eyes bleary, sandy hair sticking up in odd places, lines of sleep on his face. Today though, that face had sprung straight out of a dream, and not necessarily what she would have called a good one.

He stopped rubbing his eyes and stared back at her. “You okay, boss? You look like you saw a ghost.”

She handed him a box of Sugar Bombs and a few spoons. “Sorry. Ellie’s gone. So I’m here.”

“Gone? Gone, as in-”

“Gone as in flew back to Diamond City with some Brotherhood Scribes.” Murphy frowned and turned back to her tea. “Wish I’d had a chance to ask them why they were all regrouping at the airport and in Cambridge, before they left. That worries me.”

MacCready set the Sugar Bombs and spoons down on the table before joining her, sliding a tentative hand around her waist. “That the only thing worrying you?”

The gesture of affection was small, careful, but it was enough to bring all of Murphy’s suppressed fears and guilt to the surface. She collapsed against him silently, hanging onto his neck for dear life, pressing her face into his shoulder.
“I had a dream about you,” she said, her voice muffled by his t-shirt.

MacCready stiffened. The hand moving through her hair stopped. “Uh-oh.”

“No, it- it wasn’t…” She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. “Sorry, I should’ve… you were young. In a cave, guarding a gate, to Little Lamplight I think. And Paladin Titus was there. You wouldn’t let her in.”

He relaxed. “Oh. Sounds pretty normal to me.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah.” MacCready resumed stroking her head reassuringly, pulling her back in to rest her chin on his shoulder. “I mean, we told you that story, remember? In Far Harbor?”

“Yeah.” Murphy nodded. “Yeah, you did. It felt really vivid, though. Like I was there, you just couldn’t see me or hear me.”

“I’ve had a few like that. Gets old, not being able to stop everything and tell the monsters chasing you that you’d rather be playing Nuka Tapper.” She could feel the reassuring grin in his voice. “How’d young me look? Still as handsome as old me?”

“You’re not old.” Murphy smiled and looked up at him again. “You looked a lot like Duncan, honestly. Dirtier mouth, though.”

“Well there you go.” MacCready held her out at arm’s length, rubbing a few stray tears off her cheek with his thumb. “A dream grounded in reality. That’s progress. Your mind probably just plugged me and Titus into whatever cave you last fell into.”

“Maybe.”

Codsworth breezed through the front door with a wooden crate of bottles while they regarded each other, and the two sprang apart like they’d been caught making out behind the school bleachers by their parents. “Good morning, mum!” the robot cried, failing to notice.

“Morning, Codsworth,” Murphy said with an embarrassed laugh. “I’ve… I guess I’ve moved back in.”

“Wonderful, Miss Murphy, simply wonderful!” Codsworth exclaimed. “I’ve bought supplies for breakfast. Shall I rouse the boys?”

“I’ll do it,” MacCready offered quickly. “Someone’ll have to explain to Shaun why Ellie had to go.”

“No, let me,” Murphy said, cutting him off. “You take Dunk, I’ll… I’ll talk to Shaun.”

Even asleep, Shaun looked so much like Nate that Murphy had to stop and will her heart to slow down. He was beginning to stir, the noises from the kitchen probably winding their way into whatever dream he was having. Murphy hoped, prayed, that his dreams were nothing like hers.

“Shaun,” she said gently, putting a hand on his blanketed shoulder. “Time to get up. It’s a school day.”
“Mmmm five minutes, Ellie,” he mumbled, turning his face into his pillow. Nine, who was draped over the foot of his bed, raised her head and gave a toothy yawn.

Murphy pulled up a chair and sat forward in it, resting her elbows on her knees. A minute went by before Shaun turned back and opened his eyes cautiously.

“Ellie never gives me five minutes,” he said.

“I know.”

“Where’d she go?”

“Home.”

“Why?”

“To help Nick.”

Shaun sat up. “Without me?”

Murphy sighed. “You know it’s not safe for you there, right now. She was doing what she thought was best. She’ll come back, when she’s got things in Diamond City sorted out. Nick, too.”

There was confusion on his face. Guilt, too. He looked a lot like what Murphy imagined she had looked like, not ten minutes ago.

“When?” he asked finally.

“I don’t know,” Murphy answered truthfully. “But you’re safe here. MacCready and Duncan are here, Codsworth, Nine, Dogmeat and I, we’re all here for you. And outside, there’s Sturges and Bethany and Slim. Okay?”

Shaun sat up, pulled the overgrown white puppy into his lap and hugged her. Nine whined and licked his cheek a few times.

“It’s my fault she left Diamond City,” Shaun said quietly. “I never told her I was sorry.”

Murphy reached out to scratch Nine behind the ear. “You can tell her when she comes back. Ellie loves you. She wouldn’t have come here with you if she felt anything less.”

“Then why did she leave?”

“Because she loves Diamond City, too.” Murphy took a deep breath. “And right now, it needs her.”

He was silent again. Then, in the smallest of voices: “Everyone leaves.”

Murphy scooted her chair an inch closer, racked her brains. “Shaun, I know this new world is hard to get used to. I know in the Institute, no one left, not really. You could always find them, somehow down there. But up here, people come and go. It’s part of life, and it hurts sometimes. But the people you love, the people who love you, they make a point of coming back. So maybe Ellie needs to go be with Nick for a bit, that’s okay. She’ll come back to you. Nick, Danse, Rory, all of them. Life up here is knowing when people need to leave and welcoming them when they come home. Make sense?”

“Is it always going to be like that?” Shaun asked, biting his lip. “People coming and going?”
Murphy thought carefully on her answer. “It depends on the people you decide to love,” she said finally. “And after a certain point, you might have to be the one coming and going. It hurts, but there are times when you have to leave.”

He was searching for reassurances in her face. “You leave. But you always come back.”

“Right.”

“Why?” he asked. “Who are you coming back for?”

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

“All of you,” Murphy said, before rising from her seat and pulling the chair back to its original place. “Now come on. Don’t want to be late for school.”

Before Murphy knew it, the day had flown by and she found herself retiring in the house she once called home. The walls still seemed oppressive at moments, and Dogmeat nudged her leg when he sensed her breath growing ragged. She had to step outside more than a few times that evening to get fresh air.

Sturges dropped by after supper to let Murphy know that he had gotten word of Ellie’s arrival in Diamond City with the Brotherhood recon squad.

“She didn’t give you any hints?” MacCready asked, looking sideways at Murphy.

“I didn’t pry.”

Sturges snapped his fingers. “Oh, and Haylen was on the box today too. Wanted to let me know the two dogs had gone missing. She was relieved when I told her they’d turned up here, safe and sound, but the rest of the group over at Breakheart still wants at least one replacement pup.”

Dogmeat panted happily and pawed at Sturges’ overalls. He stooped down and scratched his ears softly. “There now, boy. Don’t scare people like that again, ya hear?”

When Murphy tried to thank Sturges for his gifts of toys, however— a Vault Boy bobblehead wearing glasses and brandishing a beaker had been discovered by Codsworth that afternoon on the doorstep—he denied any knowledge of the rubber ball or the figurine.

“Bethany, maybe?” the mechanic guessed. “Or some other family that wants to welcome you in? Could be anybody.”

MacCready frowned. “You can’t find bobbleheads like that just anywhere, these days. I’ve only seen a few in my whole life.”

“Could be a collector?” Sturges shrugged. “You figure it out, let me know. Anyway, I’m having a get-together at the shop tomorrow to listen to the debate. Come by, if you feel like joining.”

Murphy and MacCready promised they would, and wished the Minutemen officer good night. When
they made their way back inside, they found Duncan moving his things into Shaun’s room.

“Please, Dad?” he begged MacCready, hugging his stuffed dog tightly in anticipation. “He can’t sleep by himself.”

“I’m not by myself, I have Nine,” Shaun corrected him. “But is it okay? Dunk wants his own bed.”

MacCready glanced at Murphy, then looked away. “I’m not sure if-”

“It’s okay,” Murphy cut in. “But I’m going to have Codsworth and Dogmeat keep an eye on you three. Alright?”

“Yes.” Duncan hugged her around the waist before rushing off with Shaun to continue setting up his new nest in the spare bed.

“Okay, okay.” MacCready straightened his hat. “It’s fine, I’ll just sleep on the couch.”

“Please don’t.”

“So,” MacCready said later, after the boys had been tucked in and left with Dogmeat curled outside their door. “This room, this bed… they were yours, before everything?”

“The room was,” Murphy replied, her head resting in the crook of his arm as they laid together in the dark. “Pretty similar setup. The bed’s from next door, though. Our old one was in pieces.”

“How’d you get this one in here? It’s huge.”

“I’m pretty strong.”

He looked down at her skeptically. “Was it Sturges?”

“And Preston.”

“Thought so.” MacCready caressed her head, smoothing her hair out carefully. “You sure you’re gonna be okay all night? We can get you a room at the boarding house, if it’s too much.”

“I’ll be fine.” Murphy rubbed her thumb over the fabric of his Grognak t-shirt. “I’ve got you. You’re great at scaring nightmares away.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, god forbid you have another dream about baby me. I was a horrible little monster.”

“You weren’t nearly as scary as Titus was,” Murphy reassured him. “Hiding in the shadows with that mohawk of hers, like some kind of raider.”

MacCready stopped stroking her hair for a moment. “Mohawk?”

“Yeah.” Murphy shook her head slightly. “That should have been the tip-off for me that I was dreaming, I guess. I only ever saw her with braids.”

He fell silent for a minute and resumed stroking her head. Eventually she nudged him. “Something I
“Did I tell you what Titus looked like, when I first met her?” he asked.

“No. I mean, you said she had power armor on, but I don’t think you told me anything else.”

“That’s what I thought.” He frowned. “Murphy… she did have a mohawk, then. But how could…”

It was Murphy’s turn to stiffen. “How could I know that?”

She sat up quickly and put her head in her hands. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck fuck.”

“Hey, hey.” MacCready sat up with her, put an arm around her shoulders. “Breathe. Maybe it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Maybe it does,” Murphy argued. “Something’s wrong with my head, and for some reason Titus is at the center of it, even though we barely know each other, like a fixation I keep coming back to. It’s like I keep seeing pieces of her life, but I don’t know why, I just don’t know.”

She looked up at him again, desperate. “I don’t know what to do.”

MacCready put a hand to her cheek, studied her with concern. She could see in his eyes he had come to some kind of decision, and he nodded.

“I do,” he said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. “Get dressed. I’ll meet you back here, but there’s something I need to go get.”

Murphy met him at the side door half an hour later, wrapped in a jacket to ward off the evening winds. The breeze was whipping MacCready’s coat around as he approached, but his hat was pulled so low it looked like it might never come off.

“Okay,” he said, when she stepped out to meet him. “Let’s go.”

“What did you need to get?”

“You’ll see.”

The mercenary took her hand and led her down the empty street, wind howling around them. Before long they stood outside the light blue house with the mailbox marked JAHANI in peeled paint.

Murphy dropped MacCready’s hand. “No. Absolutely not.”

He turned to her, took her shoulders in his hands gently. “Murphy, you want answers. She’s got them.”

“What she has is a problem, Bobby, and I’m not going to contribute to it just to get some addled bullshit about how I’m ‘standing with the people,’ or the Commonwealth is ‘filled with hope for a better world.’ What did you buy her? Psycho? Med-X?”

MacCready produced an inhaler with a red tube from inside his coat pocket. “Jet, actually.”
Murphy shook her head. “You know how old she is. One hit could kill her.”

“Word around town is that Sturges has been mixing doses of Addictol into her food for years, now,” he argued, pressing the chem into her hand. “If you feel bad about it, then don’t mention you have it. See if she’ll help you without getting high.”

Murphy shoved the inhaler inside her jeans pocket, glancing around quickly. “This is insane. She’s just an old woman who fancies herself a fortune teller. Cold reading and vague answers that she thinks you want to hear. How is this going to help?”

MacCready took a step closer, lowered his voice. “Look, I know you don’t believe in this kind of stuff, but there’s a lot that happens nowadays that you wouldn’t have dreamed of happening back in your day. Sure, maybe you need a shrink, but what you’ve been seeing lately doesn’t sound like something a shrink could explain. That woman has told me things that sounded impossible when I first heard them, but they’ve all come true so far.”

Murphy raised her chin in defiance. “Like what?”

“That’s between me and her.” He shook his head. “Go in, don’t- I’m going back to the house. Trust me when I say, though, she probably already knows you’re coming.”

He pulled his collar up and stalked off down the street, leaving Murphy standing alone outside the blue house. She watched him go, squinting in the gusty darkness before turning back to the door before her and the rusty mailbox.

The door cracked open, and light from a fire spilled out. “Come inside, kid,” a faint voice floated over on the wind. “And don’t hold out on me, put what’s in your pocket on the table.”

Murphy rubbed her hands together in front of the fireplace, warming slowly while Mama Murphy settled into her chair and studied the inhaler of Jet. “Been feelin’ like I need a little kick lately,” the old woman said in a welcoming tone.

Murphy sighed and sat back in her own chair. “Can it wait? I’ve got questions.”

The unofficial matriarch of Sanctuary chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure you do, kid, I’m sure you do. And you’ll have your answers, by the end of the night. Might even have mine, too.”

“What answers do you need?”

Mama Murphy sighed. “Last I saw you, I’d have said this world was united, standin’ together with you at the center of it. Now, I can see the cracks of a different kind forming. You’re still in the middle, tryin’ to pull everything together and hold it in one piece, but there’s a weight in your heart and soul threatenin’ to sink it all that I can’t get a read on. Some days it’s yours, some days it’s another’s. Some days it’s today, some days it’s from long ago, or not so long ago.”

She shook her head. “I said you’d walk a long, hard road, but I didn’t think it’d be this hard.”

“Mama Murphy, I didn’t come here to have a pity party,” Murphy said as gently as she could. “I’m here because MacCready asked me to talk to you. You know how I feel about all this.”
“Oh, that Bobby’s a sweet boy.” The fortune teller grinned, showing yellowed teeth that were in remarkable condition for a chem addict. “He knows where he stands, when to rise and when to pull back. Good dancer, too, but who wouldn’t be when your partner’s wearin’ a dress like that?”

“Mama…” Murphy cleared her throat, momentarily surprised. “Mama, I’ve been having these… dreams. I’ve been seeing Nate, since the Institute attack, like a hallucination, but the dreams are kind of new, and they’re different. Scarier. They’re pieces to something, and I don’t have the whole picture. I just need to know, is there anything I need to do to stop this, or is it all connected to my PTSD? Do I just need to ride it out until I’m back in the Brotherhood’s good graces and can get medication, or keep meditating? What do I need to do?”

“You’re right, it’s not your man you’re seein’,” Mama Murphy replied apologetically. “But the pieces he’s tryin’ to show you are important. Maybe not to the now, but to the then, and what’s to come.”

Murphy pressed a hand to her forehead. “No, Mama, I need to stop it. I need to keep a clear head. Like you said, everybody’s counting on me. I can’t be freezing up on battlefields or screaming in my sleep because… because…”

“No, kid.” Mama Murphy was getting agitated. “You’re pushin’ it down. Let me tell you a story. Once, there was a beautiful young girl, with a special power. Used to get in all kinds of crazy adventures.”

“She meets a handsome young boy, but he doesn’t like her power. Thinks it makes her a slave to something evil.” Mama Murphy sighed heavily. “And so the power goes away, and it's not there when the girl and the boy need it most. Now the boy's gone, and the girl's old. But she has friends. And her power keeps them safe. That's all that matters.”

She leaned forward in her chair and jabbed a gnarled finger at Murphy. “Pushin’ it down won’t work. You want to know how to beat this, you gotta let it in.”

“No, Mama Murphy.” Murphy stood up. “I’m not going to sit here and take chems to try and exacerbate this. Give me the Jet.”

She reached out to grab the inhaler, but the old woman snatched it back to her chest and narrowed her eyes. “You need proof, kid? Fine. Maxson has to choose, or you’ll choose for him.”

Murphy froze. “What did you say?”

“Can’t say I’m fond of the kid, thunderin’ over us all like he knows better, but you’re settin’ him straight, bit by bit.”

“Mama Murphy,” Murphy said sternly. “Where did you hear that? Did Bobby tell you that?”

“And I can’t say I blame you, gettin’ all twisted up with him and him.” Mama Murphy winked and cackled. “Back in my day, might’ve done the same.”

“Where did you hear that?” Murphy demanded. “Hardly anyone knows, how would-”

“I told you, kid.” The old woman settled back in her chair. “I’ve seen it. Now it’s your turn.”

“My turn for what?”
Before Murphy could stop her, Mama Murphy stuck the inhaler in her mouth and breathed deeply. Her arms fell to her sides, the plastic chem container clattering to the wooden floor as her pupils dilated.

“Mama Murphy!” Murphy scooped up the Jet and kneeled down in front of the green armchair. “Shit, Mama, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

“I can see them,” the fortune teller said, the firelight flickering in her eyes. “The women you’re chasin’, and their shadows, and their shadows’ shadows. One glowin’ like the moon, the other bright as the sun. One climbed from the earth, the other descended from her shinin’ tower. Endin’ and beginnin’, for years and years until they find you.”

“Mama, stay with me, I can go get Doctor Bethany-”

“No.” The older woman grabbed her by the wrist. “You want to find them, the truths they’re hidin’, you’ve gotta go where they’ve been. Down into the earth, up into the sky. Might be you find some more truths along the way.”

Her face twisted, air hissing through her worn teeth. “Walkin’ that path will wake him, though. You can’t know the truths that he bottled up, sold to the highest bidder, spun out of wool from the bighorners come back to the fold. Watch out for him, and what he brings out of the deep to break your center.”

“Bighorners?” Murphy shook the inhaler and was horrified to hear no contents sloshing around. “Mama, did you take the whole-”

“Oh, kid.” Mama Murphy’s eyes welled with tears. “You’ve got it laid out in front of you, but it’s all in pieces. Let it in. Let it happen. Let her choose. Let him choose. They’re waitin’ for you. Follow the signs, go back where it all started.”

“Mama-”

“You’ve challenged the storm, you’ve known the sea. Now find that horizon.”

With that, Mama Murphy released Murphy and sank into her chair, eyes rolling back into her head.

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