Summary

Nisha wasn’t even truly conscious of what she’d just done until the screaming bore into her skull. Arm still in the air, shaking from the effort of being held up.

How long had she been standing here like this?

Angel screamed again as Nisha made eye contact. Of course she’d be afraid of her, Nisha’d just shot her father in the head.

Why wouldn’t she be next?

But she was wrong. For once in Nisha’s life she was about to be a good person.

Notes

This is my first Borderlands longfic in a while, feels like coming home. Especially since my last longfic was a bit.... cumbersome.

I feel like it's a rite of passage for literally every Borderlands fanfic author to have at least one Rescue Angel fanfic and like I KINDA did one a long time ago with Eighteenth Birthday but this is a canon universe one instead of an odd on-Eden AU.

Athenisha starts about three chapters in, Gaigel a bit later once they meet up with the BL2 Crew. Other tiny ships sprinkled in probably as I am wont to do.
Screaming, Nisha wasn’t even truly conscious of what she’d just done until the screaming bore into her skull. High and piercing, echoing off the wide, open room.

Jack’s body had fallen back over one of the barriers after the shot to his head. His knees hooked over the top leaving his legs dangling limply, the only thing in view. Lifeless. Nisha supposed it was a mercy to the screaming girl that the rest of his body wasn’t visible.

Nisha’s arm was still in the air, pointed directly at where his head had been. Shaking from the effort of being held up.

How long had she been standing here like this?

Terrified noises to the side jerk her to attention, Angel screaming again as Nisha makes eye contact with her. A small gasp of fear as Nisha’s trembling arm finally lowered, the woman slowly facing her.

Of course Angel was afraid. She’d just watched Nisha, a woman she’d not even properly met, whip out a gun and abruptly shoot her father in the head.

Why wouldn’t she be next?

But she was was wrong. The confused and combative stare Nisha was giving her had nothing to do with anger towards her. It was just a woman being forced to process the idea that she was about to do the right thing. Be a good person.

She was doing something that actually would make her more than just the bandit who kills bandits.

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Jack keeping things from her wasn’t anything unusual, hell, normally it wasn’t even anything malicious. Just boring Hyperion business that Nisha couldn’t be assed to care about.

The only part of his business that Nisha was interested in and somewhat annoyed he wasn’t sharing was the progress with the vault key. She knew he had one. She knew he was doing something with it. She knew he wasn’t telling her for a reason.

Jack’d even been visiting her less and less as she started asking about the vault key more and more.

It had come to point on his most recent visit.

He’d blustered around, ranting about her never prodding about anything else, why was she prodding now? But eventually he relented to her piercing glare and crossed arms.

Jack’d said it would be easier to show her than to tell her.

Ever since she’d been gifted Lynchwood she’d really stopped her adventuring ways due to, you know, the responsibility of running a town. Initially she’d honestly been pretty excited about going somewhere different, especially knowing that there was a vault key at the end of this rainbow.

Granted, she’d rather be jostled around in a rough and tumble vault hunter buggy than riding shotgun in a fancy schmancy Hyperion luxury car but at least Jack was taking care to crush as many hapless wild animals under the heavy wheels as he could.
Each one eliciting a sharp and cruel laugh out of the woman as she hung out of the window. Getting just the perfect amount of blood on her.

Behind her, Jack kept grabbing the back of her coat to keep her from flying out the window. More amused by the danger than worried.

She hadn’t even bothered to open the door when they stopped outside a wide, open Hyperion building. Just slid right out the window before sliding back over the hood to retrieve her hat from Jack’s head.

But that’s where the fun ended.

He’d led her up to the top of the building, Nisha noting it was actually kind of pretty up here. Weird place to keep a vault key though. Why not keep it up on Helios where the bandits can’t get at it?

The weirdness was just starting as Jack instructed her to stand back for a second. A bioscan before he leaned forward into a mic.

“I love you.”

Hearing those words out of Jack’s mouth felt weird and foreign and wrong. An odd wariness falling over Nisha as she let Jack grab her wrist and lead her inside the newly opened door. A sinking feeling that was more than just the elevator down. Gut feeling of a rat in a maze as Jack led her deeper inside. Pressing a button.

An unfamiliar woman’s voice spoke, “Executing phaseshift.”

Jack explained as the room shifted around them, eventually revealing a young woman in front of her. Hovering in the center of the room, pale face looking down at them sadly. Glowing white wings making her live up to her namesake.

Angel. A heavenly siren with her wings clipped.

Nisha didn’t even react at first. Just staring at the girl like a dumb, gaping child. Jack either not noticing or not caring as he continued to lead the listless Nisha around like a drifting giant spore. Unaware of things clunking into place into his girlfriend’s mind. Unpleasant things. Memories of being locked in a closet, her mother banging on the door when she dared to start crying.

She dully looked in the general direction of Jack, fiddling around with some dials. Explaining that Angel was able to charge the vault key with her powers. In equal parts explaining little technical things about the room they were in and putting an emphasis on Angel’s mom not being in the picture, don’t worry about it, babe.

That was what Jack was worried about? Nisha being jealous?

So he soldiered on, still giving empty platitudes as there was the sound of a pump. Purple seeping down some of the tubes and into the pale women’s back.

Angel’s scream, contorting in pain high above them, cracked into Nisha’s skull. Echoing her own screams as a child, a glass shattering against her skull, blood dripping down her face, her mom cackling at her pain.
A sharp bark of laughter had brought her back to the present, Jack’s arm around her and shaking her a bit, “What’s the matter, Nish? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The rest was a blur.

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A blur that led to the current predicament of “Nisha standing in a room with Handsome Jack’s body and apparently his daughter Angel hovering above her.”

Oh holy fuck she had to get this kid down and get the hell out of here.

Whatever was in Nisha’s head it was like the opposite of a conscience. Yelling at her for doing something so reckless and dangerous to herself, all of Hyperion would hunt her down, kill her. Not only had she killed Handsome fuckin’ Jack but she was about to steal what was no doubt considered Hyperion property.

She ignored that part of her brain, admonishing her for daring to act out of consideration for anyone but herself.

Luckily just enough information about Angel’s containment had permeated Nisha’s brain as she pounced on the control board.

Above her, Angel watched her with absolute horror. She had vaguely heard her father reference dating a cruel sheriff, she supposed based on appearances that this woman must be her. The one she had just watched shoot her father down in cold blood.

And what… what was she doing now?

Angel didn’t have to wonder for long as the clunking noise above her announced her being disconnected.

A sound usually reserved for her being taken down to be tested on.

But Nisha certainly wasn’t going to be doing any of that, as Angel touched down on the ground. Tubes and wires still sticking out of her back like a mess of snakes biting into her spine.

Seeing Nisha approach her was terrifying, the sound of thick heels on tile feeling like being stalked by a tall, spindly predator looking to eat her up. But she didn’t. Stopping in front of Angel and looking at her with the look of utmost confusion.

She flinched at the long fingers pushing her heavy bangs out of the way.

Angel blinking up at Nisha with undeniably her father’s eyes. One blue, one green.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, promise,” Nisha tried to sound soft, “I’m gonna get you out of here, kid.”

Before Angel could answer the loud, blaring alarm came over the sound system unseen above. Blood red and yellow light flashing out a warning.

Nisha looked at the still connected girl in a panic, mess of wires and tubes sticking out of her. Roughly grabbing and yanking, there was an almighty racket of noise as cords snapped, tubes broke free, plug ripped out.

Almost immediately, Nisha failed her promise to Angel as she yelped. Majority of the long tubes tearing from above but nearly as many pulling free from her back.
“Shit, sorry,” Nisha hissed, jerking Angel forward to examine her back between the mess of wires and cords. No blood. That’s… good? Either way she grabbed Angel’s hand and tried to start running, “C’mon, let’s go!”

Only a few steps in proved that was going to be a worthless effort as Angel either couldn’t, or possibly wouldn’t, run.

Growling, Nisha scooped her up in an over the shoulder carry and took off. Gun up and at the ready to take out each and every Hyperion schmuck who dared to even look at her on the way out.

And given the location, she was going to have a hell of a body count before this afternoon was out.
The vice grip around Angel’s hand as starting to cut the circulation to her fingers off but some passive fear was keeping her from telling Nisha this.

Nothing that had happened wasn’t terrifying. From the moment Nisha shot at her dad Angel had been in a constant state of paralyzing fear. Perhaps her least favorite part was the tumultuous escape. Her view had been mercifully limited as Nisha had her thrown over a shoulder as she slaughtered Hyperion works by the dozens.

Angel closed her eyes and tried not to think of the blood, of the brains, of the dead bodies she’d seen left in Nisha’s wake.

Leaving the Hyperion grounds had been as much as mercy for her as for the remaining Hyperion forces who’d had the sense to keep their heads down.

Fast travel was new to Angel and she was pretty sure she didn’t like it. Being pulled through space left a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach. Arriving in an arid wasteland only to get rushed onto a train wasn’t much better. A tarp stolen from the bandit camp they’d passed by wrapped tightly around her.

It smelled like gunpowder and blood.

By now Angel’d shut down, though. Her senses dulled as she reverted to a passive, scared woman being led around by both her captor and her savior.

Nisha was that, wasn’t she? A savior. This was something Angel’d dreamed about for her entire life. Freedom. But this… she wasn’t sure this was the way she wanted it. Violently torn away from things with someone she was scared of. Really scared of.

It was a good thing Handsome Jack was shot. Angel knew that. It was less upsetting to her than it should be, honestly. Maybe she would have been more emotional about that if she’d seen his body. Seen the bullet in his head.

But neither of them had. Maybe even Nisha not wanting to see the body of a man who Angel supposed she might have loved at some point.

That was weird for Angel to think about. Her father having a relationship with a woman she knew nothing of. Other than apparently she’d be eagerly ready to kill him at the drop of a hat and that she had a hell of a grip. It was especially alarming considering Angel wasn’t entirely sure WHY Nisha had shot her father.

Looking up at the stony faced Nisha being jostled on the ratty train seat next to her didn’t give her enough confidence to ask.

That bravery didn’t find her as the train jolted to a stop and Nisha led her out either, thankfully her grip loosening in what she must perceive as the safety of her own town. However, instinctually, Angel bridged the gap as she grabbed onto Nisha’s hand tightly at the bodies hanging from the sign.
Lynchwood. Angel had heard the name from her father a few times. Never thought it would be this… literal.

“This’ll be your new home,” Nisha broke the long silence, “You’re, uh, probably pretty scared but don’t worry. Everyone here listens to me without question, nobody’ll hurt you. I promise.”

Angel remembered Nisha’s instantly failed promise not to hurt her. Wires and tubes still hanging off her back, a couple even dripping glowing purple, liquidized Eridium onto the dusty street.

She couldn’t worry about that as a small gang of bulky men were approaching them, giving Angel something else to be afraid of.

“I’ll be back, stay with Deputy Winger,” Nisha instructed, letting go of Angel for the first time since escaping with her, “I’ve got to address the town at large about this. Can’t have anyone thinking you’re an intruder.”

Somehow, seeing Nisha walking away from her was even more terrifying than standing by her side.

A gentle but massive hand on her shoulder started steering her towards a nearby building, Angel supposing this man must be Deputy Winger, “Don’t worry, we’ll get you all fixed up. Got some clothes picked out for you, some of the boys are fixin’ up a room at Nisha’s place, we’ll make sure you’re comfortable.”

“Thank you,” Angel replied, a soft smile on her face. While the Sheriff was certainly terrifying the Deputy seemed… nice. A weird opposite but not an unwelcome one.

As they got inside she found herself in a dirty little Sheriff’s Office. The Deputy pulling out an odd assortment of clothing that seemed out of place in the ratty city, “Got most of these off of trespassers and people who broke the laws.”

Angel sat still as the man circled her, gently removing the things still stuck into her spine and back. Flinching at the needles that had been embedded in her flesh being carefully removed. Gone from her for the first time in as long as she could remember.

Going into another room with an outfit she’d picked out, Angel started to gather herself. Maybe… maybe this is alright. She wasn’t sure what had brought Nisha to her bunker or what had prompted her to gun down her father but maybe… this was just how things were supposed to go.

Doing a little spin in the mirror, Angel marvelled at looking… almost normal. The clothes weren’t exactly her style, the odd cowgirl style of the town she was in. Felt like a costume. Blue checked button up, sleeves rolled up. Knee length black skirt. A white leather vest, lightly fringed, with some matching boots.

Stepping out, the Deputy and the doctor seemed… happy for her.

“Nisha said you should wear this,” Deputy Winger said as he carefully tied a purple bandana around her neck, “Wanted something to mark you as safe. She’s gonna wear one too.”

Like very weird friendship bracelets but if you take yours off a psycho might rip you to pieces.

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Returning to Nisha, she saw the tail end of Nisha announcing to the townsfolk at large. Intimidating them, really.
But it was effective. By the time Angel was gently urged to join Nisha at the makeshift podium on the bridge over the city, everyone was cheering for her. Nisha’s arm around her feeling a little less threatening now.

This was… this was going to be okay. Right? It was scary. But it would be okay.

Lynchwood looked almost beautiful in the sunset.

Nisha’s place was fairly nice too. Led there by the woman herself and the Deputy to see her new home. It was fairly small with just two rooms not counting the kitchen but warm enough, clearly having been lived in. Either way a step up from the cold, sterile prison she’d been trapped in for nine years.

Winger left quickly after they entered but not before surprising Angel with a tight, warm hug. Even though she still had some reserves about Nisha herself, it was nice to have someone so… unambiguously kind around.

A few pictures littered the flat spaces of the Angel couldn’t help but notice a few of the picture frames were mysteriously empty. One even cracked as if removed in a hurry.

A few remained though, Nisha looking a bit younger in them. Posing with a small group of people around her on Elpis, Pandora in the background.

Young Nisha’s arms wrapped around two of them. A woman was on Nisha’s right. Short, bulky and even from the single photo Angel could tell her face was ready to snap back into a scowl at any second. Nisha’s face leaning in too close seeming offensive to the soldier. The other person Angel knew people would erroneously peg as her father but Angel knew better. A body double. Hair too red, too tall, too bulky.

“That was my Vault Huntin’ group,” Nisha answered before Angel could even ask, picking up the picture and looking at it fondly.

“Do you still see them?” Angel asked, gingerly tilted the photo to look at it as well.

“No, not really,” Nisha responded, gently tapping over them as she named them, “Athena and Aurelia split the second our contract was up, Claptrap fucked off to who knows where… sometimes I see Wilhelm and I used to see Not Jack but…”

A million things to ask but Angel focused in on the familiar name, “That’s Wilhelm?!”

“Yeah, when he was a normal dude… you seen Wilhelm before?”

“Only through camera’s he’s much more… augmented now.”

“Sure as hell is,” Nisha laughed, “He always wanted to be a robot, his weird addiction.”

“Do you miss them?” Angel asked, looking closer at the image. Maybe it was the unpleasant circumstances in which they’d met but Nisha looked… so much happier in this picture.

Nisha looked like she was going to fight it for a second before relenting, “I… miss ‘em a lot. I ain’t ever been a woman to make a lot of friends and when I lost them… I just didn’t make any more.”

“Not even the Deputy?”

“He aint’ a friend he’s an employee.”
“He’s very nice though…”

“Well, he is,” Nisha nodded, pushing herself up to start fixing her bed, “But I’m not and that’s why we aren’t friends.”

Angel could tell that was true from what little interaction she’d had with Nisha so far but it did drudge up an old question. Feeling slightly bolder, Angel asked quietly, “Why did you save me?”

She watched every muscle in Nisha’s muscle tense up, very pointedly not looking back at her, “I was… I never… I don’t want talk about that. I did what I did and the important part is I did it, okay?”

Something in her voice told Angel not to ask again.

Enough about the past, Angel inquired about the future, “What’s going to happen to me?”

Turning and sitting on the bed, Nisha finally looked at her, “Let’s… let’s worry about that later. Don’t gotta figure out what we’re doing long term tonight. Just… know that you can do whatever you want now. I’m gonna make that happen. Alright?”

Her sharp tone was at odds with the kind offer. The duality of a woman trying to be kind who simply wasn’t used to trying to be anything but intimidating.

“Alright,” Angel replied, a practiced, reserved smile clunking into place on her face. Used to polite platitudes to keep a frightening person happy with her.

“C’mon, you can do better than that,” Nisha raised an arm to let it drop back on her lap, “Show a lil’ excitement, kiddo, you’re free now.”

Oh no, this frightening person doesn’t want polite.

“Yay?” Angel tried with a little hop.

“Little gratitude wouldn’t hurt either,” Nisha mumbled, instantly regretting that as Angel obediently came over and wrapped her in a tight hug, “Y’don’t have to hug me!”

“Sorry,” Angel let go and sat next to her, “Force of habit. Just… thanks.”

Weird force of habit but Nisha supposed it was an artefact of the girl existing to be the ‘perfect daughter’. She did have a question related to that though.

“Your name’s actually Angel, right?” Nisha sounded unsure, “That’s not like… a nickname?”

“It’s… it’s not a nickname. It’s my name,” Angel answered. She supposed that that would be a weird question from most people but her dad really did have a propensity for pet names.

In fact, her name had come from that. Before she’d even been born. A story told to her long ago by her mother, not too much before… it happened. Her equally pale arm around Angel’s shoulders while she was suffering from a bad cold, wanting to distract her from her discomfort.

A light, fluffy little story about how they’d put off the naming conversation for too long. Jack’s tendency to just refer to the baby as ‘their little angel’. How it had just become her name over time. Her mom had laughed she was afraid to pick anything else because Jack would probably just keep calling her that.

That memory was eons ago, more than a decade decayed. Not only was her mom gone but her dad
was too. He’d been gone for a long, long time.

As far as Angel was concerned, he’d died the same day as her mother.

There was nothing about Handsome Jack that bore any resemblance to her long gone dad other than physical appearance. And barely even that anymore with that cold mask bolted over his face with those jarring, heavy clasps.

“You still with me?” Nisha asked, shaking her a little.

Angel shook her head, “Yeah, yeah, just… have a lot to process about today. About now.”

“You upset about me shootin’ your dad?” Nisha peered at her, broaching the touchy subject they’d been avoiding. Deep down Nisha knowing that ‘maybe this one wouldn’t be quite as gung-ho about parental death than the teenage version of herself had been.

“No, I’m not upset,” Angel shook her head, “I feel like I should be but I’m not. My father deserved it and at the end of the day… you’ve probably saved countless lives with a single bullet.”

The warm feeling of pride rising in Nisha’s chest battled with the sinking feeling of being a hypocrite, of being not herself. Voice wavering as she answered something that somehow satisfied both halves of the fight, “Should have let you kill him yourself though, I’ve got no memory fonder than puttin’ one between my mom’s eyes.”

Angel’s eyes widened at that, Nisha accidentally giving away more than she intended to, “That’s why you saved me. You were-”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it,” Nisha spat harsher than intended, feeling bad as Angel shied away, “Sorry, just… drop it, alright? What’s important is you’re safe now and Jack’s dead. He can’t hurt you any-”

Both of their blood went cold at the sudden calamity outside. Gunshots and screaming. Their silent evening now a chorus of death.

None of those was anything compared to the voice carrying over the crowd over a megaphone. Barely even necessary, the man having the natural speaking voice of a stage actor trying to project to the cheap seats.

“I KNOW YOU’RE HERE, NISHA,” Jack’s voice thundered over the raucous violence around him, “COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP AND I’LL AT LEAST MAKE IT QUICK! I mean, I’m lying through my teeth but hey, at least it’ll be OVER then! Dead women don’t gotta worry about being killed AGAIN!”

Both women nearly knocked each other over getting to the window, cautiously peering down at the man who should be dead.

Moonlight glinted off the shiny new clasp on his left temple, highlighting exactly why the man was still alive. The wound on his head grisly from where the bullet had ricocheted off the offending metal, a bloody stripe that was going to form a nasty scar given time. But now it was still fresh, blood caking his greying brown hair and a streak of red going down the side of his face.

“PRO TIP, NISH! One I thought I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to tell YOU of all people,” Jack pointed at a random building he supposed they might be in and sending a flood of Hyperion forces in, “ALWAYS. DOUBLE. TAP. You’re freakin’ LUCKY you knocked me out then but YOUR LUCK’S RUN OUT.”
“We have to go, back door, back door,” Nisha hissed at Angel, not really giving her an option as she dragged her to it, unlocking the door and sliding out with the girl in tow.

Being outside was no more of a comfort than being indoors. Jack’s voice through the bullhorn even louder outside, Angel’s mind panicking at the idea that her supposed-to-be-dead father was less than fifty feet away and more pissed than she’d ever seen him before.

“This way,” Nisha ordered, dragging Angel quickly through the shadows. Unmistakably trying to get to the train station unseen.

The peek of an unwary Jack through the alleyway nearly caused Angel to shut down. Listlessly being dragged along by Nisha the only thing keeping her going.

“ANGEL,” she flinched, gripping Nisha’s arm tightly as her name was barked at her, “I KNOW YOU’RE HERE TOO. DADDY’S NOT ANGRY AT YOU, BABY. YELL FOR ME. I’LL TAKE YOU AWAY FROM THE BAD LADY.”

For a second, Angel almost felt betrayed at the scared look Nisha gave her.

But she stayed dead silent. Pressed tightly against the gunslinger’s side as they crept around the Hyperion forces.

They had one thing in their favor as they made their way through Lynchwood. Place was built like a fuckin’ maze. Even Jack who had been here a decent number of times before could never have remembered all the side streets weaving through the town.

Only one obstacle was a couple of Hyperion guards blocking the way to the train station, standing just twenty feet out. No way around them.

Both women jumped at large male hands, one on each of them.

But whipping around they mercifully found Deputy Winger towering over them, “I’ve got my men poised to help you get out, ma’am. Small window but we can get you in and get that train rolling, know how to fix it so it won’t stop either. We’ll hold them off as long as we can.”

“You’ll die,” Angel’s voice was tiny, looking up at what little of the man’s face was visible. His mouth a thin line.

A look that said he already knew that, that he’d already made peace with that.

He jumped at Nisha’s thin hand gripping his shoulder back, face set in the same cold determination, “I’ll never be able to find a Deputy half as good as you again.”

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It was like her life on fast forward. The next few minutes a blur of blood and chaos as the men were taken out, her being dragged behind them. Morbidly realizing that the Deputy was being a meat shield for them as she watched a bullet rip through his arm.

Peeking past him to see that the one who’d taken the shot had been none other than her father. Glaring them down with a cold point. Get them. Hurt Angel and you’ll be seeing your own intestines.

The wave of yellow threatening to drown them as Deputy Winger shoved them into the train car.
Slamming himself onto the control panel as they heard the engine of the train start.

Watching Jack approaching faster and faster, hate in his eyes as he stomped towards the Deputy.

A thin hand clamped tightly over her eyes was a mercy but Nisha couldn’t stop Angel from hearing the violence outside even as she pulled the thin girl against her. The screaming. The gun shots.

The sickening sound which Angel could only suppose was the sound of guts spilling out onto the floor.

But Deputy Winger’s sacrifice wasn’t in vain. Whatever he’d accomplished before Jack reached him enough as the train started moving. No evidence of being able to be stopped as they were whisked away from the carnage left in their wake again.

All of Angel’s trust that things would be okay cruelly ripped away from her as she sobbed violently into Nisha’s shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

I am two chapters in and this bitch gotta up the rating not because of future sexual content like she thought but because "that's a pretty gnarly description of Deputy Winger getting killed."

I have no idea how good the science is on "Jack got shot in the clasp and that's why he's alive" but it's the story I'm going with.
The sobs punctuated the silence of the empty train car, Angel clinging to Nisha like a life raft. Except a life raft was made to help people and keep them safe and Nisha was a mean, spindly woman who was made to blast open skulls and strangle puppies.

Imitating what she’d seen others do she just gingerly patted Angel’s back a few times. Trying to remember times she’d seen other people cry and get comforted. She had alarmingly few options, mostly only seeing people’s tears when they were on their knees, begging her to spare their life.

Squinting her eyes, she could only picture one time where she’d seen something relevant up close. Not Jack. Right after the vault. He was terrified by what he’d seen in there. From the literal monster towering above them to the figurative one ranting and raving with a glowing orange arch burned into his skull. Sobbing violently, curled up in a ball. Choking on his own pain. Nisha’d never really realized how big the dude was until he’d crushed himself down to half his size.

Aurelia was awkward like she was now. Touching him like he was an expensive crystal bauble she was afraid of knocking over. A dull ‘there, there’ all she could muster.

Like Nisha, Aurelia was unfamiliar with the business of caring about other people.

Opposite of her was Athena, shockingly doing… doing really well.

Practically pulling Not Jack unto her lap, she was the only one successfully calming him down. Strong arm clamped tightly around his shoulders, nearly a headlock, but he seemed relatively comforted by that if the fact he was hanging onto her forearm with a deathgrip was any indicator.

Unfortunately, Nisha had been too far away to hear what Athena had said to him.

But whatever it had been had gotten him to calm down.

He sat up, giving Athena a bone-crunching hug, sniffling, but at least not bawling his eyes out anymore.

Just… try to do what Athena did.

But as she tried to get an arm around Angel, she jerked away fearfully. Looking up at her like a kicked dog. Alright, that’s… that’s not gonna work.

Going right back to crying, Nisha let her head clunk against the window behind her. Sighing.

How was she going to do this? Fuck, it was going to be hard enough when they were back in Lynchwood but some stability… with Jack after them though? There would be no rest, no safety, nothing to comfort the emotionally damaged girl.

It was going to just be the two of them wandering around Pandora, being hunted down by a madman.

Angel fearing a life of continued imprisonment.

Nisha fearing a drawn out, painful death.
God, now Nisha was starting to feel like crying too. She wasn’t going to, of course, but this was by far the closest she’s been in over twenty years.

If she’d known this is how it’d turned out she would have clambered over that barrier and put all five remaining shots into Jack’s forehead at point blank. Reload to fire again and again. Keep emptying her gun until his stupid ugly head was nothing but a bloody pile of brain chunks and skull shards.

But she didn’t do that. She shot him once, didn’t check the body, and ran like a coward.

And now they were gonna be hunted down like animals.

Without Lynchwood they had no support either. Both Nisha and Angel knew that Jack wasn’t going to stop until every living creature in the town had been executed. No stone would be left unturned.

Outside of there it wasn’t like Nisha had made any friends. Normal Vault Hunter havens were off the table for many good reasons. Sure she could go into normal cities without notice for a while but… well, Nisha had a pretty good feeling that she was going to have a very, very tempting bounty placed on her head. Courtesy of Hyperion.

Nisha needed help. Somehow.

It clunked into place in her mind, flipping back to earlier thoughts.

Wilhelm was out, still working for Jack.

Not Jack was out, Nisha knew well enough to know that Jack had 'taken care of him.' Everyone knew what that meant.

Aurelia was bound to be off planet and certainly hadn’t left any contact information behind.

Athena… Nisha startled Angel as she abruptly jerked back up.

She knew where Athena was.

Due to her own connections Athena had found no favor with other Vault Hunters, forced to remain on the sidelines. Take shifty, low paying merc jobs to support herself and Janey.

It had been a while since she’d last heard from her. About a half a year ago. Overpaid her to take out an encroaching bandit camp. Cannibals. Nasty business. She’d mentioned staying with Janey out in the remains of New Haven. Something about rebuilding efforts.

There was a fast travel station right by the train but they couldn’t afford to use it. With Jack chasing them they had to stick to cars. Luckily, the Catch-A-Rides are run by some redneck motherfucker and not some corporation Jack can pay off.

When the train rattled to a stop Nisha jumped up, grabbing Angel’s wrist, “C’mon, we have to keep moving.”

“What are we going?” Angel asked, squirming to try and tug her wrist away to no avail.

“New Haven’s remains,” Nisha answered, “Got a… friend there. She said they’re rebuilding.”

God, it was weird to call someone a friend again. Hadn’t said that word since she was back up on Elpis. Drunk and laughing at Moxxi’s Up Over, resisting being tossed over Wilhelm’s shoulder to
be transported back to her room.

Would Athena still think she was a friend?

Angel seemed to have similar concerns as she stepped off the train and into the glaring sun, raising a hand to her eyes, “Don’t you think we should go somewhere more… stable?”

“Ain’t gonna be nothing more stable than getting to Athena,” Nisha replied, “That’s our best bet. I got a single gun on me and just enough ammo to get us there.”

Angel’s heart raced at the name “Athena.” She’d been kept a bit in the dark about what had happened on Elpis but she’d heard her father talk of the gladiator before. A terrifying force of nature. A soldier to the core.

Someone strong who’d had the sense to leave her father’s side.

Angel was excited by the prospect but also knew...

“What if she doesn’t want to help us?”

“Then… well… at least we’re further away from here,” Nisha replied, approaching the Catch-a-Ride, “I’ll get us a bandit technical, I like the buggies better but given your… pallor... I get the feeling we maybe shouldn’t have you cooking under the blinding desert sun.”

It was weird to watch the car digistruct from thin air, Angel curiously approaching it. A primitive vehicle with a busty woman painted on the front.

“Get in, we’ve got a bit to go,” Nisha demanded as she jumped up into the passenger’s seat, “Try to keep your head down, if I don’t slow down we should get there in a few hours. If you want… well, if I was you I’d try to nap.”

Angel nodded as she climbed up as well. Thankfully the car was wide, the front seat a singular bench. Scooting over as far as she could, there was plenty of room for Angel to curl up.

Never in her life has Nisha been described as a safe driver but damned if she wasn’t driving like she was transporting a glass baby.

- - -

The closer they got to New Haven’s ruins the more Nisha felt her plan was garbage.

What if the attempt to rebuild had failed? What if Athena wasn’t here anymore? What if Jack had already blasted out a bounty so sky high that she’d be mobbed the second she stepped into town?

Hell, what if Athena took them in herself?

No, no, can’t think like that. No reason to assume things’ll be bad until they’re bad.

Looking down, Angel was sound asleep. No doubt only having been able to sleep through that through sheer exhaustion. Fuck, this better work.

Pulling up to the moonlit town, Nisha’s heart dropped into her stomach. The place looked dead abandoned, not a soul walking around the still too damaged center of the town. Rebuilding must have failed…

Next to her, Angel stirred. Groggily pushing herself up to look outside, “Are we there?”
“We’re… we’re here,” Nisha nodded, “C’mon. Get out and stay close to me.”

Both hopped out, meeting at the front of the car. Outside the silence was deafening, only highlighting how completely empty the town was. Angel wanted to state the obvious but she instead decided to follow Nisha silently. Opting to be pointlessly optimistic, wanting to keep some small spark of hope alive in her heart. But it skipped a beat as she realized there was one more set of footsteps than there should be.

The sharp, unmistakable cocking of a shotgun followed by an ice cold announced they were no longer alone, “Hands in the air, state your business, I will NOT hesitate to put you down.”

Looking up at Nisha with trembling eyes, Angel found the woman calm. Smiling even.

“Is that any way to talk to an old friend?” Nisha sneered, “I mean, it’s what I expected but it’s still a bit rude, don’t’cha think?”

Roughly grabbed by the shoulder and jerked around, Nisha was unsurprised to find herself being glared up at by a wary Athena. Shotgun pointed at her stomach, dully shining in the moonlight. Her surprise just barely crushed down, refusing to seem even one iota unprepared for such a turn of events.

Angel slowly turned to look too, getting her first look at the infamous gladiator. First thought was “shorter than she expected” but second thought was “just as intimidating as she expected.”

“What are you doing here?” Athena replied, warily giving Nisha an up-and-down and not lowering the shotgun an inch, “If you’re here to stop the rebuilding efforts you’re too late. Everyone’s gone.”

“Well, good thing I only came here for you then, huh?”

Angel’s heart skipped a beat as those words were punctuated by the shotgun being jammed in Nisha’s face.

“Ain’t like that,” Nisha replied calm as can be pushing the muzzle of the gun away from her face, “Not here to hurt you, Athena. I need your help.”

Lowering the shotgun, Athena didn’t look terribly happy with that answer, “Why? What did you do? Who’s the girl? Is she… is she a Siren?”

Flinching at the nod in her direction, Angel didn’t like the cold stare being blasted at her. Scrutinizing her, trying to place her and failing. Eyes tracing the markings visible on her exposed wrist. And a spark behind her eyes that Angel could only hope was curiosity.

“Can we not talk about this in the open?” Nisha looked around at the most devastated buildings, “You’re holed up somewhere, take us there.”

For a second it looked like Athena was going to send them away by firing a warning shot to the air, but she relented. The spark behind her eyes winning out as she gestured for them to follow her to one of the few buildings still standing. A little two story one, deadbolted heavily behind them after they filed in.

There wasn’t much to it on the inside though. A small table with a few chairs, a backpack full of Athena’s stuff, a threadbare cot, a sad blanket and a small reserve of food.

Two loud clunks filled the room as Athena set the heavy vintage Hyperion shotgun and oddly gear-
like shield on the ground before sitting at the tilted table, gesturing for them to join her, “You’re not the ‘come crying to Athena for help’ type. So I reiterate, what did you do? I mean, what the hell can I do that Jack can’t?”

Nisha ignored that Athena’s gesture skyward was inaccurate with Jack down here on Pandora and presumably chasing after them, “This, uh, ain’t something Jack can help with. Kinda the opposite.”

“What, you break up with him and he’s throwing a fit or something? Because that’s not my problem. That’s your fault for deciding to date a raging narcissistic asshole.”

“Well…” Nisha tapped her fingers on the table with annoyance at the accusations, “For your information, I shot him in the face and stole his daughter.”

Whatever Athena had considered, that certainly hadn’t been on the table as an option. Jaw dropped, she just pointed at Angel, “THAT is who this is?! Jack has a daughter? A SIREN daughter? And you stole her? And brought her HERE?!”

“I feel like you’re being disappointingly dismissive of the fact I shot him in the face. I don’t even get a ‘hell yeah, go Nisha’ or anythin’?”

“What do you want a gold star?!“ Athena jerked to her feet, leaning over the table with a cold glare at her, “If you’d killed him you wouldn’t be here. Did you at least incapacitate him for a while or are we a bunch of sitting ducks, waiting for a psycho with a choking fetish to show up and kill us as slowly and painfully as he can?!”

“Technically it’s strangulation, you choke on food but when some-”

“NISHA,” Athena banged on the table, ignorant to the tears starting to well up in Angel’s eyes, “I don’t care. Is. Jack. Coming? Is he on Pandora? Does he know that you’re here?”

“Jack is coming, he’s on Pandora, he doesn’t know where we are though. He’s gonna be hung up for a while. Lynchwood’s fast travel station is busted and there’s only one working train in and out. We’ve got an hour lead on him, not counting the fact he has to figure out where we went.”

“Give me one reason not to just kick you out right now,” Athena seethed, “I don’t want any part of this, Nisha. Shit’s bad enough for me right now as is. Nobody will hire me, Janey’s gone, and just-fuck! Why me?!”

Off to the side, Angel watched the two begin to argue the point. Athena apparently not the bastion of support and protection that Nisha thought she’d be. What would they do now? This was the first time she’d ever been on Pandora out of her bunker. She’d seen how this world operates through a lens and erroneously, she’d always assumed she’d be safe from it.

But now she was just thinking of all the people she’d seen ripped apart by bandits, strung up like a cat toy, frozen to death in the middle of a frozen wasteland, drowned in a river, impaled on spike...

That was going to be her now.

All it would take would be for Nisha to fail once and it would all be over.

At first her whimpers were drowned out by the sounds of the other two women arguing but as she started choking up more and more it crescendoed back up to the same desolate sobs as before. Causing a ceasefire as they both stopped to look at her.

Relief washed over Nisha as she instantly watched Athena crumple. The change would have been
imperceivable to anyone who didn’t know her, cold face barely changing, posture barely relaxing, but her eyes always gave it away.

Pulling her chair closer to Angel, Athena gently put an arm around her. Not surprised when the girls instinctually threw herself into her arms. Too thin, too pale arms wrapping tightly around her as Angel sobbed into her armor.

Sighing, Athena accepted her fate as she ran a hand through Angel’s hair, “What’s your name?”

“Angel,” she replied, looking up as her wet bangs were pushed away from her face.

Looking up at Athena with those familiar mismatched eyes.

It felt like she was signing away her life but Athena knew that was just her life at this point.

“I’m Athena. Guess I’ll be protecting you from now on.”

Of course, Angel already knew her name. She didn’t care, she didn’t point it out. She just hugged Athena tighter around her middle, her tears turning from fear to relief.

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There hadn’t been much to carry to the car, their supplies alarmingly low. Barely enough for one woman and certainly not enough for multiple. Athena had sighed, saying there was a small town out in the Badlands that would be willing to trade for food and guns but they better be ready to do some menial task for them.

Clarifying with a glare, that YOU’LL be doing for them, Nisha.

But for now, it was Nisha’s turn to try and sleep. Leaning on the door, window down, seemingly unperturbed by the fact her hair as being whipped around wildly by the wind as Athena drove.

For a while, Athena said nothing to Angel. Just staring angrily forward, eyes on the road and hands at ten and two.

But eventually Angel found herself being asked the very question that she’d asked Nisha earlier.

“Hey, no offense but, well, why did Nisha save you? She’s not exactly the type.”

Athena didn’t look over at her as she asked that.

Angel stole a peek at Nisha’s sleeping form but it certainly didn’t look like she was waking up anytime soon, “She wouldn’t directly tell me but… she said she shot her own mom. I’ve just been assuming she was in a similar situation to me. Well, not… not entirely similar. I don’t imagine experimentation was on the table. But something. Her mother hurting her.”

“Fuck,” Athena muttered, “I knew Jack was running some inhuman testing but… his own daughter? How the hell’d the bastard swing that with his whole ‘hero’ idea he has of himself...”

“He was using me to charge the vault key, I think he thought-”

“Wait, Jack has another key?” Athena interrupted, looking over at Angel for the first time, “He’s going to try to open another Vault? How many blows to his dense skull does the man have to take before he gets the point?”

“As long as he doesn’t have a Siren, his progress is at a standstill,” Angel replied, shaking her
head, “There’s no other way to charge the key. As long as I’m away from him, we’re safe.”

They rumbled along in silence for a while before Athena had another question.

“How long has your dad had you locked up?”

“Well… I got my Siren powers when I was twelve and they… it… after my mom…” Angel stumbled around her own story, Athena picking up the painful pieces she was barely concealing easily, “After I got them he tried to contain me. It’s been about nine years.”

“Nine goddamn years,” Athena looked pained, looking at Angel from the corner of her eye, “Angel, I… I’m sure you know I worked for your father. A few years ago.”

“I know,” Angel nodded, “I know a lot of things. I couldn’t watch you on Elpis like I can watch people on Pandora but my dad talks a lot. I catch things. He always said you were the most capable one. He was really mad when you just up and left him, wanted you and Wilhelm to be his right and left hand men. Women. People.”

“Ugly bastard wishes,” Athena grumbled before pausing, “I’m… gonna assume you don’t care if I call him that?”

“Oh no, I don’t mind. If anything you maybe you should be saying it more. Maybe to his face.”

The unnatural noise was sharp, an inhale of air that made it sound like Athena was choking.

But a smile slowly spread across Angel’s face as she realized what that was.

She’d made Athena laugh.
The two women were silent as the car rattled along the bumpy wasteland, a weird imitation of times past.

But they weren’t on the moon, flying along the ragged surface on a rickety buggy. Getting ready to hop out and eliminate a bandit camp together, back to back. Going to stop by Moxxi’s afterwards for a drink.

They couldn’t even play pretend. Not with the dozing girl lying across the bench with them, head resting on Athena’s lap. Pale face illuminated in the moonlight.

Neither of them was speaking. Not since they’d shuffled to switch which one of them was driving, Nisha making a crack about giving Athena a lap dance as they awkwardly tried to climb over each other.

Same as she ever was, even with her current circumstances.

Athena eyeballed her cautiously though, breaking the long silence, “I’ve got questions.”


“Why’d you do it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You… know what my mom was like,” Nisha called back to nights long ago. All of them drunk. All of them spilling their guts. The casual camaraderie of Vault Hunter life dragging out their secrets from the depths. That was enough of an answer for Nisha, “That’s why I did it an’ don’t you dare think about blabbing about that to anyone else. Bad enough you and the kid know about it.”

“I’d buy that for shooting Jack in the head but not for hauling her around Pandora with the bastard chasing you,” Athena looked down at the sleeping girl, “For someone like you… what you did is above and beyond. What were you even going to do with her? When you thought Jack was dead?”

Nisha’s grip on the wheel tightened, knuckles paleing, “I just… fuck, I don’t know. I was figurin’ it out. Had her in Lynchwood, got her some new clothes, got an extra room.”

“Never took you for the type to try and raise someone…”

“I ain’t raisin’ nothing. Angel’s an adult. I’m just… helping her get on her feet.”
“Why?” Athena reiterated, “What are you getting out of it?”

“Fuck, did Janey leave you for askin’ too many questions? You give her the third degree like this?” Nisha spat back, shooting Athena a glare.

Nisha’d expected to get a stern, stony faced stare back. Would have been preferable to the heartbroken look of betrayal she was getting instead, the kicked dog look wildly out of place on the usually stalwart Athena.

“Shit… sorry, that uh… I didn’t need to make that so personal.”

“No, no you didn’t,” Athena shot back, words harsh despite the defeated way she looked the other way.

“I mean it, I’m sorry,” Nisha’s second swing at an apology sounded more sincere, mouth a thin line, “I don’t apologize much but… ain’t right sayin’ something like that when you’re going so far out of your way to help me.”

“Can’t expect you to go all the way from evil to good, can I?” Athena sounded resigned, “I’d at least settle for an answer to my question.”

Nisha was quiet for a second, no sound in the cab except for Angel’s slow breathing. Honestly, she wasn’t even entirely sure what she ‘getting out of it.’

Shootin’ Jack and freeing Angel made sense but she wasn’t the long con type when it came to helping people. Get in, get out, don’t form attachments was a little more her speed.

“I’ve been lonely,” the words came out Nisha’s mouth before she’d even thought them. A thoughtlessly vocalized thought that shocked her as much as it did her travelling companion.

Athena raised an eyebrow sharply at that, “That’s, uh, not what I expected. Especially considering you just shot your boyfriend in the head.”

“Like he was much companionship,” Nisha growled, “Been getting sick of him anyways. Certainly not the way I saw it ending but what can you do.”

“Yeah I don’t exactly see Jack as the, uh, affectionate type.”

“Nope. Half the time he just shows up, we fuck, then he leaves.”


“Is it because he’s a dude or because he’s Jack?”

“Yes.”

Nisha cackled at that, “Always did wonder if it was girls only or not with you. Granted, I was pretty sure but fun little bit of confirmation there.”

“And what made you so sure?” Athena looked over curiously.

“You only stare at girls. Cold and dead eyed but still. Half the time you don’t even look at men when you’re talkin’ to ‘em. Real dismissive like. An’ when Janey started hitting on you and that big tough Atlas assassin act started ripping at the seams...”

“So much for being trained to have no feelings,” Athena grumbled, “Frankly, wish I hadn’t started
having them. Once you start, you can’t stop even when those feelings aren’t exactly pleasant anymore.”

“I take your, uh, breakup with Janey wasn’t a mutual thing?”

“No. It wasn’t,” Athena sighed, watching Angel shift in her sleep, “Even if I was the one to call it off. I was just saying what she was thinking at that point.”

“Can I ask what happened?” Nisha tried not to sound too curious.

“She wanted me to stop all mercenary work. Said it was too dangerous. Bullshit, this entire planet is too dangerous. Sure, nobody wants to hire me for the big jobs anymore but even doing little jobs here and there brings in a lot. It’s what I’m trained to do. It’s who I am. I’m not… I’m not someone who can just work at a restaurant or sell guns or do construction. I’m built to kill on a hellhole that rewards it. Why would you try to take that from me?”

“It’s hard for normal people to understand people like you and me,” Nisha replied, “To them we’re living on borrowed time, chasin’ something that’ll kill us in the long run. But it doesn’t. They don’t understand that we don’t just cheat death, we control it.”

“Well, it was more than just hard for her to understand. She refused to. Turned into a big fight which turned into a series of fights. She wasn’t going to budge even as our money reserves fell lower and lower.”

“Hard time for her to find work down on Pandora?”

“All her black market connections were on Elpis,” Athena nodded, “She was talking about moving and trying to find work in a garage somewhere but I wanted to help with the effort to restore New Haven. I suppose that’s what she’s gone and done, wherever she is.”

“Well… guess neither of us is happy about how things ended but at least we’re free now, right?” Nisha offered up, never exactly a bastion of emotional support, “Just a couple of badasses, tearing up Pandora. Take all the merc jobs you want as far as I’m concerned as long as at least one of us is watching her.”

Nisha nodded her head towards the girl, still out completely cold. Idly, she realized this was probably the first time Angel’d been able to sleep without needles jammed into her spine in a long, long time.


“You’re weird,” Nisha sniped back, “This is just a really extended ladies’ night, we’ll have fun.”

“Getting hunted down by your ex-boyfriend with his kidnapped daughter is fun for you?”

“Hey! I didn’t kidnap her, I freed her! And also, yes. Hey if he catches up we should pretend it’s a romantic runaway. That’d really piss him off.”

“You’ve got the most dangerous man in the galaxy chasing after you and you want to piss him off more?”

“Hey, he’s gonna kill us slow and horribly if he catches us anyways. Might as well get one last stab in. We can pretend we’re together if we come across Janey too. Let her think you upgraded.”

Athena’s mouth fought against twisting up into a smile, “So now you think you’re an upgrade
from Janey?"

“You sayin’ I’m not?” Nisha aimed a smarmy grin at her, “Betcha five bucks I’m a better lay than her.”

“You know you have to sleep with me for me to judge that, right?”

Nisha nearly drove them off the road, obnoxiously leaning towards Athena, batting her eyes cartoonishly and making a kissy face.

Angel was jostled awake finally, between the violent swerve and both of her guardians laughing. Nisha’s loud and proud, Athena’s being forced out of her against her will.

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Thankfully it had been a pretty good time for Angel to wake up. The sun rising on their destination in the near distance, the small town having grown a bit since Athena had last been here.

“Looks like they added a garage,” Athena noted, the ‘Catch-A-Ride’ sign visible from a distance, “We should see about getting a cover for the back. Give us a little more room to sleep in this thing, let Angel have the entire cab to herself, more than enough room for both of us back there.”

“You wanna give us some privacy, huh?” Nisha grinned at her, “I see how it is.”

Oh great, apparently ‘Angel is awake’ is not a deterrent factor in stopping the flirting.

“Nisha!” Athena barked, smacking her arm.

But Angel didn’t seem to mind, giggling at that, “It’ll be nice to have my own space. I haven’t really had my own room since I was like twelve.”

“Man, your bar is too low,” Nisha replied, “We’ll get you a real room when this is all over.”

Those words hung a bit more heavily in the air. A cold reminder that they were, in fact, not on a fun road trip and were being hunted down like animals.

They couldn’t think about that though, they’d lose their minds.

All that mattered was they were free and Jack had absolutely no idea where they were. Until they saw yellow rushing at them, they were safe.

Walking into the town, it felt like old times again. Athena even managing to relax a bit as she watched Nisha lean on the counter, haggling for a bargain on enough non-perishable rations and fuel to last them a long, long time.

Looking around, the town was unusually abuzz. People excitedly chattering away in small groups.

It was weird. It wasn’t like people didn’t find their own happiness in the wasteland but to see this many people so cheerful all at once… that was weird. That was really weird.

To Angel it was nothing but as a couple workers helped them transport their newly bought goods the older women leaned in.

“Why the hell is everyone so… happy?” Nisha whispered to Athena, “Weird as shit, I ain’t seen this many smiles unless I’m up on Helios, looking at the goddamn sycophants tryin’ to keep Jack happy.”
“You don’t think…”

“No, he ain’t here. And these smiles… they seem genuine.”

Nisha was right. Beyond them smiling it was also weird how they seemed… actually happy.

“I’m gonna go eavesdrop, you make sure these bastards don’t rip us off,” Nisha said, disappearing off into the crowd before Athena could even protest.

Instantly, Angel attached to her arm nervously, “Where is Nisha going?”

“Don’t worry,” Athena replied, confidence in her statements not false either, “She’s just checking out the town real quick. She’ll be back.”

Good to know Angel apparently had a probably very reasonable fear of abandonment.

But Athena was correct, Nisha reappearing about fifteen minutes later. She looked… relieved.

As the last container of food was loaded up into the back of the car, Athena called out to her, “Did you figure it out? Your face says you did.”

“Yuhp,” Nisha nearly skipped over, “Looks like Jack won’t be our problem for too long. Dumbass is going to get his ass killed being down on Pandora right now.”

“Elaborate?” Athena asked, feeling wary as Angel quickly perked up at that news.

“Apparently Jack pissed off a big group of Vault Hunters,” Nisha held her arms out wide, “Rounded up a bunch of badass loners and now they’re travelling as a pack, determined to take him down. They’re all anyone’s talkin’ about on the ECHOnet.”

Athena couldn’t help a small smile from gracing her face, “And the idiot is chasing us around on the surface of Pandora.”

“Hell yeah he is,” Nisha held up the ECHO device in her hands, “One of these Vault Hunters is even wanted for political assassination. We don’t have to run forever, we just have to run until one of these guys finishes off what I failed to do.”

It wasn’t until after an enthusiastic high five did they stop to consider their company.

In unison they both looked right at Angel, who answered automatically, “You can celebrate, I’m not upset. I know what has to happen.”

Another high five, before both cautiously offered one each to Angel. She took both.

“Alright, let’s get our ride fixed up,” Nisha practically sung, “This road trip just got a lot more fun.”

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The three of them were in the same oddly cheery state of mind as they approached the Catch-A-Ride, pulling the car up close before sliding out to walk in.

“Hey let’s get a Pandoracorn painted on the side,” Nisha nudged Athena in the side.

“Why?” Athena squinted up at her.
“There is literally no way Jack’ll think it’s us if we’re rolling around in that,” Nisha explained, before looking back at Angel behind them, “You want a Pandoracorn paintjob right, you seem like you’d like that kinda stuff.”

Angel shook her head with a smile, “Let’s get flames painted on the side.”

Athena grinned at that one, “Now we’re talking.”

“Let’s get both,” Nisha pushed the door open, “Pandoracorn on fire. Send some nice mixed messages there.”

Angel chirped up happily, blue eye sparkling, “Oh! I like that one! Can we really get it?”

“Deal,” Athena shook Angel’s hand as they walked into the building, “See? Compromise isn’t so bad.”

“Ah but where’s the fun in that? I wanna argue an’ gamble, we’re Vault Hunters after all,” Nisha said, happily draping herself over Athena’s shoulders and getting in her face, “Besides, if we’re gonna have some privacy in the back we can always finish out that one bet, see if I’m the better lay.”

The shocked, confused voice broke Nisha out of her teasing with a slightly alarmed, “A-Athena?”

Both women’s heads jerked up at the familiar voice.

Angel curiously peeking her head around them to get her first ever glimpse at the oft mentioned woman.

Janey was frozen in place, taking in the unexpected sight with a dropped jaw. Not only was Athena suddenly standing in front of her but she’d brought NISHA of all people. Nisha Kadam, Handsome Jack’s girlfriend. And Nisha was all but cuddling up to Athena, making a dirty joke. At least, she hoped it was a dirty joke.

And who the hell was the younger girl?

“What are you doing here?” Janey said, still wide eyed and gaping at the display in front of her.

“I am… we are… uh, hey, Janey...” Athena was wholly unprepared for this turn of events, dumbly pointing at everyone in their party. Suddenly forgetting how to form sentences.

It was both a blessing and a curse as Nisha was still able to speak but apparently the surprise had knocked out anything resembling a filter, “I shot Jack in the head and took his daughter and now we’re in the run ‘cause it didn’t kill him.”

“Nisha!” Athena smacked her in the stomach, “Shut up!”

“You WHAT?!” Janey exclaimed, dumping some heavy metal on the counter and walking around it, “Is that girl...”

Angel didn’t look exactly comfortable as she brushed her hair to the side, revealing her green left eye. A wordless confirmation.

Trying to diffuse the situation, Nisha focused on what was more important, “We need some modifications to our car, gonna be livin’ in that for a while.”

Janey didn’t look exactly thrilled about this, “Is he following you? Did you lead him here?!”
“He doesn’t know where we went, we’re fi-” Athena started.

But Janey wasn’t having any of it, flailing her arms out, “This is exactly why I didn’t want you going out and being around Vault Hunters! This is what happens! It’s never just a job, there’s always strings attached!”

Flinching back only momentarily, Athena didn’t let herself be browbeat into submission, “And that’s why I left. Also, I didn’t even choose this. Nisha just showed up on my doorstep and I’m not going to just going to abandon a friend when they need me.”

“And now you’re getting hunted down by Jack,” Janey crossed her arms “Just… just leave. Quickly. If you’ve brought him here, I’ll… I’ll… I can’t even come up with a threat because if he shows up, we’re all dead!”

It was Angel who intervened though, Janey jumping at the ice cold hand on her shoulder, “Please Miss Janey, Nisha rescued me and Athena promised to help keep me safe. We just need at least a canopy for the back to keep the supplies safe, have a place to sleep. Then we’ll leave.”

Janey gave the girl a once up and down. Really taking in how sickly and pale she was. Poor thing was going to bake under the Pandoran sun if she didn’t do something about it.

“Alright… but… just that. Nothing else,” Janey put her foot down, “Maybe check the motor.”

“Sounds just fine, sunshine,” Janey flinched as Nisha broke out the old nickname, “If you want we’ll even get out of your hair. Got one more thing to pick up in town. C’mon, Athena.”

Janey looked relieved at that although she was still weirded out by the casual way Nisha was hanging off of her former girlfriend.

And if she was being honest with herself, she was a bit jealous.

“I’m going to stay here if that’s alright,” Angel piped up, “I like mechanical things, maybe I can learn a little in case something goes wrong on the road.”

Athena looked at Janey who seemed less than enthused about the idea, “That’s fine, I don’t mind.”

“Alright, we’ll be right back,” Nisha shoved a confused Athena through the door.

When the door closed behind them, Janey turned to Angel with a forced smile, “Alrighty, uhm, Jack’s Daughter, let’s take a look under the hood, huh? Sound good?”

“My name’s Angel,” she replied, not exactly enjoying the moniker of ‘Jack’s Daughter’.

“Angel, right, sorry,” Janey kept trying to stop herself from examining the girl curiously, “I’ll show you how to make sure everything’s in place. Get it all set, reset the digistruction code, then you guys can respawn it at any Catch-A-Ride.”

Pushing up the hood, Janey got to work. Not minding the slightly spindly girl curiously watching her. Calmly explaining things as she did them.

But man, oh, man did Janey want to ask the girl questions.

Janey settled for curiously examining the girl though.

She’d never heard of Jack having a daughter and looking at her that seemed to make sense. Poor thing looked like she hadn’t seen the sunlight in at least a decade, maybe more. Sickly and sunken
in, such dark circles around her eyes. Ports in her head. Blue tatt-

Oh holy shit, she’s a Siren.

Janey’s little play pretend ruse fell at her feet at that, freezing up as she gawked at the girl’s half-
covered arm.

Angel noticed, of course. Self consciously running her normal hand over them, “Yes, those are what you think they are.”

Badly pretending like she wasn’t wildly terrified, Janey’s voice was restricted, “That’s cool. I’ve got some tattoos too but they’re, uh, less cool.”

Turning her attention back to the engine, Angel watched Janey tighten a few things, “I think they’re cool. I like Athena’s tattoo too, the bird. I imagine they’re a little more fun when you get to pick them.”

“Well, whatever you do, if you’re ever thinking about getting some of your choice, don’t ever get a name tattoo’d on you. Got these skags over the name of my first girlfriend. Broke my heart. Although I figure a checklist for revenge for another girlfriend isn’t much better…”

“You’ve had a lot of girlfriends?” Angel asked.

A bit of a sore point, “I’ve had a normal number of girlfriends.”

“I haven’t seen anyone but my dad and scientists since I was twelve, I’ve never had any girlfriends,” Angel casually dropped, apparently ignorant of how sad that was as she ran a hand long the smooth metal of the car, “Maybe now that I’m out here I can have one. Eventually.”

“That’s the spirit,” Janey tried to sound chipper, patting her shoulder, “You seem like a sweet girl, I’m sure you’ll catch someone’s eye.”

“Thanks,” Angel scratched idly at a patch of dried mud in front of her, “I hope so. Hearing about everyone else having someone or having had someone really makes me think about how much I’ve missed.”

“Does… has Athena said anything about me?” Janey questioned, unable to help herself.

“She did, mostly to Nisha when she thought I was asleep.”

Again, Janey felt a weird pang of jealousy in her gut, “To Nisha? What’d she say?”

“Just about why you broke up but that’s also what you just told me so not really anything different. She doesn’t talk bad about you if that’s what you’re worried about. Just sounded… disappointed that things didn’t work out.”

“What’s… what’s the deal with her and Nisha?”

Angel cocked her head, “What do you mean?”

“They’re being… touchy,” Janey looked at the door they’d disappeared out of, “I mean, I knew Nisha before and she’s kinda always been like that but like…”

“I mean, they’ve only been around each other for about a day,” Angel noted the instant relief on Janey’s face, smashing it with her next question, “Why, do you want to be with Athena again?”
“N- I do- It’s more complicated than that,” Janey replied, “It’s not about… wanting her back. I don’t. I mean I do but I don’t. I know she doesn’t and that makes me not want to either. She’s… she’s picked the life she wants and if she thinks I hold her back… “

Angel blinked at her a few times, clearly not getting the message or why Janey would care so much about someone she’d already broken up with.

“It’s not about wanting to be back together it’s just… it hurts when someone you dated for a long time moves on really fast. Makes you feel like your connection wasn’t that important. It’s not really all that rational…”

Angel nodded, “Makes sense. Guess I’m just thinking about it too clinically.”

Janey instantly felt bad pumping the girl for information and right after the poor thing expressed interest in relationships. Way to paint a disappointing picture for the girl.

Paint. Janey perked up, “Well, the engine seems to be in tip-top shape! It’s going to take me a little bit to get the cover on for the back. You like to draw at all? Heard you guys talking about painting a Pandoracorn on it. You can take a crack at it if you’d like.”

Instantly, Janey felt relief at the wide smile on Angel’s face.

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About an hour later, Athena and Nisha showed back up to the garage. A few bags hanging off their arms, getting Nisha off of Athena to Janey’s relief.

Both of them couldn’t help but smile as they watched Angel turn around with a proud gesture to her handwork, arms out wide and a cheery, “Ta-da!”

Nobody here was pretending the slightly crudely drawn Pandoracorn painted on the sides was the work of the next Michelangelo but it was cute at least. A slightly stick figure-y creature with flames all around it, making it look like a comet. White body, purple mane and tail. Blue flames. One on each side of the vehicle.

“Good work, kiddo,” Nisha cooed, ruffling her hair as she passed by to talk to Janey, “How much do we owe you, sunshine?”

“It’s on the house,” Janey replied, “Just this once. Try not to muck it up too much but if you do, you can always digstruct another.”

Athena looked surprised at this, “T-thanks, you… didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t want this to end on a bad note,” Janey replied, suddenly very interested in the wrench in her hands, “Figured it’s the least I can do for yellin’ at you.”

Reaching out, Janey was surprised at the tight hug from Athena. Familiar and not at the same time, no longer having that warm edge it had had when they were together. She supposed it was better than nothing though, patting her back.

When Athena let go she was surprised to get one from Angel as well, the girl seeming even more emaciated this close.

“Ah, hell, why not,” Nisha said as Angel let go, giving Janey a sharp and quick hug around the neck that was almost more of a very, very quick strangling.
At that they took off, piling into the modified technical. Angel leaning out the window and waving to Janey as they pulled away, the woman waving back.

It was a grim thought but Janey hoped that wouldn’t be the last time she saw any of them alive.
Nisha supposed she should have expected this but it didn’t make her feel any less sick to her stomach.

Vault Hunters were no strangers to wanted posters promising millions for their head on a silver platter. Hell, this wasn’t even Nisha’s first wanted poster. Knew there was an old Dahl one from Elpis floating around, courtesy of Zarpedon.

But this one… her black and white photo, printed on yellow paper.

Two hundred billion dollars if dead, five hundred billion dollars if alive.

The last thing she wanted to see. If this was in the boonies of this backwater town then it was plastered all over Pandora.

Nisha was dumbstruck, “Goddamn that’s the biggest bounty I ever did see.”

“Hell, almost makes me want to hogtie you and drag you to Jack myself,” Athena said, eyes wide at the amount listed.

Athena wasn’t going to joke about the one next to it though.

Printed on the same Hyperion paper was a black and white photo of Angel. Slightly dated, she looked about thirteen in the picture. Underneath it was “MISSING” instead of “WANTED.”

Eight hundred billion reward for her safe return.

“What are… what are we going to do?” Angel asked, moving closer to Athena, “I don’t… you guys are Vault Hunters but…”

“Well I hope you’re both down with some makeovers,” Athena replied, ripping down the two posters.

Nisha and Angel had immediately gone back to the truck after Athena tore them down, telling them to wait with the insistence of “she’d take care of it.” Not leaving before being handed Nisha’s credit chip.

It was a bit amusing to Nisha that she was the one funding so much of this, grateful that she’d had the common sense to store her money where Jack couldn’t reach it.

There was a decent chunk of savings but it was finite. Eventually they’d have to start taking some merc work here and there to bolster it.

“Do you… do you think disguises will be enough?” Angel asked, nervously pulling her new hat down low on her head.

“Better’n nothing,” Nisha replied, crawling to sit on the back of the truck, “Get in the shade, you’re gonna burn to a crisp. You’re practically translucent.”

Angel didn’t listen, tilting her head back, “Wouldn’t a tan help hide me?”
“More like it’ll tan your hide, get in here,” Nisha demanded, “If you’re going to tan, you’ll tan but don’t go out of your way to stand in the sun. Don’t need you passing out in the desert.”

Complying, Angel crawled up next to her. Letting her legs dangle out the lowered back. Swinging them in and out of the sunlight.

“I won’t just go out in the sun but… I hope I get a tan,” Angel replied, “I used to have one, being so pale is… weird. Even after all these years.”

“Huh, just assumed you were always pale. A lil less so. But still.”

“No, you know what my dad looks like,” Angel shook her head, “He’s fairly tan-skinned. My mom was maybe a little bit lighter.” Lack and sun and just all of… this.”

She tapped the metal in her head, a clear sign of the experimentation permanently glinting on her head.

“Well, you’re certainly gonna have a lot of time in the sunlight,” Nisha looked out at the scorched earth, “Honestly, that’d probably be one of the best ways to hide you. Get you fed too. Make you not look like the sickly girl in the photos.”

“Maybe I could work out like Athena,” Angel offered with a flex of the alarmingly bone thin arm, “Get stronger.”

“Ain’t a bad idea,” Nisha replied, “Gotta get you used to Pandoran living. Don’t think she’d admit it but Athena actually does love helping train people. She did with… the newbie Vault Hunter Jack stuck in with us. Dude had zero combat experience and by the time we got into the vault dude was fucking terrifying. Probably the strongest of us. I mean, he was still emotionally a pansy but I wouldn’t try an’ fight him.”

“Where’d the rest of your Vault Hunter group do?” Angel asked, “I couldn’t watch everyone on Elpis and dad… dad didn’t talk about anything but vaults when he came back.”

“Well, you know me and Athena… Wilhelm still works for your dad, the newbie Vault Hunter stayed too. Except Wilhelm’s in for fun and the newbie is just… scared to leave. Aurelia fucked off to her turbomansion. Claptrap… I’m gonna be honest with you, I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“I’ve know of Wilhelm,” Angel nodded, “I’ve seen him in person a few times.”

“He was… he was more normal back then.”

“I’ve seen a lot of the people Jack works with through cameras, what’s the newbie’s name?”

“Oh… his name is… was…”

“Alright, I’ve got a bunch of stuff,” Athena called out, turning the corner with several big bags, “Some clothes, some makeup, some scissors… It’s smaller than the town Janey’s in but they had a warehouse of this stuff. Got a little business exporting it around Pandora, said not to ask where they got it though.”

“So we’re wearing dead people clothes,” Nisha smirked.

Angel tugged at her own outfit, “I’m pretty sure you already gave me dead people clothes.”

“Well now we’re all wearing dead people clothes,” Athena dumped the bags on the ground,
“Except me because, well, nobody wants me right now. At least not more than usual and not fucking Jack. So put on your dead people clothes.”

Nisha hopped off the back of the truck obediently, dropping to dig through the bad excitedly like a kid on Mercenary Day.

“It’s a little more rhinestone cowgirl than your normal look but it was the only cowgirl look I could find,” Athena warned.

“Whatever, I gotta look different anyways, right?” Nisha replied, pulling out a new long coat with a nod, “Ain’t too bad. Close enough.”

While Nisha busied herself with the bag of clothes, Athena scrambled up into the technical with Angel. The scissors glinting bright in the sunlight, “Hope you’re okay with a haircut…”

“Are you kidding? Anything outside of what my dad wanted for me is absolutely welcome,” Angel smiled, “You can even shave my head if you want to.”

“Not gonna take it that far,” Athena replied, “Probably going to want to keep that left eye covered for the time. Too identifiable.”

“That’s fine too,” Angel nodded before going still, feeling a strong hand yank her ponytail free before regathering it.

The slide of cold metal against her skin made her shiver as it was all chopped away.

It was weird to see her own hair tossed to the wind, black strands blowing away in the desert winds.

Outside, Angel saw Nisha begin to shrug off the old coat with ease. Resting her hat underneath it so it wouldn’t join the cut off hair in blowing away across the Dust’s empty desert. But as Nisha quickly unbuttoned the vest as well, dropping it to the ground before going to remove the entire top-

“Nisha!” Athena barked over Angel’s shoulder, “Not in front of the kid!”

“I’m twenty-one,” Angel retorted, annoyed, “My father may have treated me like a child but I’m not.”

“See, she’s twenty-one,” Nisha mocked at Athena, hands still gripping the bottom of her shirt, “She’s a grown woman, she has titties, seen titties. Don’t baby her.”

“We’re only about a hundred feet out from the town-” Athena started as Nisha ignored her and whipped the shirt off and tossed it into the pile, “Hey!”

“Big deal,” Nisha held up the new midriff, examining it, “There’s a bunch of big fucking rocks in the way. Lighten up.”

“This isn’t like up on Elpis, you can’t just walk around naked.”

“Hey, watch this,” Nisha laughed, dropping the shirt to hook her bra straps and quickly flash them.

“NISHA,” Athena barked, snipping a large chunk out of Angel’s hair by accident.

“I saw you starin’,” Nisha laughed, picking up the shirt and finally putting it on, “Your face is redder than a bleedin’ out skag. C’mon, it ain’t nothing you haven’t seen before.”
“Angel!” Athena pointed at the girl again.

“Still an adult,” Angel replied more sternly, looking back at her almost warningly, “Still don’t like being babied.”

“See? She’ll live. Hell, second we can shrug off your nanny I’ll take you to a girlie club. Get an actual show for you. Sound good?” Nisha pulled on the white button up, tying it up in front.

Sensing Athena was going to protest, Angel cut her off, “Yeah!”

“You’re a bad influence…” Athena mumbled, snipping off more and more of Angel’s hair.

“Maybe she needs a lil of that,” Nisha started stepping off her boots, “Between my sense of freedom and your sense of duty I think she’ll turn out fine. We’ve gotta get her adapted to all types of Pandoran living, not just the combat ones. Let the girl live a little.”

“Let’s worry about keeping her alive first,” Athena retorted, “Then she can live all she wants.”

“Why wait?” Nisha countered, “It’s dangerous out there. Gotta get living while you’re still alive.”

“Look, Jack’s trying to chase us down,” Athena took off the last of Angel’s hair, “We’re not taking a side trip to a strip club until we’re not being hunted like skags.”

“So that’s a yes on the strippers, just eventually?” Nisha grinned.

Nudging Angel to leave, Athena kicked the space in front of her, “Just get over here and get your hair cut.”

While Nisha grumbled and climbed up in front of Athena, Angel walked around to the front of the car to try and see her new look in the rearview mirror. Running her hand through the completely gone back, smiling as her hands raked through the soft, short remains. Her bangs still hung over her eye but just barely. She liked it.

Also the fact her father would hate it was just a cherry on the sundae.

Only her physical weakness stopping her from skipping back, Angel went returned to her guardians.

Athena had already roughly cut away Nisha’s hair to her cheeks. She didn’t seem to mind though, playing with some of it, “Kinda like old times. Lil’ straighter now than before though, kinda not even too.”

“I never said I was good at this,” Athena flatly replied, “I really only cut my own and Janey’s. Not exactly trained in this.”

“What, Atlas didn’t train their assassins to be beauticians? Fucking amateur hour.”

Angel giggled, climbing up into the back of the technical with them, “I think you did a good job. I like mine and I think yours looks cute too, Nisha.”

“Aw, thanks,” Nisha raked a claw through Angel’s new hair, “Now we just need to wait for the other half to grow in. Hide those ports.”

Athena dropped a new cowgirl hat on Nisha’s head to match her new getup, “In the meantime… keep the hat Nisha gave you on. Hides ‘em and it’ll keep your head from burning in the sun.”
“Well, now we’re all glammed out we should get moving,” Nisha looked out in the distance, “Honestly if we get to a real city I think we should set up camp. Get a real night’s sleep.”

“Yeah,” Athena cautiously agreed, “Sleeping on the go… well if we ever want Angel looking healthy she’s gonna need some real rest. Maybe hunt a skag, get her well fed. Map says there’s a pretty big city nearby, we can hide the car in with others.”

Piling into the main cab’s wide seat, they turned towards it and took off into the wastes.

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When they pulled up to the wide lot just slightly inside of the town, Angel pushed herself out of the window. This one was a bit bigger, bright neon signs dotting the stern metal buildings. It looked like an abandoned Atlas settlement, maybe.

“Can we see if there’s a restaurant out there?” Angel turned back to Athena, “I haven’t been in a restaurant for so long…”

“We should keep our heads down,” Athena shook her head, “Makeovers can only do so much, we should still stick to small towns if we have to go around people.”

Sighing, Angel slumped back down.

“I got some sleepwear while I got the rest of your clothes so we won’t be uncomfortable. It’s just… like this is our home. For now.”

Angel tried not to look too disappointed at that sentence.

For as long as she could remember she’d fantasized about a home, a new one, a real one. Somewhere she could have her own space. Get little trinkets. Decorate. Sleep. Have friends come over.

But for the foreseeable future her ‘bedroom’ was going to be the front seat of a Bandit Technical.

Well, at least she could lay down here.

Nisha wanted to say something about that, even as she followed Athena to the back. Returning only to toss Angel’s pajamas through the window to her.

She wasn’t entirely sure what she’d pictured when conscripting Athena to help her. She’d known the women long and well enough to know that with a danger like this she’d slip into pure utilitarian survival mode.

When she laid down next to Athena on that thin pad she let her brain drift back to that short, sweet period where she let Angel pretend that she was going to have a new life in Lynchwood. A weird one, she was scared, but if Jack hadn’t… if she hadn’t…

If she’d finished the job she could be lying on her bed at home. Spent the day running the town, Angel free to go around and do whatever her little heart desired. Hell, maybe she would have called up Athena anyways to come help too.

But she hadn’t. She’d failed a basic task she’d done thousands of times and now they’re sleeping a car with a crazy bastard after them.

Within no time Athena was out cold next to her. Even took sleeping like a job, clocking in and out
perfectly.

And Angel was probably lying there in the cab of the car, disappointed at being shoved into another disappointing life.

Fuck that.

With minimal difficult, Nisha managed to slink out of the narrow area where the mat lay, boxed in by their supplies. Fishing her clothes out and Angel’s. Scribbling a note and leaving it on one of the too-flat pillows.

Athena was a deep sleeper, she wasn’t going to move an inch.

Snapping open the flaps, Nisha slid out and reclosed them.

Knocking on the window, Angel popped up immediately. Face going from fear to curiosity in and instant when she saw it was Nisha. Cracking open the door she couldn’t help but look excited, “What are you doing?”

“Commander Buzzkill is out cold, we’re gonna see what this craphole’s got to do,” Nisha grinned, dangling Angel’s clothes.

The grin lit up Angel’s face, even in the dark.

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At first Nisha had been put off by Angel grabbing her hand on instinct but as she led the girl through the small city she grew accustomed to it.

There were a few features, just enough to be an absolute delight for Angel. The small food court had a decent array of options for them to pick from. Angel delighting in the rainbow colored cotton candy and Nisha with some good old fashioned deep fried skag-on-a-stick.

It was… weird. Being a civilian. So used to being a town leader herself and before that, a Vault Hunter.

Now she was just a woman walking around with… did people think Angel was her daughter? Adoptive, if that. Considering their physical differences.

God, she hoped they didn’t. Even in passing she didn’t want to be seen as a mother figure.

Idle chatter filled the air between them. Angel curiously prodding for tales of daring up on Elpis, Nisha trying to figure out what Angel wanted to do going forward.

Man, if her intense interest in Vault Hunting was any indication… girl might have adventuring on the mind after all is said and done.

But right now she had something else on her mind.

The neon lights glinted sharply off the wide, open blue eye.

Girls, girls, girls. Turns out Nisha can make good on her promise a bit sooner than she thought.

“I’ve been in enough of these places to know they ain’t gonna let you bring in food,” Nisha tossed her own empty stick into a trash bin as they passed, “You better choke down that candy, kiddo.”
It was almost comical how quickly Angel vacuumed up the rest of the cottony goodness before excitedly dragging Nisha towards the strip club.

“Oh man, Athena’s gonna kill me,” Nisha practically sang as they approached the building.

Angel was revelling in the disobedience too, “Probably! Turn you in for the money.”

Laughing, Nisha admitted a nugget of truth, “Honestly? Surprised she didn’t with those going rates. Be real easy to say she found me and not you. I mean, she’s still got time.”

“She won’t,” Angel said with confidence, “I can feel it.”

Stepping inside, all conversation immediately became impossible. The pounding music nearly knocked Angel on her frail ass, the flashing lights blinding her. Overcoming the initial shock she found herself in a scene she’d only seen in PG-13 movies she’d snuck looks at as a child.

About a half dozen gyrating women in skimpy lingerie were dancing their hearts out for the crowd below them tossing floating bills at them.

Tearing her eyes away from the sight in front of her, Nisha stole a look down at Angel.

She looked like she was in heaven.

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The blaring sound of a car alarm going off bore into Athena’s skull sharply.

Growling, she rolled over and pulled her pillow tightly over her head as she tried to drown out the sound to no avail. Being woken up even more by the sound of crinkling paper and the fact she was now lying right where Nisha should have been.

“Fuck me…” Athena pushed herself up and pulled out the neatly written note.

She was going to fucking kill her.

In what must have only been two minutes she was dressed and bursting out of the Technical to chase down the dumbass and the one too innocent to know better than to listen to her.

Stomping into the small city, Athena wanted to ask if anyone had seen a couple of cowgirls but drawing any attention to them was such a danger.

There weren’t too many people out, she could do this.

How many places could they have gone-

Still flashing brightly in the night, just off to the side, unignorable as she passed it, Athena knew exactly where they’d gone.

Turning sharply, the second Athena started stomping towards the girlie club she heard a sharp scream followed by the sound of people running. Yelling themselves, the crowd behind her dispersing nigh instantly.

While most of it was a indecipherable cacophony Athena had heard the only word that mattered.

Or rather, name.
Inside the building, things boomed along. Completely oblivious to what was going on outside its four walls.

Angel giggled excitedly, just the vaguest bit tipsy off the fruity, barely alcoholic drink.

Her first ever, had while sneaking out to see a dirty show. If her dad could see her right now he’d absolutely shit himself at the visual of his daughter reaching up to stick some bills from Nisha’s wallet into a g-string.

But for the first time in her life, Angel felt like a real adult. In the sleaziest way possible but still.

Eventually, the show started slowing down. More and more girls leaving the stage as the place prepared to close down for the night. Filtering out through the back curtain one by one. A woman over the speaker system giving them a five minute warning.

The music didn’t stop pounding though, Nisha just gesturing for Angel to follow her so they could get out of there.

“That was so fun,” Angel managed to say loud enough for Nisha to hear as they went through the slightly quieter hallway, “What’s next?”

“I say one more sweep through the food court then head back to the car,” Nisha grinned, “Maybe if we’re lucky Athena won’t even realize we were out. But maybe we buy her some cherry candy on the way. She’s surprisingly easily bribed.”

Angel nodded, as she pushed open the door, “Sounds go-

Her statement died in her throat as the door cracked open just wide enough to see her father in the near distance, flanked by a small group of soldiers.

Talking to Athena.

Mercifully, he hadn’t noticed them. Not even as Nisha nearly knocked Angel over a second later, asking, “What’re you looking at?”

But looking over the girl’s shoulder she got her terrifying answer.

Jerking her back, Nisha started pulling her through the strip club again. The music finally dying down after their departure, the lights up to show the dark room lit up like a normal one.

Somehow, it seemed much skeezier in the light.

They ignored the bouncer trying to grab them, Nisha picking up the pace as she quickly headed to the stairs to the stage, “Back door, there’s gotta be a back door.”

“You can’t go back there!” the man yelled at them, chasing after, “What do you think you’d do-”

Quick as her whip, Nisha had her revolver in the man’s face, “Handsome fucking Jack is out front. I don’t wanna die, you don’t wanna die. Let’s cut a deal.”

Instantly the man went white, shoving past them to make his way through the backdoor himself. Banging on doors and calling out to the girls inside to get out and get gone. Worry about anything
else later.

Ducking behind the curtains, Nisha and Angel found themselves in a sea of strippers in the least sexy way possible.

Like a scantily clad stampede.

Eventually they managed to burst out the back door with a pack of the women. Eventually left alone as their bouncer herded them towards presumable safety.

“What about Athena?!” Angel looked behind them, “We can’t leave her there, alone!”

As much as Nisha wanted to cut and run the look Angel was giving her was telling her that under no uncertain terms that that wasn’t an option.

“We’ll… we’ll watch. Athena’s smart and Jack’s stupid and also probably still trusts her. If anyone can trick him, it’s her.”

Pulling Angel back towards the building and pressing herself against the dirty bricks, Nisha peeked around the corner. Slinking into the too-narrow alley between the club and the one next to it. Slinking towards the Dahl dumpster, hoping that’d be close enough to hear.

Luckily, it was.

- - -

Athena’s blood froze in her veins the second she felt the large hand on her shoulder, familiar voice dripping with malice that she could only hope wasn’t aimed at her, “Athena! Didn’t think I’d see anyone I knew in this shithole.”

She didn’t have a choice in turning around to look up at the man fearfully. While Athena’d grown used to his plastic smile before the mask it was a whole other thing with the monstrosity pulled taut against his face. Highlighting the sharp glare in his eyes.

God, Athena wasn’t a great actor but thank god for the fact that didn’t matter considering she had one tone no matter what and it was “angry.”

“Jack,” she replied, “Didn’t expect to see you here either. What are you doing on Pandora?”

God. Weird polite chit chat with an intergalactic dictator. Always fun.

“Actually, something I think you can help with,” he replied, his attempts at flattering anyone but himself always sounding plastic and fake, “You’re good at hunting people down. Capturing them. Bringing them back. I’ve got two people I’m looking for and, I mean, you know you were always my favorite of my Vault Hunters, right?”

“Wilhelm,” Athena flatly replied.

“My… second favorite?”

“Your body double.”

“Third favorite?”

“Nisha,” Athena shot out, making the woman in the alleyway twitch in panic against the metal fo the dumpster.
“See, that one is actually the problem,” Jack’s eyes glinted in the darkness, bright red from the sign behind her, “This may come as a shock to you but I actually have a daughter. Done everything in the world to keep her safe. But that FUCKING BITCH shot me in the head and ran off with her.”

For once, Athena was glad for her poker face, “Ran off with her?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve been sweeping towns in the direction they took off,” Jack snapped his fingers at the men behind him, a couple rolled up pieces of paper unfurled behind him displaying those inordinate bounties. Pointing at them, Jack promised, “I’ll even tack on an extra two hundred billion for old times’ sake. Deal?”

“Sorry, I’m out of the mercenary business,” Athena instantly shook her head, “Promised Janey no getting wrapped up in any dangerous work.”

Switching gears, Jack’s mawkish attempt at gaining sympathy nearly made her curl her lip in disgust, “C’mon, Athena, if not for the money just… my little baby girl is out there, all alone. She’s gotta be so scared.”

She is, Athena thought, of you finding her again. Evidently not enough to stop her from going on a nighttime joyride but still.

“I’m sorry, Jack, I really can’t,” Athena lied, “Janey’ll leave me in a heartbeat.”

Jack’s final attempt at changing tactics was the worst one, arm over Athena’s shoulders and sweeping an arm at the girlie club, “Lots of fish in the sea, I can GUARANTEE if you walk in there with a trillion dollars you can get any woman you want. We can discuss terms over drinks and I’ll buy you a lapdance from the prettiest girl in there.”

This time Athena was completely unable to hide her disgust, shooting him a sharp glare that instantly made him shrink away as she replied flatly, “No.”

Snatching the ECHO device from her hip, Jack was undaunted as he entered the code to his personal line with the demand of, “Well, I know that Janey chick of yours is involved with the Catch-a-Rides… if you hear anything, and I mean anything, tell me.”

Athena looked down at the device shoved into her hands before Jack turned around to leave, already ordering his troops to fan out.

But Nisha and Angel were presumably still somewhere in this city.

“You know, come to think of it, there is one thing I heard…” Athena’s mind started working, desperately trying to come up with something, anything to get Jack out of here.

Jerking back around, he looked hopeful, “What?”

“Have you been to New Haven’s remains yet?” Athena quickly started piecing together a lie from the truth.

“Not since I burned it to the ground, why?”

“I heard there was some weird activity out there lately, talk of an old Vault Hunter lurking around there with a mysterious girl. Scooter’d been looking into rebuilding there. Didn’t think much of it at the time. If you want to check it out, I’d do it soon. The rebuilding efforts shut down a long time ago and the last of the people should be out of there soon if not all already gone.”
Jack’s face lit up like a kid on Mercenary Day, quickly fishing out his wallet and shoving a thousand dollars into Athena’s hand, “See, was that so hard? I’ll get out of your hair, tell Laney I say hi.”

At that, Jack powerwalked in the opposite direction. Leaving Athena to finally release the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding.

Looking back at the strip club to Jack and back, she stomped towards it.

The sharp whistle from the alley when she got close leading her there instead.

“The only reasons I didn’t sell you out were, one, I couldn’t figure out how to only rat out Nisha without damning Angel too,” Athena started talking before she could even see them, glaring sharply at Nisha when she could, “And two, I’m going to strangle you to death myself.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” Nisha tried to joke before getting sharply smacked upside the head, sending her hat drifting to the ground.

“A threat,” Athena flatly replied.
“What were you thinking, no, really, what was going through your empty little head?” Athena ranted, layered hair trembling with sheer rage as she stomped ahead of the hangdog women, “Because if the answer was ‘nothing’ I’m going to kick you clear across this desert.”

“It was just supposed to be some harmless fun,” Nisha retorted, pointing at Angel, “She’s been imprisoned for god knows how long, just wanted her to have some fun.”

“Life isn’t fun,” Athena spat back, jabbing a finger at Nisha as they reached where the car was parked, “This isn’t a game. There’s an interplanetary dictator chasing after us with a fervor and you’re taking his daughter to a strip club!”

“It’s my fault-” Angel tried to interject, only to be cut off.

“No it’s fucking not, it’s the grown ass woman who’s in charge of you,” Athena shook her head, “You’re just a kid, you don’t-”

“I’M NOT A KID!!”

Both Athena and Nisha paused at that, looking back at the panting, enraged Angel.

“I am an ADULT,” Angel stomped up to Athena, straightening up to her full height for once to tower over the admittedly kinda short woman, “I am twenty-one years old! Yes, I’ve been in captivity for a long, long time, I KNOW I don’t know everything but I do know that I DON’T want ANOTHER person acting like I’m a baby!”

Athena dumbly went to defend herself, “But you-”

“NO! No buts! I’m an adult, my dad has treated me like a child my whole life and I’m not going to have anyone do that EVER. AGAIN.”

The glow had started off light, barely visible even in the darkness of the night but as Angel’d grown more frantic it was blinding. Tattoos glowing, lighting up her eyes with a white hot raging light that made the other two women flinch away.

It lasted for only a moment though, Athena not even having enough time to apologize before it all fizzled out. Tattoos growing dark again as Angel’s eyes rolled back and she collapsed to the ground.

“What did you do?!” Nisha shot back at Athena, already roughly trying to pick up the girl nearly her height.

“What did I do?!” Athena tried to reply, “What did- we’re not arguing right now, you said- you mentioned getting Angel from the lab, was there anything weird about the lab?!”

“There were all these tubes and shit stuck into her back-”

“What was in the tubes?!”

Nisha paused for a second, “Eridium. Shit. I had her fifty feet from a fucking Eridium mine like a day ago…”

“Where the fuck are we supposed to get Eridium?!” Athena asked, grabbing the shallowly
breathing woman from Nisha, “None of these hick towns is going to have anything!”

“Let me just…” Nisha fumbled as she pulled out her ECHO device, pulling up the area map with some fumbling difficulty, “I got… a map. From a while ago. Jack wanted the Lynchwood mine to act like… a shipping depot, like he’d send equipment down to me to send to other mining operations around Pandora… I think I still… map!”

An inelegant end to her sentence but as she turned it to Athena it revealed every Eridium mine on the entire continent.

Hoisting Angel up, Athena ran towards the other side of the car, “Quick, get in, start driving!”

Nisha wanted to make some snippy little comment about Athena not being the boss but seeing Angel lying there limply… there were more important things than being right. If she was going to be the good guy she’d have to do that sometimes, she supposed.

- - -

While Angel remained unconscious she mercifully didn’t see to grow weaker, breaths shallow but steady.

“It’s… it’s her powers, I think,” Athena finally broke the tense silence, “Using them… it must be hooked into that somehow. She’s so used to being overcharged that she just…”

“Shorted out and used just… whatever was leftover,” Nisha finished, scowling, “Fuck, I didn’t… I don’t know there were so many wires, I just thought they were… He just kept talking about charging a key, I just instantly put two and two together, thought… thought it was about that.”

Athena wanted to further admonish Nisha but they were already pulling up to the other mine.

“You stay in the car with her,” Athena started trying to gently move Angel off her lap, “I’ll handle this.”

“No you won’t,” Nisha put a hand up, pushing Angel back to her.

Athena’s head snapped up sharply at that, ready to snipe back.

But Nisha had a point, “Look, if you start going around attacking Jack’s mining operations for Eridium it’s gonna be real fuckin’ obvious that you’re in on this too.”

“That’s… true…” Athena conceded.

“Besides, despite bein’ an assassin you’re somehow shit at stealth. I’ll creep in, just grab enough, creep out. No one the wiser.”

“How are we going to get it in her?”

“That’s… we’ll figure something out,” Nisha shook her head, “Gently rest it on her skin if he have to. I don’t know. I’ll be back, I’ll holler if there’s a problem.”

Athena hated this plan but as she watched Nisha slide out of the car she knew she was right. For the time being Jack had no idea that Athena was involved in this and the less people that could be recognized in their party the better.

- - -
It was still pitch dark, Nisha glad now that the outfit Athena had selected for her had been so black.

The Mining operation was similar to the one at Lynchwood but tighter.

There was a small group of guards but thankfully they were completely clustered off to the side. A bag hung limply at Nisha’s side, a spare pulled from the back. Thankfully unprocessed Eridium isn’t too bad to grab. For short periods.

Countless hiding spots dotted the area, large machinery excellent for squeezing behind.

Peeking through a gap in the metal bars, Nisha groaned when she saw the Eridium stores were behind the group. Thankfully, still enough space around the back to creep there.

Keeping an eye glued to the guards, Nisha circled closer and closer to them. Glowing purple almost within her reach.

Slamming the ground, mercifully quietly, Nisha balked at hearing her name.

“You think Jack’s gonna find Nisha?” one laughed.

“Prolly,” another replied, “He’s fucking pissed. Ain’t never seen anyone ever take a shot at him and live.”

“One brave motherfucker,” the third cut in, “Everyone’s saying she shot him in the head, knocked him out, only reason she didn’t get torn limb from limb. Pretty fucking wild he has a kid, right?”

“Old one too, how’d he hide her so long?”

“Who knows but man, I’ve got a buddy who works close to Jack. Geographically. Just a secretary for his main office. Smart dude, keeps his head down. He says all Jack’s done for the last two days is fast travel around Pandora, questioning people.”

First guy chuckled again, “Questioning. I think we all know what that means.

Third guy nodded, “Oh we do. My friend says when he does come back he’s all but rabid, covered in blood, ranting. Heads into office, comes out clean a few minutes later, and repeats.”

“Man, how do you think he gets the blood out so fast?” the second guy asked with a genuine curiosity, “Because I’ve got these pants…”

“I assume that it’s some kind of crazy rich person dirt laser or something…” first guy mumbled, scratching the back of his head, “I wish I had a dirt laser.”

“You’re both fuckin’ morons,” third guy groaned, “Anyways, my buddy says that he’s half-scared for when Jack does find Nisha. Doesn’t wanna see the woman dragged into the office and cut to pieces until there’s nothing left. Jack said he was gonna leave the pieces all over Helios like an easter egg hunt from hell.”

God, that was not a comforting thing to think about less than ten feet from people who would happily hand themselves over to Jack for the reward money.

She was close though. A small tented area with a little office and a couple of Eridium carts stashed away

Sliding her hand up to reach into one of the rusty metal carts and start pulling out slab after slab of glowing purple mineral. Glad that the angle wasn’t severe enough that she could be seen as they all
gossiped about her potential fate.

It made her stomach churn, thinking about how unbelievably plausible everything they were saying was.

Alright, bad full, get the fuck out of…

The glinting metal object on a desk just past the cart caught her eye.

Fuck, that’d be perfect it must be some… prototype or something or other of Hyperion. It clicked into her head what it was.

Instantly, she knew it was absolutely perfect. Small, light, portable.

She had to have it.

Stealing another look at the distracted guards, Nisha decided to go for it. Slinging her now heavy backpack over her shoulders. No guts, no glory. Also they needed a solution anyways and that was just so, so perf-

“Who’s there?!” she heard one of the guards bark, undoubtedly at her.

Quick as a whip, she put one between his eyes.

That was one down but the hollering had alerted the many, many other guards that had been sleeping. Not to mention the other two still at attention.

“NISHA!” one of them yelled out to the other, “NISHA’S HERE, HELL WE COULD SPLIT THE BOUNTY TEN WAYS AND STILL BE SET FOR LIFE, GET OUT HERE!”

Snatching up the device, Nisha squeezed between the carts and tried to loop around. Ignoring the bullet holes bursting around her, raining shrapnel at her while she made her escape. Cursing the distance between her and the truck, lightly feeling her age for the first time. Wasn’t in her twenties anymore, that’s for sure.

Grimacing, she realized she’s grown a bit soft during her time at Lynchwood. Wasn’t quite the fearsome Vault Hunter she used to be.

But she had to be at least enough.

Closing her eyes, Nisha pushed herself even harder as she saw the car come into view.

Bursting away, the engine revved as Athena closed the distance between them. Only the practice of fighting side by side for all that time, way up on Elpis, was their timing so perfect that Athena whipped the car around to perfectly catch Nisha’s leap. Soaring through the open door, slamming into the passenger’s seat and yelling, “FLOOR IT!”

Athena didn’t need to be told twice, still holding Angel tightly against her side as she slammed the gas pedal and they tore out of there.

- - -

“Did you get-”

The sharp look Athena gave her said this wasn’t a waiting matter.

Struggling to breathe and not in the fun way, Nisha set down the device and squirmed out of the giant backpack and dropped it on the floor of the cab with a loud thump. Opening it to reveal what should be enough Eridium for months.

“Good job,” Athena doled out some rare praise, “What the hell is the metal thing?”

“Jack was always talking about stupid slag experiments,” Nisha grabbed at Angel, pulling her upright to get the device on her, “Always wanted to make some sort of… portable slag injector. Wanted to use it to make super soldiers. Said he had several mining operations outside of Lynchwood workin’ on it and we walked into one of ‘em.”

“That’s… that’s perfect, holy shit,” Athena marvelled, still not comforted by the way Angel was flopping around like a corpse, “Will it work?”

“Only one way to find out,” Nisha replied, “Don’t like stickin’ needles into the girl but it’s probably better than just… rubbing the bars on her face or somethin’.”

With the backpack on, Angel was forced to sit forward uncomfortably but given her current state of ‘unconscious’ it wasn’t like she minded.

There was a perfect place to put the Eridium bars in the back, no doubt sized for the natural sized chunks that Eridium always seemed to come off in. Clamping it shut, the thing lit up with that familiar purple light. An odd noise that Nisha and Athena could only assume was liquidifying the solid chunk.

Clasping the weird gauntlet like thing around her wrist, Nisha fumbled with it for a second before finding the button. Secured under a flap so it couldn’t be pressed accidentally.

Pushing it in burst the tube to life, sickly purple liquid sliding through it like a nuclear slushie. Nisha didn’t like the sight, familiar if only from a single snapshot in time, but Angel jolting back to life was a relief.

Looking around confused, she tightly gripped Nisha’s arm, “What… where am I?”

“Being driven very, very far away from an Eridium mine very fast,” Athena answered.

“You used your powers and just kinda… shorted out,” Nisha badly explained, “Turns out the Eridium pumping into you was a little less… well you gotta have it.”

Angel looked dismayed at the gauntlet around her arm, “Oh…”

“Well, it’s not ideal,” Athena sighed, “But… I don’t know, maybe we can find a way to make it not permanently something you have to do.”

“At least it’s just a needle in the arm instead of the spine?” Nisha weakly offered.

“I guess…” Angel was quiet, the jolt awake wearing off. Mismatched eyes growing sleepy.

“Should we find a place to pull over?” Athena asked, “Or keep going?”

“Keep going,” Nisha kept what she’d learned in the camp to herself, at least until Angel was asleep, “The further we can get away from this mine the better.”
“Is it okay if I just… go back to sleep?” Angel asked, hand fiddling uncomfortably with the new accessory, “The injections always makes me so tired after that first hit…”

“Yeah go nuts, kiddo,” Nisha patted her, “Switch seats with me so me and Athena can take turns driving. Cuddle the Eridium bag if you want.”

Angel giggled at that as she crawled over Nisha and curled up against the door.

It was a bit bittersweet to watch her struggle to find a comfortable position with the newfound limitations.

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They drove in silence for forever, Athena looking sternly forward with her hands at ten and two. Knuckles white but her face expressionless.

“I’m still mad at you,” she said after what seemed like hours, “What were you thinking, Nisha? We’re not on some fun joyride through the desert. Some weird road trip. We could all die.”

“That’s exactly it,” Nisha checked to make sure Angel was out cold, “We could all die. At any moment. Angel… man, I don’t know how long Jack had her down there but I know it’s since childhood. She’s… she’s got nothing. She’s never had a scrap of freedom in her life. I mean, hell, we had to strap more needles to her again just so she won’t die.”

“So trying to hurry the reaper along is a solution?” Athena growled, “You know I could have died, right? Jack was standing right there. If his peabrain had put two and two together, he would have killed me on the spot.”

“You’re tougher than that,” Nisha looked away as Athena looked over for an answer, “Besides, I woulda stepped in, not just gonna watch like a yellow bellied bastard while the fucker puts you down like a sick dog.”

“And then, best case scenario, he kills us both and Angel manages to get away. Realistic case scenario he recaptures her.”

“I find your lack of faith in our ability to take him down fairly disturbing,” Nisha replied, “Jack’s not some all powerful-”

“Nisha the man survived getting shot in the head,” Athena jerked to avoid a Skag in the road, “It’s like these some invisible force field around the bastard keeping him alive. Like the universe doesn’t want him dead.”

“Look… it’s just…” Nisha struggled for words to defend herself, “I just want her to squeeze at least some semblance of living out of this. Even if it ends up Jack finding us again. Just let her have literally anything, even if it’s just a happy memory when he straps her back into that big fucking machine.”

“You’re being… uncharacteristically pessimistic about this,” Athena cocked an eyebrow, “You learned something in that camp. Spit it out.”

Nisha had forgotten how hard it was to lie to Athena, “Jack’s… Jack’s been using the fast travel stations. He could be anywhere at any time. Our lead on him isn’t necessarily stable.”

Closing her eyes, Athena briefly contemplated just driving them off a cliff, should she be able to find one, “So Jack could show up literally anywhere, any time.”
“Luck of the draw and the cards are stacked against us.”

“Great, this is just great,” Athena mumbled.

“So let’s… just when we can, let’s let Angel pretending things and normal and fine. Let her have some fun. Let her be an adult.”

There was a very pointed edge seared into that last word.

Athena looked like she wanted to disagree, eyes darting angrily between the road, Nisha and Angel, “Fine. But don’t leave me behind ever again. Could have gotten yourselves killed, could have gotten me killed, could have gotten all of us killed.”

“Aww, you jealous you didn’t get to come to the strip club with us?” Nisha already slid back into a more familiar groove, tugging at the bottom of her shirt, “I c’n give you a show if you want.”

“I’m driving.”

“You could stop driving.”

“If I stop driving Angel might wake up.”

Nisha laughed, “Alright, rain check. But I owe you one.”

Groaning, Athena put her head down on the top of the steering wheel, “No you don’t.”

“Yeah I do,” Nisha cackled, leaning back contentedly, “Besides, how we ever gonna get a conclusion to the bet? Can’t see if I’m a better lay than Janey with some romancin’ first.”

Athena lifted her head from the steering wheel, only to bang it down again. Unfortunately, a bit lower than intended. The sharp honk of the horn jolting Angel awake while Nisha cracked up, patting her shoulder, “Sorry, cupcake. Go back to sleep. Mommy and mommy are just fighting.”

Angel gave both of them a weird look before rolling back over, hoping that she wouldn’t be jerked awake a second time.

“If you call either of us ‘mommy’ ever again I swear to god I will turn this car around and kill us all,” Athena threatened and Nisha had a good feeling that it wasn’t a joke.
Mother Dearest Darling Dead

Gas was the one thing they really couldn’t stockpile, to Athena’s annoyance. A forced reason to stop, although honestly the other two were always glad to stretch their legs.

Athena was trying to be sympathetic to Nisha’s viewpoint, she really was. She got the basics of it, she wasn’t stupid, but trying to bring it into practice... In a perfect world Jack would be dead, Angel would be Nisha in Lynchwood leading a weird but safe little life and she...

Actually, Athena wasn’t entirely sure where she was in this scenario.

Probably still alone in the ruins of New Haven.

For a split second Athena felt a weird, guilty moment of being glad. For this. For not being alone.

But the circumstances were bad and daydreaming about going to Lynchwood and living some hunky-dory life with Nisha and Angel was pointless. It’s not gonna happen. They’ll be lucky if even one of them survives if they’re living on the mercy of Jack fast travelling around at random.

God, maybe Nisha did have a point then. Let Angel have some fun before Jack snatches her back, it’s bad enough they’re going to have to keep injecting her with poison just to keep her own powers from burning her alive.

She looked over at them, Nisha teaching Angel some crude Pandoran clapping game like a couple of schoolgirls. The rhyme was one about some psychos and a particularly sadistic Vault Hunter, Athena had never heard it before. That was unsurprising, given her history. Not a lot of playful bonding going on in Atlas’s underbelly.

If something amused Angel… well, as long as it wasn’t going to endanger her… Athena would try to play along. Might as well. As long as it’s safe.

Cringing, Athena looked back to the gas gauge, “We’re gonna have to make a pitstop soon.”

Nisha caught the pale hand in midair, grinning, “Fun, let’s get shit to make some s’mores too.”

“This isn’t... “ Athena sighed, “Whatever, s’mores, we’ll make s’mores.”

Angel perked up at that, “Ohhh I haven’t had one of those since I was a little girl. I barely even remember it, I must have been eight or so...”

Athena wasn’t a woman of tack, ignoring the slap on the arm Nisha gave her as she asked, “What have you even been doing since you were twelve?”

“Don’t ask that,” Nisha hissed.

“It’s fine,” Angel replied flatly, “I can understand why you’d be curious, it was a long time. Dad... he wasn’t object to buying me things to amuse myself. I couldn’t leave but he’d bring me books, movies, games... anything to keep my mind occupied. It was like being permanently grounded. Featuring painful experiments.”

“How the hell did the bastard even justify that in his mind?” Nisha scowled, “Always going around sayin’ he’s a big damn hero.”

“Well... we was always talking about buying whatever I want so I suppose that,” Angel pulled her
legs up against her chest, “The experiments didn’t start out that bad. Maybe at the beginning he even meant it when he said he wanted to make sure the powers weren’t hurting me in any way. But even if that was true it wasn’t by the end. Just got more and more horrible and intrusive until…”

Tapped a thin finger on the new metal device on her arm, both of the other women flinching at the cold sound of her new little prison.

“Frankly, I’m surprised you’re relatively well adjusted all things considered,” Athena’s eyes perked up at the sight of a small truck stop in the distance.

“Yeah, coulda been a friendless weirdo like Athe- OW!” Nisha yelped at the light punch to the leg, shooting her a dirty look.

Angel giggled at that, along with Nisha’s slap back to Athena’s exposed arm, “I had… well, I had one friend. Jack gave me her when he first hooked me up to the whole big machine I must have been about sixteen at the time…”

“GAVE you her?” Athena shot her a horrified look, “What, like a slave or something?”

“Oh no, not… she was a CL4P-TP unit,” Angel corrected, imitating the shape of the boxy bots with her hands, “Painted white and blue, her name was H4L0-TP. I miss her so much, she was my only companion other than my father for so long…”

“What happened to her?” Nisha asked before she realized…

“One day she just… malfunctioned. Started sparking and jerking mid sentence then just… fell over smoking. It was around the time dad was on Elpis with you two so her body just… lay there for so long.”

Athena and Nisha locked eyes. Both recalling the very moment Jack had shut down the entire Claptrap line, extending even to Angel’s H4L0-TP. Nisha felt a pang of delayed guilt at the high five she’d shared with Wilhelm at their demise.

Both of them looked back to Angel, hands folded tightly in her lap, knuckles even whiter than usual, “Eventually he came back and I showed him H4L0 but he said it was a fatal error that’d taken out all the Claptraps and he couldn’t fix her.”

Wordlessly, both Athena and Nisha communicated not to say anything. Both had heard talk of their own annoying yellow companion being reactivated by some dude out in the middle of nowhere. They weren't hard to fix.

Angel didn't need to know her friend was killed by her dad. That the metal husk that most certainly has been thrown out could have been saved with ease.

"It's silly but… H4L0 reminded me of my mom. Not like she was a mother figure or anything but like… she liked to take care of me and she was so nice. She always tried to cook things for me but they were really bad because, you know, she's a robot but I ate them anyways because it made her happy."

"What happened to your-"

"Athena!" Nisha barked at her with a smack.

Athena recoiled at the teary eyed look Angel gave them, already halfway there just talking about H4L0 and mounting, "My mom… my mom was killed by…”
Jack’s name echoed in both their minds.

Neither of them surprised that someone like Jack would stoop as low as to kill his own wife.

This was bad and Nisha knew only one way to stop it: distraction.

Grabbing Angel’s shoulder stopped her sentence dead in the air, Nisha pointing out at the stop, “Hey, we’re here. C’mon, let’s go get enough s’mores crap to make you puke your brains out.”

It was an inelegant solution to the growing tensions but Athena was absolutely going to play along, “Get some soda too. Candy. Chips. Have a little party at a camp in the desert.”

“That’s the spirit,” Nisha jerked the door open and started crawling over Angel to get out, “We’ll have fun.”

“Don’t crawl over her like that,” Athena chided, “You’ll crush her with your ass.”

Tumbling and landing on her feet, Nisha leaned back over Angel onto the seat, “So you’re finally payin’ attention to my ass?”

Athena grumbled, pinching the bridge of her nose, hearing Nisha and Angel laugh and high five.

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The vibe at the bus stop was pleasant, a bit of a small oasis in the in the desert. Nothing but a place to fuel up, a small mechanic shop attached to it, maybe three-room motel, a little grocery store with a small cafe in it. Even some outside seating.

Nice place to sit too. A small, slightly grassy area with a little lake off to the side, just barely visible through some rocks.

A single, hardy looking woman seemed to be in charge of all of this. Very dark skin with wavy golden hair tied into a bouncy ponytail. An odd thing swinging behind her that was revealed to be, somewhat alarmingly, a fluffy taxidermy tail, as she got closer. Trotting over when she saw the car approaching, eagerly greeting the women when they piled out and walked towards her, “Hey, hey! Name’s Sandy and welcome to the Thacker Family One-Stop-Shop! Where all yer wildest dreams come true!”

To hear an Elpis accent in the middle of nowhere Pandora was weird but the three of them supposed “wanted to get off the moon which nearly got destroyed by Helios” wasn’t the most unreasonable thing.

“Kind of a sparse family…” Nisha looked around.

Sandy looked around almost confused for a second before whirling around and screaming at the top of her lungs, “LEO. LEO GET OUT HERE. WE’VE GOT PEOPLE. REAL PEOPLE.”

There was the sound of crashing before a tall, scrawny man stumbled out of the garage. Smoothing down disheveled clothes, wiping the sleep from his eyes, barely shoving down a yawn.

Instantly, he snapped in a practiced, “Thacker Family One-Stop-Sh-”

“Already said that,” Sandy smacked him in the chest, “Get their car, stupid.”

The women didn’t even need to ask for gas, apparently. Not surprising, they doubted a single person stopping here wasn’t looking for fuel and a check up on their car.
While the brother got to work on that, clearly it was Sandy’s job to try to sell them on more. Luckily for the woman, they were in the business for that while she tried to sweet talk them, “Got anything you could possibly want at the store, only rule is ‘don’t ask where we got it!’”

“I feel like that’s the policy everywhere,” Angel replied, looking up at the bell as it dinged upon their entrance into the dingy little building.

What Sandy said was true. Floor to ceiling, it seemed like the junkers had collected a little bit of anything and everything. While there was expected stuff there was also a ton of weird stuff that they couldn’t conceive anyone wanting.

Focusing on the food, they were pleasantly surprised that everything they could want would be here.

Each handed a shopping basket they got to work. Sandy eagerly goading them into buying more and more, dangling off planet candy with a grin on her face, “Aw, you ain’t leaving without Galaxy Bars are ya?”

It worked every time, one of the three snatching whatever she held up to her delight. They were gonna get so much cash off these over excitable Vault Hunters.

“Don’t forget the graham crackers,” Athena called out to Angel, hovering by them, “We can’t make marshmallow and chocolate ones only. Nothing to grab.”

“S’coward talk,” Nisha replied, “Who doesn’t love a molten hot squishy mess on their hands?”

“God, I can’t even tell if that’s a dirty joke or not,” Athena mumbled, shaking her head.

“So what you ladies doin’ wandering around in the middle of the desert?” Sandy struck up conversation, rocking on her heels.

“Just… going on a vacation,” Athena poorly lied.

“Any special occasion?” Sandy asked, “You guys’ anniversary or something? Daughter’s birthday?”

Athena jerked up, each of those words being something she needed to deny and needed to deny right now but unfortunately someone else was quicker on the draw.

“Yes and yes,” Nisha beamed, making her way over to Athena to affectionately drape herself over her shoulders, “My little anniversary gift to her. Just made her birthday the day we adopted her since she was such a little baby and we didn’t know when it was. My wife’s always wanted to be a mommy, isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

Athena wanted to spit the entire concept out like a rancid mouthful of rotten meat but over Nisha’s shoulder was Angel. Giggling and excitedly waiting for Athena’s answer, clearly enjoying being a bit player in the little drama Nisha was constructing.

Swallowing her pride and giving a snarl-like smile, Athena replied, “Uh, yeah. Always wanted to be a mother.”

“A mommy,” Nisha corrected, ignoring the sharpening edge in Athena’s glare to pinch her cheek, “A cute widdle mommy-wommy. Why don’t you tell the nice lady the first thing you said when you held our little angel? It was so cute.”
If looks could kill Athena’d be collecting Nisha’s “found dead” bounty within twenty-four hours. But Angel was looking at her expectantly.

Athena gritted her teeth, “That she was… the prettiest little girl I’d ever seen.”

“And she still isssss,” Nisha grinned, pinching Angel’s cheek, “Such a good girl.”

“Aww, you guys are a real cute family,” Sandy gestured for them to follow her to the register with that same vacant smile, “Anyways, that’ll be seven hundred and ten and one cent.”

“What the-” Athena start before being cut off.

“You think it’s easy getting this shit into the middle of the fuckin’ desert? Gotta pony up if you want it.”

It was a good thing Nisha had a hell of a lot saved up.

Hopefully once Jack stopped chasing them they could find a steady source of income. Athena alone had had trouble obtaining work but she also isn’t terribly good at talking to people.

Nisha always had been. Up on Elpis it seemed like the woman would just disappear for a second then come back with days and days of very well paid work for them to do. Could make thousands a day, easy.

Honestly explains why the woman has so much stockpiled. Probably was doing that well after Elpis too, not to mention she was certainly making some sort of money off the Eridium mine in Lynchwood.

Well… it had been hundreds but none of the woman could deny it was actually a damned lot of good stuff they had. Packed happily away in the back of their car for later.

Rooms had been pricey too but they figured hey, we’re already in for a lot. Even let Angel have her own room which she was just ecstatic about. It had been kinda cute to watch her get excited about it for five minutes then collapse face first onto the soft bed and nigh instantly fall asleep.

Locking the door behind them, Athena and Nisha went to their own room next door. Identical in its drab decoration, nondescript. Expense had absolutely been spared.

Nisha herself collapsed backwards on the somewhat shitty bed like it was made of a cloud, “Oh shit it’s so nice to be in a real bed again.”

“Your standards have dropped so, so quickly,” Athena let out a rare joke, sitting on the mattress to test it herself. Not an awful one but certainly nothing to write home about.

“In beds maybe but not in who’s in ‘em,” Nisha rolled over to half curl around Athena, walking along her leg with her fingers, “But I’d say you’re a good number of steps up from Jack.”

In a moment alone, Athena could finally address… this.

“What is even up with you and that?” Athena put a halt to the marching fingers, flattening the hand against her leg with her own, “You were always like this towards me to a point but… you went with Jack in the end, were with him for years, shot him in the head a few days ago and now suddenly ‘wow, Athena, the sexiest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on yeehaw.’”
Nisha laughed, “Yeehaw? That’s what I sound like to ya?”

“You’re avoiding the topic.”

Huffing, Nisha tried to pull away but was thwarted by her trapped hand being grabbed tightly. Athena pulling her back towards her with ease. Nisha just lay there limply in self defense, “I ain’t gotta explain shit to you.”

“When you’re pawing at me like an animal in heat you do.”

Nisha weakly tried to tug away, “It ain’t like me and Jack meant anythin’ in the grand scheme of things.”

“You know that’s not normal right?” Athena tightened her grip, “Dating someone for years then just cutting it off instantly to jump on someone else?”

“Asshole made it a pretty easy choice,” Nisha snarled, jerking her free hand in the direction of Angel’s room, “Got a pretty convincing argument for ‘Jack can go fuck himself’ sleepin’ about ten feet in that direction.”

“I’m not saying you made a bad choice ditching Jack, not by a longshot, don’t get why you’d stoop to his level in the first place honestly,” Athena ignored the appreciative grin that netted her.

“Aww, you really think I’m too good for Jack?” Nisha batted her eyes, fishing for compliments from a woman who wasn’t going to give them on demand.

“Look… when we were up on Elpis…”

“Do we gotta drag up ancient history?”

“Apparently we do,” Athena replied, finally letting go of her hand, “Since you’re gonna act like it’s not repeating itself.”

Nisha escaped to the middle of the bed, crossing her arms and looking away like it was somehow going to stop Athena’s monologue.

“You were just like this, up there. Hanging off me every second you could, flirting my ear off while ignoring my every protest of my Atlas training-”

“Cause it was bullshit and you knew it and now everyone knows it ‘cause you cozied up with lil ol’ Janey.”

Athena ignored that, “You were all about me until one day you just weren’t.”


She jumped, not having felt Athena make her way over to her until the woman was already grabbing her wrist again, “It’s not a mystery, you’re right. What I don’t get is why you pulled away the next day. Why you acted like nothing happened. Why-”

“Does Janey know she wasn’t your first kiss?”

“Does Jack know he wasn’t your first pick?”

The two accusations hung heavily in the air as Athena and Nisha stared each other down.
“After that night… why did you just… stop?” Athena broke the silence, “I let you in, I let you kiss me and then you just dropped me like a broken toy you didn’t want anymore. Barely talked to me for the rest of the mission, left with Jack the second it was over. Showed up three days ago after barely talking to me for years. Why? Why did you do that to me?”

Nisha tried to look away but the authoritative tug at her arm told her not to, blue eyes ice cold and boring into her skull.

“That night I knew I couldn’t do it.”

“Couldn’t do what?” Athena spat back.

Nisha turned her head away again, this time ignoring the demand to look at her accuser, “You looked… you looked scared afterwards. Seen you cut a man in half with less regret and fear on your face. You kept lookin’ at me like… like I was supposed to have some big answer, somethin’ nice to say to make you feel better and I had nothing. Absolutely fuckin’ nothing.”

“You could have tried.”

“But I didn’t,” Nisha shook her head, “Next day I thought about it. Thought about it real hard right up until we got to work. Testing some shitty guns for Janey and she just kept… batin’ her eyes at you. Knew if I backed off she’d just step in. Janey’s a good woman. She’s nice, she’s normal, she’s good with her feelings and shit. Knew Janey could fix you. So I backed off.”

“Janey didn’t ‘fix’ me, you can’t just fix a person,” Athena squinted, “And even if you think she did or something, now that the hard part’s done you’re all about me?”

“It’s not… you’re makin’ me sound like some sort of predator, waitin’ to pounce until you’re weak,” Nisha jerked her arm away suddenly, shoving herself off the bed, “You know what fuckin’ forget it, this was a mistake. Shoulda kept my stupid mouth shut.”

“Where the hell are you going?” Athena said at her back as she watched the woman stomp out of the room, “Get back here, don’t just fucking leave me alone again!”

Rolling off the bed and stomping after her into the night it was obvious that Nisha had no real direction out here other than ‘leave confines of room’. Walking in a straight line at nothing, hunched over, ignoring the other woman talking to her.

“You’re acting like a big baby, come back to the room and just talk it out like an adult,” Athena chased after her.

Eventually Nisha settled on a target, no doubtedly one that wasn’t intended. Giving up and sitting on a rock at the edge of the small lake, arms crossed and her back to Athena.

“Do you have any idea how stupid you look right now?” Athena stopped just behind her, looking down at her with an annoyed look, “You look like you’re in time out.”

Nisha didn’t answer for a long time, staring angrily at the moon reflecting in the water with the threatening H crossing it, “I don’t… I’m not flirtin’ with you now ‘cause it’s easy or something. You think I don’t have regrets? I ain’t perfect, far from it, I’d say I’m pretty damn flawed. But I made my choice then and… thought I was doin’ the right thing for once. For someone else.”

“You’re doing a lot more of that nowadays,” Athena looked back towards Angel’s room, “But dumpin’ someone like that’s not… do you have any idea how rejected I felt? My first ever contact with someone romantically and they just completely peel off the next day like it was nothing?
Handed me off to some other woman?"

“Thought you’d be happier that way.”

“Well… I wasn’t. Janey left and I was alone. Again.”

Nisha peeked behind her, “I mean… you ain’t now. You’ve got Angel and you’ve got me.”

“That doesn’t undo what you did to me,” Athena replied, “I still feel-”

“Look, I can’t undo what I did but… shit, what’s gonna make you feel better? You wanna fight, you wanna duke it out or somethiING!!”

Nisha yelled as the boot found her back and harshly kicked her into the frigid water. Flailing and sputtering to the surface, she looked up dumbstruck at the smirking woman crouching over at her, “Well, that kinda helped.”

The gut reaction to yell at her and start that fight she’d just proposed was as strong as it was fleeting. Nisha closed the distance between them with a wide grin, “You’re a real asshole, you know that right? Yer lucky I like ya or I’d put one between your eyes for this.”

“Like to see you tr-”

Unlike Nisha, there was no yell. Just the abrupt end to the sentence as Nisha burst out of the water, so much further than she’d prepared for, and grabbed her vest. Toppling her into the lake too.

It was considerably more of a struggle to stay at the surface though. Badly doggy paddling to keep her head above the thrashing liquid until she felt the arms around her waist hoist her up.

“Calm down, it’s not even that deep,” Nisha cackled, “I ain’t even treading water, I’m just standing.”

“Good for you, I’m wearing ARMOR,” Athena tried to squirm away, even though she knew she’d sink like a rock, “Put me down.”

“I’m not gonna let you drown in a shitty little lake ‘cause you’re too short to reach the bottom.”

“Shut up, let me drown.”

“C’mon, now you’re bein’ the baby,” Nisha tightened her grip on the struggling woman, “If you die Angel’s out another mom. Already lost her birth one to Jack, don’t need to lose another one to something stupid.”

Giving up and putting her arms around Nisha’s shoulders, Athena tried to turn the tables, “You’re real obsessed with this mom thing. Secret lifelong dream?”

“The kid gets so choked up over her dad killing her mom that she can’t even talk about it without crying,” Nisha jerked her head towards the motel, “Excuse me for growing a little bit of empathy.”

“You’re getting soft.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Athena wanted to have some witty comment she could throw back, some snarky, vaguely suggestive barb. But that was Nisha’s field, not hers. Instead she was just stuck staring at her stupid smug face, the woman the only thing keeping her from an inelegant splashy struggle to the edge of
the water.

With no verbal retort, Athena took an alternate path. One that surprised even she herself as she jerked her head forward, slamming an inelegant kiss against Nisha’s mouth.

Perhaps a normal person would be more annoyed about the painful show of affection but Nisha is not a normal person. Barely taking a second to muffledly cackle about it before shoving back just as hard.

But the weird, somewhat violent moment was harsh cut short.

From dead silence the cacophony grew. Engines roaring so close, so suddenly, the hooting of bandits echoing through the night.

Athena’s struggling began again, trying to get to the shore, “Where did they come from?! When the hell did bandits learn to be stealthy?!?!”

Ignoring the fact Athena had already kicked her in the stomach, Nisha shoved her onto the shore before scrambling out herself. Both of them unarmed aside from shield and whip as they ran back towards the motel and the endless screaming. Both screaming at the top of their lungs for Angel.

A small ring of bandits, methodically kicking in each of the doors to the shitty motel. Some already lying dead on the ground by the car, Sandy with a shotgun heading in the same direction as them.

Wide, large bursts of fire were arching behind her warding off several more approaching cars. Initially alarming until seeing the source as the brother, Leo.

Athena didn’t hesitate for a second, seeing Angel’s door already kicked in and hearing the girl’s screams.

But stepping into the room she saw her heroics were too late as the walls were already painted with the blood of the assailants. Horrifically torn apart at the seams, almost as if their very bones had dislocated from their sockets.

Angel kneeling on the bed, tattoos glowing in the dark, large, white wings filling the room with an unnatural light, bright as the sun.

The girl’s screams were that of rage, not of fear.

In that moment, a cold reminder of the deadly power of Sirens was burned into Athena’s brain.

- - -

They left immediately after that. Thacker siblings too preoccupied with the grisly task of cleaning up the bodies to really notice the women creeping away to their car, sliding in, and quickly pulling away.

Angel was still panting in an odd sort of adrenaline fueled rage. Even though she’d stopped glowing she clung painfully tightly to Athena as the woman quickly carried her back to the car.

Shellshocked, Angel didn’t speak for a long time afterwards.

Staring straight ahead.

“You… you alright there, kiddo?” Nisha eventually asked, touching the ice cold skin of her arm, “You uh, probably never seen that much blood before, huh?”
“I have,” Angel droned, shaking her head.

“You have?” Athena asked, taking her eyes off the road for a split second.

“When my mom died.”

The statement was just as flat and toneless, as if Angel was just recounting what she’d had for breakfast.

“Fuck, what did Jack even do to your m-” Nisha shook her head, “Look, it’ll be okay-”

“What my dad did to my mom?”

Both of the other women looked at each other at that statement? Question? Nisha moving in for potential damage control, “Whatever he did to your mom, I’ll do to him, that make you feel better?”

“My dad didn’t kill my mom.”

All eyes jerked quickly to her, at a loss for this revelation.

But they didn’t have time to question her about it before she clarified.

“I did. When my powers came in. Just like those bandits. A bright flash of light, her mangled body, my father’s screams of agony. It was me. It was all me. I’m the reason… I’m the reason…”

The glass containing her shattered, Angel jerking forward into a tight ball as she started violently sobbing into her own knees. Yelling those words over and over again.

I’m the reason.

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By the time Jack had shown up the women were long gone. The man chasing nothing but rumors and vague pointings by terrified Pandorans, willing to tell him anything if he’d just leave their family alone.

And he was the hero, of course, so he only brutally murdered the ones who had nothing of importance to tell him.

This place already looked like a bloody mess by the time he showed up. The shitty truckstop clearly having just dealt with a bunch of bandits attacking it. But the people running it had clearly won, just the two of them pulling dead bodies out of a room.

The second the two siblings laid eyes on him, the brother shoved his sister inside the room and slammed the door behind him. Gaunt face horrified as he backed against the door with a gasp of, “Handsome Jack.”

“Ding ding ding, we have a winner,” Jack stopped just short of the man, annoyed at having to look up to meet his eyes, “Now let’s see if you can recognize a couple more faces and man, oh man, do I hope for your sake you can.”

Snapping his fingers, two of the guards unrolled the wanted posters. One each. On his left, Nisha’s smirking mugshot. On his right, a far too young photo of Angel.

“You seen either of these women?” Jack asked, tapping on the paper, “And don’t lie to me or your,
what, sister? Break right in there and bash her skull in right in front of you and force feed you whatever comes out.

Leo wasn’t a hero and he wasn’t about to start being one now, pointing at the posters, “They were just here last night, left right after the attack. Don’t know how but the lil’ one nuked all these bandits in one go.”

Jack’s stomach lurched as he finally took a good look at the dead bodies’s familiarly mangled form. Unusual damage forcing up memories he was now desperately trying to cram back down.

Shaking his head, he knew the man wasn’t lying to him, “Which direction did they go?”

Thanking every single one of his lucky stars, Leo had seen the car in the distance as it had left, “Towards the Frozen Wastes.”

“Man, oh man, you better hope that’s right because if you’re lying or keepin’ something from me I swear to god I WILL come back here and just-” Jack laughed before his face jerked back to the glare, “You really, really don’t want me to come back here, alright?”

Jack turned to walk away from Leo, leaving the trembling man pressed against the door.

Keeping something from him. That phrase pounded in Leo’s ears a few times, a face burned into his mind as he looked back towards the room. Knowing Sandy’d be crouched in the bathroom, heart racing as she waited to find out if the next and last thing she’d experience be Handsome Jack’s wrath.

He wasn’t risking it. He wasn’t risking his only remaining family member for this.

Leo called out to Jack, barely ten feet away, “There was a third woman with them.”

He felt his stomach drop to the ground as Jack whipped back around and stomped over to him with a burning rage. Voice cracking as he barked out a sharp, “What?”

Not the reaction he’d hoped for, Leo beginning to hyperventilate as he wondered if he’d damned his sister and him right here and now, “A third woman. Short, stocky. Purply-bluey hair. Wearing some outdated Atlas armor. Weird tattoo on her arm.”

Leo’s legs nearly gave out as Jack reached behind him, already making peace with whatever gods were waiting for him as he closed his eyes. Expecting the bullet to tear into his skull.

But instead there was a dull whack in the center of his chest.

Peeking an eye open, he found himself looking down at the fattest wad of cash he’d ever seen in his life. Easily forty- no- fifty thousand dollars.

Hands trembling, Leo cautiously took the cash.

Looking down at Jack’s face the rage had twisted into the most terrible smile he’d ever seen in his life. Not an ounce of joy in the man’s voice as he spoke, “See how nice things go when you work with the hero and not against him? Do me one more favor and tell allllll your little bandit friends that ol’ Jackie just CARES deep down, you know? Just wants to know where his daughter is. And there is such a nice, nice reward waiting for those who help, yeah?”

Jack sharply pinched Leo’s cheek like the man wasn’t nearly as old as him, giving it a few light slaps before turning around again and beginning to stomp off again with his entourage in tow.
Pressed against the door, Leo slid down it. Clutching the money to his chest like a gaping wound as he watched Handsome Jack walk away.

Praying to whatever gods would listen that he’d never see the man again.
You’re Not The Reason

I’m the reason.

Those words hung heavily in the air between the three women.

Both Athena and Nisha knew that it wasn’t Angel’s fault but god they could see how she’d think that and neither of them was equipped for the subtleties of “hey Jack’s an asshole who was gonna do what he was gonna do, how the hell would you have stopped him?”

If Jack had been… normal before that though what would they say to that point? They didn’t know normal Jack. They knew a pretending to be normal Jack at one point but never what he was like before.

But they knew even if that was the genesis of his violence...

God it just wasn’t her fault but either of them saying anything could make it so, so much worse.

So they just silently listened to her cry. Not able to do much but move her arm so at least she wasn’t burying her face into the metal clasped around it. Rub the back of her neck above the backpack.

It was Jack’s fault.

Jack was the reason.

But they knew that wouldn’t be enough words to soothe the girl and god help them it’s all they’d have between them. Eventually Athena at least got her to sit up, bringing the girl to cry herself to sleep on her shoulder.

“What are we going to do?” Nisha finally asked, “We just… fuck, we’re… we’re shit at this, aren’t we? We’re fucking shit at it. Being the good guys. Helping people. Fuck.”

“I hate to agree but… yeah, no we’re not great at it,” Athena admitted, scratching a hand through Angel’s recently cut hair, “But we’re all we’ve got and we’re not… it’s not like we can just abandon her. Hand her off to someone else.”

“You’re still fucking hung up on that?!” Nisha shot back, “I took our nasty lake kiss as a literal kiss and make up. You gonna lord this over me forever?!”

“I can’t just turn off my feelings, not anymore-”

“No shit, but you can let them not fuckin’ dictate your every move too!”

Athena crumpled up her face in annoyance, eyeballing Nisha critically.

“You’ve got a real fucking problem with letting shit go,” was what she got in response, Nisha sideyeing her, “You can either hang onto shit until it eats you alive or you can just… let it fucking go.”

“Easy for you to say, you’ve never-”

“Never what?” Nisha interrupted, “We ain’t that different, you and me. Miserable childhoods that made us a hardened merc. Long, lonely life of doin’ what we had to to survive. Killed someone we
didn’t want to.”

Athena hissed at that, “You killed a dog, I killed my sister.”

“Angel ain’t the only one who killed her mom.”

“All you ever do is brag about killing your mom,” Athena replied, “It’s not the same, I didn’t want to.”

“Shit, you think I wanted to either?” Nisha gripped the wheel tighter and tighter, knuckles going sheet white, “You said it yourself, you can’t turn off your feelings. I was a kid. No matter what, no matter how awful a parent is, somewhere deep down you just want them to love you. You know they won’t, you can even know they’re a monster but you just...”

“Pull over,” Athena gently commanded, grabbing the wheel and not giving her much choice, “Before you punch out the window.”

Mercifully there were a lot of nice little nooks and crannies along the rocky cliffside they were driving along. Plenty of places to tuck a car away, completely not visible to anyone driving by.

Nisha resisted being pulled against Athena, still looking fit to put her fist through the windshield, “I don’t regret it, not for a second. I’m proud of it. I coulda let her go and just left but I didn’t. I made sure she was never going to make my life or anyone else’s life hell again.”

“I don’t get it,” Athena admitted, “But I guess that’s because I never had parents to not love me in the first place.”

“I’d rather have never had any,” Nisha sighed, forcing herself to calm back down, “But Angel… she… she sounds like she knew a normal Jack at some point. Had a dad she loved. Hell, I bet if you woke her up right now and asked her, she’d admit that she still loves him. Think she has to, somewhere deep down, or he’d be a bloody smear on the ground like those bandits.”

“You think she needs to let it go too,” Athena looked down at the woman, still out cold against her side with her hands tightly balled into the gifted skirt.

“In a perfect world, I’d want her to pull the trigger,” Nisha leaned her head back, “Jack ain’t dead, she’s got another shot at this. Killin’ ‘em yourself don’t feel good but hell if that ain’t the best closure you’re ever gonna get.”

“Talking about all these dead parents when we’re kinda the parents now is weird,” Athena replied, letting her head rest back against the seat too, “Feel like I’m drawing a big target on my chest.”

“Nah, we’ll be fine,” Nisha laughed, “We may be kinda bad at the mom thing but you and me are real damn good at the surviving thing. Just gotta try not to fuck Angel up anymore than she already is.”

“Wish we had more than just us for this…” Athena sighed, “Every other Vault Hunting group… I see them sometimes. Moving in a group. Together. Kinda like a weird family of their own. You don’t think…”

“No. It’s just us. Wilhelm’s real happy right where he is as Jack’s right hand man. Aurelia… god, who the fuck knows where Aurelia went. She’s way, far off planet. No fucking way she’s coming back, not with how she stormed off right after the whole mission was over. Not Jack…”

“Timothy,” Athena corrected.
“Don’t matter what I call him, Timothy’s dead.”

Those two words felt like a punch to Athena’s sternum, chest tight as she confirmed, “Timothy’s… dead?”

“I saw him pretty frequently after the Vault for a long time,” Nisha’s voice was flat, “Real defeated, saddest fucking dude I’ve ever seen in my life. Told me he was gonna try to leave, wanted to… wanted to see if I’d help him.”

“You didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” Nisha sounded pained, “Happened when I was visiting up on Helios just… one night Jack came back splattered with blood. Refused to elaborate other than he’d dealt with Tim, insisting that he’d just ‘sent him off on a mission’ but that was just Jack-speak for… it’s like when you tell a kid their pet dog went to a farm somewhere.”

“And that wasn’t your cue to leave Jack why?”

“Don’t know,” Nisha replied, “Thought about it. Thought about it real hard, almost did. But in the end somethin’ was gonna kill Tim one way or another. Might as well be a demon he knows.”

Athena wanted to dig into that but at the same time god was she tired of opening old wounds. Well, this one was new to her but still.

Instead she just decided to close her eyes with a resigned, “Fuck.”

“I know,” Nisha replied, looking out at the rocks, “I should have helped him. I think about it a lot. Don’t like living a life of regrets but I regret that one. Guess it turned out for the best or Angel wouldn’t be sittin’ over there.”

Athena looked over at the girl, still out cold. Pressed against the window. Her little cowgirl outfit couldn’t be comfortable but thinking about it that was nothing compared to the backpack and the injector clamped onto her arm. Frankly, it was impressive that she could sleep like that at all.

“It’s not ideal but yeah, we’ve at least you got her away from Jack,” Athena sighed.

“Better two moderately alright moms than one horrifically shitty dad.”

“Still not giving up on the mom thing, huh?”

“Yer the one who kissed me.”

Of course. The elephant in the car. Neither of them having had addressed this yet.

And Athena wasn’t going to be the one to do it. Crossing her arms and continuing to stare at the roof of the car.

“You can stare at the ceiling all you want but it ain’t gonna make me go away,” Nisha sat up, grabbing at Athena’s scarf and tugging to get her to look down, “Why’d you kiss me?”

“You kissed back,” Athena accused, still refusing to look all the way down as she peeked at her.

“Of course I did. I been hitting on you since picking you back up,” Nisha replied, “Why’d you kiss me? That’s the real question. Been fighting me the whole way.”

Finally, Athena lowered her head, “Why were you hitting on me within a single day of trying to kill
your previous boyfriend?"

“I think we’re both just idiots who don’t know what the hell we’re doing.”

“That’s for sure.”

“So,” Nisha prodded at Athena’s arm, “What are we then?”

“Well, I mean, according to you we’re moms now,” Athena let out a rare joke, looking proud of herself.

“Wanna get a quickie marriage in Los Magus? I don’t think we’re even that far away, could be there in like half a day. If that.”

“Would be a hell of a powermove on Jack.”

“Send him a selfie with the marriage license in our makeshift wedding dresses,” Nisha nodded towards Angel, “Get her a lil’ bridesmaid dress. Really piss him off.”

“Yeah because the number one thing we need right now is to piss off Jack even more that we already have,” Athena couldn’t stop the smile, “But stop making it sound so tempting. Go out with a bang. Although to be fair I could still disappear into the night and he’d never know I was involved.”

“Nah, you ain’t leaving me,” Nisha continued her jabbing, stabbing a finger into Athena’s cheek, “You’re all attached to me and shit. Kissin’ me. Still not answerin’ me. ‘Cause you’re difficult but I kinda like that.”

“You’re weird.”

“You like that.”

Nisha’s leery smile was met with resigned annoyance, Athena looking tired, “You’re trouble.”

Only made her laugh and repeat herself, “You like that too.”

Groaning, Athena kicked the seat with her heel, “Whatever. We should get going.”

“I mean, we’re pretty hidden here. Wouldn’t be the worst place to camp. Angel’s already out cold, you and me and just sneak into the back, get real cozy, maybe fool around a lil’ bit. Fall asleep lookin’ at the stars.”

“The back of the truck is covered.”

“We don’t gotta stay in the truck?”

“It’s like you willfully want to embrace death,” Athena shook her head.

“I wanna embrace somethin’,” Nisha scooted over to her, pawing at her, “’C’mon, it’s not like we’ve got anything else to worry about right n-”

God, it was like it was on cue. The sound of an incoming call coming from Athena’s hip.

Four letters glaring up at them as their only warning.

Jack.
Athena clamped a hand over Nisha’s mouth instinctually but it was unnecessary, the woman frozen solid. Jerking her hands away, Angel got the same treatment. Waking up at the sudden commotion, groggy but fearful as a strong hand stopped her from making a sound.

They all looked between each other, every one thinking that they shouldn’t answer but knowing that ultimately staying the dark would be even worse somehow.

Although she hesitated for a second, Athena pressed the button with a cautious, “Jack?”

“Heeeyyyyy Athena, how are you?”

The jagged plastic tone was seething in rage despite the empty pleasantry.

“I am… alright?” Athena stumbled out, “Uh, how are you?”

She wasn’t great with pleasantries on a good day, so this was even more awkward.

“Pretty freakin’ bad, ‘Thena,” he hissed, “You know why?”

Athena just looked to the right, at the currently cowering Angel, “Was your daughter not at New Haven still?”

“Yeah, no, she wasn’t,” Jack replied, “But I uh, think you know that, huh? Don’t cha Athena??”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Athena was a bad actor but she was just kind of a bad talker in general so this wouldn’t have been quite as incriminating if not for…

“Met those lil’ Elpis friends of yours. Didn’t catch the name, don’t care, scrawny little spaz and uhhh, ah sh!t I didn’t see enough of the sister to mock her. Whatever. Stick bug sang like a songbird. Apparently he’s a lot smarter than you are, that’s why that guy got to live.”

Athena didn’t respond, staring coldly down at the stern ECHOnet portrait glaring back at her. It made her glad video calls weren’t popular, the last thing she wanted Jack to see was the fear on her face. Never truly at the forefront but creeping through the cracks in her stony facade.

“What’s going on, baby? Can’t you, baby?”

Immediately an ice cold hand latched onto her, Angel pulling closer defensively but staying dead silent.

His tone was forced sickly sweet but no amount of sugar in the world could coat the malice in this voice, “It’s okay, you don’t have to talk. Don’t worry, sweetheart, daddy’s coming to take you away from the bad ladies and then you’ll never have to see them ever, ever again. I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

Each word a threat, disguised as a loving promise.

The second he turned his words back to Athena all the softness burned away in an instant, “You’ll regret this, Athena. I was gonna say I’m gonna kill you and everything you love or has ever loved you but you’re a depressing little island, ain’t’cha? Guess killing you and Janey’s gonna have to be enough.”

Athena thought the twisting knife in her side couldn’t feel colder but this time she couldn’t hide the edge of fear in her voice, “Janey left me months ago.”
“Whatever, hurting her’ll still hurt you,” Jack replied before switching gears, “And Nisha, I assume you’re there too. You’ve got even less people who care about you so I guess I’m just gonna have to make it more personal somehow. If you’re cozying up to Athena so much, maybe make you kill her yourself. Old Yeller style. If Old Yeller involved copious, drawn out torture.”

“Fuck you, Jack,” Nisha snatched the ECHO device out of Athena’s hands, sneering, “I’d bite out my own tongue before I do a damned fucking thing you ever say again.”

“Just might come to that, Nish.”

Click. As quickly as it had begun, it was over. Jack hanging up and leaving them with that sword hanging over their head.

Athena had a weird resigned, faraway stare in her eye, “We have to find a safer place.”

“Don’t know if you remember this but we just went over all our friends being dead or with Jack.”

“I’ve got other friends,” Athena replied, “Thing is, those friends don’t like you.”

“What the hell are you talking ab… no fucking way, no goddamn way, we’re not—”

“We have to at least try. I don’t know if they’ll take us in but you’ve got a LOT of information on Jack’s operations… and Angel…”

“I’m not, absolutely not—”

“We need to try to go to Sanctuary.”

- - -

Leaning against the side of the car, Athena sighed heavily. Looking down at the ECHO device in her hand. Finger hovering over the button. Knowing she had to select Janey and warn her.

Nisha sure as hell wasn’t happy about Athena’s plan but Angel was. Probably the only reason the cowgirl eventually folded and agreed to go. Were this situation not so dire it’d actually be pretty cute how the young woman had managed to curl two of the planet’s biggest badasses around her finger.

But this was all exactly what Janey didn’t want but god, they’d have to take her into Sanctuary too. She was in danger now.

Some part of Athena was spiteful though. If Janey hadn’t wanted the trouble that comes with Vault Hunters she shouldn’t have dated a Vault Hunter.

It wasn’t her fault.

It’s just… how Pandora is.

How Vault Hunters are.

But she couldn’t sit here and muse about the depressing realities of this shit planet. She had to put aside her pride and call Janey so the woman wouldn’t be strangled to death, cursing her name with her last breath.

Closing her eyes, Athena hit the button. Dial tone. Click.
“Athena?” Janey’s voice came over, loud in the quiet night.

“Hey Janey,” Athena tried to stay calm, “We uh, have a problem.”

The dead silence doubled over itself, Athena still refusing to open her eyes. The image crystal clear in her mind of Janey’s disappointed face. Soon to be a reality in front of her.

Janey’d say yes. She’d say yes and go to Sanctuary with them.

Then they’ll be around each other.

Permanently.
“I can’t believe this,” Janey growled, pressed hard against the door of the modified technical. Determined to be as far away from Athena as possible. There was a gradient from closest to furthest of how pissed off she was at them. Angel, Nisha, Athena.

“I said I’m sorry,” was all Athena could defend herself with, “I didn’t… look, this is just what happens sometimes.”

Janey didn’t answer that, forehead pressed against the glass while she huffed to herself.

Athena knew she couldn’t blame her entirely for being mad but she still deep down felt like this was a bit…

What did you expect? You dated a Vault Hunter, stayed with that Vault Hunter for years even when it became obvious that all her friends were ‘the bad guys’, this is just…

This is just what it means to involve yourself with Vault Hunters. Even “retired” ones.

Her mind cruelly spat out ‘ones you forced to retire’ before instantly feeling guilty for thinking

Even Nisha was being quiet, not wanting to provoke Janey’s wrath as she knew well enough that she was going to be a primary target for that too. She’s certainly heard enough from Janey’s original rant when they picked her up, only Angel safe from the raging anger inside her.

Not that Angel wasn’t also equally uncomfortable, feeling rather like a flimsy wall keeping the fighting from breaking out again.

But at least the entrance to Sanctuary was right there. Athena parking the car outside of it and turning to the others, “Alright, me, Janey and Angel should go in first. No offense Nisha but I think our best bet to get you in there too is to explain the situation first and tell them you have information and want to help. I think if they see you just… yeah it’d just go bad, so we’re going to go in wa-”

Janey was already sliding out of the car, stomping over to the intercom and pressing the button.

“State your business,” the familiar voice said over the intercom.

“Janey Springs,” she replied, cramming down her anger at the others into her sunshiney normal tone, “Currently homeless due to… circumstances. Need a place to stay.”

“Alright, come on in,” the woman replied, a clunking noise as a door in the gate opened just long
enough for Janey to squeeze through before locking shut behind her.

“That’s great,” Athena grumbled, kicking open her own door, “Nisha stay here and duck down a bit so no one sees you. Let me and Angel take care of this.”

“What if they won’t let me in?” Nisha eyeballed her cautiously, “What if they’re only gonna let you and Angel stay?”

“Well if we were a couple of smart women, we’d leave Angel with these competent, normal people so she could be safe and grow on her own,” Athena replied, “But unfortunately, we’re attached now so if this doesn’t work then we get to go right back on the run and just… try not to die.”

“Great plan,” Nisha deadpanned, leaned back and slowly slid down, “Try to make it quick, if we gotta get moving I wanna get moving.”

Athena didn’t feel great leaving her behind but what else could she do?

- - -

It seemed like forever Nisha was left behind in the car, ending up lying on the ground and looking up at the dingy ceiling of the car. Swinging her leg a little, crossed over the other. Waiting.

Supposed it wasn’t a surprise, I mean, Athena was already in there debating in favor of letting a known Jack sympathizer into the walls of their secure town. Of course it would take a while.

If the tables were turned, Nisha knows she sure as hell wouldn’t have let Lilith or Roland or Mordecai or, god for-fuckin’-bid Brick into Lynchwood. How many of them were even in there? Because the more the less merrier. Or something.

Sighing, she thought about what Athena said. Implied.

If she wasn’t here it wouldn’t even be an issue.

Nisha’s the only thing really holding this back. Athena’d been around when Jack’d gotten into power but it was just a job and she’d left immediately afterwards. And Angel? Jack’s tortured daughter? Yeah, no way they wouldn’t be willing to help her.

Looking at the ECHO device on her hip, Nisha weighed the benefits of just sending Athena a copy of all the information on it and disappearing into the wasteland alone.

But given Athena’s hang ups about Nisha abruptly dropping her back up on Elpis, also right after kissing her…

Man, she didn’t need an enraged Athena ALSO hunting her down.

Although if Nisha had to pick death by Jack or Athena she’d take Athena in a heartbeat. Woman loved a good fight but wasn’t a sadist, at least she’d be killed quickly and cleanly. She really didn’t want to think about how the other option would go.

Nisha couldn’t properly identify the other feeling she had about that was but it was one of “doesn’t want to hurt Athena again.”

She hadn’t quite caught on how attached she’d gotten yet.

Not that she didn’t have some kind of inkling, considering even now she was still curiously churning over the ramifications of their kiss.
There hadn’t been a second alone with Athena since and Nisha wasn’t going to discuss something like that in front of Angel. And double sure as fuck wasn’t going to bring it up in front of Janey.

Maybe they’ll actually get some alone time in Sanctuary, if they’re let in. Maybe Angel’ll even get her own apartment, get to be a real adult. Either way, Nisha imagined they’d manage to get a two bedroom. Or at the very least have some time alone if Angel wanted to wander around the city.

Should get her pliers ready now because forcing Athena to face her emotions was like pulling teeth.

I mean so was she but right now she had the upper hand of “can be the teaser and not the teasee” and that suited her just fine. She can sneak out emotions under the guise of making Athena squirm.

But again she found her mind creeping back, wondering if Athena WOULD just decide to take Angel and leave, some weird revenge for Nisha dropping her on Elpis. God knows that Athena has a penchant for very, very thorough and piercing revenge.

That thought made her feel sick as it twisted in her gut but the pinging noise on her ECHO device brought her out of that.

She didn’t like how comforting it was to see Athena’s name over the simple message.

“Get in here.”

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The long walk into Sanctuary from the front gate was awkward. There was nothing but a single guard in the way but the way he glared Nisha down as she walked in was piercing.

Heavy wall already falling in front of her… felt ominous. Felt like walking into a trap. Even as she saw Athena and Angel standing there next to a very, very pissed off looking Lilith. If she’d though the guard’s glare had been bad it was nothing compared to this. Yellow and cold like a deadly dragon staring her down.

“Nisha,” Lilith said without a touch of her normal charm, “Athena… Athena says you can help us.”

“Sure can,” Nisha wiggled her ECHO device, “Got more information than you’d even know what to do wi-”

She stopped when Lilith raised her tattooed hand, “Stop. Before I let you in I’m going to need you to give me at least one thing. An answer to a question then a solution to a problem. Consider it your goodwill ticket in.”

“Name it, firefly,” Nisha replied, lapsing into her casual tone to… seem more reasonable? Habit? Self defense mechanism? She wasn’t quite sure but also wasn’t hung up on it.

Lilith wasn’t interested in digging into that either, a wavering note of fear in her voice, “Do you know where the Friendship Gulag is?”

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Athena and Nisha sure as hell didn’t like leaving Angel with Lilith in Sanctuary, somehow they liked it even less than the fact they were being sent right back out into the cold, empty world where Jack was prowling around.
And Lilith wanted them to go to a fucking goddamn Hyperion prison to jailbreak her stupid boyfriend.

“I think she’s tryin’ to trick us,” Nisha growled, compliant in this only by virtue of Athena being the one driving them back through the Dust, “Get rid of us. Be Angel’s new hero. You said she was really forgiving of the whole first vault thing, think she just wanted to get us killed.”

“If she was trying to trick us she wouldn’t be giving up backup,” Athena referred to the new Vault Hunters they were supposed to be meeting, “And she certainly wouldn’t be sending us after a target so valuable to her. Frankly, I think it’s a surprising amount of trust being placed in us.”

Nisha was still skeptical, “Or they could be thinking that they’re just gonna trade us for Roland. We somehow managed to end up even higher on Jack’s shitlist.”

Stomach lurching, Athena hadn’t thought of that possibility and the self doubt crept into her voice, “We just. Look, it’s all we have.”

“I won’t fuckin’ hesitate to put a bullet in each and every one of those freaks if they pull a gun on us,” Nisha hissed, hand already on her revolver, “I ain’t bein’ put down like a sick dog. That’s not how my story’s gonna end, going out in a blaze if anything.”

“Yeah, you putting down a dog is a big part of the reason why they’re so hostile to you,” Athena quipped, “Except I’m pretty sure it wasn’t sick.”

Nisha didn’t care, pointing out the window, “That’s gotta be them.”

Neither of them terribly liked the weird mixture of people they were supposed to meet. Each one such a weird and unique threat. Mixed nuts, everything from a mind melting hyper intelligent Siren to a classic unstoppable Pandoran powerhouse to a freakin’ actual interplanetary ninja assassin.

And all of them were eyeing them warily.

Neither of them could even blame them.

Especially as they slid out, the last remaining remnant of Atlas’s legendary assassins and Jack’s infamously sadistic ex-girlfriend who cut a hell of an intimidating figure.

The Siren walked to the forefront, the others almost seeming to gather behind her like a pack of skag pups and their mom. Her look was intense but unwavering, refusing to be intimidated as she raised a hand to shake theirs. The tattoo one. A silent powermove.

Athena wasn’t deterred though, grabbing it and giving her a firm handshake, “Athena.”

“Maya,” she replied, letting go to reach for the other woman’s hand as well, “And I assume…”

“Nisha,” she was validated, the woman glad that her hat cut a severe and intimidating shade across her admittedly nervous face to hide that, “Nisha Kadam.”

It was pretty obvious that Maya was uncomfortable, even as she tried to play nice tour guide to this awkward meeting. Pointing to each of her wary teammates in order, “The Dahl soldier is Axton, the red haired cyborg is Gaige, the psycho is Krieg, the… man in the orange shirt is Sal-”

“You were gonna say short,” he cackled in response.

Her face went bright red as she skipped over that to their last member, “And the one in the helmet
is Zer0.”

“So, I just gotta know, does Jack-”

Whatever probably inappropriate question Gaige had was crushed down by Axton clamping a hand over her mouth.

“Elephant in the room,” Nisha raised her hands, “How filled in are you guys?”

“Minimal,” Maya confessed, “All Lilith said was that we were getting an old Atlas assassin and Jack’s ex-girlfriend sent to help us.”

“Nice and vague,” Nisha sighed, “Guess she wanted to force me to explain myself then. Alright, Nisha Kadam, one of Jack’s Vault Hunters up on Elpis during the Vault there, stayed with him as his girlfriend, found out he was keeping his daughter captive, shot him in the head, took his daughter, grabbed Athena, on the run. Any questions?”

Gaige struggled free from being clamped against Axton’s stomach long enough to try and, “I wanna know if-”

This time Salvador’s hand clamped over her mouth, pinning her stupid little head against Axton’s chest. He sounded excited, pointing at Nisha rudely, “Heard of you! Pandoran like me, double gun like me! MI NUEVO AMIGO!”

“Oh, gracias,” was Nisha’s weak answer to that, knowing only basic Truxican, “So, the Friendship Gulag.”

“Yeah we uh… we failed to rescue Roland at the Bloodshot Ramparts,” Maya confessed, “Kind of a freak accident, Zer-”

The sword appeared suddenly over her shoulder, to the alarm of Athena and Nisha.

But she didn’t react to it, gently placing her fingers on the side of the blade and pushing it away, “Nobody likes when you’re a drama queen, Zer0. But whatever. Weird accident. Totally, absolutely not Zer0’s fault. So they took Roland back to their prisons.”

It was a weird little entrance to the area they were standing at, a weird little place nobody would notice if not for Nisha’s instructions to go there.

“C’mon, let’s get this over with,” Axton jerked his head towards it, “Don’t wanna miss the new episode of The Young and the Shieldless.”

Salvador cackled at that, “Can’t have that, huh?”

“Shut the hell up,” Axton shot back, jabbing him with an elbow, “If you think it’s so stupid why do you come and watch it with me?”

“I’m STEALING your POPCORN,” Sal retorted.

“We can argue about you guys’ lame soap operas later,” Maya cut them off, “End of the day, we all want to get back and finally relax. Be it with bad TV, a good book, some robotic tinkering, or whatever the hell Zer0 does when you leave them alone.”

She gestured for them everyone to follow her into the Gulag, the psycho in particular sticking close to her side.
Only Gaige lagged behind, finally freed from Axton’s clutches. Cupping a hand over her mouth as she ratted out her friend, “We didn’t get Roland the first time ‘cause Zer0 scoped in and dork kept backing up without looking until they went off the side of the cliff and we had to resc- OW!”

Her betrayal was cut short by the handle of the undigistructed sword being tossed at her forehead.

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If the Vault Hunters had been weird and chaotic in visuals it was nothing to how weird and chaotic they were in the battlefield.

Athena and Nisha’s group had had a remarkably harmonic synergy but these people…

God it was like seeing a bunch of Barbie dolls in a blender but all the Barbie dolls have guns or knives.

Never in their lives have either of them had a hard time keeping up with their team but Athena and Nisha found themselves weirdly hanging back if only to not get caught up in the electric zapping, the black holes opening, the endless rain of bullets, the glowing blade seeming to teleport around, the turret that they were vaguely concerned would register them as the enemy.

Nisha felt stupid hanging behind Athena like she normally did. Their solid strategy of back to back feeling weirdly tactical compared to the chaotic vortex going on around them.

Both of them had been warriors their whole life but this was the first time they’ve ever felt behind the curve.

In no time they’d cut through the Hyperion forces, leaving Athena and Nisha feeling stupid that they’d ever felt paranoid about this. Hell, Jack himself could storm in and try to snatch them only for the unstoppable force of the new Vault Hunters to rip him to shreds.

Even when the W4R-D3N came into view it couldn’t stop them.

Athena and Nisha had barely even have enough time to catch up to them and get a shot in before the great metal beastie collapsed to the ground, freeing their target.

Despite the new Hunters being his saviors he looked right past them, locking eyes instantly with Nisha. A cold stare that wasn’t… wasn’t quite hateful. Angry, for sure, but disarmed a bit by confusion.

Luckily for them, there were bigger concerns than confronting her like “holy shit we are a bunch of extremely wanted fugitives we really need to get out of enemy territory.”

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Walking fully into Sanctuary was weird, Nisha looking around at a place she’d only heard Jack disparage in his wildest rants.

Even weirder was walking next to Roland, a man warily eyeballing her as quietly as he could. Flicking his eyes quickly away if she looked too far in his direction. Wanting to say something to her, certainly something cold and angry and man… she couldn’t even blame him.

Seeing Angel was a comfort, still donning the cowgirl get up but clutching another outfit folded up in her hands.
Nisha wondered how the hell they even had a Crimson Raider outfit small enough for her.

She wasn’t crazy about the idea of Angel wearing it but supposed she’d need a few changes of clothing. Just… had to try and replace that as fast as she could.

Both Athena and Nisha expected some big to-do about them being there. Some fanfare or even just an acknowledgement that they’d helped. But there was none of that, just Roland reaching Lilith and bending over to let the woman whisper something in his ear for a few minutes of solid dead silence.

Eventually the information was relayed but it didn’t make Roland look at either of them with any warmth as he flatly decreed, “You can stay. For now.”

And that was that. Everyone slinking away, partnering up, going solo, all going home to roost after a long day of uncontrollable chaos.

Leaving the three of them to fend for themselves when it came to where to rest their heads.

Chapter End Notes

The bit about Zer0 backing off a cliff based on my first playthrough experience of doing just that.

Several times.

Until Roland got taken to the Friendship Gulag.

I am not a bright woman.
Being left standing there was painfully demoralizing, the second they realized Lilith and Roland had no intentions of further help a real blow to the supposed stability they were supposed to have here.

Athena looked around warily, “Maybe… maybe there’s a place like the hotel on Concordia.”

“Oh yeah, Pandoran hotels,” Nisha replied, taking the initiative to start walking into town, “Infamous for being great places to stay. Hope you like getting shit stolen from you.”

“Wouldn’t it be kind of stupid to try and steal from Vault Hunters?” Angel asked, considering her company, “Surely you’d want an easier mark.”

“Easier mark ain’t got money,” Nisha shook her head, “And there’s depths of stupidity on Pandora you couldn’t imagine in your wildest dreams, kiddo. They’d stick their hand in a skag trap if they thought there’d be a shot at getting ten bucks out of it.”

Angel rubbed at her tattoos uncomfortably, “Like the bandits at the rest stop.”

“Yeah I mean… we can stop ‘em if we see ‘em but it’s not gonna be comfortable. Not like having your own house. That was the nice thing about Lynchwood, bandits are a lot less likely to go after a gang of people than a small group.”

“It’s part of why Vault Hunters travel in packs,” Athena cut in, “Strength in numbers especially since camps are a popular target. They just like anywhere they can smash and grab. We get a real house, we’ll be fine.”

“Can’t imagine the real estate market is great here…” Nisha looked at the tightly packed buildings and even more tightly packed people, “Rent’s gotta be a nightmare.”

A deep pang of guilt struck in Athena’s gut, thinking about the fact they’d uprooted Janey from a stable life in a small town with her own place to being trapped in Sanctuary with no way to make money, no home and little prospects for changing the status of either.

She always hated the feeling of a twisting knife in her gut whenever blaming Nisha came up in her mind.

It was kinda true though. Without Nisha, both Athena and Janey’s lives would be better.

Well, Janey’s would be. God knows where Athena would be now.

God knows where Angel’d be too.

But god did Athena want someone to blame.

Before Athena could stick out a barb about this, take her deadpan anger out on someone, a sudden slam of metal-on-legs nearly knocked her over. Painfully jabbing both her achille’s heel in one obnoxious go.

Only two things kept her from falling directly on her face and slamming out half her goddamn teeth.

Two long metal poles, latched tightly around her waist in a painful imitation of a hug and- oh shit
he’s got his clampy little hand on her belt. He wasn’t stupid, he knew she’d quickly walk away if not restrained.

“Athena!!” Claptrap’s shrill voice pierced the air, “You ARE here!! I thought it was just people getting you Vault Hunters confused but you are! And you brought Ni-”

He unwrapped his arms- without releasing the clamp on the belt- he tried to reach for Nisha as well. Met with a harsh slap that stung her hand but sent the message it needed to send, “Nope, don’t touch me.”

Claptrap looked disappointed but left his other clamp to himself, “Aw, but Nisha I haven’t seen you in forev-”

“Don’t care,” she stepped back, eyeing the firm grip he still had on Athena.

Everyone knew not to let Claptrap get a clamp on your clothes. Prying off his sharp little hands is impossible, you just have to wait until he gets bored and lets go.

Angel giggled as he let out a petulant ‘aww’ of disappointment.

That caught his attention, letting go of Athena to roll up to the new person curiously, “Helloooo new friend!! I’m a CL4P-TP unit but you can call me Claptrap! Who’re you?”

“I’m Angel,” she replied, not minding him grabbing at her hand and curiously turning it around quickly to look at the siren markings, “Yes, I’m a Siren.”

“Neat!” he chirped, looking back at the other two expectantly, “But really who is she? You guys don’t make friends usually, you’re both kinda mean! By which I mean- very!!”

“Aw, that’s sweet of you to say,” Nisha cackled.

“You’re welcome!” Claptrap bounced up a bit, “You’re one of the worst people I’ve ever met!!”

“Alright, shut up now,” Nisha’s smile dropped into a glare.

Athena had a little more focus, potentially because Claptrap didn’t have any insults in particular for her, “Angel is…”

She just kind of gestured for Angel to push her hair back, revealing the green eye, which she obliged.

“HOLY F***,” Claptrap’s voice cut off abruptly into a loud self censoring beep as he jumped back in surprise, “HANDSOME JACK HAS A- WAHAHAHAHGH!!”

His sentence was abruptly cut off by Nisha aiming a sharp kick at the top of him, imitating what she’d seen a hundred Scavs do. Everyone knew Claptrap units were easy to knock over. It made everyone hustling and bustling around pause for a second but no longer, not too unusual to see physical violence against the bot.

“Shut yer yap,” Nisha warned, short heel of her boot on his optic, “Unless you want to be seeing the world through a cracked lens.”

“Ohhh I’m dying, I’m DYING,” he groaned, putting up a half assed effort to push her leg off him, “Is this the end for ol’ Claptrap, crushed under the heel of the oppressor?! Who will come to his rescue?!”
Athena silently stared at him, frantically clapping his metallic mitt at her.

Louder, he beseeched again, “I SAID who will come to his RESCUE?!”

It wasn’t the one he expected to stop the bullying but he was more than happy to have it be Angel, her hand on Nisha’s shoulder, “Let the funny little robot go, please?”

Rolling her eyes, Nisha stepped off him, “Whatever.”

“Ah HA,” Claptrap crunched up before ejecting himself back upright with a gesture of victory, followed by a jerky little dance and uns uns uns noises. Rolling over and grabbing Angel’s hand before spinning himself around, absolutely reveling in someone actually having an honest to god positive reaction to him. Quietly babbling little preprogrammed catchphrases like ‘I’m dancin’! I’m dancin’!!’ and ‘Check this out!!’

“Augh, don’t encourage him…” Nisha groaned, grabbing Angel’s other hand to tug her away, “C’mon, we’ve got to go find somewhere to stay.”

Her effort was cut short by the fact Claptrap was holding onto her hand again in a heartbeat and… augh she was actually holding it back, a weird foreign thing to see a human willingly wrap their hand around his.

“You can stay with me, it’ll be just like old times!!” he started rolling towards a little alcove tugging an obedient Angel behind him, just off from where they were, “I’ve got PLENTY of room! Even got a mattress! Well, half a mattress. But I don’t use it, so you can! Got PIZZA it’s cold but it’s PIZZA, got it from Moxxi a couple months ago for a party. No one showed up but now I have YOU!!”

While Claptrap has resisted Nisha pulling Angel away he wasn’t about to do the same to Athena, giving up the second the woman grabbed Angel’s other hand and started tugging, “No offense but kind of offense Claptrap you don’t uh, have a great concept of how much space a person needs.”

Angel couldn’t really do much but be tugged along by Athena, quickly cutting through town with Nisha who agreed, “Need some things, like more than half a mattress and a roof and warmth.”

“My processors overclock VERY easily, remember?” Claptrap offered, “You guys said I was like a space heater up on Elpis!”

It was no wonder he remembered that because it was just about the nicest they ever were to him, arguing over who got him in their tent.

It was obnoxious how the boys always won out, coaxing him over to their side with promises of a boy’s night. Toasty bastards. Especially considering Aurelia was the opposite of a space heater, always seemed to make a room ten degrees colder.

Before Claptrap could make up any more shitty reasons to live in his garbage pile with him they saw a familiar glowing red sign and made a beeline to it.

Dragging Angel up the steps to Moxxi’s, they both confirmed a rumor they’d heard.

“I see how you guys would not know this because of all my daring stair-based adventures with you two but I actually can’t climb stairs anymore! Sad but true, like Icarus my wings were cruelly clipped! My Achilles’ heel! I get it though, you guys want a drink just- just grab a couple and come back out here, I’ll be waiting! All alone. By the… by the dumpster.”
After a few seconds of them disappearing, Claptrap dropped down until his whole body was limp and barely off the ground.

Rolling away sadly with a relatively quiet, self censored, “***holes...”

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The pounding music in Moxxi’s bar isn’t exactly the best place to talk but neither is the center of town where everyone can glare them down while Claptrap literally screams their business at the top of his non-existent lungs.

Word travels fast, anywhere there’s Vault Hunters and considering the company they just left this existence here had no subtlety left. Locals with dreadfully boring lives eagerly dispensing anything and everything they can about the living legends sauntering around. And to have two new ones show up and such infamous ones at that?

There wasn’t a single person in Sanctuary right now who wasn’t discussing Nisha and/or Athena’s presence.

Curious questions about the girl accompanying them too but people hadn’t quite pieced together who she was. Yet. At least- past his initial shock- Claptrap had the common sense not to go around loudly announcing that Handsome Jack’s daughter was here.

When they did figure that out though, things were really and truly going to get out of hand.

“Usually Atlas operations have bunks,” Athena tapped a hand on her glass, “Maybe the Crimson Raiders have kept up that amenity.”

“If they do I think Lilith or her lil’ boytoy would have mentioned that to us,” Nisha hissed, staring down a man who was looking a bit too fighty, “This uh… feels pointed. They say anythin’ to you, Ang?”

It took a second to Angel to even properly register the unfamiliar nickname, “Oh! Uhm… not really. Asked me some questions about being a Siren, my powers, some bits about my dad… she’s kind of awkward, really.”

“Hah, look at that,” Nisha cackled, “Firehawk’s an awkward nerd like you, Athena.”

“Shut up,” she replied, looking back down at the menu, “Why does the only option have to be pizza?”

“Pizza’s good,” Nisha replied like it was the most obvious thing on the planet, “It’s like 90% of what they eat on this planet. Sorry it ain’t good enough for your offworlder ass.”

“Variety is all I’m asking.”

“Cheese, sausage, pepperoni-”

“Augh, whatever,” Athena turned to Angel next to her, “What do you want?”

“Meat lovers,” Angel replied instantly, almost surprised, used to her father’s underestimation of her appetite and not getting a choice herself.

“Atta girl,” Nisha grabbed a too-skinny arm, “We’ll get you back to a normal size in no time.”

“So, a couple of stray alley cats did manage to slink into Sanctuary, huh?” the voice crooned,
“Surprised they let you in without declawing you. Full armor, all your guns, fully cocked and loaded.”

An obnoxious amount of emphasis was put on the word “cocked.”

Athena had watched the woman approach, now leaning over Nisha’s shoulder and examining the woman she truly hadn’t thought she’d ever see again. All but exposed chest inches from Nisha’s face as she spoke.

No one was ever quite sure if her doing that was intentional or merely a reality of her body type.

“Moxxi,” Athena pointedly made eye contact, “Haven’t seen you in a long, long time.”

“Sure haven’t,” Moxxi only leaned over more, hands on Nisha’s shoulders, “See you’re still keeping some deeply, deeply questionable company.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Nisha looked up, mostly at boobs but partially at face.

“Move over,” Moxxi swung her hip and roughly checked Nisha deeper into the booth so she could sit down next to her.

It earned her a rough shove in return from Nisha, “Who the hell invited you?!”

“Myself,” Moxxi calmly answered, “You think I’m not a major player here, sugar? Unless you want to starve I’d like to be filled in, hand personally. So. Are the rumors true?”

“Which one, I’m sure there’s a thousand by now,” Athena answered.

“About this rowdy lil’ cowgirl,” Moxxi ran a finger along Nisha’s jawline with a question that sounded almost reverent, “Did you really shoot Jack in the face?”

“You sound impressed,” Nisha smirked, “That the secret to gettin’ girls? Shooting dudes in the face?”

“I don’t know,” Moxxi looked curiously over at Athena, “Depends on if the other rumor is true.”

While she easily caught her drift, Athena herself wasn’t sure of the answer to that question, “I don’t know, you tell me.”

Nisha shooting Athena a look of annoyance, the tension there was painfully evident. Moxxi immediately parsing out that one of the two women knew the answer to that question a bit better. Should have aimed it at Nisha instead. Or not. Didn’t want to get caught up in this kind of catfight.

Moxxi rolled her eyes, “Difficult as always. I’ll just assume it’s true until proven otherwise then, given the fact Janey’s already sulking in here. Tucked away in a different corner, don’t worry about it. Or do. Questionable swap, considering… where she’s been.”

“You done now?” Nisha made another gruff attempt to shove her out of the booth, nearly successful this time, “Just take our order and go. Not like you’re in a place to judge me anyways. You dated him too.”

“Dated him before he did anything monstrous,” Moxxi corrected.

“You sure about that, sweetheart?”

Nisha nodded vaguely in Angel’s direction, a movement which caused Moxxi’s confident smile to
crack. Fearfully both not wanting to know what the man had done to this girl but also needing to for her own sanity.

Angel was smart enough to know she probably shouldn’t say the words out loud in such a crowded place, same as before. Instead pushing aside her hair.

The mismatched blue-green eyes said it all, only accentuated by the bruising.

Were Moxxi’s face not painted over she would have gone white, all of her guesses way off base, “Oh my god…”

You could see the timeline running through her brain but there was no ignoring it, the girl had definitely been alive and not well even when Moxxi and Jack had been together.

“I didn’t… I didn’t know…” Moxxi’s voice cracked, her accent peeking through, “He never… never ever mentioned a daughter…I wouldn’t have…”

“I’d be a lot more high and mighty atcha if I hadn’t been in the same position,” Nisha admitted, “If you were wonderin’ exactly why I shot Jack in the head, she’s it. Took her and ran, didn’t have the common sense to double tap. Now we’re on the run.”

“And have nowhere to stay,” Athena looked towards the exit, “Lilith’s kinda left us to fend for ourselves. You got any ideas?”

Moxxi surveyed them for a second, her decision tempered both by sympathy for the sickly looking woman she’d failed to save herself and the girl’s surprising savior.

She was hesitant but she offered, “I’ve got a living space right outside the bar. Used to stay there myself but turns out living so close to where I worked was making me a little… stir crazy. I won’t pretend it’s not a little bit dusty there but it’s got two bedrooms and a small living room area. If you want.”

“What’s the catch?” Nisha replied before Athena could stop her with a sharp rap on the hand.

“No catch, if you’re here I imagine the other other other rumor that you’ve got info on Jack is also true,” Moxxi tapped the menu, “As long as you’re helping bring Jack down now… well it’s not like I was using the space anyways. Except as storage. Just keep the hands off my goods and I’ll let you stay. Until you find somewhere else.”

There was a bit of a time limit on that but Athena would more than take it, “Thanks, Moxxi.”

“Least I can do if even Nisha’s playing hero,” she replied, still looking rather upset at the revelation of Angel, “It’ll be a bit loud there though, you can only soundproof so much against the music. Might want to get on the bar’s schedule.”

“I’m pretty tired but I’m gonna guess the bar isn’t shutting down anytime soon,” Athena looked around with a groan, patrons obviously nowhere near getting ready to settle down. That fact made so much more unpleasant by the fact a growing, pounding headache was settling into her skull.

“Nope,” Moxxi tapped the menu, “But how about this, I’ll make your first pizza a personal favor. Just consider it a little thank you gift from me to you for at least trying to put one between Jack’s eyes.”

“I want meat lovers!” Angel asserted, proud of her newfound bravado.
Moxxi barely choked back a filthy joke at that, replying simple with, “I’ll get you half a zoo on your pizza, sugar.”

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Remains of the pizza tucked away in a box they entered their new home, directly outside the bar. Pounding music still blaring loud enough to be clearly heard.

Getting inside didn’t do a whole lot to drown out the noise but it was tolerable at least.

The space was pretty bare aside from some crates pushed against the wall, stamped with Moxxi’s logo. A peek inside an opened one revealed, disappointingly, rather than booze the crates contained mostly supplies like glasses and coasters.

But as empty as the space was at least there were a couple beat up couches, split by a battleworn coffee table.

“It’s not much but it’s not a car at least,” Nisha put her hands on her hips, “Think she’ll care if we decorate a bit?”

“I mean, if you’re not going to hang corpses from the rafters I don’t think she’ll care,” Athena replied, already peeking in her head to check out both of the rooms, “Two bedrooms, one bed each.”

“Aw, we’re going to be cuddle buddies,” Nisha tried to drape herself over Athena’s shoulders.

Shrugging her off earned her a sharp glare, “It’s a big bed.”

If Angel wasn’t so preoccupied with the whole ‘I have my own room!’ thing she’d be more concerned about that but she was too busy slinking into the other room. Happy exclamations about having her own bed, her own closet, her own little window. My god is her bar way too low, they had to raise that.

But that wasn’t the concern now, Nisha annoyedly following after Athena, “What the hell is up with you? One day you’re kissin’ up to me, literally, and the next you’re shoving me off and won’t even have the decency to put a ‘it’s complicated’ sticker on our relationship.”

“I’m just tired,” Athena crashed onto the bed armor and all, crushing herself as against the wall as she could with her back facing outward, “Today’s been a bad day. Kinda a bit preoccupied with the whole ‘your crazy ex-boyfriend knows I’m working with you now’ thing. And my not-so-crazy ex-girlfriend is here too and pissed off at me.”

“You know, you can just call him Jack,” Nisha sat on the bed, shaking Athena’s leg, “The way you always call him my ex-boyfriend just… feels like some kind of accusation each time.”

It was, at the core of it.

But Athena wasn’t well suited to long conversations about her feelings on complicated topics on a good day, let alone under duress.

Groaning she tried to adjust a bit more comfortably before giving up and ripping off her shoulder plate at least before chucking it at the ground, “Who cares what I call him? Excuse me for not being wildly enthusiastic when it’s you and your ex-boyfriend not only uprooting my life but Janey’s too.”
“Didn’t listen to a goddamn word I just said, huh?” Nisha let go her ankle with a growl, “Real nice, Athena. Making me feel real appreciated right now.”

A snarl tugging at her lips made Nisha want to stomp off immediately but where the hell would she even go, back to Moxxi’s? She was new and bad to this whole ‘try to make it work’ thing but figured she should at least try.

Kneeling on the bed she crawled towards Athena, attempts to make her voice softer only coming out suggestive as she gently tried to roll Athena over to look at her, “Look, I’m tired too. We don’t… we don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. Not right now. Eventually. But let’s just stop arguing, cuddle up-”

“I said I don’t want to cuddle,” Athena coldly replied.

Anger getting the better of her, Nisha roughly shoved Athena’s shoulder. Not accomplishing much but jostling her before angrily climbing back off the bed and flinging the door open, “Fine then, be an asshole! See if I care! If you need me- no, actually, go fuck yourself if you need me.”

The only thing keeping her from slamming the door with all her might was somehow, despite the commotion, Angel had stayed in her room.

Might as well keep it that way. Girl had her own problems, she didn’t need to be taking on theirs.

Stepping back out in the cold night air, Nisha looked back up at the glowing neon sign and knew she really only had one place to go.

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Knowing she was only about eighty feet from Athena made Nisha’s little runaway attempt feel stupid but at least it was something.

Moxxi had looked more than a little bit wary as Nisha had stomped up to the bar and sat on one of the stools, crouched over it like a wild animal with an anger that hadn’t been there before and a growled demand of, “Whiskey.”

“What kind?”

“Don’t care.”

In Moxxi’s experience ‘don’t care’ was usually code for ‘whatever is the strongest you’ve got’ and she obliged. Pouring it out for Nisha then watching her down it alarmingly fast. If there was one thing Moxxi wasn’t known for it was subtlety, leaning on the counter with desperate curiosity, “Well you certainly weren’t gone for long. Lover’s quarrel?”

Nisha considered just demanding the whole bottle and leaving with that but acquiesced, “Don’t think I can call her a lover, at least without her bitching or denying it.”

Surveying the almost empty bar, save for a few long time patrons passed out at their customary seats, Moxxi felt brave enough to inquire, “So if I asked you what the deal is with you and dear old Athena would you freak out and wreck my bar or talk about it like an adult?”

“Give me another drink and find out,” Nisha handed her the empty glass.

“Always was a gambling woman,” Moxxi poured again, “Now spill. Your problems, not the drink. It’s a bitch to get alcohol out of the floorboards.”
Nisha tapped her fingernails on the glass in a way that communicated exactly how hard she was thinking about doing just that. To Moxxi’s relief though, a potential outside source of advice was more valuable to the woman, “I don’t know what I expected when I tracked Athena down to help me.”

“Well, again, gambling woman, but I would have bet on ‘emotional unavailability’ and ‘a stalwart protector’ which is what you got, huh?”

“Damn straight,” Nisha took a drink, deep but not as quickly, “Half what I needed. Stalwart protector. Didn’t think I’d be able to keep Angel safe by myself and Athena… she was the only option left. Everyone else is with Jack, off planet, or dead.”

“Unusual to see a Vault Hunter group get so divided,” Moxxi remarked, “Normally stay thick as thieves until this universe starts picking them off one by one.”

“Wish it hadn’t picked off Not Jack,” Nisha griped, “May have been a coward but he was the only one of us who had his shit together when it comes to giving a shit about someone else. Would have been a lot more useful taking care of Angel. You know. After she got over the whole looks-like-her-dad thing.”

Moxxi was unsurprised by this information, not even bothering to ask what took the body double out. Didn’t take a rocket surgeon to figure it was Jack himself.

“Instead she’s just got the two of you for replacement parents.”

“Barely,” Nisha sighed, “I don’t… get Athena’s shit. Didn’t get it back up on Elpis, don’t get it here.”

“You’re still tapdancing around-”

“I know, I know, the whole… situation,” Moxxi shot her a look, “The juicy gossip you’re trying to dig out.”

Moxxi really couldn’t refute that, nodding, “I don’t kiss and tell but I do like kissing.”

Nisha snickered at that, shaking her head, “And here you’re asking me to do just that.”

“So you did kiss her,” Moxxi smugly grinned, “At least once, or more? Up on Elpis? Now? Both?”

There was a long pause.

“Both.”

Moxxi lit up at that.

Might as well give up at this point and tell the titty clown everything, Nisha supposed.

“I was always flirtin’ with her up on Elpis. Fun to watch her get all flustered and make some weird excuse to run off. Always pulling up that ‘Atlas training’ bullshit to deflect anyone getting close. It was… fun. Just a little game of cat and mouse until the mouse decided to turn around and kiss the cat.”

Moxxi looked thrilled at this revelation, “So Janey wasn’t…”

“Janey… I knew Janey’d handle this better than me,” Nisha waved a hand in the direction of their new home, “Helpin’ get Athena out of her shell. Give her a normal life. So after that night I pulled
away, backed off and let nature take its course.”

“So you pawned her off on someone else to do your dirty work?”

Nisha snarled at that, “Why’s everyone think me having the brains to know I can’t help her is a bad thing?”

“Because it’s a cold, logical solution to a situation that requires warmth and feelings?”

“Fine, whatever, I’m the bad guy,” Nisha rolled her eyes, “Anyways I figured ‘hey, Janey fixed her and left her, might as well give it another swing’ but this time she was the one to kiss me and then abruptly pull away.”

“And given the circumstances this was… recently, I assume?”

“Like a day or two ago.”

Tapping her fingers on the bar, Moxxi was giving her such a condescending look, “You know that’s not how people work, right? You can’t just fix a person.”

Glowering, Nisha debated chugging the rest of her drink and leaving in a huff again but where the fuck would she go this time? Take up Claptrap’s offer to sleep on his shitty half a mattress in a garbage pile?

Swallowing her pride, she gave up, “Alright little miss know it all, then what the hell do I do with this? With a stuck up, angry jerk? Ever since we- or rather she- decided we were gonna come here she’s been throwing the whole dating Jack thing in my face every ten minutes. Gettin’ real sick of it.”

Nodding, Moxxi had to admit that drudged up some genuine sympathy, “I can… I can relate to that.”

Nisha’d gotten so tangled up in her own dramatics that she’d somehow managed to overlook the fact her and Moxxi had the shared shame of ‘dated Handsome Jack.’

But before she could comment, Moxxi’s tapping fingers grew faster. Clearly trying to make a decision.

“I really shouldn’t tell you this but…” Moxxi bit her lip, “Janey spent a couple hours talking my ear off about everything. With Athena, not about you. Don’t think the dear girl’s put two and two together on that yet. Can be a bit dense.”

“What good’s that do me?”

“She talked a lot about how she got Athena to open up,” Moxxi stood up, nodding to where Janey had been, “Said it wasn’t complicated it was just… frustrating. Nothing works better than she starts putting up that prickly edge to just be gentle in response. Do something nice for her and-”

“I ain’t about to let her just walk all over me,” Nisha shook her head, “If she’s being a jerk, I’m not gonna let her keep being a jerk.”

“If you’d let me finish,” Moxxi tilted her head in annoyance, “I was going to say ‘and she’ll come back shortly after with her tail between her legs.’ Like an apologetic little puppy dog who’ll have a grown up talk with you about whatever it is you want.”
“So what, I’m just supposed to go back in there and be nice to her even though she’s being a dick?”

“Well you did pick a particularly hard mark to hit,” Moxxi replied, “It’s not an elegant solution but it’s a solution. You can’t fix her with a hammer you’ve got to shame her into submission and let her sort out her shit herself.”

Nisha hung her head, “Can’t I just seduce her into submission? That’s way more my style.”

“You can’t fuck your way out of problems,” Moxxi took her glass, storing it with the others, “Believe me I’ve tried.”

“You sure? Maybe you just didn’t try hard enough,” Nisha cackled, patting the whip still attached to her belt, “Bet I’m a bit more aggressive than you are.”

Quick as a… well, whip, Moxxi darted a painted claw out and dragged Nisha halfway over the bar by the front of her tied up shirt with downright alarming ease. Held up so their faces were a mere few inches apart. Moxxi proudly looking down her nose at Nisha’s shocked face with a confident smile that only made her heart beat a little faster.

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me, sugar,” Moxxi cooed, reveling in how quickly the cowgirl had crumpled.

“So if the Athena thing doesn't work out, wanna take our degree of sexual separation from one to zero?”

Rolling her eyes, Moxxi let go and let Nisha slam down against the counter. Barely biting back a comment about how quickly the other woman’s attention moved, knowing that she was the very same.

“Closing time,” Moxxi turned around, starting to put things away for the evening, “You don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here.”

Nisha only laughed at that, sliding off the stool with a departing, “You’re alright, Mox.”

“Don’t call me that,” was all she got in return.

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Even though Athena wasn’t moving when Nisha walked back in she was obviously still awake. Doing a bad imitation of being asleep.

Sighing, Nisha took a few minutes to at least get herself comfortable. Making a mental note to try and acquire some more clothes sometime soon. Maybe something not from a warehouse of stolen dead people clothes.

It was almost comical how bad Athena’s fake sleep was.

Well if she’s still up might as well at least try the whole… do something nice. If she does manage to actually fall asleep in all that metal she’s definitely going to regret it when she wakes up.

Grabbing Athena’s ankle like before, Nisha started unlatching the armor and tossing it to the ground. That jerked Athena awake, trying to pull her leg away, “What the hell are you doing?”

“You can’t sleep in your armor,” Nisha replied, “Gonna wake up feeling like a train hit you.”

Athena wanted to have some jab back but there was nothing but the silent unacknowledged fact
that Nisha was right. With a grunt she twisted enough to start unlatching the plates around her torso.

She wasn’t even fighting back against Nisha tugging off a few pieces herself.

Sneaking a peak when Athena started unwrapping her scarf she could already see that Moxxi was right. Obvious guilt creeping onto her face, even as she tried to maintain that same angry glare.

Tomorrow morning, Nisha imagined, was when Athena would fold.

If even then, it wasn’t long after the armor was off and the lights were too that Athena shifted. No longer pressed against the wall to be as far away from Nisha as physically possible. Not saying a word, probably banking on Nisha having fallen asleep.

For a second Nisha considered moving closer herself but if she was honest, the day had been long and tiring.

A few blinks later, she was out cold.
Jack and Janey

It was vaguely surprising to Nisha to wake up alone, threadbare bed devoid of anyone but her own sprawled out self.

And flailed out she was, wouldn’t be surprised if she smacked Athena awake.

Rolling over with a grunt she look a look at the small, nearly non-functional clock on the bedside table. If the glowing digits were correct, it was way too fuckin’ early to be awake. Not by an early bird’s standard but by her own. If not for the sound of shuffling outside the room she’d just roll right over and pass out again.

But that had her curious and she was the type to sate that desire.

Wrapping the surprisingly nice, big blanket around her against the cold early morning air, Nisha wandered out.

The place was way too small to have a proper kitchen but it’s not like Vault Hunters are terribly used to having that amenity anyways. Seeing Athena crouched over a small portable skillet was nothing unusual. She wasn’t the best cook of their Vault Hunting group but she wasn’t the worst.

Not Jack had been the best. Really the guy seemed to excel in anything that had to do with “normal human skills.”

Aurelia had been the worst. Every dish she made all but inedible, presented with an annoyed flair of “this is what you get for asking me to cook.” Truly evident that gourmet chefs had taken care of the pampered woman for her whole life.

But Athena was alright. The small collection of rakk omelettes gathered around her would be reasonably tasty.

Nisha did wonder where the hell she got the supplies though.

Not too fussed though, teasing, “Well ain’t you a cute little housewife, makin’ me breakfast.”

The glare Athena shot over her shoulder died down quickly, tamped down by guilt, “Just… my little way of saying I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Nisha lightly kicked Athena in the butt, knowing the answer.

Flipping the last omelette off the skillet onto a plate, Athena got up, “You know what I’m apologizing for.”

“Yeah, but I wanna hear you say it.”

Athena shot her a look which Nisha flatly returned.

Sighing, Athena gave in, “I’m sorry I’m… taking things out on you. You didn’t… you didn’t do anything wrong. All you did was go to a friend who you thought could help you. Help Angel. Don’t think you would have even come for me if it was just you on the run.”

“Prolly not,” Nisha replied, “I can take care of myself.”

“But you can’t take care of someone else,” Athena set the food out on the coffee table before
sitting on the ground, “I can’t either but together we can do alright enough. Even with the added pressure of multiple exes on the table.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“What?”

Nisha sat next to her, throwing the blanket over her shoulders too, “No more calling them ‘exes’. Just… Jack and Janey.”

“Sounds good,” Athena replied, deep down very grateful that word wasn’t going to hang over her head either, “Never even had to say the word exe before. Feels weird.”

“Doesn’t help that they’re a couple of weird people.”

“Janey’s not that weird?” Athena asked, not offended but confused.

“And that’s what makes her so fucking weird,” Nisha replied, “She’s weird like Not Jack was weird. They’re fairly normal people in this abnormal world.”

Athena just had to nod along to that, “I just… wish both of them weren’t issues. I’d be a damned fool if I wasn’t scared of being Jack’s laser focus pointed at me now and Janey… I just wish she wasn’t here. I feel bad, we’ve completely uprooted her life.”

“S’what happens,” Nisha echoed a sentiment Athena had only thought a million times, “She dated a Vault Hunter than thought all semblances of that life would just fade away. It doesn’t. Not ever.”

“You ever feel like you’re trapped in this life?”

“Kinda, but not in a way that bugs me.”

Athena nodded, “Same it’s just… what life is. Janey was always trying to make like there were other options out there for me. A normal life for us. She wanted that so bad and somehow managed to make me want it too.”

“You miss her and that dream ever?” Nisha warily eyed her.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” Athena replied, “I miss Janey but I don’t miss the box she wanted to keep me in. But it’s hard to cut off feelings, turns out.”

“I ‘unno dropping Jack was pretty easy.”

“I don’t think you ever really had feelings for him.”

That sentence hung heavily in the air, neither of them wanting to poke the sleeping bear they’d just dragged into their midst.

Instead, Nisha slid out from under the warm safety of the blanket, “I’m gonna get Angel. Don’t want her food to get cold.”

“Yeah,” Athena dumbly added, “I’ll… just sit here.”

Nisha’s laugh at that stupid addition made Athena prickle, cut off but the door to Angel’s room opening and closing.

- - -
Angel’s room was all but pitch dark, Nisha finding herself all but blinded when she stepped into the room. Awkwardly fumbling for a light switch she couldn’t feel.

Nisha supposed the singular light source would have to be enough.

It was unnerving to see though.

Twisting patterns lighting up in the darkness, the softest white glow.

It’d be beautiful if not for Nisha, like any smart Pandoran, knowing it beholds endless amounts of dangerous power. Pulsing just beneath the thin girl’s skin. Screaming to be unleashed, especially as the girl jerked around in her sleep.

Nisha didn’t want to think about the unintentional consequences of waking up a Siren from her nightmares.

Pressed against the wall, Nisha hoped the girl wasn’t a heavy sleeper, “Angel?”

No response but the worrying heavy breathing.

“Son of a bitch,” Nisha cautiously approached her, reaching for the normal hand extended out, “Angel, c’mon, get up.”

Seeing the tattoos only light up more was terrifying. Nisha considered the now very attractive option of leaving and coming back with Athena’s shield but that thought didn’t pass her brain fast enough.

Touching the ice cold hand only for her eyes to fly open. Glowing white in the dark as she jerked upright like a girl possessed, bright white wings bursting from her back. Nisha jumping away and slamming painfully into the the slightly rusted metal walls.

“What time is it?” Angel managed, pulling the pack onto her, “My head is killing me…”

“Breakfast time,” Nisha answered, using every ounce of willpower not to sound afraid. Angel didn’t need that. Voice steady in the dark even though her heart was beating out of her chest, “C’mon, Athena made breakfast and I’ve got something in my bag for headaches.”

Nodding, Angel slid out of bed.

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Angel was quite chatty over breakfast, apparently quite happy about the prospects of their new life. Both wouldn’t say it but they wondered how long her boundless optimism would last before being snuffed out.
A weird consequence of seemingly having done the impossible already, a false sense of being unstoppable.

The rapping of Lilith’s knuckles on their door signalled that they had to come and discuss someone who actually just might be unstoppable.

Sitting around the map table of the crowded Crimson Raider’s HQ was a hell of a feat.

Half of them were stuck sitting on a desk, awkwardly made to be a part of this even though only Lilith, Roland and Nisha stood around the map. Even Angel off to the side, given room to hang back and wait for anything that nobody else knew.

But so far it was all on Nisha’s little device. At least anything useful. Angel’s tidbits about Jack being more benign like his favorite type of pizza being pepperoni with pineapple. If they ever need to poison him with something he simply can’t resist, she’ll be their girl.

Although actually Nisha probably knows that too.

She did, in fact. Nearly slapped the disgusting thing out of his hand the first time she saw him eat that with an idle threat to break up with him and an adamant refusal to try it.

Angel found herself feeling rather redundant.

Roland wasn’t exactly happy with Nisha’s refusal to just hand over her ECHO device, “If you won’t even do that, how do you expect us to trust you? Blind faith?”

“I’m playin’ friendly not playin’ stupid,” Nisha replied, “If I hand everything over I have absolutely no safety net and considering how eager you’d all be to toss me out…”

“After what you did to Brick,” Roland crosses his arms.

“Exactly,” Nisha tipped the device at him, “So everything stays safe here, on my device, nicely locked behind a password.”

“And why the hell shouldn’t we assume you’re covering for Jack’s ass?” Roland tilted his head at her.

“I shot the dude in the head and you think I’m gonna cover for him? You know all he’d have for me now is a slow painful death, right?”

“Could be lying. Could be a double agent.”

“How do you explain that then?” Nisha pointed back at Angel, curled up into a little ball next to Athena, “Because last time I checked, Jack didn’t like when other people take his toys.”

“She’s lied to us in the past too,” Roland replied, cautiously looking over at her.

But even he had a hard time feeling aggressive towards the sickly woman. He knew well enough to have a healthy respect and fear for her power but looking at her…

She hadn’t been treated well. He’d be an idiot to pretend otherwise, pretend she wasn’t another victim of Jack’s. Sunken in eyes and bruised flesh, a raging Eridium dependency that dragged purple veins to the surface of ghost white skin.

When she sleeps she must look like a corpse.
But he was still cautious.

“I mean, I can just take her and my information and go if you’re gonna be a dick about it.”

“Passwords can be broken into,” Roland looked down at the device in her hand, “I wouldn’t say fighting your way out is terribly a good idea.”

“Yeah we might not win but we could take a hell of a lot of you out on the way,” Nisha bluffed. That wasn’t true and she knew it. She’d seen the new crew of Vault Hunters in action, a crazy blur of chaos. Regardless of how this panned out she knew her and Athena had to step up their game from here on out. Although they did have one thing on their side, said with a smirk on her face, “Besides, we’ve got a whole Siren all jacked up on Eridium and you don’t even know what she can do.”

All eyes looked over to Angel at that, even Maya and Lilith had to cautiously take in that information. They knew their own powers well enough to know you should never underestimate one of them, especially one so backed into a corner.

“Well, if it were up to me, I wouldn’t have even let you in,” Roland gave Lilith a wary look, “But you’re here and by a popular enough vote…”

“ Didn’t know this was a democracy,” Nisha replied, looking around wondering exactly where the votes had laid.

“You got in by one vote,” Lilith responded, “Feel like it’s kind of obvious which way I went but everyone else…”

“Tread carefully is what she’s saying,” Roland nodded at the small crowd gathered, “And be glad Mordecai and Brick aren’t here or you’d be out on your ass. Or ripped directly in half. Depends on if you think you can outrun Brick or not.”

Not something Nisha wanted to try again. She’d already had the massive brute tearing through people to get at her, having busted out of restraints that would hold down any other man or beast. Hate in his vacant eyes.

Getting away only on a combination of sheer luck and his own injuries.

Her and Jack had laughed when they’d gotten away, separated from him only by a wall of rock with a thin crack in it that the big lump was too big to get through. Hell if Jack’d eaten just a little more than morning she probably wouldn’t have been able to drag his ass through there either.

Age comes for us all and he wasn’t in as good shape as he liked to look on the posters.

Hell, it wasn’t even him in the pictures most of the time. For a long time he’d been using Not Jack considering the man was fit and in his twenties. After he was gone? Just another body double took his place.

Disposable, like most people in Jack’s life. Even she was in the end.

But they’d been there together in that moment. Pressed against the cool stone walls, cackling loud enough that it echoed in the gorge. Jack cheerfully imitating her strangling the dog like you’d repeat a joke. Her, a cruel imitation of Brick’s pain. Like a couple of murderous schoolchildren.

They could hear Brick’s screams of rage but their car was right there and the time it would have taken him to sprint around to another exit of the dusty valley was too great. They’d be long gone
and he knew it.

Nisha had only heard rumors of why Brick wasn’t in Sanctuary but given the rumor’s credence…

Well she was pretty sure he’d actually, genuinely ripped a dude in half starting at the head.

Now she couldn’t help but wonder if pressing circumstances wouldn’t bring Brick back to Sanctuary. If they were accepting the help of a lowlife like her surely they’d be more forgiving of one of their oldest friends.

Nisha didn’t want to think about that right now.

Roland had other plans on his mind though, having been talking to one of the people who’d just barely missed being on the voting party, “Well, as much as I don’t trust you, we’re gonna need your help.”

“How much do you have on the Wildlife Exploitation Preserve?” Lilith asked.

The pained look on Roland and Lilith’s faces told Nisha she had the upper hand in this, smirking, “Oh absolutely everything. What do you want to know?”

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While the three of them worked out the transfer the remaining others dispersed, not terribly interested in watching a bunch of file transfers.

Crowding down the stairs, Athena couldn’t help but try to figure out who’d voted them in and out. She had a feeling that Maya might be a bit sympathetic to their cause but the others… the others were a big question mark.

Angel was a bit more brave and direct though. A bit of a surprise to Athena to see her chatting with Maya as they went down the stairs.

Athena wasn’t about to stop her though, be good for her to get some new friends.

Outside everyone milled about the courtyard, Athena more than happy to let Angel talk to the others even though it left her sitting on a bench alone. God, it was honestly really nice to see the girl among her peers.

Well, mostly her peers. Salvador was definitely older and Krieg… well Athena wasn’t sure actually he might be in his twenties who the fuck knows on Pandora.

Gaige in particular seemed interested in her, seeming to hang onto Angel’s every word.

Athena almost smiled at the idea that Angel could find a little girlfriend of her own. Cute. Jack would hate that. Honestly that part just made it kind of cuter. Good for her.

Either way their backs were to them, happily chatting away. Curious questions about Angel that she seemed more than happy to answer.

She wasn’t alone for long though, head jerking to the side at the familiar voice, “Mind if I sit here?”

The look she gave Janey was a bewildered one but the woman more than knew her enough to know that was just her reaction to any unexpected social contact. It didn’t phase her and neither did the baffled, simple question, “I don’t mind?”
Truth be told, Athena’s complete and utter lack of social graces had always been a point of cuteness to Janey and now wasn’t an exception. A good thing, considering what she’d come to talk to her about, “Thanks, don’t really want to hold a conversation just… standin’ there. Starin’ at you. Not that I don’t like staring at you, though.”

Okay, maybe now the bewildered look Athena was still giving her was a bit off putting.

“What are you doing?”

Athena’s question feels like an accusation.

Definitely not the reaction Janey expected, “I’m… flirting with you?”

Alright, we’ve, uh, escalated from “awkward staring” to “openly weirded out.”

“Why?”

Another accusing question.

Janey sighed, “I guess I shoudn’t have thought this would go so smoothly…”

No answer, just more confusion.

“Look… I still… care about you a lot, Athena. Things have gone wrong, real wrong, but it’s just making me realize how much I miss you. Even when I’m angry- even when I’m absolutely LIVID-I just find myself thinking about how I wanted things to go and think I just… I fucked it up.”

All social graces knocked from her, Athena just stared blankly. Not properly able to process something as complex as ‘someone trying to get back with her.’

And the fact she didn’t terribly have the words to explain she’s moved on already.

“I shouldn’t have tried to make you give up everything for me. It was selfish and I just… know this is part of your life and part of my life now too. We’re already stuck here in Sanctuary together, let’s give it another go, yeah?”

Not an option, not anymore.

It did snap Athena out of her social anxiety stupor though, looking away and trying to figure out the newfound problem of ‘how the hell do you let someone down easy?’

Because it wasn’t what she wanted, even if a small part of her brain that craved a normal, stable relationship was hollering for it.

Athena’s voice was strained as her mind raced to find a solution, “Janey, I—”

Turns out that didn’t matter as Janey leaned forward and pecked a kiss onto Athena’s mouth.

That didn’t give her the reaction she expected either.

Where before shows of affection like that would make Athena’s awkwardness and standoffishness melt away it now caused her to all but shove Janey away as she jerked suddenly to her feet, wild eyed and… scared. She looked scared.

“I have to go.”
Now that was familiar.

Athena’s old parting line when she doesn’t know what else to say.

Janey moved to get up and follow her but the way the woman abruptly turned about face and bolted away let her know she absolutely should not under any circumstances do that.

Leaving a woman standing there, absolutely confused about how and why things had gone that poorly.
What’s Mine Is Mine

Chapter Notes

Three updates in a week! I’m hoping to get this fic at least kinda close to done by the time Borderlands 3 rolls out so I’m running on a pretty irregular schedule from my normal "rotated between two." Do have next Punch-Drunk chapter partially done too though, I’ve been busy lmao.

By the time Athena was near the exit of Sanctuary she was practically at a sprint, ignoring the cheerful if confused greeting Scooter yelled at her as she passed.

Whatever, she’d stop by later and say hi, this wasn’t the time for pleasantries.

If Athena’d known Janey was going to pull some shit like that she wouldn’t have let her sit down.

But how could she have expected such a quick turnaround? Janey had been so absolutely set on Athena giving up the Vault Hunter life for YEARS. Until it completely tore apart their relationship and left them both alone. All because she wouldn’t back down and let Athena have a life of her own.

Ruefully, Athena wondered if that was why she’d been so ineffective in the last fight. Disgustingly out of practice. Seemed like Nisha was too, running a town probably hadn’t left her with much time to spend gunslinging.

They should go out together and just take down a few bandit camps just to get into the swing of things again.

God, look at her, distracting herself with combat scenarios to avoid the fact Janey had kissed her right on the mouth and wanted to get back together.

But her and Nisha…

Athena didn’t know what the hell they were but they were…

Something.

Whatever they were Nisha sure as hell was going to be pissed as hell.

After stepping foot outside of the gates of Sanctuary it immediately became obvious to her that she’d bolted out here with no real plan. It wasn’t like she was going to leave the safety of the city all on her own.

Slamming her back against the wall outside she slid down, hugging her legs tightly to her chest and resting her head on her knees. Still so close to the bustling inside that she could still hear Scooter working on his cars.

At least he wasn’t coming out to check on her.

Closing her eyes, Athena tried to figure out what next.
Probably best to hunt down Nisha and be as direct as possible, nothing the woman seemed to hate more than information being kept from her. Just… just get yelled at or get dumped/not dumped by her girlfriend/not girlfriend or, hell, get into a fistfight who the hell knows.

Athena realized she actually had a pretty poor concept of Nisha reacts to things like this.

Jack was the only relationship of Nisha’s that Athena had as any point of ref- oh fuck what if Nisha decides to shoot her in the head over this?

Okay that was a bit much, she wasn’t going to execute Athena over this. You execute your significant other over prolonged parental abuse, not over ex-girlfriend kissed them out of the blue.

Athena didn’t notice the clanging in the distance stopping over her own agonizing thoughts. Pausing for just a second before drowning out the noise of Athena being approached by thick heels clunking on pavement.

“The hell’s wrong with you?” Nisha nudged her with her foot again, “I come out to get you and see you sprinting across Sanctuary like you’re tryin’ to win gold. What gives?”

Some desperate stupid part of her mind latched onto the fact that Nisha hadn’t seen Janey kiss her. Wanting to lie, cover it up, tell Janey to keep her mouth shut. But that would be stupid. They’d been right in the middle of the town, no way nobody else say it and no way Nisha wouldn’t figure it out.

The silence was long enough to make Nisha join her on the frozen ground, sitting against the frigid stone on her left, “Spit it out, what’s wrong?”

Athena almost wanted to laugh at the ice cold attempt at caring, biting her tongue. Didn’t need to give Nisha even more reasons to be angry at her.

Dragging it out would only do the same, each word felt like pulling out one of her own teeth with a rusty set of pliers as she confessed, “Janey came over while you were in there. She… said she wanted to get back together. Then she kissed me.”

In an instant, Nisha’s bright curious eyes turned dark.

“So Janey’s still got feelin’s for you,” Nisha’s tone is bitterly sharp as she asks, “So, what, you gonna go crawling back to her now? Sittin’ out here trying to figure out how to dump me on my ass like yesterday’s trash?”

“No,” Athena peered out at her, meeting the sharp glare with a hangdog look, “I don’t… I don’t want that.”

Nisha tilted her head with an accusatory, “Did you kiss her back?”

“No,” Athena buried her head back into her knees, “All but pushed her away and ran out here. Don’t… don’t really know what the plan was at the end there other than ’get away from Janey.’”

“Then why are you lookin’ at me like I’m gonna bite your head off?”

Athena shot Nisha the same bewildered look she’d given Janey not that long ago, the same look she always got on her face when some new, foreign social situation threw her for a fucking loop.

It was hard not to flinch when Nisha grabbed her by the jaw, shaking her head a little with that sharp, stabbing glint in her eye, “You didn’t do anythin’ wrong. All you did was sit your oblivious
little ass there and try to have a conversation. How the hell am I supposed to blame you for not being psychic? Hell, you can’t even read normal human interaction for shit.”

Grabbing Nisha’s claw and prying it off her face, Athena was wary of the anger that was still there, “You’re… not mad?”

“I’m not mad at you,” Nisha clarified again, looming too close to her face, “Go behind my back and kiss Janey yourself and I’ll gun you down where you stand but ain’t your fault she came onto you.”

Even though no official words were still being said about their status even Athena could read this plain as day.

Nisha considered the two of them an exclusive item.

Athena… Athena did too.

It may have been her second kiss of the day but this one wasn’t nearly as one sided. Wasn’t as awkward and painful as their own first one either, in a nasty lake in the middle of nowhere. Granted Athena had still slammed her head forward a bit too rough but again, this was Nisha. She’s never expecting anything gentle.

Even just laughing as Athena grabbed the back of her neck like she was going to pull away if she didn’t.

But she just laughed and grabbed Athena’s jaw again, squeezing a bit to get her to open her mouth which she happily obliged. Not even caring about the fact they were making out on the cold hard ground until…

Nisha made an annoyed noise as Athena suddenly pulled away, “You know there’s a guard right over there, right?”

“He’s not payin’ attention,” Nisha tried to pull her back.

“No, he definitely is,” Athena nodded at him.

“What kinda Vault Hunter are you if you don’t wanna make out on the ground in front of a total stranger with a gun?”

Nisha had always been a sucker for Athena’s awkward, strangled laugh. Like someone imitating something that they’d only had vaguely described to them. It was rare too, when you could drag it out of her it felt like a real accomplishment.

Only made Nisha want to kiss her more, chuckling as she leaned back in, “Dork, get back here.”

Athena obliged though, Nisha squawking in delight as the hand previously on her neck was brought to her wait. Easily dragging her closer, nearly on her lap. One long leg trapping one of Athena’s kinda stumpy ones.

Just as they resumed though, a noise of shock and confusion knocked them right back out of it.

Immediately Janey regretted her belated decision to find Athena and apologize, certainly not expecting her to be just outside the gate.

Even less expecting to find her crushed against Nisha, making out with her on the ground.
“I, uhm, just…” Janey stumbled over every bit of her words, “Came to… check you were okay?”

“She’s fine,” was Nisha’s ice cold response.

While Janey had just taken her previous actions as her old flirty self this was… not something she could mistake for anything else.

Knowing that she had, just ten minutes ago or so, kissed Nisha’s girlfriend.

As weird as it was to think of Athena was that.

And now Nisha, one of the most terrifying people Janey had ever met, was glaring her down with a red hot look of sheer disgust. A hand possessively creeping up her back, tangling into her purple-blue hair, pulling her head against her chest. All while her yellow eyes bore into Janey like a drill, threatening to shred her apart.

While Nisha didn’t think Athena had done anything wrong she sure as hell thought Janey had.

- - -

Despite Athena’s concerns, the small altercation had gone unnoticed by the happily chatting Vault Hunters and Angel. Even though they started dispersing shortly after. Mostly splitting into a few groups to do a few missions.

Only one passively rejecting each and every offer, only going far enough to see her friends off at the fast travel station

That left Angel alone for only a second, looking confused over at the bench where Athena had been. Walking up to the Crimson Raider’s HQ only yielded a vague ‘Nisha left’ statement from Lilith.

Angel knew she was an adult but walking back out into the middle of the town she felt like a lost child.

Logically she knew she didn’t need to be supervised but after nine years of constantly being watch she found herself just… not really knowing what to do. Some animal part of her brain was just telling her to sit right down on the ground and wait for the others to come back.

She managed to fight that enough to at least be standing up while she pointlessly waited for someone else to tell her what to do.

But it wasn’t one of her makeshift guardians who came to her first.

Gaige had quietly been rehearsing to herself what she was going to say as she walked over but regardless what actually came out of her mouth was, “Hey pizza, wanna get some Angel?”

The confused, somewhat alarmed look on Angel’s face makes Gaige feel even stupider as the girl stumbles out a, “What?”

“I said, uh,” Gaige corrected herself even though she absolutely knew Angel knew what she said on a literal level, “Hey Angel, wanna get some pizza? At Moxxi’s? I have money.”

I have money. Fucking smooth. Of course you have money you’re a goddamn Vault Hunter.

Despite the fact she looked and sounded horrified by the prospect, Angel responded, “Sure.”
Walking back into Sanctuary with the three of them is unbelievably awkward.

It’s so pointed the way Nisha has planted herself between Athena and Janey, even going so far as to hook arms with the former.

Athena knows that this is a bad situation and that she should definitely try to diffuse it right away but she also knows that her social skills are bare basics and anything she could possibly say would probably just make this whole thing worse. Be better to just play along right now and distract Nisha any other times Janey is around.

Would she even try? Was Janey going to drop this whole thing?

Janey was tenacious. All Athena could hope is that wouldn’t extend to this.

But the concerned look Janey was giving her was worrying. Athena recognized it all too well. Face twisted into concern, obviously wanting to say something.

She knew it because that was always the look Janey gave her before trying to gently coerce her into dropping some dangerous thing she was doing or wanted to do. And now that thing wasn’t a job or a missions or even an errand it was a human woman.

“Lilith wanted to talk with you too,” Nisha nodded her head towards the HQ, “Nothing too urgent. Honestly she just wanted to know more about up on Elpis, said you had a better memory than me.”

It was true. Athena’s memory was immaculate to the point of being slightly disturbing.

Speaking of, she looked around, “Where’s Angel?”

Janey cautiously piped up, “I saw her go off with Gaige.”

Thinking back to the two’s interactions earlier, that almost made Athena smile despite the current situation. That was cute, real cute. Vault Hunter girlfriend was a plus too, Athena wasn’t about to say ‘no’ to another certified badass watching over her.

“Cute,” Athena flatly replied, glad to have an excuse to break off from the awkward group, “I’ll catch up with you after I talk to Lilith.”

She got an “okay” in stereo.

Nisha sharply jerking her head over to Janey with a warning glare that clarified that it was clearly aimed at her.

Janey didn’t consider herself much of a drinker but for the second day in a row she found herself needing a drink.

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Gaige felt like she was talking way, way, way too much but for the love of god she just couldn’t manage to shut her mouth.

It was nerves, probably, forcing her to expel every single random little detail about her life in absolutely no semblance of order. Attempts at being impressive randomly undercut by embarrassing stories.
She wasn’t even sure why she was sharing them but the fact Angel just giggled demurely at them was probably why.

Currently she was dramatically telling the story of how she met up with Axton, only slightly stretching the truth, “And by the time he found me I was just standing there, pile of bandits all around me, Deathtrap floating behind me and he-”

To Gaige’s great disappointment, Angel’s attention had shifted for just a split second from their secluded little booth.

Following her eyes, Gaige couldn’t blame her.

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Janey knew she was being followed, it was part of why she’d chosen to sit at the bar rather than the table. Moxxi wouldn’t exactly be the biggest help against a raging Nisha should it come to arms but behind her lurked Sir Hammerlock. He was a hunter, right? Had to be a good shot.

The woman was lagging behind like a stalking predator but Janey knew she was coming. Distracted for only a second by Moxxi putting her usual beer in front of her. A polite, quiet thank you.

How the hell was she supposed to know? How was this her fault?

She’d seen Nisha cozying up to Athena back at her old place but she’d seen her do that for MONTHS up on Concordia, only for the woman to peel off and leave the woman all alone.

And that… that’s where Janey had come in.

But now…

Just… Nisha? Really, Athena? Really?

Sure Athena was awkward but being a massive badass is like ninety-nine percent of being attractive on Pandora. Janey wouldn’t say she was jealous it was Nisha but like… why not literally any other woman on the face of the planet? Aurelia? Moxxi? Tannis?

Alright those suggestions are fairly random but still! Anyone else anyone but-

“Hey there, Sunshine.”

The cutesy nickname feels like poison being jabbed into her neck.

Regardless, she knows no good will come of being hostile back to Nisha. Swallowing her fear she tries to sound fairly calm about the fact such a powerful, dangerous woman is sidling up into the seat next to her with such a lethal glare.

“Uhm… hello, Nisha. How… are you?”

That’s dumb and not much but it’s a response.

She looks up, hoping Moxxi will provide some sort of distraction but sensing the tension the bartender was making a pointed effort to stay on that side of the bar. It’s obvious she’s whispering about them to Sir Hammerlock with the way his robotic eye keeps flicking over her shoulder.

Might be warning him. Janey had noticed a distinct lack of a proper bouncer yesterday. Supposed
Moxxi just relies on friends.

It dawned on her that Nisha wasn’t talking.

Tearing her eyes back to the woman, Janey swallowed thickly to see her just staring at her with blank anger.

“I… I didn’t know,” Janey let go of her glass, afraid she might shatter it if she kept squeezing it like that, “I wouldn’t have… I wouldn’t have done what I did if I knew you two were… together.”

“You saw us before,” Nisha coldly replied, “Back when we stopped by your garage.”

“You’re just like that,” Janey tried to defend herself, “Even back when you were very flirty with everyone, you were even kind of flirty with me at times. I just… I thought it was-”

“Well it ain’t,” Nisha cut her off, “Didn’t take you for a dumb person but I guess I’ve got to lay it out plain for you. Athena’s with me now, not you. You missed your chance. Back off or I’ll make you back off.”

“I wouldn’t- Nisha, I told you I didn’t know,” Janey resisted the urge to run, knuckles white as she balled them into fists on her lap, “This is what you were like on Elpis and nothing happened then, why should I have assumed something happened now?”

Nisha answered vaguely like it was the most obvious thing in the world, “Things are different now.”

“I’m not psychic, how would I know that?!?” Janey couldn’t keep her voice from rising, “Last time you were treating Athena like this you pulled a one-eighty and went with Ja-”

Quick as a whip, Nisha grabbed the bottle of beer in front of Janey and shattered it on the ground as a warning before grabbing the front of her shirt and pulling her in close, “Listen here, Ja-”

“HEY!” Moxxi barked, gesturing for Hammerlock behind her, “What did I tell you about getting drinks on my floor?!”

“Whatever, I’ll pay for the cleaning,” Nisha growled, surprisingly barely resisting being grabbed from behind off of her stool and steered out by Sir Hammerlock.

“You will if you ever want to step foot in here again,” Moxxi pointed towards the door, “Trying to start a bar fight, what are you? A twenty something frat boy?!”

“Lighten up, was just sending a messa- jeez, can you loosen your grip a little?!” Nisha addressed the metal arm pressed against her throat and partially the meatier one clamping her wrists behind her back, “You know, I’m friends with your sister if tha- HGHR!”

Nisha’s poor attempt at appealing to the man only tightened his grip on her.

As they approached the door, Nisha experienced something she remembered from her youth.

The experience of literally being thrown out of a bar.

---

Dinner and a show was over as quickly as it began, Gaige just barely restraining from hooting at Sir Hammerlock while he dragged Nisha out like a shitty you-are-not-the-father type show audience member.
Really only Angel’s presence was stopping her, the girl quietly transfixed on the scene in front of them.

Gaige figured she should check, “Uh, you okay with that? Weirded out?”

“I wouldn’t say weirded out,” Angel looked back to her, “I mean… when I met Nisha she instantly shot my dad in the face so like… there’s not really anything she could do that will ever be more shocking than that.”

Appreciatively, Gaige couldn’t stop herself from hooting at that, “That’s sooooo BADASS! Nisha’s so fucking cool, what a totally bitchin’ substa-mom!!”

Angel couldn’t help but be amused by how quickly the girl brushed off the fact Nisha had just clearly been threatening someone, giggling behind her hand, “I guess so.”

Frankly she herself knew she should probably be more concerned but mostly she was just curious what had prompted it. If she had to guess, Nisha wouldn’t tell her but she could potentially convince Athena to.

“Hey, you think I’ll get the same treatment if I keep you out late?” Gaige pointed at the bottle, “Because I was thinking we could go for a walk around Sanctuary, maybe do a little stargazing…”

“Here, give me your ECHO device,” Angel held out a hand, typing up a short text message to Nisha, “I don’t think she’ll care so long as we tell her where we’re going.”

Gaige couldn’t help but bounce in her seat waiting for the answer.

It was quick, it was apathetic, and it was sans punctuation.

“stay out all night i don’t care you’re twenty-one do whatever the hell you want i ain’t your mom”

Well that was certainly enough permission for Gaige, excitedly sliding out of the booth and grabbing Angel by the wrist, “C’mon, let’s get going! Maybe if she really doesn’t care you can even sleep over at the Crimson Raider’s HQ! There’s an empty bunk across from mine!”

Moxxi only looked up from annoyedly picking up broken glass to watch them run out of the bar, having left a haphazard pile of money on the table.

Well, at least someone was having a good night tonight.

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The one nice thing about living right outside the bar was that her awkward shambling walk of shame home was very, very short.

Walking into the empty house was… depressing.

Nisha’d lived alone for most of her life, this should be something familiar but it’s quickly become… not.

Walking over to one of the two couches facing each other she spun around and crashed onto it. Not as shitty as it could have been but less nice than her place back in Lynchwood.

While she might not have had Athena and Angel there and only Jack visiting on random occasion she’d never felt lonely there.
Days were simple.

She’s wake up, head into town, meet up with Deputy Winger, make the rounds, maybe hang a few people, sign some of Winger’s pointless paperwork, lounge at a desk for a while waiting for potential problems to arise, go to the bar, go home.

Now every day was complicated. The simple, uncomplicated company of Deputy Winger replaced by a girl who both seemed to both look up to and fear her and a weird, twisty relationship forming with an awkward, emotionally unavailable, sometimes hard to connect to assassin.

For all the massively unfilling crap that her relationship with Jack had been at least it’d be simple. Do something cruel, watch the man laugh and clap on command like a trained monkey.

Not like she could back off now though. Today’d been pretty cementing. Making out with Athena on the outskirts of town, threatening Janey to back off, saying Athena was “with her now.”

Well it was true, just not something either of them was putting into words.

Even thinking “Athena is my girlfriend” was… weird.

Felt almost wrong calling her that for some reason.

Maybe just proximity to last time she’d had a boyfriend? It had only been a week or two at this point. Man, she moves fast, don’t she?

Before she could further contemplate this, she heard the door click open. Rolling onto her side she put aside any internal weirdness to mockingly call out, “Honey! You’re home!”

“I think that’s supposed to be my line,” Athena flatly replies, shrugging her shield off her back, “What’re you even doing?”

“Waitin’ for you to come home and ravish me,” Nisha replied, half joking.

“Yeah nothing gets me in the mood like a nice, long interrogating by a couple of former friends about how we helped yo- Jack get into power. Real sexy.”

“Well I mean if you cut out the fun parts it’s not.”

Athena smirked at that, “Yeah, just let me derail from a dictator’s rise to power to tell Lilith and Roland about the time we all went to karaoke as a team building exercise.”

“Or the time we tried to make a kraggon rodeo,” Nisha propped her head up, “Still think we could’ve done it if Not Jack would have stopped screaming the second one of them got too close to him.”

“It’s weird to think about that time of my life,” Athena opened the door to their room just enough to toss in the shield, starting to unwrap her scarf, “As bad as helping Jack was… I still have so many good memories from up on Elpis.”

“Maybe after all this shit is over we can go visit up there,” Nisha nodded upwards, “Take Angel with us, have a little vacation.”

“Speaking of…”

“She’s still with Gaige.”
Unguarded, unsarcastic smiles from Athena were rare but she had one for a split second before it disappeared, “Got herself a girlfriend?”

“Sounds like it,” Nisha pushed herself up, walking over to Athena and throwing her arms around her neck with a coy look, “Looks like I do too.”

Uncertainty passed over Athena’s face, “So we’re…”

“Look, I don’t really want to do this weird, awkward song and dance about words and shit with you,” Nisha cut her off from whatever uncomfortable stumbling around was going to come from that, “Let’s just… be us. No long, deep conversations about what it all means. Alright?”

It was almost comical how relieved Athena looked at that, resting her head against Nisha’s chest, “Oh thank god, that was… one of my biggest issues with…”

It was like Janey’s name was a cuss word.

But knowing that made Nisha smile.

“Don’t worry, I ain’t here to change you,” Nisha started pushing Athena back into the bedroom, “We’re the same, you an’ me. Don’t like it when things are complicated. So let’s let them be uncomplicated, alright?”

A sharp push sent Athena tumbling backwards over the edge of the bed, slamming onto the mattress in a cacophony of rusted bed springs creaking.

Crawling backwards enough to not have the metal bars cutting her off at the knee, Athena replied uncertainly, “We’re… together though. Right?”

Nisha only laughed at that, straddling Athena’s waist at great protest from the beat up old bed. Roughly grabbing Athena’s wrists and pinning them above her head before leaning in close and biting Athena’s neck hard. Reassuring her, “Don’t worry about it, you’re all mine now. Got it?”

Athena looked away with an uncharacteristically demure smile, pale face practically glowing red, “Got it.”

“Good,” Nisha crooned, reaching back and uncoiling the whip from her belt, “Now I’m gonna prove it.”
The Birds and The Bees

Chapter Notes

Kind of a short chapter but I thought things would be better in a different chapter than in this one.

I know the timeline's a little more different (considering Mordecai and Brick don't come to Sanctuary until it's off the ground) but things are different when you've got some dangerous extra Vault Hunters in Sanctuary.

That’s gonna leave a bruise. So is that. And that over there. Also like ten other places. She’s gonna look like the loser of a twelve round boxing match.

Except if it’d been that there’d be less bite marks. Probably.

Athena took count of the sore points on her body as she slowly woke up.

Nisha had done a hell of a number on her, that was for sure. Not that she minded although some of the marks were in places that were a bit more visible than she’d care for them to be. Nothing she couldn’t explain away as a battle injury, right?

Maybe. Had to get up and take a proper look at herself before she could say that for certain.

Not the easiest task considering how happily Nisha was coiled around her like a snake. Face pressed happily into the crook of her neck. Covers kicked away in the night, leaving their bare skin exposed to the morning air.

Any part of Athena that wasn’t plastered to Nisha was freezing cold.

An exploratory attempt at pulling away only made the woman snuggle in more with what Athena could have sworn was a small kiss.

“Nisha, you up?”

Silence.

Sleep kisser. That’s a new one and something oddly cute for someone was spiky as Nisha. Who knows? Maybe in-a-relationship Nisha is secretly a big ol’ lovebug.

A sharp rasp of Athena’s unnatural laughter seemed loud in the dead silent room, laughing at her own internal joke. Nisha, a sweet and cutesy girlfriend. She had a wide array of bruises and marks criss-crossing her body that loudly said otherwise.

Nisha was a bit more affectionate than expected though, even if certainly not to the degree that you could say she’s a lovebug.

If only because Athena didn’t expect to wake up to being absolutely snuggled up to. Nisha’s lanky limbs wrapped tightly around her like she was afraid the woman would leave.
Maybe that’s just what she was used to. It would make sense, Nisha had expressed vaguely that Jack would just show up to have sex with her and leave right afterwards.

Knowing the bastard it makes sense that she might have a bit of a fear of waking up alone.

Hell, she was probably used to it.

Athena abandoned her previous goal of getting up to survey the damage. Just let Nisha have this, get to wake up still in someone’s arms. Hell, given her general life trajectory up until now it wouldn’t surprised Athena all that much if Jack was only the latest in a long line of people who’d left Nisha to wake up alone.

Even she’d had at least Janey. It was only one person but at least it was something, someone to wake up to.

Grabbing Nisha’s leg, Athena pulled her closer. Leaning as much more into the cuddle as she could with the awkward position Nisha had left her in. Mostly pinned down, tied up by limbs much longer than-

Oh wait, shit, she’s also still kind of literally tied up.

That explained why her shoulder hurt so much.

Closing her eyes, Athena wondered if she should just try to go back to sleep until she could get Nisha to untie her as she felt a stirring next to her.

She could feel Nisha’s eyelashes on her neck as the women blearily blinked awake. Twisting in an awkward stretch as she refused to let go of her prey for a second, nails digging into Athena’s side before she settled against her with a content noise.

With a kiss over a ringed bite mark on her neck, Nisha’s whisper was loud in the silence, “Mornin’, Athena.”

Letting a single blue eye peek open, she asked, “It that obvious?”

“You’re really bad at pretending to sleep,” Nisha nodded, “Always were doing that, even up on Elpis. Never gonna understand your anxiety about being the first one up.”

“Maybe I just don’t want to get up,” Athena leaned against Nisha’s head, “Maybe I’m just comfortable right now.”

“Alright I’ll buy that excuse for this morning,” she felt Nisha’s mouth pull into a wide smile against her skin, “But in Concordia? I think you just didn’t want to deal with everyone else that early in the morning.”

“Wilhelm always thinks breakfast is the time to actually fucking open his mouth and spew about complicated robotic upgrades he’s working on,” Athena defended herself.

“God, yeah,” Nisha laughed, moving up to pull out the knot on the singular tie still around Athena’s wrist “Only time you could get him to talk. No other topics though.”

“Just his bots,” Athena grinned against the ache that came from finally bringing that arm down, “Damn he loved those things.”

“You should have seen him when it was time to retire them for new models. Practically had a
funeral for them. Made me and Not Jack show up and everything even though literally all he was
doing was puttin’ them into storage.”

Some part of Athena’s heart ached knowing that everyone else had been together, without her.
Without Aurelia as well but she had a feeling their most opulent member probably wouldn’t care.

But as much as she missed her old group an issue concerning their new one arose.

“Hey, did you hear Angel come back at any point last night?”

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Athena hadn’t had time to see the state in which Nisha had left her in as they quickly tossed on their
clothes and tore across Sanctuary.

The new group of Vault Hunters were sleeping in the Crimson Raiders’ HQ, they knew that much.
Door wide open, the type of arrogance you only have when you’re the biggest badasses on the
planet.

Nisha looked ready to make a scene about their missing daughter figure had Athena not crept in so
silently. A quiet reminder that the woman had been trained as an assassin.

Easy to forget considering how brash and in-your-face her fighting style had become over time.

They got an answer as to where their missing charge was quickly enough. Passing by just a couple
other bunks, hooked around a corner was Angel crumpled up on one of the bottom bunks. Directly
across from her little date, sprawled out so dangerously that she looked on the cusp of falling off
the bed at any moment.

“Do we, like, yell at her or somethin’?” Nisha whispered the question to Athena, “I dunno I just
feel like that’s the thing to do.”

“You did tell her she could stay out all night,” Athena quietly replied.

“How about I just tell you to not to make dumb jokes unless you mean them?”

The punishment for bickering while surrounded turned out to be a panicked pillow thrown full
force at Nisha’s head. Tannis jerked upright in her top bunk. Sharp, shrill voice groggy and
confused, “I don’t recall ordering a wake up service, nor do I even recall this being a hotel! Are we
a hotel now, has my life been uprooted from the roots?! I demand to converse with your manager’s
coworker’s cousin’s secretary’s manager!”

Athena wanted to tell her to go back to sleep but the damage was done, everyone waking up to see
what had set of their own personal alarm clock this morning.

“Snooze button…” Gaige groggly reached up towards Tannis’s bunk.

Axton yelled at her from his own across the room, tossing one of his own pillows at her, “Do you
want a repeat of three days ago? Do you REALLY want her to puke on you again? Because if so,
go nuts, but don’t come crying to me when it happens.”

This makes Gaige pause with her hand less than an inch from patting the top of Tannis’s head,
pulling it away, “No…”
“What’re you two doing in here?” was Axton’s next question, pointing accusingly at Athena and Nisha.

Maya rolled her eyes though, “Gonna take a stab in the light and say they’re looking for Angel.”

“Pay up,” Salvador slapped the metal of the top bunk, making a grabby hand at Axton, “Told you, pendejo, they were showin’ up if Gaige didn’t take little Ángel home.”

Smacking the hand away, Axton tap danced, “The bet was, if you’ll recall my exact words, that they’d show up in the middle of the ni-”

He couldn’t finish his semantics based excuse before Salvador grabbed that exposed hand and easily pulled him right off the bunk for his semantics based crimes, “CAPULLO! Stop tryin’ to squeeze out of bets!!”

Athena and Nisha weren’t terribly concerned with the sneaky betting habits of Axton and more concerned with the girl sheepishly looking up at them with the defense of, “Nisha said she didn’t care if I was out all night.”

“Well Athena cares and Athena is the one in charge,” Athena ignored Nisha’ snickers behind her.

Sal wasn’t letting that one go though, looking downright delighted, “Nah, chica, if those marks on your neck are sayin’ anything, they’re sayin’ you’re not the one in charge.”

Athena slapped a hand over her neck, pale face bright red, but the damage was done.

The majority of the room shared knowing looks of amusement, from Tannis snickering behind her hand to Zer0’s bright red “>:D” of scandal.

Only two were left in the dark, both of them with twisting blue marks up their left arm.

Maya looked over at Axton in a way that implied he was usually the one she turns to for stuff like this, a rare change of leadership, “What’s Sal mean?”

“Oh, I’ll explain it to you later,” Axton looked at the sharp glare Athena was giving him, “By which I mean I totally won’t, please don’t anyone throw a shield at me.”

Angel had no particular recourse for this, just looking confused between the two women.

Before she could further question this in her mind, the rhythmic thumping brought Lilith and Roland down to the first floor. The latter calling out, “Alright, not sure why uh, everyone is here but anyone that actually stays here? Get upstairs, got a mission for you.”

The omission of Athena, Nisha and Angel was pointed. But what were they going to do about it?

Answer? Nothing. Passively leaving, idly wondering where they could pick up some breakfast.

Unaware of exactly what Roland and Lilith were planning up there.

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Half a week passed without them finding out, a boring few days where they quickly realized that there was a severely limited amount of things to do in Sanctuary. Angel content to just be left alone, not poked and prodded at, but the other two starting to go absolutely stir crazy.

They found themselves begging for something to do as they did little more than lounge around,
watching videos on the ECHOnet.

Just something, anything exciting.

When they got an answer to that tedium it wasn’t anything they wanted though.

Degrees of recognition for the man walking into Sanctuary, nearly bowled over by a tight hug around the waist by Lilith, varied.

Athena’d known him fairly well for a period of time but it was during a period of time in her life when connections just didn’t stick. Had too much work to do.

Angel knew him through screens, supposing that very technically she’d “talked” to him.

Nisha recognized him purely from description, having never seen him in person before. But like all Vault Hunters, he was easy to parse as not a single one is ever known for subtlety. Their presence always loudly announces who they are. If they’re anyone of note, you’ll always know who a Vault Hunter is in seconds.

This one in particular was heralded by a bird’s scream, circling above. Waiting for her dad to stick out an arm so she could spiral down and greet people as well.

Angel idly was almost excited, it had been interesting meeting Roland and Lilith after all that time talking to her only through projections. Any anger they would have had melted by her sickly appearance. She assumed the same of him.

But for Nisha and Athena it wasn’t a good exciting, it was a pitch black omen dark on the horizon. Watching the bird finally swoop down and land on Mordecai’s arm they knew what this meant.

If Lilith and Roland were bringing Mordecai back…

They were going to bring Brick back.
On A Wings And A Prayer

Chapter Notes

Just so you guys know there's gonna be a lot of rapidfire chapters and an unusually erratic post schedule for this one. I'm really hoping to get it done before Borderlands 3 comes out.

I'll be rolling DIRECTLY into the next chapter, hopefully done by tomorrow but maybe even tonight if everything goes exactly as planned.

Angel looked confused as Nisha quickly pushed past her and started almost running back to their house, “Where are you going?!”

Athena looked between the departing Nisha, the arriving Mordecai and the confused Angel.

Eventually deciding on calmly ordering the girl to “Stay here.” before taking off after Nisha.

By the time she caught up, the fleeing woman had already slid inside their house, stomped to their room, and was frantically packing what few belongings she had quickly into her tattered purple duffle bag. Mumbling something to herself about not dying today, not like this.

“Nisha-” Athena called out, only to be roughly cut off.

“Don’t know exactly what you’re going to say to me,” Nisha shook her head, “But whatever it is I ain’t buying. Stupid of us to think they ain’t gonna bring those two back at some point. Stakes are too high, they’re not leaving half their Vault Hunting group out in the cold. Sure as hell not gonna sit here like a lame duck and wait for them to bring back my executioner.”

“You know if you didn’t make a point of making every single massively deadly person you know into a deeply personal enemy this wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Shut up,” Nisha snarled, “Like you’re any better than me.”

“I don’t strangle the dogs of 7’4” hyper violent giants at least,” Athena replied flatly, “Means I’m at least smarter than you are.”

“Shut the hell up,” Nisha reiterated, cramming in her remaining clothes, “You coming with me or not?”

“Never took you as someone quick to run.”

“I ain’t. Thought that was something that wouldn’t chase me though.”

“The invincibility of having an intergalactic dictator as a boyfriend is fleeting.”

Nisha wanted to take a shot back but that was it. Back then she’s felt unstoppable, safe from anything that could possibly hurt her. Jack had the resources to ensure that anything she did wouldn’t come back to bite her in the ass. A literal eye in the sky watching over her.
“So, what's the answer? Whatever we do I think we should leave Angel here, she’ll be safer. Can have this whole little place to herself. Brick ain’t gonna touch her and she’s got… her little girlfriend now and…”

“We’re not leaving and we’re double not leaving Angel alone.”

“I mean, you wanna see me get beat to death? Because that’s what-”

Their conversation was derailed by the door opening. The quiet footsteps to their room seeming thunderous as Angel cracked the door open and peeked in at them, “What’s… what’s going on?”

They were never sure exactly how much Angel knew about anything, ever. Both knowing things she shouldn’t and oblivious of things she should.

“How much do you know about Nisha and Mordecai?” Athena asked, holding onto Nisha’s arm to prevent any further packing.

“Uhm,” Angel tapped her lower lip in thought, “Was it you who dated him?”

“Augh, ew, fuck no,” Nisha spat, “That was Moxxi, not gonna date an ugly old man.”

“Mordecai is younger than my dad?”

“Whatever, no,” Nisha waved a hand, “No, he’s… friends with Brick.”

“Do you know about Nisha and Brick?” was Athena’s follow up question, answered by Angel shaking her head. Giving Nisha an accusing look, she asked, “Why don’t you explain yourself then?”

Nisha shot her a look but folded, “I… strangled his dog.”

The tables turned for a second with the disapproving mother tone Angel took with her, “Nisha!”

“Look, times were different…” Nisha badly tried to justify her actions before giving up, “Either way, whatever, we have to get the fuck out of here. If Mordecai’s back they’re bringing his BFFF Brick back. Not just gonna take my death lying down..”

“I don’t think they’ll let him do that…” Angel looked back at the general direction of where they’d last seen the others, “I’ll go… I’ll go talk to them. Lilith seems to really like me.”

Of course she does, those blue tattoos crawling up your arm means you two are linked in some way.

Sirens were always like that, bonding to other Sirens.

Neither of them stopped her though, even with Nisha looking at Athena with utmost skepticism. Even when she started pulling Nisha’s stuff back out. Trying to make the choice for Nisha by herself.

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A week later, Nisha’s thought about creeping away in the dark every night.

If she was smart she would.

Angel had gone and talked to the three of the original Vault Hunters. Lilith and Roland had
claimed they wouldn’t let Nisha be killed, largely because of her informational usefulness. Not a trace of fondness there.

Especially Mordecai. The man had been glaring at them ever since, menacingly petting his weird ugly bird while making eye contact with them. No doubt twitching to throw the damned creature at them, let her rip them to shreds.

Nisha hated to admit it but it was intimidating.

They’d gotten out of town at least a few times though. Needed to resharpen their skills, even if they weren’t willing to get too far away from Sanctuary. Conversely, they hoped Jack wouldn’t stray too close TO Sanctuary.

But things seem to have shifted, from all they can tell. Best they could Lilith and Roland were tracking Jack on Pandora, hoping to ambush him until eventually the trail just… went cold. Roland’s general belief was that Jack had gone back up to Helios, especially if he realized where Angel and Co. had gone.

Considering the lack of barrages on Sanctuary the past week or so… that seemed likely.

In some ways it was a relief to know that the man was no longer actively hunting them but on the other hand, it meant he knew where they were.

A new kind of scary.

Idly, Nisha wondered if it would be worse to be killed by Brick or Jack.

But neither of the two violent men had shown up yet, Nisha living with her future feeling very Schrödinger’s Skag.

A distraction arises though.

On the long days where Angel is left to her own devices while Athena and Nisha try to get back into the swing of things she mostly wanders around town, talking to people.

Most people don’t seem to mind the girl. Moxxi lets her sit at the bar, both herself and Sir Hammerlock regaling her with some tales of bravery and intrigue. Claptrap certainly doesn’t mind the company. Helping Scooter a bit for a few bucks here and there while the man prattled off nonsense to her.

Marcus even let her play around in the shooting range. That one a bit of a disappointment to Nisha, not being there to see Angel fire a gun for the first time. Left only with Marcus ensuring her that Angel was a surprisingly good shot.

Even the original Vault Hunters didn’t seem to mind her sans Mordecai who had a standoffish, wary vibe towards her. Nothing that Athena or Nisha feared but something that left Angel feeling uncomfortable, only rarely making efforts to talk to the man who was usually eyeing her like he expected her to stab him if she got too close. Or shred him apart with her powers. Probably mostly the second thing.

But by far she spent the most time with the new Vault Hunters.

Especially Gaige, to no one’s surprise.

But regardless of the degrees of closeness, they’d become her friend group. Separated only by the
fact they can leave Sanctuary but she cannot.

Until they asked if she could.

Both Athena and Nisha were resistant to the idea, initially.

When Angel had posed it, the request was quiet, expecting an out and out no. Wing eating competition out at the Holy Spirits, both Maya and Salvador were competing. One participant more surprising than the other.

Both the new Vault Hunters and the old ones were going.

It was dangerous to peek outside but… Nisha’s previous sentiments of letting Angel live…

They said yes.

As long as both of them came with.

Even if Jack were to surface it would be sheer stupidity. A slaughter. Eleven Vault Hunters at once? Absolute insanity. Not even Jack had enough foolhardy, misplaced self confidence to try and fight that.

And that’s what led to them, standing at a fast travel station, watching Axton punch in his code to send them all the way out to the Highlands. It was usually him, they learned, who handled that. Maya said it made it harder to track them, if only one of them was ever the one in the machine. You’d never know if it was Axton alone or Axton with five or more Vault Hunters.

It never got less weird being pulled wildly through blindingly colorful time and space only to be dumped back onto grim old Pandora.

The Holy Spirits looked only moderately beat up so doing pretty well by Pandoran standards.

Inside was loud, everyone clustered around the bar and barely restrained as the bartender yelled loudly over them to try and organize the competition.

Waving Angel off to go and watch the carnage of the wing eating competition, Athena and Nisha crept upstairs. A quieter place to sit and a decent vantage point to peer down at the contest, should they get a bit curious.

“I’m scared,” Nisha confessed, hailing down a waiter to take their orders, “Angel… fuck, I know she says they’ll stop Brick but how the fuck do you stop Brick? You’ve seen the goddamn dude. That’s not a man you can just put a leash on.”

“It’s weird hearing you say that,” Athena gave her order to the waiter as well, “The scared part, not the leash part. I feel like trying to put someone on a leash is very up your alley.”

“Sounds like you wanna try that.”

“Sounds like you’re changing the subject.”

Nisha growled a little, looking at the chaos begin to unfold before as rakk wings began getting devoured at an alarming rate, “What, now I’m not allowed to get scared? I’m a human. That’s what we do.”

“Where would we even go?” Athena replied, shaking her head, “Even if we were to just up and leave it’s not like… look, ours options are stay in Sanctuary and take our chances with Brick or we
leave and face eventual, certain death at the hands of Jack.”

“I mean, I’ve thought about it and I guess I’d rather die to Brick than Jack. Big fucker doesn’t have the patience to torture me or anythin’, probably just rip off my head and be done with it. Worse ways to die on Pandora.”

Athena noted Angel’d been given a small plate of her own below. Surely not a part of the contest, if Athena had to try and read the face the bartender kept giving the sickly girl it was pity. Something about her just made people radiate to her, want to protect her.

He was giving a much more annoyed look to the red haired girl stealing wings from the contest though, turned completely with her back to the entire debacle. Focused entirely on talking to Angel or, more specifically, getting her to laugh.

“It’s nice seeing her smile,” Athena barely looked up at the waiter as he set her drink in front of her, “When this is all over… I think she’s set for a pretty nice life.”

“Got herself a little girlfriend and everything,” Nisha sounded proud, picking up her own drink with a laugh, “Heard the lil’ brat exploded a classmate before gettin’ shipped off planet. Pretty hardcore.”

“You know that was an accident, right?”

“Still badass.”

“What do… what do you think we’re going to do?” Athena asked.

“What, you don’t think they’re cute together?” Nisha raised an eyebrow, “I think they’re cute together.”

“No, I just mean… when this is all over,” Athena swept a hand behind them, both of them knowing the nearby town of Overlook as under Hyperion control albeit loosely, “When Jack’s gone and we’re…”

“Hopefully still alive?”

“Yeah.”

Nisha leaned back in her seat, a dangerous feat considering the large mug of beer in her hand, “Well… I was thinking we could take back Lynchwood. Asked Lilith about it once, she says some Hyperion forces are living on the edge that’s by the mining operation but nothing too extreme.”

“Miss being the sheriff?”

“Yeah and I miss my home,” Nisha sighed, taking a sip that nearly dumped it over her at the unnatural angel, “I know it was technically kind of a gift from Jack but… it was mine. He may have been how I got it but I like to think I was pretty good at it.”

“Nisha, you called it Lynchwood because you kept lynching people.”

“Yeah, well, they were criminals and bandits so-”

“You know you sound like Jack when you say shit like that, right?”

Nisha shot her a dirty look, “Say some shit like that again and I’ll show you soundin’ like Jack.”
“But if you’re thinking of making another murder town…” Athena tapped the table a few times, “I don’t want any part of that.”

“I mean, I liked my little murder town but…” Nisha didn’t even try to sugarcoat her previous actions, looking down at Angel, “I mean, if she’s coming with us it’s not like that was even an option in the first place.”

“Think you can handle being in charge of a bunch of regular folks?”

“I was thinkin’ we could turn it into another hub for Vault Hunters and people tryin’ to be that,” Nisha replied, clunking forward and spilling droplets of beer all over the table, “Sanctuary’s real fuckin’ small and already infested with tons of regular townsfolk.”

“What, you want to raise up the next generation of Vault Hunters?” Athena’s turn to raise an eyebrow, “Never took you for the type.”

“Already doin’ it with Angel kinda, might as well make a profession out of it.”

“Are you? Because last I checked Angel’s only field experience was ‘exploded a bunch of guys out of fear and self defense.’”

“I mean, she shot a gun with Marcus, right?” Nisha nodded towards the fast travel machine, “That’s the first step. Just you and me gotta teach her to get better at combat’s all.”

“I don’t… know if she wants that or not,” Athena replied, “I mean, you do you really think she’s even built to be a Vault Hunter?”

“She’s a Siren, ain’t she? I think she’s thinkin’ about it. Just needs a little help from Professor Kadam.”

“Professor Kadam. Sounds weird.”

“Shut up, you sound weird,” Nisha cackled, “Professor Athena sounds way more stupid. No last name havin’ weirdo.”

“Presumptuous of you to assume I’ll help be a teacher at your weird little Lynchwood University of Vault Hunting.”

“Ah, you’ll do it,” Nisha waved a hand dismissively at her, “I know you. All anyone’s ever gotta do is ask. And be pretty while they do it. You’re remarkably easy to corral.”

Athena wanted to protest that statement but deep down she knew it was true.

“First let’s see if we can even help Angel before we start dreaming of helping other people.”

Drinking the remainder of their drinks in silence they watched the carnage unfold below. Angel tucked just so out of the blast radius of flesh and sauce as the contestants ripped apart wing after wing with the type of gusto you could only see on Pandora.

Looking at the numbers displayed on a makeshift scoreboard though, the whole contest was a bit of a slaughter. One contestant leagues ahead of the others, soaring through the competition.

No doubt going to be the winner.
Maya groaned loudly, tattoos glowing almost blindingly bright even in the daylight as she was carried out of the Holy Spirits. First place trophy dangling from her hand, gently knocking against Krieg’s back as he walked.

Even with the mask on, he somehow managed to look proud of her.

Sal on the other hand looked very disgruntled with his silver second place trophy, “You know if you throw up, you gotta hand over that trophy. Right, pendejo?”

“Fuck…. you…..” Maya’s voice was muffled against Krieg’s shoulder, “Pry it from my dead hands…”

“Still think you cheated…” Sal grumbled, eyeing her golden prize hungrily.

“Told you… Siren powers….. burn calories……” Maya turned her head enough to smirk.

“Yeah, yeah, I ain’t a pretty Siren,” Sal pointed the tip of the trophy at her like a sword, “I’ll get you next time! Eat twice as much! Thrice as fast!”

“Good luck…” were Maya’s last words before she promptly fell asleep.

Sal opened his mouth for a final jab, gruffly cut off by Krieg smacking him upside the head with his free arm.

Athena and Nisha lagged behind as they excited, milling around outside and enjoying a stretch. Broken off into little groups to chat before heading home. Angel carefully peeling away from Gaige’s side to come back to her makeshift moms.

“Do you think I could join the contest in the future if I try hard enough?” Angel looked down at the peek of Siren tattoos visible, “Just have to figure out how to passively burn up enough without making myself pass out…”

“Maybe let’s worry about getting you back to a normal weight first,” Athena examined the girl’s arm, “You are looking healthier though lately.”

“Almost human colored again too,” Nisha noted the slight difference, just enough that Angel didn’t completely looking like a mummified corpse in pallor anymore, “Just gotta keep feedin’ you.”

“Joining the contests would feed me.”

“Maybe shoot for something a little higher than wing eating champion,” Athena replied, looking over at the out cold Maya.

Rocking back and forth, Angel gave them an answer to a question she didn’t know they had for her, “Well… I know things are dicey right now but maybe after… this is all over, you guys could… y’know, train me? To be a Vault Hunter like you two? Like them?”

Nisha grinned, ruffling her hair hard enough to expose her green eye, glinting in the sunlight, “Yeah, I think we can give that a shot.”
After that weird little afternoon things had shifted in a single act.

Nisha had made a habit of making herself scarce whenever Mordecai was around, been grateful that he’d soon left Sanctuary again to go off and deal with something out in the boonies. Keep his cold, judgemental eyes off of her.

But things quickly had gone sideways with that.

Their little trio hadn’t even had time to find out what had happened before they saw the aftershocks. Standing at the gate with Angel, the girl eager to see Gaige again after some time apart.

But that eagerness was dampened when they watched the missing Vault Hunters return.

Gaige was a bit off to the side, Axton having purposefully put himself between her and the already horribly drunk, slurring man half strangling him. Thin arm pressed against his neck but the only thing keeping Mordecai from slamming to the ground. Other arm gesturing wildly with a bottle of rakk ale, ranting in Truxican in the general direction of Salvador. Knowing he was the only one there who had any chance of understanding him anymore.

Whatever had happened… it was bad. Real bad.

The second Mordecai laid eyes on Nisha he broke away from Axton’s grip and smashed the empty bottle at her feet, pointing at her accusingly, “¡Áléjate de mí, mujer malvada!”

Not having any idea what he was saying, she froze with a confused stare. Interrupted only when Athena stepped between them. Carefully pushing his hand out of her face, “What happened?”

That only seemed to make Mordecai more fired up, a weird, active rage that was out of place on the usually quietly bitchy man.

He didn’t answer, just shoving past them and mumbling repeatedly to himself, “Lo siento, Blood… Lo siento…”

Eventually the information managed to creep its way around to them.

It came in two parts.
A confirmation that Jack had stopped actively chasing them, having returned to Helios.

And the information that he’d nuked Mordecai’s stupid bird from orbit.

That made sense with his erratic behavior, the man was known for two things. Being a massive drunk and loving his ugly grandma bird more than anything else on this godforsaken planet.

The mood in Sanctuary was somber, Moxxi’s bar somehow receiving amazing amounts of business and none at all as nobody else wanted to be around the grieving Vault Hunter hunched over the bar. Ordering drink after drink after drink.

Moxxi didn’t even look like she wanted to be there and she certainly didn’t want to be giving him inordinate amounts of alcohol but she hadn’t found an out yet.

Nisha’d avoided Mordecai even more since that moment, probably for the best as ‘drunk’ had become even more so his default state. Everyone did the same, really. Only Lilith getting close enough to try and talk to him. Sometimes throughout the day and every night to help him get back to the Headquarters to sleep.

Quickly it became normal to try and stay out of Sanctuary for as long as possible.

The new Vault Hunters going out more and more as a consequence. Doing something out deep in Hyperion territory to combat Jack, out by where the bunker had been. Leaving Angel without her newfound friends.

It seemed like a good a time as any to try and train Angel a bit.

They’re recruited another odd teacher, figuring once again that it was better to leave in packs.

Right now said teacher was sauntering ahead of them, blood red hair stark against the blue-tinted snow and ice of Three Horns. She’d seemed surprised when they asked her but both of them felt like having a more experienced Siren presence was for the best.

“Alright, kid,” Lilith grinned for the first time in weeks, “You got an experience with using your powers to kill?”

“Some…” Angel admitted, “Bandits attacked us at a motel but I… uhm…”

She mimed a small explosion with her hands with a squealchy noise.

“Ha, gross,” Lilith replied, “So like, are we talking a regular explosion? Elemental explosion? Just… blood and guts explosion?”

“The… last one. Kind of.”

“Kind of? Gonna need more specifics here, Angel.”

“Well… it’s kinda of like I just make them… fall apart at the joints. Like a broken doll.”

“Oh man, that’s brutal!” Lilith’s voice echoed in the valley, “Sooo badass! And gross. I just make fire and junk. Got wings though.”

“I do too but right now when I try to do most things I just… pass out,” Angel tapped the metal strapped tightly around her wrist.

It was clear on her face how much that made Lilith’s blood boil, having already been filled in on
“exactly what Jack had been doing to her, “Eridium addiction’s gonna be a bitch to kick, I won’t lie to you. But just... we’ll try having you do small things, test your limits to see what you can do before we try to expand it.”

While she intended to be careful, they still had a backpack full of eridium hanging off of Athena’s shoulders. Should worst come to worst. Overpacked, really, but it never hurts to be a bit overkill with safety.

“We’ll make this session pretty quick, Maya messaged me and said they’re coming back soon,” Lilith stretched with a groan, “First, have you do some shooting with Nisha. Second, some rudimentary combat training with Athena. Then some Sireny powery stuff with me. Considering my shit’s the most likely to knock you out of commission.”

“I’m excited,” Angel consciously fiddled with the device on her arm, gently twisting her hand around it, “I’ve never seen another Siren do something in person, it’ll be cool to see it firsthand.”

Lilith patted her on the arm before turning her to eagerly face Nisha, “Alright, start with Nisha though. Maybe I’ll treat everyone to some pizzas at Moxxi’s after we get back to Sanctuary. Maybe everyone else will be back too.”

Spare revolver put into her hand, Angel smiled at the thought that her dad would absolutely hate this.

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Angel’s first even training session had been a bit of a mixed bag in regards to success.

Nisha’s part went surprisingly well, Angel only nerfed by the kickback of the gun being harsh and unfamiliar to her. Athena’s went the worst by far, the girl awkward and ungraceful. Currently unsuited to things like combat rolls. Lilith’s a healthy medium, albeit tiring her out greatly.

By the time they were driving her back to Sanctuary she was sleepy, leaning on Nisha’s arm and curling around it.

Even Lilith herself had been a bit oblivious to exactly what it had been that the new Vault Hunters had been up to, knowing eventually they’d do... this but as they slid out of the car and walked into the gates of Sanctuary all four of them were blindsided by the sight less than twenty feet in.

His back was to them but there was no mistaking Brick for anyone else. Standing out from the small crowd around him by leagues, head and shoulders above the rest.

Wrapped tightly around his waist were too thin arms, clawed into the back of his leather vest. Eclipsing the grieving, downright inconsolable Mordecai clinging to him to keep himself from crashing drunkenly to the ground.

Nisha’s first instinct to run was put to rest, the guards already closing the gates behind them with a thundering slam. Oblivious or uncaring about what would happen to her. Probably the former. But maybe the latter.

For a mad second she considered other options but Brick half let go of Mordecai long enough to see her standing there. Frozen like a skag in headlights.

Timing was the key here. Lilith and Roland had figured they could just separate the two at the start since Nisha was hiding so much already. Explain the situation to him. Let the giant man come to terms with the fact that Nisha was in Sanctuary. That she was helping them. That you shouldn't rip
her limb from limb on sight for what she did to Dusty.

But there hasn't been time for all of that. Or any.

Meaning there was absolutely no barrier between Brick and "rip Nisha's head clean off."

Mordecai stumbled nearly to the ground at suddenly having his support pulled away, only stopped by the firm grasp of Roland on his upper arm. Yelling it at their friends currently rushing his target with empty bloodlust in his eyes, "BRICK. DON'T."

This did less than nothing to stop Brick from slamming into Nisha like a goddamn truck. First calculated punch crashin into her in an erratic burst of static as it simultaneously took out her shield and shattered the device itself.

Painfully dazing Nisha as it sent her flying back, slamming high against the metal gates before crumpling to the ground.

Angel shrieked, instinctively clamping onto Athena’s arm in terror. Preventing the woman from leaping at the massive assailant, trying to pull away from her vice grip without hurting her, “Angel! Let go!”

She wasn’t the only one trying to stop him though.

Lilith’s attempt to stop any further attacks was almost comically brushed off, instantly breaking her grasp on his arm as he rushed towards Nisha again, barely managing to make it to her feet.

Grabbing Nisha by the front tie of her shirt Brick easily slid her painfully up against the wall while she futilely struggled, feeling like her clawing hands were nothing more than a kitten’s claws and her kicks finding themselves glancing harmlessly off his chest. Completely unphased by her assault.

Less than fifteen feet away everyone stood back, horrified. None of the new Vault Hunters looking to go toe-to-toe with the giant although more than one of them looked like they wanted to help, deep down. Only Athena straining to, still finding herself somehow unable to unhook the desperate grasp on her arm.

“Brick!” Lilith shouted, having to jump up to even get a grip on his arm again and make a weak effort to pull him off of her, “Stop, she’s-”

“She’s what?!” Brick barked back, “Give me one good reason not to crack her head open for what she did to Dusty!”

“She’s helping u-”

“Shit reason.”

He pulled his arm back, Lilith panickedly calling out to their friend watching the scene unfolding with wary eyes, “MORDECAI! Make him stop!!”

That paused things for just a second. All eyes, even Brick’s, on the skinny man. Drunken stare cold and apathetic but not thoughtless, a conscious silence as his face pulled into a sneer. Like a Roman coliseum crowd deciding a man’s fate, his silence was a firm condemnation of Nisha’s life as worthless. A wordless thumbs up.

“MORDECAI!!” Lilith snapped at him, “SAY SOMETHING!”
He said nothing. Just a terse nod at Brick.

Brick grinned widely at that, ignoring the loud “BRICK, SERIOUSLY, STOP.” shouted at him from Roland. Jerking back his arm again, uncaring about the struggling and kicking growing more frantic. Eager to turn Nisha’s skull into a meat pinata against the cold steel of the ga-

It wasn’t who Brick expected to try and succeed at stopping him, suddenly enveloped in a twisting ball of purple and darkness. Lifted harmlessly off the ground like a ragdoll, dropping Nisha on her ass. Scrambling away, quickly falling into Athena’s arms as she finally managed to get out of Angel’s fearful deathgrip.

Squinting in effort, Maya released the swirling orb in her own hand. Letting Brick drop to the ground with an authoritative, “Rush her again, I can do this all day.”

“HOUGH!” Gaige hooked her clawed arms over her head before bringing them down sharply, “That was so BADASS, Maya!!”

The tension broken, Brick was disarmed. Feeling rather like a child who was just chastised by his mother except infinitely more confused about the whole ordeal. Shaking his head, he looked back up towards Nisha with the same hateful glare. Measuring if he could get to her before being trapped again.

But as Athena put herself between them, shield up, he knew it couldn’t be done fast enough.

Growling, he shook his head, “Whatever you’re thinkin’ Lil you’re bein’ a damn idiot.”

Each step he took made everyone around him wary, ready for him to bolt towards Nisha again especially as he kept his glare firmly locked onto her. Burning a hole in her head as all five of his brain cells focused on the mental image of killing her, ripping her limb from limb, smashing her head open.

He only stopped when he reached Mordecai. Putting a massive arm around the shoulders of the only person who didn’t feel like a massive traitor to him right now. Only confirming it as he rasped, “I’da let you. You deserve it.”

Brick’s grip tightened affectionately as he led the drunken man away.

The other quickly scattering into the depths of Sanctuary to avoid the pair.

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“I don’t need to go to the doctor,” Nisha resisted being pulled towards one of two shifty medical professionals, “I’m fine.”

“That bruise isn’t fine,” Athena retorted, pointing at Nisha’s slightly exposed stomach, “And neither is that burn.”

“Never had a shield explode before…” Nisha admitted.

But the one thing she wouldn’t admit to was how much this injury goddamn HURT. The now destroyed shield might have saved her life but damned if the punch still hadn’t nearly done her in.

Angel was unusually quiet, hands clasped over each other as they walked.

Didn’t say a word until Nisha had disappeared into Dr. Zed’s, voice even more quiet than usual,
“Am I… a bad person?”

Athena raised an eyebrow at that, “Don’t get how you’ve taken Nisha nearly getting beat to death over her own stupid choices as a reflection on you but no, you’re not.”

“When Brick was threatening Nisha,” Angel clarified, “I… stopped you. From helping. Held you in place because I just…”

“Didn’t want me to be in danger over Nisha.”

Already tears were forming in Angel’s eyes, crushing her own hand, “Nisha’s the one who saved me but… I stopped… I didn’t…”

Crying. The one emotional thing Athena had never mastered.

Instantly she froze up, all social graces gone, “I uh, shit, it’s… it’s okay? Just… just head back home, alright? We’ll have a nice little dinner in a bit, Nisha’s not mad at you, I promise.”

Angel reluctantly nodded, giving Athena a tight hug before taking off.

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Whatever Dr. Zed was doing in there it was taking a while. Scans, Athena assumed. Making sure there was no internal damage on the banged up Nisha.

She wasn’t alone out there for long though, hearing the door just twenty feet down open up.

Janey. Not exactly the person she wanted to hear from.

But she was coming right at her.

For a too-long second Athena wasted her chance to escape by trying to choose between ducking into Dr. Zed’s with them or just bolting to Claptrap’s corner.

She was socially trapped though, feeling Janey’s hand on her shoulder as she pointedly tried to pretend she hadn’t seen her coming, “I saw what happened. Is Nisha okay?”

“Dr. Zed’s checking, she’s probably fine,” was the curt answered, Athena keeping her arms crossed and warily making sure Janey wasn’t going to go for another kiss.

“That’s… good,” Janey lied, twisting a rag she’d forgotten in her pocket, “I just… it’s… it’s not my place to bring this up but…”

“Then don’t,” Athena cut her off.

Janey was undaunted though, “Do you really think going with Nisha is the best idea?”

“Jealousy’s an ugly look,” Athena pulled her arms tighter against herself, side eyeing Janey warily, “Better not let Nisha hear you talking to me like that.”

“You’re not… you’re not the best at social situations, I know that but… Nisha? Nisha’s worse somehow. I just don’t want to see you get hurt trying to defend someone who just… does the undefendable all the time. She makes a lot of enemies, Athena, do you really think you can protect her from all of them?”

“Nisha doesn’t need protecting,” Athena looked away, “She’s not like you. She’s like me.”
That raised some hair on the back of Janey’s neck, pleasantry melted away, “I’m just worried about you, it-”

“Then don’t.”

Janey narrowed her eyes.

“Fine, get yourself killed over an intergalactic dictator’s ex-girlfriend! See if I care!”

She watched Janey literally throw up her hands and leave, quietly ranting and raving to herself as she disappeared towards the Crimson Raiders HQ. Not staying there but must be somewhere past it. Maybe right before Marcus’s place.

Athena just sighed, closing her eyes and wishing that things could be different.

Angel got most of the way home without seeing anyone in particular she knew, most of them quickly having scuttled away after the confrontation.

It was a bit unnerving seeing Brick so close to their home, sitting on the steps up to Moxxi’s but the sad, vacant look on his face said that he wasn’t aware of that fact. Most likely just waiting on Mordecai, wanting some fresh air.

Logic would dictate that Angel should turn around and just find any excuse not to go home right now but she found herself propelled forward until she was standing about five feet in front of him.

When he looked up there was no recognition on his face beyond seeing her earlier, flatly stating, “Hey. You’re the girl that was with Athena and… who the hell are you?”

The Siren tattoos twisting up her arm hadn’t gone without note. His eyes constantly flickering to her exposed left wrist, blue tattoos just barely visible around the hefty gauntlet looking device.

“I’m…” the one who guided you to the Vault? the one who lied to you? Jack’s daughter? She settled on, “Angel. My name is Angel.”

It took a couple seconds but this time recognition did spark to life on his face, “You’re…”

“I am,” she nodded, seeing no reason to lie, “And you’re Brick. I wish we could have met in person in better conditions.”

His wariness was being beaten out by curiousness, eyeing the cowgirl get up she’d continued to don, “Suppose I should be angry at you for the whole Vault thing but I ain’t. Just… more wonderin’ who the hell you are and why you’re hangin’ around Nisha. And why you’re so…”

There was a general gesture towards all of her. She’d managed to put on a couple pounds since being rescued by she was far from escaping her corpse-like look.

Honestly she was pretty sure it was why the man was so non-hostile towards her.

“I know you’re… not exactly Nisha’s biggest fan,” the understatement of the year, “But she saved me from my dad, helped me escape the lab and I can just… try to have a normal life. Kinda.”

“Who’d your dad?”

Really hit the nail on the head, huh.
For a second that did make Angel hesitate but she figured if he wasn’t going to knock her out over Nisha he wouldn’t over…

Reaching up she went through the motions. Pushing aside her hair in the same way as she had many times now, a wordless, quiet way to reveal herself without potentially alerting everyone in the whole damn city.

Blue and green, even Brick didn’t have to think on that one. Looking uneasily at her like he wanted to say something but she couldn’t guess what, instead just landing on, “Hell of a shitty dad.”

“You’re telling me,” Angel let the short hair fall back into place, “So if you could just… not kill one of my new caretakers I’d appreciate that. I know… I know what she did to you and I’m sorry for that but… I need her. I need her and Athena to help keep me safe.”

Looking away with a grimace, gripping his own knee painfully tight, “If she fails to keep you safe I ain’t making any promises.”

A lovely stipulation. If you die, she dies. No pressure.

But Angel figured it was the best they were going to get.

“Thank you, Brick,” Angel nodded, “I’ll just have to make sure I stay alive so things don’t come to that.”

He nodded with a sigh, “Yeah. Maybe eat a lil’ more. Got enough bone thin people around here.”

“I’ll try,” Angel had no doubt by the way his gaze began to ghost backwards he was no doubt thinking of Mordecai inside. One-ten soaking wet, drunk out of his mind.

Belligerent if the sudden commotion from inside was to be believed.

Swearing, Brick left her to go deal with the rowdy Mordecai. Enraged at being cut off, cursing out Moxxi, banging on her countertop.

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Eventually Nisha resurfaced, her side wrapped up tight but looking none worse for the wear, “Doc says I’m gonna look like a Bullymong got at me for a while but I should be fine. Enough.”

“You’re lucky Brick didn’t catch you alone…”

“Knew we shouldn’t’ve stayed,” Nisha shook her head, taking off and eager to get home and just had a midday nap, “It was stupid. The hell we gonna do from here on out? Only in one piece because of Maya. Gonna have to thank the girl somehow.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a chance for that but just… we’ll just go home. Have you stay in. I’ll go and try to smooth this out later, okay? Brick’s diffused at least.”

“For now,” Nisha scoffed, hand over her wounded stomach, “Big bastard’s definitely going to hold a grudge.”

“Well, that’s nobody’s fault but your own. You know that right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the big bad wolf. What else is new?”
The Trolley Problem

Chapter Notes

Third update this week, still well on track to get this done before Borderlands 3 comes out. Might take a break and pop in a Punch-Drunk chapter though, eager to get the next piece of that done even though I have no such time limit on it.

Still condensing things into less but longer chapters. Keeps me more on track for completing this bad boy.

Nisha never knew why Brick backed off after that, even though he continued to glare her like a junkyard dog glaring at a mangy alley cat. Like he’d eat her alive if the chain around his would just break already.

It was an uncomfortable new normal, one nobody was quite happy about. The continued efforts to leave Sanctuary more and more only growing as people realized that Mordecai had been cut off at the bar. Mostly skulking around with Brick, annoyed at even him for not further enabling his drinking habits.

But not pulling away like he was with the others. Merely grumbling and continuing to let the man stay in personal space bubble. Even grouchily cuddling up to him at times, whenever he thought no one else was looking.

When the new Vault Hunters invited the trio to help them liberate Overlook they were more than happy for an excuse to do so.

While Angel was allowed to tag along from the back while they fetched some medicine she wasn’t allowed into deeper territory. Forced to watch things from a distance, flanked by Gaige and Axton as body guards.

Feeling rather helpless, even as she was allowed a few controlled shots from a long, long distance.

Angel was a bit annoyed that she was shuffled into the Holy Spirits for the affair, joined by an equally annoyed Gaige who was refusing to let her hang out by herself. Indignant about the circumstances, “It’s bullshit, we can TOTALLY help. Lilith told me Angel melted some dudes, I wanna see her melt some dudes!”

That wasn’t enough to sway Nisha, pointing at them with a stern, “Stay.”

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Maybe things would have been okay, the Hyperion siege was remarkably easily dispatched but that also could have simply been sheer numbers. The eight of them easily doing work that could have been done by four.

Jack might not have been expecting that big of a turn out.

Or maybe he just didn’t care. Or something else.
Seeing the townsfolk of Overlook creep out from their houses was worth it. Sickly and scared but happy. A small group but still enough to eagerly crowd around the Vault Hunters, happy to have the medicine distributed out to them.

Eventually Karima stepped forward, harshly stuttering but taking Maya’s hand in hers. Trembling with both sickness and excitement as she thanked them for saving them, insisting that they could throw them a party. Just give them an hour, tops.

Maya was reluctant to accept the offer but eventually did, watching everyone scatter to begin setting up.

“Let’s get Angel and Gaige back out here.”

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It was amazing watching the little celebration come together, so quickly even with the coughing and shivering people of Overlook.

Granted the fact they let some of the Vault Hunters help definitely was a factor in that. Also a few Zafords, maybe making a bit of profit off of this, but helping nonetheless.

Heavy lifting being done by Salvador, Axton and Athena, the utilized height of Zero and Krieg, Angel and Gaige off to the side helping organize the food table.

A few lagged back though with nothing really to do, Nisha and Maya leaning against a defunct job board.

“Ain’t got a chance yet to thank you for what you did back in Sanctuary but uh, thanks,” Nisha looked over, “You definitely weren’t the one I was picturin’ stepping forward to help me.”

“You’re welcome,” Maya nodded, “I just… nobody else was. Everyone else was too scared or Athena was being held back by Angel and just… nobody else was going to.”

“Most everyone else thinks I deserved it, probably.”

Maya looked contemplative for a second before responding, “I think we all do.”

Nisha shot her a look, “Jeez, thanks for the confirmation.”

“Oh! No, I don’t- I didn’t mean we all think you deserve to die,” Maya awkwardly sprung upright, “I mean we all… we’ve all done something that we probably ‘deserve’ to die for. I just… don’t think anyone being killed makes things ‘right’ you know?”

“I dunno I can think of a few deaths that would probably benefit the world.”

“That’s true,” Maya cautiously leaned back against the board again, “But there’s a difference between killing an active danger and killing someone who’s trying to be a better person.”

Trying to be a better person. It wasn’t like Nisha hadn’t thought of this whole ordeal like that before but it was weird hearing someone else saying it.

“Well… thanks for that, too,” Nisha flashed her a smile, “Sayin’ you don’t want me dead’s a real compliment to me, everything considered. Hey, maybe if things don’t work out with Athena…”

Maya’s face went bright red instantly, hands defensively jerking up, “I can’t- we’re not- I’m with
K-

Nisha cackled, smacking Maya’s arm, “I’m just teasin’ you! Calm down, don’t pop a blood vessel.”

A reminder that she was an outsider was seeing Krieg jerk up at the fleshy slap noise, staring her down with his one visible eye. Nisha just gave him an awkward little ‘I’m not hurting her!’ wave. He went back to helping lift a banner but not without stealing more nervous looks at her.

Maya figured if she acted normal it would help with that, “Well, either way, you’re turning your life around. Athena is a major step up from Jack, that’s for s-”

It wasn’t over. The sudden slams coming from just outside town heralding a fresh new wave after wave of bots stomping towards the town. And…

My god, that had to be every single Hyperion force that had been holed up in all of the Highlands.

How had they snuck up on them like this?

Maya leapt to action first, calling out to her team, “Gaige! Stay back by Angel! Everyone else, come with me! Athena, Nisha, you too!”

Nobody had any objections to this, running through the crowd of panicked and scared Overlook citizens rushing to try and get back into their houses. The sounds of dozens of locks clunking into place and door being barricaded loud enough that even over the sound of the crashing bots and yelling forces.

This was a fight of a scale that none of them was used to but Axton and Athena, such a pointed overuse of resources. Like a siege, not the normal kind of force you’d see outside a warzone.

They could do it though, there were enough of them.

Slamming proverbially into the wall of Hyperion forces the carnage began. All they had to do was keep shooting and slashing and searing through until there was nothing left.

Nothing weird but numbers.

No big bad.

At least, at the front lines.

Gaige didn’t like being this far back from the action, anxiously sending out Deathtrap to help and awkwardly fumbling around with the corrosive Maliwan sniper rifle.

Zer0’d insisted she have one on hand at all times but she’d largely ignored it until now. It had been Axton who’d taught her to fight after all, her experience in the mid to short range mostly. She felt sluggish with her shots as her shots landed weakly. Body shots that did little more than slow enemies down.

Angel felt similarly ineffective, far too far from the action outside town to do anything. Armed with nothing more than the hand me down Jakobs revolver, shooting from this distance nothing but a waste of ammo.

But they wouldn’t be keeping their eyes to the horizon for long, both of them stumbling back from the dead fast travel suddenly jumping to life.
Backing away from it, towards Karima’s house they suddenly realized exactly how isolated they’d become.

Watching the figure materialize in front of them there was no doubt who it was for a second.

Still backing away until they reached the end of the cliff, they watched Jack step forward into reality. Looking around, he paid only a moment’s notice on the small war going on at the edge of town. Knowing his quarry wasn’t going to be down there.

Just turning to face the two girls, Gaige putting herself between Angel as she pulled out her Torgue shotgun, “Stay back!”

“Well, aren’t you a ratty little brat,” he replied, checking one last time to make sure nobody else had noticed before stalking after them, “C’mon Angel, say bye-bye to your weird little bandit friend. It’s time to come home. You’re safe now.”

Angel tried to talk back, tried to have some cool, witty remark like Nisha or some defiant statement letting him know how she really felt like Athena. But her voice was a strangled whisper, not even audible to Gaige as she pressed against her metallic arm. Twisting her clothes in her hands. Feeling smaller and smaller with each step he took towards them.

“She doesn’t want to go with you!!” Gaige pointed the gun at him, pulling the trigger a second too late.

Her shot missed as he shoved the barrel of the gun out of the way, grabbing her by the throat in one swift motion. Ripping her out of Angel’s grasp as he held her over his head, eyes gleaming, “And who the hell asked your opinion, pumpkin? What even are you, a rabid Pippi Longstocking?”

“Put… put her down…” Angel’s voice barely loud enough to be heard over Gaige’s gasping breaths, shakily stumbling towards him like a newborn Drifter, “I’ll come with you just… put her down… please…”

The look he gives her is one she’s never seen before, at least never in person.

A cold, mirthful smile usually only reserved for when he’s come up with what he thinks is some clever punishment for someone daring to try and stop one of his rampages.

“Alright,” Jack agreed, Angel immediately realizing her mistake, “I’ll put her down.”

With ease he brought his arm back and sent Gaige flying back over the edge of the cliff, her muffled choking turning to an echoing scream.

“Now get over h-” Jack reached to grab at Angel’s arm only to miss as he watched her, without hesitation, dive off the cliff after Gaige.

His mad scramble to continue to grab at the air after her nearly sent him crashing over the side himself, sliding roughly on his stomach to make one final, fruitless attempt to get her by the ankle. Screaming her name after her as she fell.

He almost sounded more angry than sad.

Now Angel didn’t exactly have a lot of experience with midair rescues- or really any- but tucking in her arms she knew this was either do-or-die. Gaining speed on the wildly flailing Gaige, diving at her like a bird of prey. Squinting against the sandy wind berating her face, trying not to think about how incredibly close the craggy rocks they were falling alongside were.
Or how quickly they were getting to the cracked, scorched earth below.

Slamming into Gaige, Angel roughly jabbed the button on the device on her wrist. Flinching against the stab of the needle and sickening rush of purple flowing into her veins.

But she’d need it if-

Hugging Gaige tightly to herself Angel brought out her wings.

The sudden stop was jerky and brief and way too close to the ground for comfort. Angel and Gaige coming to a rough, dangling stop for just a second before the wings disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Dropping them the remaining twenty feet to the ground.

Landing hard and painful but alive.

Dazed and panting from the rush of adrenaline, Angel was more than happy to just lay there in the dirt and appreciate the fact she’d done it but Gaige was already on her feet, grabbing her by the hand and tugging, “Get up, quick! There’s a Catch-a-Ride right there, we gotta go before Jack catches up!”

Getting her legs under her in a zombie-like daze, Angel dizzily followed after Gaige.

---

The next twenty minutes were a blur to Angel. Passively climbing into the back of the Bandit Technical and laying there on her back. She could feel Gaige pull away, yelling some plan about making it look like they were going into the Dust only to turn around. Something about a different fast travel station, something about Overlook not being safe to go back to.

Where she able to sit up and talk, Angel might have protested. Saying they should just wait out the fight, try to reunite with everyone else.

But she couldn’t.

Watching the world fly over her head, Angel knew she couldn’t pass out.

It was all she wanted though, to close her eyes. Forget about this world, about everything.

But it wasn’t long until they were at the other Fast Travel station and Gaige was pulling her out of the truck again, frantically chattering away about getting back to Sanctuary and getting Lilith.

When Gaige punched in her code the machine spoke up though.

“Hyperion wishes to apologize but due to a very personal emergency, Handsome Jack has temporarily suspended the Hyperion Fast Travel Network.”

With a loud frustrated yell, Gaige kicked the base of the thing hard. Immediately regretting it as she fell on her ass, clutching her now injured foot with a thunderous, “FUCK!”

Her brain slowly waking back up, Angel looked around. Recognizing the area she’d seen through the lens of a camera many, many times. Seeing the city looming in the distance she spoke, “Gaige… Opportunity. My dad… my dad’s shut down the fast travel network before but he never does it in the city. Said it’s bad for business. Needs to be able to get to his men and get his men back to Helios. If we get in there…”

“Are you crazy ?!” Gaige replied, sweeping her arms out wildly, “That’d be total suicide!!”
“So is standing out here,” Angel looked back towards the others, “Did you see-”

Spotted. Must be more forces on their way to Overlook, sidetracked by seeing a face which was no doubt posted everywhere. Wanted, alive.

There were only a few men in the car but it was enough.

Scrambling back into the truck, Angel ordered, “Opportunity! Now!”

Gaige obliged without retort.

- - -

The distance they’d had on those Hyperion forces had been more than enough to get into the city with time to spare but when Gaige approached the Fast Travel station at the entrance they only got the same message.

This time Angel managed to stop Gaige before she assaulted the machine in a rage again.

Gaige turned to leave the same way they came but it was too late, the guards catching up to them.

It was late though, the sun sunken low in the sky. If they could just… get to a hiding spot and wait until morning they could send a text message to their friends and just… wait it out, right?

Taking off deeper into the city, Gaige oddly found Angel leading the way, “Do you know your way around here?”

“A bit,” Angel responded, “It was… boring in captivity to say the least. Dad was always talking about the city, always leaving the blueprints up and pointing out things he was most proud of in it. There’s… there’s this little hidden room, if we just get in there…”

They both shut up, diving into a bush to avoid a guard that suddenly came around the corner. Whistling to himself the whole way, obliviously passing by them, and disappearing around the other corner.

Bursting out again they kept going, Gaige looking around wildly as Angel led her by the hand, “Holy shit this place’s layout is confusing. He expects people to live here?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Angel replied, having to admit that Opportunity was one of Jack’s less evil and more normal projects, “It’s just… here!”

Leading her down some stairs, Angel opened up a very inconspicuous set of doors leading to a wide open, empty room with just some computers sitting in it. The way the dust seemed to settle on every surface said this wasn’t a place they’d be disturbed.

Excitingly some extra Hyperion uniforms hung in the corner, something perfect to drape over themselves tomorrow as they snuck back out of the city.

“There,” Angel stumbled to a corner and slumped to the ground, exhausted, “That was… more physical activity than I’ve done in eons…”

Gaige slid down next to her, putting her weapons to the side with a sigh she pulled out her ECHO device, “What should I tell them?”

“Tell them… tell them we’re safe for now and we’ll tell them more in the morning,” Angel replied, knowing it was a bit of a lie, “Everyone’s going to be burnt out from the fight, they might not have
even noticed we’re gone yet. Just… we’ll tell them in the morning. My dad beefs up security here at night, it’s when the bandits like to attack.”

Gaige didn’t relish the thought of spending a nice on the cold metal ground but she complied, grumbling, “This never would have happened if they just let us in the fight.”

“They just wanted to keep us… well, me, safe.”

“Yeah I get that I’m supposed to be like… your knight in shining armor but you’re not like, some weak little girl or anything. I mean, you’re a Siren and like the shit Maya and Lilith do is like fwwuuaaahh peww kuhhsplash!”

Gaige crudely made some gestures imitating the always alarming Siren ability to just kinda explode people.

“I mean you can do that, right?” Gaige responded, “I don’t know much about Sirens, they’re not really… a thing on Eden-5.”

“Yeah, I’ve exploded a few people on accident in self defense,” Angel couldn’t help but be amused by that thought in hindsight.

“Twinsies!” Gaige piped up, doing little jazz hands, “I, uh, accidentally exploded my rival Marcy at our Science Fair. I mean Deathtrap did but I built Deathtrap so like exploding-by-proxy.”

Giggling behind her hand, Angel asked, “What’d Marcy ever do to you?”

“She stole my designs and was a total fucking bitch ass narc about it!” Gaige threw her hands up, “Just INSTANTLY sold it to the man. Like, my Deathtrap is supposed to help those who can’t help themselves not fuckin’ enforce fascism!”

“Your robot’s cute,” Angel replied, face dropping a bit, “I used to have a robot too but I didn’t build her. Her name was H4L0-trap.”

“Uh, a Claptrap unit?” Gaige forcibly kept the judgemental edge out of her voice, “What happened to her?”

“One day she just… short circuited. Dad said he couldn’t fix her it was some kind of fatal flaw in the units. Burned out all of them but one, the one in Sanctuary.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure just Sir Hammerlock fixed Claptrap and I don’t think it was terribly hard either,” Gaige absentmindedly drummed her fingers on her metal arm, “Like, if he can’t even fix a Claptrap what’s he even doing? I helped Claptrap get something out of his guts like a week ago, they’re not that complex.”

“Well… maybe after he’s dead we could find her body. Dad said he’d keep her for me and try to fix her once they found a way so maybe you could get her back online for me.”

“Deal!” Gaige chirped, patting at her own knees tucked up against her chest, “That’ll be so easy but then, like, you’ve gotta show me you exploding a dude. I mean, the possibilities! I’ve heard Sirens can even like, melt your mind right out of your skull! Or you could burst someone’s heart like KALI MA! KALI MA!!”

Reaching out, Gaige put a clawed hand against Angel’s sternum and twisted gently. Laughing at her own joke before realizing exactly what she was doing.
“Oh! Uh, fuck, shit, sorry,” Gaige whipped her hand away, “Didn’t uh, think through what’s in front of the heart. Which is boobs. Sorry.”

Angel only laughed though, “It’s okay, not like I have much anyways. We should try to get some rest before tomorrow I’m… it takes a lot out of me when I bring out the wings.”

Disappointed their conversation was cut off early Gaige had to agree though, “Yeah you… look pretty beat.”

She couldn’t help but blush bright red as Angel stretched out a bit, curling her long, thin arms around Gaige. Pulling her close, the two of them supporting each other’s weight so they wouldn’t fall over in their sleep.

“Night, Gaige.”

“Uh, night, Angel.”

---

The slaughter of the Hyperion forces had taken every ounce of energy out of the Vault Hunters, the sheer numbers grinding them down to a nub.

Athena poorly tried to wipe the blood from her shield, doing little more than splattering her shoes, “Augh, disgusting.”

“Is everyone alright?” Maya panted out, hanging onto Krieg’s arm for support as she staggered towards the center, “Where’s Zer0?”

Axton pointed to a pile of corpses, Zer0 lying over the top.

“Tired or dead?”

Zer0 raised a hand, middle finger up.

“Don’t sleep in the corpses,” Maya chastised, ignoring the ‘>:($.‘ she got in response “You’re going to give one of us a heart attack one of these days.”

“Humans, so fragile,” Zer0 shakily pushed themself up, annoyed, “Your organs, so pathetic / Give out on a whim.”

Salvador cackled as he promptly shoved Zer0 back into the corpse pile.

“Where’s Gaige and Angel?” Nisha squinted towards the town, “Did they take cover back there?”

“I saw them shooting earlier,” Axton stepped over some destroyed, sparking machinery, “Probably ran out of sniper ammo and wanted to lay low. Gaige never did like long distance.”

Exhaustedly slogging into town they found no hide or hair of either of the girls though, not even when they split off to knock on all the doors. Every failure dropping a cold stone of sickening worry into Athena’s stomach.

But Nisha? Nisha was getting more and more frantic. Just barely stopped by Maya before making a grab at a townspeople near the end. One who she thought was a bit shifty, hand just barely raking his shirt with a shouted, “You know somethin’, spit it out!!”

The only thing that really stopped her from breaking down the door and giving him the third
degree was her ECHO device going off.

A message from Gaige, cryptically saying they were safe and they’d tell her more in the morning.

Nisha didn’t like that.

Neither did anyone else particularly enjoy hearing the message relayed to them.

Quickly they decided to put up camp in Overlook tonight, all of them coming to the mutual agreeance that the girls must not have gone terribly far. Wherever they’d gone, easily accessed from this location.

They’d just… have to wait.

Every Vault Hunter’s least favorite thing.

- - -

Waking up in the dark, hidden room was disorienting. No sun to let them know what time it is, as vague a concept as that was on Pandora anyways.

Going to push herself up, Angel looked back at the disguises, “We should just send the message to meet us outside of Opportunity then suit up and go. We’re in the middle of the city but the edges always have less of a patrol than the center where the valuable stuff is.”

Gaige put an arm around Angel’s waist, “Orrr we could stay here and call them and have them pick us up? Just kinda… hang out. Continue cuddling maybe. Let the legion of like seven huge badasses clear the way out.”

“I don’t…” Angel shook her head, getting out the grasp and standing up, “I don’t like the idea of that much bloodshed. Overlook was already a slaughter, I don’t like having this much blood on my hands.”

“Something you’re gonna have to get used to if you wanna be a Vault Hunter,” Gaige hooked her hands behind her head, leaning back, “Loots of blood. Lots of murder.”

“Let me at least adjust,” Angel responded, pulling down one of the too-big uniforms, “I don’t want to just… jump into the deep end with no floaties.”

Gaige couldn’t fault her for that, pulling out her ECHO device and beginning to type, “Alright, tellin’ Nisha and them to meet us outside the city. I’m telling them to come in if we’re not out there though, alright?”

Angel didn’t really have a choice but to nod, “Let’s hurry then, get your disguise on.”

Slinking out they knew that they should still avoid the patrols, their disguises not the best. Obviously several sizes too big for them.

But better than nothing, they supposed, at least the helmets hid their faces.

Creeping out they found the little plaza deserted, morning light streaming through the austere buildings. Seeming almost too perfect.

“Let’s go back the way we came, along the side,” Angel whispered, heading up the stairs.

This proved immediately a bad idea, both having to duck back down as multiple guards began
Pacing.

Pressed against the wall they found out why.

The Hyperion forces they’d seen yesterday, the ones that had arrived before them?

They’d told everyone.

Hearing the passing guards amicably chatting about the fact “Jack’s missing daughter’s in Opportunity, it’s that crazy? Living up to the name. Catch that girl alive, you’re set for life. You heard how much he’s offering?”

Holding a finger to her lips, Angel pulled Gaige the opposite direction, “Other side. More people maybe but shorter walk.”

They froze as they heard one more sentence, from the other guard, “Did you see Jack?”

First guy responded, “From a distance, near the entrance, I ain’t getting close to the guy. Not unless I’ve got that little girl by the arm, ready to receive riches beyond my wildest dreams.”

“Not if I gun you down for her first,” the second guy cackled, joined by the other. Sound of him slapping his friend on the arm quiet as they walked further and further away.

Angel was quiet as they started moving again, not talking until they were decently far away with an uncomfortable adjustment of her borrowed helmet, “There’s… there’s maybe an exit by the back. Front’s a no-go. We’ll just… have a while to walk. Try to look confident and like we’re supposed to be here.”

Coming out on the other side they blissfully found the guards paying them no attention. Too preoccupied for scanning for someone out of place, a pale, sickly girl not a slightly too small person in a Hyperion uniform.

There was one person with their mismatched eyes on them though.

Someone much better at hunting down targets.

Someone smart enough to wait and see where they were going before pouncing.

Someone that scared off everyone else who could have possibly stalked after them as well.

Angel and Gaige simply thought that it was sheer dumb luck that everyone seemed to be branching away from them. Not something, someone, more eye catching following them. Ducking expertly in and out of sight.

“It should be right past that last statue of my dad,” Angel pointed to the horizon, grabbing Gaige’s hand and jogging ahead a bit in the absence of people, “There’s a bridge to a secondary area that has an exit. We just have to…”

Eagerly running past the golden statue they found themselves standing twenty feet from the edge of the destroyed bridge. Completely impassable, collapsed in the middle.

Frozen in place they finally heard the sound of footsteps behind them, loud in the empty city. Everyone having filtered away, finding an excuse to patrol a different part of the half built metropolis. Not wanting to get too close to…

Turning around, Gaige and Angel found themselves face to face with Handsome Jack again for the
second time in a single day.

- - -

The entrance had burst to life with gunfire, more Vault Hunters than any of the thinned Hyperion forces knew what to do with.

Maya leading the charge, authoritatively splitting the group, “Zer0, Axton, Salvador. Take the left route and circle back. Me and Krieg will take the right. Athena, Nisha, right down the middle.”

Nobody had to be told twice, splitting off.

Athena and Nisha’s route was the most direct and also had the least people, the proverbial red sea having been parted by Jack’s path cutting through.

The intense look in Nisha’s eyes was giving even Athena pause, feeling like she should say something but the words, “I’m sure Angel’s fine,” as that ran instantly felt stupid. Reminding her of her social ineptitude.

“You don’t fucking know that,” Nisha sounded labored, easily keeping pace further ahead, “Might suspicious that we ain’t seein’ any guards.”

Athena had to concede that, distracted by the strain in her legs, “Can you… can you slow down?!”

“Fuck no,” Nisha spat back, “Keep up!”

Athena could have sworn she sped up then, the shorter woman cursing her stumpy legs as she pressed even harder to try and at least somewhat keep pace. Eyes practically closed as she just blindly focused in on the star design on the back of Nisha’s new jacket, just keep up with that you’re g-

Oh no, you’re about to slam into that.

Skidding to a stop, Athena managed to only lightly crash against Nisha’s back, not even enough to knock her over.

But before she could comment on it, she righted herself. Still hanging onto Nisha’s waist as she looked around her to see what the hell had made her stop so suddenly.

Ghostly skin going even paler at the sight of Jack in front of her, easily hoisting Angel over his shoulder with a collar clasped around her neck. Gaige struggling on the ground, handcuffs locking her hands behind her back as she cursed wildly and erratically at him.

Both of them recognized the thing in his other hand although Athena on a more intimate basis. A personal teleporter and it wouldn’t take a rocket surgeon to figure out where it’d whisk the two of them away to at the pull of a trigger. Helios looming in the distance like a cold reminder.

“Jack, don’t,” Athena again cursed her lack of a way with words, “This is… fuck, Jack she doens’t… want to go with you. How can you do this to your own daughter?”

“Sometimes the hero has to do things he doesn’t want to for the greater good,” Jack replied, adjusting the struggling Angel better, “Besides she’ll… she’ll be safer with me. Swearsies.”

“That’s bullshit!!” Gaige yelled from the concrete, trying to twist herself around and get up, “How can you even buy your own crap this hard?!”
“Shut up, kid,” Jack shot back, “You wanna get zapped again?”

The crackling, blue bursts of electricity coming off Gaige’s trapped, metallic arm suddenly made more sense. Knocking it offline, no doubt try to stop Deathtrap from being…

Why was Nisha being so quiet? Absolutely dead silent, her stare almost… vacant. Like she’d seen a ghost.

“Say something, Nisha!” Athena smacked her arm, “Why are you just-”

“That’s not Jack.”

“What?” Athena looked from the man to Gaige, easily defeated on the ground, “If he’d just one of the body doubles he’s got running around how did he take out a Vault Hun-”

“No, you don’t…” Nisha shook her head, emphasizing, “That’s… that’s Not Jack.”

Instantly, Athena sharply locked eyes with ‘Jack’ again.

He flinched, minutely, for just a split second.

Blue eyes widening, Athena’s jaw dropped, “… Timothy?”

All pretenses dropped, the man instantly collapsed in on himself as he dumped the Jack facade. Never got less weird seeing him do that. Expertly faked false confidence shattering away to cold, bitter survival mode. Face even more dead now hidden behind a mask.

Even his voice was different, all of Jack’s distinct cadance gone in favor of a dead, borderline monotone, “Don’t try to stop me, Athena.”

Nisha finally addressed him, guardedly, “Jack said… he took care of you. He was… covered in blood, the hell are you still alive?! Where have you been?!"

“And more importantly how could you do this?!?” Athena pointed at Angel, “What the hell have you become that you’d drag an innocent back into her own personal hell?! Do you have any idea what he’s been doing to h-"

“STOP!” Tim barked in response, raising a hand, “Don’t want to hear it, don’t want to know. All I know is Jack told me if I could… if I could get his daughter back he’d let me live. He already beat me half to death once… sent me to supervise down on this hellhole planet… and what he did to my…”

His lip seemed to twitch at that, an unseen pain tugging at his skull as he twisted his head a little. As if he was trying to shake off a bad memory.

“Just… he said if I brought Angel back I’d live. You’d… you’d live. He promised to back off, said living on this shithole without him would kill you soon enough. Just… one life for three. I think that’s a pretty good deal.”

“And what the hell makes you think he’s gonna keep that promise?” Nisha started to approach him, broken free from her paralysis, “All he does is-”

“Lie?” Tim replied as he lifted an arm up at her, blaster aimed at her head, “I know he does. A lot of the time. Most of the time. But a shot in the dark is better than no shot at all. If it makes you feel any better…”
“It don’t,” Nisha didn’t let him speak, stomping closer and reaching out. Going to grab Angel, still trying futilely to struggle to freedom, hate in her eyes, “Nothing you’re gonna say-”

In a flash Nisha received a reminder than Timothy, despite everything, was no wilting flower.

He was a Vault Hunter. And a damned strong one at that.

Grabbing her wrist and jerking, it was all too easy for him to throw Nisha fifteen feet back. Landing hard but harmlessly on the concrete. Her hating knowing that he’d held back, that he could have done more, that he was just-

“Like I was saying, if it makes you feel any better…” Tim looked pained as he raised the personal teleportation device, “I’m sorry.”

“Athena! Nisha!!” Angel called out, trying to twist and get one last look at them before-

“Tim, don’t!” Athena yelled at the flash and subsequent empty air as she bolted forward, cursing her own inaction, cursing that of all people, it had to be…

The three women left standing on the windy bridge, alone.

Each too dumbstruck to say anything just standing there, looking between each other at a loss of what to do now.

Angel…

Angel was gone.
The long, cold moment hung heavily in the empty air where Angel had been merely minutes ago.

It had taken only seconds for their whole lives to be upturned, dumped unceremoniously on the ground. Shattered into pieces by someone they called their friend long, long ago. Their time on Elpis felt like it was lifetimes away now.

Gaige came back to reality first. Her body giving out from straining against the handcuffs. Her head resting painfully against the concrete, pigtail painfully pushed out of the way she as gave up. Crying onto the concrete with the shadow of Jack’s statue looming over her.

Athena came back second. Twisting her head to the side, painfully choking back a tear that threatened to escape her as well. Running up to Gaige, dropping to her knees and setting about trying to get the cuffs off her. Trying to saw through the chain with her sword.

But Nisha…

Nisha just stood there.

She didn’t look at Athena, she didn’t look at Gaige, and she sure as hell didn’t look to the other Vault Hunters jogging up.

Eventually slowly just dropping to the ground. Sitting uncomfortably on the concrete, looking rather like a lost child than one of the most feared women on Pandora. Not even reacting at the tattooed hand on her shoulder. Maya sounding eons away as she tried to extract information from her.

Led away by Axton, quietly tell her they should just ask Athena.

- - -

Their return to Sanctuary was quiet, in the dead of night. Nobody at the gates to greet them, no fanfare. Cold and empty like the hole Angel left in their group.

Athena stood firm and unyielding as always but incapable of hiding the sadness in her own eyes. Nisha was just… dead. Hadn’t said a word since, mostly just let herself be led around while she stared into space. Gaige had her face buried in Axton’s neck, the tears had stopped but she was refusing to let go.

Sitting on the bench directly outside of the Crimson Raiders HQ they stared at the building.
Watching the lights come alive as the old Vault Hunters were woken up and alerted to the turn of events.

Only Lilith became visible though, ducking out onto the balcony to be seemingly alone. Tattoos glowing bright in the night, anger and sadness poorly contained as she hugged herself tightly.

A Siren’s sympathetic feelings, they supposed. That’s one of her own, someone who easily could have been her, back into containment. Into control. Eventually Maya followed her out and talked her back indoors.

Neither of them spoke, Athena not sure what to do without Nisha to be the one to break the silence.

Had a feeling the other woman didn’t want to talk at all.

Eventually it became obvious no one was going to deal with this right now. The lights going dark again as they went back to bed. Athena wanted to be angry at that but what else could they do?

This was… this wasn’t something they could fix easily.

Or at all, clawed a small part of Athena’s mind.

Gripping the wood of the seat tightly for a second she left go and stood up. Gently grabbing Nisha’s arm and tugging, “Let’s… let’s go home. For now.”

The fact Nisha didn’t fight against it was discouraging.

As they started walking something felt off though, pinging the ‘danger!’ section of Athena’s brain over and over.

Looking around she didn’t see anything though.

She wasn’t sure why but she started to go the long way around, something about the alleyway feeling too dangerous. Something tugging at her brain, telling her to head towards the entrance.

A soldier’s instinct she supposed, paying off as she heard the faintest sound of a chain rattling.

Whipping around she saw nothing again though.

“So Nisha… we’re leaving,” Athena whispered, “I just… trust me.”

Not like the woman was putting up any resistance anyways, not even reacting to Athena’s weird statement.

But then again maybe she could hear the faint sound of footsteps behind them.

Athena knew she wasn’t imagining that, picking up the pace as she made her way towards the gates. Banging on the side for them to be let open. Slowly, slowly creaking down until that telltale loud slam.

In the open space of the little courtyard in front of Scooter’s the threat couldn’t stay stealthy anymore. Surprising that he could anyways, given he was just about one of the biggest people either of the women has ever known.

For a while it looked like Brick was going to bolt after them but he just stood there, menacingly. If they didn’t know better they’d think that perhaps he was trying to have a full, coherent thought.
“What do you want?” Athena kept pulling Nisha towards the door. She tried not to sound scared but with Nisha in her current state it was a hard feat. The sheer apathy with which Nisha was looking back at the threat was alarming. Looking like she wouldn’t even try to run away if he came after her.

“T’beat Nisha to death with my bare hands,” was Brick’s answer, not so much a threat as a flat statement, “But Mordy made a good point earlier. Yeah, it’d be fun to do it myself but…”

“We just lost Angel and you’re going to do this?”

“It’s ‘cause you lost Angel,” Brick’s face unreadable in the dark, “Told ‘er that if you fail to keep her safe, I ain’t makin’ any promises not to come after Nisha. And from where I’m standin’ it sure as hell looks like you failed.”

There was a good thirty feet between them. Brick was faster than you’d expect from such a hulk lug but even he wasn’t stupid enough to think he could beat that head start.

“You still aren’t saying what the hell you want,” Athena started pushing Nisha to head outside, get more distance between them. Zombie like Nisha obeyed, starting to walk towards the outer gate.

“Well I said what I want,” Brick referred back to the beating, “But I got Mordy back now and he’s real smart. He thinks you shouldn’t be here either, especially if Angel ain’t. Made a good point too. Yeah, I could beat you to death myself and probably have a real fun time with it. But if I just make you leave? You’re Jack’s problem then and Jack c’n hurt you way worse than I ever could. He’s good at that.”

“And what makes you think Roland and Lilith’ll be happy about this?”

“Oh they won’t,” Brick looked back, “But they won’t be as pissed as if I kill you.”

“So what’s stopping us from just walking around you and going back home?”

Athena instinctively ducked at the loud, bang of a gunshot. The shot making the concrete wall burst into pebbles and dust that rained down on her. An obvious warning shot, the scope of the source glinting on a rooftop in the moonlight.

Brick looked proud, pointing back towards it, “I may be on my last strike but Mordy ain’t. Nuh-uh. Lilith likes him too much and he’s grieving. Ain’t nobody gonna kick him out.”

Looking past him, Athena wanted to talk to the others. Wanted to stay, wanted to get Nisha somewhere safe to try and snap her out of this… dead eyed stare she was stuck in.

But another shot burst into the wall again.

Athena didn’t hesitate this time, chasing after the still slowly departing Nisha.

Catching up to her, rushing her towards the exit faster before Brick or Mordecai could change their minds.

---

Even though she’d never been up here, even with her world still upside down, Angel knew where she was.

Helios. Hundreds of tens of thousands of miles away from Pandora and her newfound family.
The teleporter had nearly made her throw up, almost wishing she could to punish her captor. Some part of her knowing she could just melt his skin right off his…

Well, she could if not for the collar tightly clasped around her neck. A new accessory. Whatever it was doing, it was suppressing her powers.

Not like it would help her to be loose on Helios.

“Put me down.”

“You can walk if you don’t try to run away.”

“Where would I run anyways?”

Angel had a good point. Even if she did try to bolt the second this… ‘Timothy’ guy put her down it’s not like she had anywhere to run to. Not like he couldn’t run her down in a heartbeat. He was fast, a former Vault Hunter.

She had a sneaking suspicion he was younger than her father. More fit at least.

Placing her on the ground she got her first proper view of Helios. A busy building with hundreds of people seeming to eye her with an intensely fearful wariness. No doubt everyone here must know who she is, knew sh-

Oh right, Timothy just looks like her dad nevermind. It’s him they’re scared of.

Her real father probably hadn’t even bothered telling Hyperion at large. Not like most of them could help find her anyways. Would explain the weird, sympathetic look she was getting too as Timothy grabbed her wrist and started pulling her through the space station.

Every part of Angel wanted to protest this, fight against it, but even though Timothy wasn’t actually her dad she’d sort of shut down. A Pavlovian fear of that face.

All she could do is talk, maybe try to appeal to the man’s reason. He wasn’t her dad and Athena and Nisha… they’d spoken of him fondly many times. Nothing about their stories had painted him as a bad person. A kind one really, being beaten down into bitterness but a good person underneath it all.

“Timothy…”

He whipped around, hissing, “Are you trying to get me killed?!”

Oh, right. All of his body doubles weren’t supposed to use their real names.

No point in pissing him off.

“Sorry… Athena and Nisha just… talked about you a lot,” Angel shifted, trying to focus in on any details that could be useful to her, “But they both thought you were dead…”

“Got halfway to it,” Timothy replied, trying to walk faster, “Still don’t want to hear your backstory. Drop you off with your dad, go back to being miserable and hating my life in Opportunity. By which I mean, come! Visit Opportunity! Where all your wildest dreams come true!”

That last part was aimed at a nearby middle manager who’d been eyeing them particularly close. Backing off quickly when seemingly targeted by “Jack.”
“Do you have any idea what my dad does to-”

“How many times do I have to say I don’t want to hear it? Because I feel like it should have sunken in the first time.”

“How could you-”

“Angel,” he stopped, turning her and grabbing her by the shoulders. It was weird looking a weird, fake version of her dad right in the eyes. The eye color was wrong, subtly. The green too blue. Faint freckles visible around the edges of the mask. Hair too auburn.

His tone of voice shifted to what his own must have been before, calmer and weaker, “Look, I know it’s pretty much impossible for you not to take this personally and weird as hell to see these words basically coming out your dad’s face but… I don’t know you. You’re some chick, you’re my boss’s kid. I don’t know you, I’m not going to get to know you. Athena and Nisha? Yeah, they’re going to hate me forever for this but they kept me alive on Elpis, I’m gonna keep them alive on Pandora.”

He flinched when she tilted her head to the side, her hair falling out of the way of her green eye.

“And leave me to rot? After Nisha had already saved me?”

For a second he almost looked… angry.

Standing up straight he grabbed her wrist again, “No more talking.”

Angel opened her mouth to say something but instinctively shut up again at a sharp glare.

The rest of the way she stayed quiet, even as she walked into the office that could only be Jack’s with the weird, off putting, giant statues of him flanking them.

Averting her eyes to the ground, Angel found not even that enough. Just closing her eyes tightly. Letting herself be led along to her grim fate. She didn’t even look up as she heard her name happily called, heard the quick footsteps, and felt herself hugged tightly against smooth leather and cold metal.

Obediently, Angel brought up her arms and hugged her father around the waist.

Knowing he wouldn’t let go until she did so.

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Timothy wasn’t sure why Jack didn’t just dismiss him after the uncomfortable, onesidedly happy reunion he was forced to witness.

But after Jack had released his daughter, he’d clapped him on the shoulder giving him that sleazy smile he only ever gave him for terrible job well done. Just for whenever he really had Tim do something evil.

As awful as looking at that face was, he kept his eyes locked with Jack if only so he couldn’t see the cold, accusatory glare that Angel was giving him over his shoulder.

He had to admit, he was surprised when their destination was back down on Pandora.

Timothy had heard vague talk of a Hyperion bunker but nothing of what was in it.
Guess he knew now.

The walk up to it was oddly… beautiful. For a long, dumb minute Timothy thought that maybe it wasn’t so bad. It was a cage but it was a gilded one at least. Maybe the inside had some nice views, a little living area for her.

I mean, one look at her said, “definitely, definitely has been experimented on” but like, who on Pandora has a fully charmed life, right?

He distracted himself, looking to Jack cautiously asking, “You’re going to hold up your end of the deal, right?”

Jack looked mildly annoyed with his perfect little reunion sullied by bringing that up but answered fairly positively, “Of course I am, kiddo. Ya did a hell of a job bringing my princess back, so freaking FAST. Took you like, what a couple hours?”

“Five,” Timothy flatly replied, “Not counting the time it took walking through Helios.”

“Should have had you on the job the whole time, turns out,” Jack went back to cheerful, hugging Angel tighter against his side, “Shoulda known, you got a face I can really trust. Except for that one time. But then I fixed that face up pretty as a picture for ya and instantly you fell right into line. You know what I like about you, Not Me?”

God did Timothy not want that answer but he asked anyways, “What?”

“You’re a damn good listener,” Jack answered, giving him a smile, “When I ask you to do something there’s no bitching, there’s no whining, there’s no FAILURE. I tell you to shoot an elderly woman in the face and you ask ‘how many times?’”

Somehow the answer was even worse than Timothy could have expected, his mouth a thin line as Angel whipped her head back. Trying to tell if her dad’s statement was just a hypothetical or something the man had actually done.

But as Jack went on it seemed more likely to be hypothetical, “Seriously, you’ve got a hell of a work ethic. Need to make more use of you, getcha out of Opportunity and back out in the field.”

“The field.” Jack speak for any sort of mass murdering, usually left for Wilhelm. Opportunity was bad, a droning monotony but at least it meant Tim wasn’t out doing Jack’s dirty work anymore. Looks like that’s coming bad. Great.

It was like Jack could read his mind, “Maybe get you workin’ with Wilhelm again, poor bastard’s seemed kind of down for a long time. Starting when you had your little tantrum, getting worse with Nisha trying to stab me in the back by shooting me in the face. You guys left the big guy with nobody to go murdering with! How about that though, go see him sometime soon? Sure I can figure out something big for you two to kill.”

He looked at Tim expectantly, thinking this some grand gift. Forcing a smile, Tim tried to sound enthusiastic, “Sounds good. Be nice to see Wilhelm again.”

“Good, good,” Jack nodded, looking back to Angel again as they reached the top of the odd building, “And I got a surprise for you too. Don’t think I’m gonna forget about my little girl, been working on it since I get back up on Helios.”

Angel looked wary about that, no doubt expecting some new sort of containment. Best case scenario maybe it’d be something a little more comfortable. Worst case scenario it was actually
going to be something much, much worse.

What it actually was she didn’t expect.

Idly bouncing, the bot was waiting at the entrance.

“ANGEL!” her digitized voice was shrill, the standard Claptrap unit’s already high pitched voice evidently not enough.

“H… H4L0?” Angel sounded uncertain as she pulled away from her dad’s side.

Some part of her couldn’t believe it was the same bot quickly wheeling towards her. Slowing only so she wouldn’t slam her old friend to the ground, worn metal pressing against Angel’s legs.

She was talking nonstop, mindless chattering that always occupied every second interacting with Claptrap. Going on about what little she knew of the situation, how much she’d missed Angel, making plans for things they certainly wouldn’t be able to do together.

But as she ran her hands along the edges of the white and blue bots’ edges she knew it had to be. Knicks her dad never would have known to include there, including one right before the arm flap. Angel remembered it perfectly, from the time H4L0 fell down the stairs coming to visit her.

Her dad had installed them in place of a ramp at some point, H4L0 hadn’t noticed in time.

Thinking about what Gaige had told her, about how easy it was to fix Claptrap units… how little time Jack would have had to do this, to fix her…

He’d probably put those stairs in all those years ago to try and break her.

Sliding to her knees, Angel pressed her face against the side of the opening for H4L0’s optic. Face hot against cold metal as tears started to pour down her face, sobs starting quiet but growing louder and louder. Pressing harder against the metal, gripping it like a flimsy lifeboat, until her sobs grew wild, frantic. Knuckles going white as she crushed the bot tighter against her too-thin chest and sobs grew to screams.

Behind her, Jack’s face grew into a wide smile. Something in his mind twisting this around, pulling things out, reconnecting them. Somehow letting himself feel like he’d done some great kindness, been the good guy.

But even further back, stepping instinctively away from the scene was Timothy.

Looking like he wanted to throw up.

But he couldn’t leave, he couldn’t run like he wanted to.

When Jack gestured for him to follow he did, instantly, obediently.

Angel dragged to her feet, still sobbing violently, by her father. Another one sided hug. Then steering her to walk, metal clamp hand in hers while H4L0-TP began to fret over her.

This all felt like something Tim wasn’t supposed to be here for, wasn’t supposed to see but he just kept getting lead further and further into the facility. Until they reached a wide, open chamber. Countless wires dangling from the ceiling.

For a second, Jack steered Angel off to the side. Pulling out a folded… something. Dress? It kind of looked like a dress. Whatever it was, it made Angel begin sobbing anew.
But she walked into the side room by herself. Going in in her odd little cowgirl outfit, coming out in an uncomfortable looking… Dress? Shirt? With matching leggings.

As they approached the center it became obvious why Jack’d forced him to come. He couldn’t get Angel back in alone and Tim was just... convenient. There. Another pair of hands. The man walked over to some sort of control panel, starting to instruct Timothy on how to reconnect Angel to the machine.

Holding the first wire in his hand, ending in a sharp needle glinting accusingly up at him, Timothy blanched. Looking away, unable to look at her or Jack but even H4L0 was looking up at him. Her expression unreadable. He’d never been able to tell what the hell Claptrap was thinking either.

But Jack was instructing him to connect it through the metal on her back.

Angel glared up at him as he reached around behind her, hesitating for a second.

Both eyes visible, staring uncomfortably into his own matching ones. Almost daring him to do it. Light surging on the collar on her neck, making him swallow heavily. Were it not for that thing he was certain she’d melt his brain right here and now.

Jack snapped him out of it though, with a slightly annoyed, “What are you waiting for?”

Quick as a whip, Timothy jabbed the needle in through the opening.

Somehow it would have been less upsetting if Angel cried out.

But she didn’t.

Her eyes barely even moved, hardly even flinched at the familiar pain. A silent accusation. Hatred radiating off of her in waves, making him want to run away. Everything about this mockery of a family did.

She didn’t have a family anymore, not really. Neither did him. The closest either of them had was the exact same set of women that he’d taken her from.

But Athena and Nisha were never going to see Angel again and they’d certainly kill him on sight if they ever caught him down on Pandora again.

So, really, neither of them had anything.

He’d saved them at least.

His only comfort.

“Alright, now grab the matching one on the other side. Should be labelled.”

Timothy reached for it and jammed it into her back.

Angel still didn’t make a noise.

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Athena hadn’t had a goal in mind when she drove just… going.

She kept trying to talk to Nisha, over and over.
Responses were short if not non-existent, as if Athena hadn’t said anything to her.

That really wasn’t helping, leaving Athena feeling more alone than ever. Hell, even sleeping by herself in the ruins of New Haven hadn’t felt this lonely. Not even right after Janey left her.

It was hard not to be angry at Nisha for it but at the same time, it didn’t feel right to yell at her either.

Pulling over on the side of the road, Athena tilted her head back with a heavy sigh as she stared at the sunrise coming up over the mountains. Looking over, Nisha was staring out the car window. Almost seeming to look for looming threats, some Vault Hunter instinct seeping through.

Athena wasn’t sure what to do. They had to get Angel back, somehow, but what if Jack kept her up on Helios? Hell, how were they going to find out where he’d taken her in general? Nisha had mentioned the weird place Jack was keeping her before being by Thousand Cuts. Did he send her back there?

It felt impossible. She’d already been hidden so well and that was before there were people who knew about her.

Helios. He’d probably keep her on Helios.

Her ECHO device started going off next to her, seeing Lilith’s name both making her feel immeasurable relief and stress simultaneously. Picking it up quickly and answering, “Lilith?”

Even over the radio it was incredibly obvious how uncomfortable the Siren sounded, “Uh, hey, Athena. And probably Nisha. I’ve got Roland here too and we just… well we just learned about what Brick and Mordecai did.”

“I’m going to guess by the tone of your voice that you weren’t able to talk down dumb and dumber into letting us come back.”

“No,” Roland spoke up, “Me and Lilith have been discussing it for a couple hours now and we think it’s best for your own safety to stay out of Sanctuary until we get Angel back.”

He sounded so confident as he stated the impossible.

“Yeah, I feel really safe out here,” Athena couldn’t stop herself, “Love the idea of being totally vulnerable to being hunted down by Jack again. Really makes for a great morning.”

“Look there’s… a place we know’ll be empty,” Lilith tried to offer some beacon of light, “Technically it was Mordecai’s but he’s a little, uhm, preoccupied. He’s not going to notice if you go and stay there. It’s out of the way, it’s high up enough that you could see any threats coming for miles, and it has reasonably nice accommodations.”

“It’s out by the Tundra Express and you won’t be completely alone there,” Roland continued, “I know it doesn’t seem like much but there’s a little girl there-”

“Is there ever going to be a period of time in my life where an adult man who’s supposed to be an authority figure isn’t going to put an absurd amount of faith in a child being able to help me or keep me alive?”

Roland sounded annoyed, “No. Anyways, if you’re going there I can call ahead and get Tina to help you find the entrance and get up there.”
Sighing, Athena replied, “Sounds about as good as it’s going to get.”

“We’ll send out a couple of the Vault Hunters later to make sure you’re all settled,” Lilith concluded, “Just… try to stay safe out there. We’re going to get Angel back, I promise.”

Again with the absurd confidence. Man did Athena wish she could have that kind of foolhardy confidence.

“I’ll send you a message when I reach the Tundra Express,” Athena signed off, turning off the device and sighing heavily again as she put her hands back on the wheel. Looking over at Nisha it looked like she might as well not have been there for this conversation.

Athena tried to get a reaction out of her, asking, “How’d that sound to you?”

All she got was a shrug in response.

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Nisha was still dead silent all the way to Tundra Express, not even reacting when Athena slid out of the car and sent a brief message to Lilith and Roland.

Just following her blankly towards the small figure in the distance, jumping up and down and waving her arms over her head. Happily calling out to them, “Heyyyy!! All the fine ass ladies lookin’ to gain entrance to Casa de Not-Mordy-Any-Moredy, holla at ya girl!!!”

Athena, not a woman prone to ‘holla’ing simply walked up with the busted up Nisha shambling behind her, “You’re, uh, Tina?”

“Yuhp-yuhp-yuhp!” she craned up her neck to examine Athena’s face, “Roland’s talked about you a hella lot! You been up to alllllll kindsa trouble, huh?”

“I guess that’s a way you could describe my life, yes.”

Peeking behind Athena, Tina looked a little less friend, “Oh and you brought Jack’s girlfriend too. Right. Roland warned me about you.”

The absolute lack of playfulness in that sentence was undercut by malice that certainly wasn’t helped by the fact that seemed to hit a button that at least temporarily reactivated Nisha, springing back to life with a growl of, “I ain’t Jack’s girlfriend.”

“Was, were, will be, don’t CARE,” Tina turned around, swinging her arms wildly as she started making her way down the hill, “Whatyeva, follows da leader. Dat’s me, bee-tee-dubs.”

Neither woman was terribly interested in following the little girl but what other choice did they have?

Athena looked over at Nisha, hoping she could at least get her to say something, anything but she’d already gone right back into that dead eyed stupor.

Swearing under her breath, Athena picked up the pace to catch up to the now skipping Tina.

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After way too many steps, Athena and Nisha found themselves in what would be their new digs. Tina having left as soon as they reached the door, very obviously not wanting to spend any more time around Nisha than necessary.
Athena had to admit, it wasn’t the worst place they could be staying. The mostly circular room was pretty roomy and the bed was surprisingly big. Guess that made sense, Mordecai wasn’t a small dude. Branching off to the side was a kitchen that looked bizarrely pristine. Almost like it was brand new, no signs of being used more than once or twice.

The only part Athena crinkled her nose at was the large bird perch, uncleaned and surrounded by grey and white feathers.

Much like everything Nisha was half experiencing since Angel’s abduction she didn’t really react to anything. Just walking over to the bed and sitting on the edge, elbows resting on her knees. Hands hanging there limply as she stared into space.

Athena couldn’t take it anymore.

Just barely stopping herself from stomping over, she crouched in front of Nisha.

The way she instantly averted her eyes to avoid contact was annoying.

“Look, I know this has fucked you up on some weird level that I don’t understand but I need you to wake the hell up,” Athena’s words weren’t soft but she had no other choice at this point, “If we’re ever going to have any chance to see Angel again you need to become at least vaguely functional.”

Nisha at least made eye contact this time, saying her second longest sentence yet, “What’s the fucking point?”

A snarl tugged at Athena’s lip at that, “The point is to get your fucking shit together so we can get Angel back.”

“You got any idea how much dumb luck it was that I got her out the first time?!” Nisha finally started waking up, whipping off her hat and tossing it at the side table and pushing herself to her feet to pace, “Only by dint of Jack’s fucking stupidity did I find out she even fucking EXISTED!”

Nisha punctuated that with screaming and a firm kick to the metal wall, reverberating loudly in the tall cylinder ceiling. Dodging the hand Athena tried to grab her shoulder with ease.

Continuing as if the gladiator wasn’t chasing after her, ranting by this point.

“I mean, what, I was with Jack for like two years? Three years?! I didn’t have ANY fucking idea she existed! At fucking all! Nobody did, nobody but Jack and a bunch of bitch scientists. Did Timothy know? Did Wilhelm know?! Hell, fuck, EVERYBODY could have known but me!”

Her movements were frantic as she spoke faster and faster, circling the room that was more than willing to accommodate that, shapewise. Broken up by occasional assaults on the walls, each crashing loudly upwards while very obviously knocking Nisha back. Each one making her limp a bit.

She was going to seriously hurt herself if Athena didn’t get a grip on her soon.

“Shit, Athena! The girl was maybe one or two miles away from civilization for YEARS without anyone finding her! What makes you think just… finding people’s so easy?! I mean, you didn’t find your sister until-”

“But I found her,” Athena cut her off before she could say something she’d regret, finally getting a firm grip on Nisha’s shoulders and stopping her even though she struggled against it, “And if Atlas hadn’t…”
“Exactly, Atlas,” Nisha jabbed a finger up, failing again to jerk free from Athena’s grip, “A fucking corporation. We’re not just fighting a man on this, we’re fighting a man with more money to do whatever he wants. He’s Hyperion. That’s his. What if he just keeps Angel up on Helios? What if he sends her to a different planet?! Jack can do whatever he wants with her now because Timothy, the absolute fucking coward, didn’t have the decency to just fucking stay dead.”

“God, I can’t believe he’s still alive…” Athena let go and sat on the bed, “You said…”

“Jack was covered in blood, what was I supposed to think?” Nisha shot back, crashing down next to her, “Guess with anyone with that freaking face you’ve got to double tap. Get them down and make sure they stay down. What… what do we even do from here, Athena?”

She wanted to have some good, smart answer. Something that would cheer Nisha up and renew her hope. Rally the troops.

But she’d never been that person.

Instead all she could answer is a weak, “I don’t know.”
Still chugging away, if I just keep writing I can ABSOLUTELY get this done by Borderlands 3 just gotta BELIEVE.

warning for general parental abuse in the jack and angel parts

Solitude. It had felt like eons since Angel had felt this lonely.

So many days had passed already, maybe a week or two? Time had always been very warped in her chambers. So easy to lose track of what day it was.

Her days had gone back to the same awful cycle. Wake up. Breakfast with H4L0. Dad shows up. It’s a coin flip then, either he’s just going to hang out and try to connect with her or it’s experiment time. Lunch with him either way. Then hours of solitude, boredom, mostly watching movies with H4L0. Then dinner with her. Then sleep.

The coin flip was her least favorite part of the day, obviously.

It was hard to say what was the worse option.

Experimentation was straightforward, at least. It hurt. It was painful. Mostly they were focusing on how her state had changed with the lack of constant Eridium flow. Seeing how the reintroduction was affecting her.

Sometimes they took her from the bunker, even back up to Helios a couple times. When they needed fancier equipment, not within the confines of her cell.

Those times were always worse. Something more invasive, something more painful.


Bur spending time with her father?

The emotional toll was so much worse and so much more erratic. Never quite sure what angle her dad was going to take. He himself didn’t seem to quite know how to reconcile her journey. Alternately trying to get her to denounce her sadly temporary guardians or express that she missed him.

While she could reciprocate the awkward, uncomfortable hugs she just couldn’t bring herself to lie directly. Not anymore.

H4L0 was here and doing her best but things had shifted, somehow seeing her friend circling her below just wasn’t enough anymore.

A weird feeling of feeling ungrateful twisted unfairly in her gut. She should be happier to see her dear old friend but it felt like a half reunion. She wanted to be on the ground, able to sit and talk and catch up and…
“Hey! You falling asleep again? Do you want me to get a blanket? It’ll fall off but, I mean, we could tie it on! Like a cloak!” H4L0 chirped up at her, “Oh, or maybe a coat! That’s like a mobile blanket, kinda!”

“No, no, I’m not… falling asleep,” Angel shook her head, floating as low as she could. Still so far away from her friend, “I’m just… thinking.”

H4L0 wrung her hands a little, clamps clanking against each other, “I wish… I wish I could help. With… I don’t know. Finding them again… getting you out…”

“It’s fine, I know it’s not something you’re capable of,” Angel shook her head, “You’re just… a steward bot. Even if you could get the door open you’d be no help against the guards outside. I’d stay quiet about that though, it’d be easy for my dad to dismantle you again.”

“My non-existent lips are sealed!” H4L0 drew a line underneath her optic, zipping up the mouth that wasn’t there, “Maybe your dad won’t show up today! We could just watch some movies, I can braid your hair- not too much though, your hair’s so short now!! It’s cute!!!”

Most people would balk at H4L0’s shrieky little voice but it pulled a now rare smile from Angel’s face, “Maybe. That’d be really nice. Some board games later?”

“I can move the pieces for you!” H4L0 bounced, “Just like old times!”

Angel’s smile dulled, nodding, “Just like old times.”

But no such peace was going to be granted to Angel, at least not today.

The sound of the door opening was familiar, the solitary set of footsteps, the off tune humming to himself. Looking over at him, Angel saw he had a large, leather book under his arm. Something about it seemed distantly familiar.

“Hey there, sweetheart!” he cheerily called out to her, sounding happier than he had in a long time, “Got a special surprise for you today.”

He held up the book to her, like the nondescript black leather meant anything to her. Something embossed in gold was written on the cover but it was far too far away for her to read from so high above, even with Jack holding it all the way up.

“What is it?” she squinted.

“I’ll show you,” he still sounded singsong as he tucked it back under his arm and walked over to the control panel.

It was weird to be lowered to the ground, knowing she wasn’t about to be experimented on. Wondering what on Pandora her father could possibly have in that book. She tried to get a better look when he came back to unhook her but it was pressed too tightly against his chest as he one handedly unhooked her and lead her towards a bench off to the side.

“Hey, Claptrap unit,” Jack addressed H4L0 dismissively, “Go wait in the other room.”

H4L0 looked as hesitant as a faceless bot could before quietly dropping her arms to the ground and rolling away. Dragging them behind her.

Sitting down, he put it on his lap. Patting the seat close next to him. She cringed at the way his arm was up, waiting for her to oblige and sit. Wrap around her tightly and pin her against his side.
Angel tried not to think about how no daughter should abhor a hug from her father this much.

Jack was staring at her expectantly and she knew every second she waited would only darken his gaze more and more. Enraging him wasn’t in her best interest either.

Just as she thought she was pulled tightly against his side with a cold, unnatural kiss planted on her forehead.

She could see the word emblazoned on the book now.

In fancy golden script it read, “Treasured Memories.”

Angel felt her stomach churn violently, bile rising so quickly her body threatened to eject the contents of her empty body onto the floor. Forcing it down, she took a shuddering breath as she watched her father open it.

The first image should be innocuous. A lumpy little misshapen newly born Angel, held by a younger, raggedy looking Jack with a wide smile.

“You were a real crier when you were a baby,” Jack voice sounded soft for once, “Never wanted your mom though, drove her nuts the way she always had to hand you back over to me to get you to stop crying.”

Angel felt a lot like crying right now actually, just barely biting back painful, bitter tears at the sight in front of her. Jack absentmindedly turning the pages. Watching herself get older and older, every single picture of her and her dad.

Her mom always hated being in photos. There was never anything more than just a porcelain hand in the shots, maybe some errant black hair falling over the lens.

Not a single glimpse of her mother in any of them, just a pale little girl and her constantly grinning father.

Jack stopped at points, commenting on the pictures with an uncomfortably believable fondness.

Like this was some normal daddy-daughter time.

Were they anyone else it would have been.

But they weren’t and each page she could feel her stress mounting.

“You fifth birthday,” Jack paused again, a photo of her with the biggest baby blue birthday cake. Arms raised high over her head, bright cheery smile on her face as she looked back at her dad. Crouched on the ground to be in the shot at her teeny tiny table.

She’d always loved hosting tea parties at it.

Sometimes her dad would come to them.

Jack turned through the relevant pages of her and her little elementary school chums, still grinning like this was normal, “You always did have a lot of friends when you were a kid. My little social butterfly. Do you remember who you always said was your best friend though?”

He turned to look at her, ducking his head down to try and force himself into her sightline.

Angel knew what the answer was.
And she also knew she didn’t want to say it.

But he wouldn’t stop staring at her, eyes creepily the only thing actually alive on his unnatural face. Blazing at her through the holes of the mask, insistently waiting.

This wasn’t going to end if she didn’t play along.

Her voice was tinier than it’s ever been as she answered, “You.”

“When did we stop being best friends, Angel?”

When you imprisoned me.

That’s what she wanted to say, at least.

Instead she stayed quiet, tattoos beginning to glow as she twisted her left hand around her right wrist anxiously. Trying to give her something to focus on other than…

It was too late, tears started trickling down her face.

She tried to pull away from the rough hand reaching up and brushing away the tears, closing her eyes tightly to not have to look at her father anymore. But he was there and she could feel him wrap his other arm around her and pull her into a cold, emotionless hug.

It hadn’t always been like this, faint memories of being held as a child faint in her mind but still there.

Those times were long gone though.

Permanently.

Willing herself to regain the cold emptiness, only if it would get her dad to stop hugging her, Angel started crushing down her feelings again. Sobs growing further and further apart, still muffled against the coarse fabric of Jack’s grey jacket.

When she stopped he let go, pulling back and looking proud of himself, “Hey, look at that, I can still get you to stop crying.”

He seemed oblivious to the cold glare she gave him in return, going right back to the book like nothing had happened. Continuing to blather on about the passing photos.

Angel watching herself get older and older.


There was only one page left, Angel mercifully waiting for herself to turn twelve and the ordeal to be over.

But as Jack turned the final page it revealed a much different photo from the others.

Gone was his own once happy visage.

Instead a short, slightly pudgy woman. Pale with oceans of inky black hair curling down her back. Round faced and grinning warmly, twisted out of place in the timeline of the photobook as she held a happy little infant Angel in her arms.
Instantly her heart was beating out of her chest, her breath hitching and gasping frantically, tattoos growing blinding.

Jack looked over at her, shocked, leaning away despite the arm now hovering over her shoulders, “Angel?”

All at once her wings sprung out of her back, provoking a rare swear from him as he burst up to get out of their path. Arm harshly clotheslining Angel and knocking her to the ground. Her wings still flared out from her back as he backed away fearfully, like she didn’t look like a baby bird thrown from the nest. Crumpled on the ground, looking up fearfully.

“What the hell, Angel?!” Jack barked down at her, book lying on the ground at his feet, “I just- I did this for YOU!”

Angel couldn’t help but recoil at the sharp accusation, wings instinctively shielding her from his vision. Folding around her protectively. Her own mismatched eyes peeking fearfully thought them. Jack was staring at her with such… disgust? fear? Hatred?

She wasn’t sure.

Abruptly he turned around and stomped off.

Upon Jack disappearing, H4L0 quickly rolled back out to Angel. Worry in her voice, “Angel! Are you okay?!”

“I’m…” Angel panted, her wings fading, “I’m not. I’m not alr-”

Seeing the photo book lying open on the ground made her wings flare back up, throwing her hands over her eyes like she was staring down Medusa herself.

H4L0 caught that fast, rolling over and flipping the book shut. Picking up the cursed thing and quickly going over to the control area and stashing it somewhere where Jack would surely come across it again before zipping back to Angel.

“Thank you…” Angel reached out and grabbed the extended hands, letting H4L0 help her get back to her feet, “I just… I can’t… my mom it was…”

“I know,” H4L0 hugged her very tightly around the legs, “Your dad… left you free though. We’ve got a while before he pieces it together, why don’t we play Oligopoly? I’ll let you have the Maliwan piece, just this once.”

“That sounds nice…” Angel nodded, shakily letting herself be led to one of the little sitting areas usually closed off from the main room, “Maybe we can… make hot chocolate. The scientists always have some there, it even has… marshmallows…”

H4L0 knew she couldn’t drink it but if these small enjoyments were all Angel had she wasn’t going to point that out.

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It had been three weeks since Angel had been taken and Athena and Nisha had been exiled to the Tundra Express.

While the worst part was knowing that Angel had been recaptured and was being excruciatingly
tortured the second worst part was much less intense but infinitely more boring. There just…
wasn’t anything they could do.

Timothy had claimed that what he’d done had left the two in the clear but they weren’t about to
wander around outside and advertise that they were here. Especially not with the Hyperion trains
whipping through the place all the time.

All they really could do was eat, sleep and try to amuse themselves.

Mordecai had a decent sized television up there but his taste in movies was not exactly one they
appreciated. Athena being able to mildly tolerate, even somewhat enjoy, the tame historical period
dramas but Nisha’s only joy was to be found in openly mocking them.

Sort of ruined what little enjoyment Athena was getting out of it.

But whenever she went to express that, there Nisha was laughing and pulling her against her in a
tight hug.

She’d gotten a little clingy up here, almost like she was afraid Athena was going to get yanked
away from her too. It was almost kind of… cute. Continual weird affection from someone who
normally wouldn’t express herself romantically unless it was by the cracking of a whip.

It was kind of cute, if smothering, the way Nisha would curl around her like a spider on its prey.

Not that there was any way for Athena to request there be more of this in between the… raunchier
shows of affection.

Nisha was still off but she was starting to wake up again.

And she was waking up into someone who was fucking pissed.

Breakfast was unexciting. Just some rakk eggs and skag bacon which Nisha was pushing around
disinterestedly. Thoughts of revenge much more enticing, “I ever see Not Jack’s yellow bellied ass
again I’m gonna give him a couple of new holes in his empty lil’ head.”

“Yellow belly or yellow ass, you have to pick one,” Athena flatly replied between bites.

Nisha let out a snerk of laughter at that, “Shut up, you know what I mean. Don’t pretend like you
wouldn’t bean him good with that shield of yours given the opportunity.”

“I just… can’t believe that Timothy’s not only still alive but just… Jack’s pawn. After all this
time.”

“It’s real stupid of him,” Nisha pointedly stabbed at her food, “Not Jack’s stronger than Jack. Only
thing holding him back is that he’s a big ol’ scaredy cat.”

This was probably true. Athena hadn’t seen Timothy in action in a long time but even up on Elpis
he’d been a quick study and a remarkably strong dude. Good shot too. It was almost comical how
well and quickly he’d taken to becoming to a Vault Hunter despite being the meekest of them all.

“I don’t blame him for being scared, for all the strength he has on Jack he doesn’t have his
ruthlessness which can make up for a lot,” Athena replied, already ready to assuage the twisting
judgemental look Nisha was giving her, “But he had us, standing right there. There’s no reason to
believe we’d be unable to help him, keep him safe. Hell, the rest of the new Vault Hunters were
with us too. Even if he didn’t know that we could have…”
The knock on the door was jarring but not surprising.
Opening the door revealed exactly what was to be expected.
Tiny Tina rocking on her heels, looking up at Athena with a big smile, “Oh haiii! Got an eensy-beensy-teeny-tiny-tina lil’ flavor I want you to come help me with.”
“What is it?” Athena asked, honestly glad for an excuse to leave the confines of their little metal house.
“Just got some stuffs that’s too big for me to pushity-push around by myself,” Tina reached up and grabbed Athena by a bicep, “So I need some Athena Assistance!”
“I’ll help too,” Nisha eagerly abandoned her uneaten breakfast, “I ain’t as strong as Athena but I’m stronger than y-”
“I don’t need your help, thanks,” Tina tersely replied, not even looking past Athena.
“I’ll be back before it gets dark,” Athena promised, “Usually doesn’t take me long to help someone move.”
“Alright,” Nisha sounded less than pleased about being excluded, “I’ll just… I don’t know.”
“It won’t be long,” Athena promised again, following after the insistent tugging of Tiny Tina, “I promise.”
Nisha just grunted in response.
---
Tina didn’t let go of her arm but her grip had slid down, holding onto Athena’s wrist and swinging it along with hers as she loudly hummed a little off-tune song to herself all the way to the little tunnel that led to her home.
If she didn’t know better, she’d say it sounded like a wedding march.
“So, should I be concerned about the explosive nature of whatever it is you’re having me move?”
“Nah,” Tina shook her head, “S’real stable and nice, it’s all good.”
Weird wording but wasn’t that everything Tina said?
“So is it just cleaning out your workroom of boxes then or…”
As they reached the end of the tunnel it became obvious what this was actually about.
Even with her back to them, Janey was unmistakable. The long burn scar always a dead giveaway, twisting all the way up her side. Nervously fiddling with the pastel pink, bunny themed teacup that was in front of her with a light tinkling noise.
“What the hell is this?” came out of Athena’s mouth before she could stop herself.
Janey quickly turned around, her face saying this wasn’t a surprise to her, “Athena, you’re here.”
“Yeah, I am,” Athena looked between the two blondes, “And I’d say I’m confused but I’m mostly just angry.”
“C’mon, sit down,” Tina insistently tugged at her hand ineffectively, small body not enough to make Athena move, “I made fresh cookies! Sit, sit, sit, sit, sit down.”

For a second it looked like Athena was going to stomp away but she eventually let Tina lead her to a seat at the small table.

She could see the name tags now.

Lady Tina of Blowyourfaceupheim.

Princess Janey of Kraggonkillaton.

Duchess Athena of Totalbadassbitchia.

“Thanks for sitting down,” Janey sounded relieved, looking over at Athena as adoringly as she could muster, “I wasn’t sure if you’d just stomp away or hear me out.”

“Oh I’m not here to hear you out,” Athena leaned on the table, “I’m sitting here to—”

“NO ELBOWS ON THE TABLE,” Tina shrieked, smacking Athena’s offending arm.

Annoyed, Athena jerked her arm back and went to retort but Janey cut her off, “I just… it’s painful watching you let Nisha pull you down. I heard a bit more about how she even got you into this in the first place. Just flew off the handle, shot Jack non fatally, took his daughter and hunted you down in New Haven—”

“Where you left me.”

“And I… that was a mistake, okay? I’m not perfect, Athena.”

“Yeah, I’d say dragging me away from Nisha by tricking me with a little girl is pretty far from perfect.”

“To be completely fairsies, I do have some boxy-boxes I need moved later,” Tina sat down and curled her legs underneath her on the chair, looking back at a stack of large crates, “I only did a lil’ half lie, nuttin’ too not true.”

“Look, Athena, things… things went bad between us and it was completely my fault,” Janey let go of the tea cup before she could accidentally break it, “I just… I get scared. About you. You think you’re this invincible, untouchable goddess who just… isn’t in danger. Vault Hunters die, literally all the time. It’s not a profession that leads to long life and a natural death.”

“Hell of a half assed apology.”

“I’m not done,” Janey continued, “But… I shouldn’t have tried to stop you. It’s dangerous and scary and so many people die but it’s also just… it’s you. It’s who you are. And I really, really love who you are. Even if it scares me sometimes.”

Athena crossed her arms, “And what all is the point of this because last time I checked I had a different bed I was sleeping in.”

“Nisha… Nisha is…” Janey picked her words carefully, “Look, Nisha’s a hell of a woman. I can see why you’d be attracted to her, who wouldn’t? But she’s… being a Vault Hunter is dangerous but being someone like Nisha and being WITH someone like Nisha is downright suicide.”

Tina grabbed Athena’s arm, pulling her back down and putting a plate of slightly malformed
cookies in front of her. Stopping her from leaving with a puppy dog look.

“I know I’m not the single most… anything on Pandora but I still love you,” Janey carefully pulled out the stops, “I talked… I talked to Lilith and she said that she thinks she could talk Brick and Mordecai very easily into letting you come back. Without Nisha. With me.”

“I’m lea-” Athena got up to try and storm off, pulling her arm easily away from Tina’s grasp.

“You don’t!” Janey cut her off, standing up herself, “You don’t have to answer now. Help Tina, I’m heading back to Sanctuary. Just… consider my offer.”

It hurt to watch Janey walk away, to hear her push this issue any further, to have both the thrill and disgust of normalcy on the table again.

Athena felt the insistent tugging at her arm though, Tina giving her the biggest pout as she pointed at the giant boxes currently blocking the entrance to her little workshop. How’d she even get them there in the first place?

Heading back to Nisha, Athena didn’t like those words burying themselves in her brain. Trying to lie to her about things being better, about how Janey’s changed, about how being in Sanctuary again would mean she could help find Angel faster.

She knew it wasn’t an option but it wasn’t something she had even wanted presented to her. Especially not in a way where Janey’d keep coming back again and again.

Clicking the locked door open, Athena couldn’t help but feel her heart flutter as she watched Nisha’s face do from an angry, glaring neutral to absolutely lighting up in that crooked, sarcastic smile of her when she saw her come back though.

“Told you long enough,” Nisha sprawled out, like she hadn’t been comfortable the entire time Athena’d been gone, “Was startin’ to think I’d be alone the whole damn day.”

Her own smile would be imperceivable to anyone but those close to her. Holding up what she’d taken as payment from Tina. The battered deck of cards one of many haphazardly placed into a junk drawer, the little girl not caring when Athena asked for them.

“Got some cards,” Athena turned them around, “Beat to hell but they’ll give us some more stuff to do.”

“Strip poker?” Nisha offered.

“Maybe more like strip solitaire.”

“What, like, getting naked by yourself?”

Athena looked at the deck, “I mean unless YOU know how to play poker.”

Nisha cackled, rolling off the couch and snatching it from her with a peck on the lips, “I’ll teach ya, it’ll be fun.”

Again Athena found herself being dragged by the hand.

But this time she had a smile on her face.
The moment had shoved aside any thoughts about Janey’s offer and the problems Athena would have to deal with in the future. Telling her no, trying to get her to understand.

Trying to get anyone to understand what Nisha was.

---

A month. It had been a solid month since Jack had dumped Angel on the ground like a discarded fast food wrapper and left. Not that she knew that.

It had been a few hours afterwards some scientists had come back to strap her back into the machine. Pulling her heartlessly away from the little cartoon musical marathon she’d started with H4L0 to jam needles back into her and send her up to her miserable perch. Hovering in the middle of the room ceaselessly.

The weird part was there was… nothing.

Ever since that moment, Jack looking down at her in disgust…

Nothing had happened. Not only had he not come back but no one had. Experiments abruptly stopping, not even a single worker bee coming in to check on her.

H4L0 was still here for her though, eagerly doing everything in her power to keep her comfortable and aiming to even make her happy.

Angel was surprised H4L0 hadn’t been taken away again.

But it was still somehow even worse, the cold isolation starting to dig under her skin.

Even worse having come off of Sanctuary where they always seemed to be someone hustling and bustling around. A gaggle of friendly faces ready to talk with her. Having H4L0 here was probably the only thing keeping her from completely losing her mind.

That’s what Jack wanted. Wanted Angel to crack into a million pieces that he could easily pick up and put back together in any way he wanted.

She was sure that was why he’d taken away all the clocks.

Let her get trapped in her own mind.

H4L0 could only distract her so much from that.

In the moment where she was expected to sleep she found the most torment.

Dangling there like a hanged man, trying to find comfort in being limp and helpless. No blanket to wrap warmly around her, no comfy pajamas to slip into. The constant sound of Eridium pumping through the tubes, into her back, into her veins. Powering the Vault Key, wherever Jack’s keeping it around here.

Not to mention just thinking more and more about “what if my dad succeeds?”

That thought making it even harder to fall asleep.

She hadn’t mostly. Insomnia biting at her mind and eyes incessantly.

Starting to warp her perception of the world.
She can’t let Jack win though.

She can’t.

Just as her eyes started closing, about to let a rare patch of sleep give her some respite…

She heard the door open.

Keeping her eyes closed, Angel felt her body shake at the sound of sneakers on the hard material. Not knowing exactly what he was going to do but knowing whatever it was…

She wasn’t going to like it.

“Angel?” she heard him call out, “You up, sweetheart?”

Sighing, she opened her eyes but didn’t look at him. Quiet voice still loud in the wide room. Only the sound of him walk towards the control panel, the machinery pumping and whirring around her, H4L0 anxiously circling below.

It was always uncomfortable seeing a CL4P-TP unit be dead silent.

He didn’t say anything else.

Angel felt herself begin to lower to the ground, still unable to take her eyes off of it.

She couldn’t look at him.

She just couldn’t.

Even as he came over and reached around Angel, pulling out her needles and wires. Leaving her standing on her trembling legs, hands tightly balled into fists from effort. Resisting she felt him try to pry the hand apart to hold onto his.

She hated that she had to relent. If she didn’t, he’d just painfully force her hand open.

Holding onto his hand she still didn’t look up. Normally they tested her inside the area but whenever he’d led her outside it had been worse. Taking her somewhere more specific.

Whatever he was going to do to her, it was going to hurt.

H4L0 trailed behind them as they exited the bunker in dead silence.

The silence terrified Angel, feeling like she was going to throw up as she was led downwards. Down the spiralling exit, towards the fast travel station, head towards whatever misery was planned for her. H4L0 clanking behind them, still eerily silent.

As the station grew closer and closer, Angel contemplated if she could survive jumping over the edge.

At this point…

Did it matter if she did?

That question asked itself over and over, louder each time as they approach the- They didn’t stop.
Confused, Angel looked back at the fast travel station, “Where are we going?”

“Just keep walking,” he growled and picked up the pace, nearly pulling her over as he tightened his grip and picked up the pace, “Faster.”

Angel wanted to ask more questions but there was not a word between them, only him occasionally tersely greeting people they passed.

Eventually she peeked up at the masked face, wondering if she could at least tell if he mad or disappointed or-

Loud, wailing alarms knocked Angel right over. Scrawny legs giving out and dropping her confusedly half to her knees, looking around in fear as she felt the blaring noise drown out the world. Her yelp not carrying as she was roughly jerked back up before being slammed into like a freight train as she was scooped up by…

For the first time Angel really looked at the man who was currently carrying her, frantically, running.

Eyes wide, green eye too blue.

From below the ghosts of pale freckles were stark.

Too-auburn hair even redder in the sunlight.

That’s Not Jack.
I have never seen the movie Planes, Trains, and Automobiles yet here I stand, naming a chapter after it.

It had been weeks since the uncomfortable meeting with Janey and Tina but it occupied Athena’s mind whenever she was left to her own devices.

Like now. Staring up at the tower-like roof above her.

Must have been kind of fun for Mordecai’s bird to spiral down that.

The only type of spiral that Athena had in her life was one of absolute bullshit.

Why was Janey doing this to her? Well maybe that she could get but... why were people backing her up? Everyone? Except Angel Why was it literally anyone’s business but hers and Nisha’s?

Rolling her head over she looked at the sleeping women, pressed against her side. Curled tightly around her. Blanket half pulled over her all but naked form, save only for the pair of surprisingly fancy black underwear. Seemed to be Nisha’s only indulgence in a sea of otherwise fairly practical clothing.

Frankly, Athena was surprised Nisha was this much of a cuddler. Always imagined she was more of a sex, boom, we’re done, rolls away and goes to sleep.

Not… not that Athena had thought about that before.

She just… Fuck. Shut up, who the hell are you to judge her?

Closing her eyes, Athena drowned out the weird guilt she felt at even thinking about things like that when they weren’t… a thing. Girlfriends? She was pretty sure they were girlfriends, it’s what she’d say if someone asked and she didn’t think Nisha’d object.

Janey sure didn’t seem to think so.

Athena felt like she was shielding Nisha from so much of this bullshit but that was her job, right? Hold up her aspis and take the hits for others.

It really sucked not to have someone she could talk to about this.

Could talk to Angel, except she’s not here.

God did Athena wish she was here.

Not just because she’d have someone to talk to, obviously. It churned her stomach to imagine the unbelievable hell that Timothy had damned the girl too. Always knew he was a coward but this…

It disgusted her to think that he’d “done it for her and Nisha.”
To have such a cruel choice made for her made Athena’s skin crawl.

It didn’t help that they’d gone so long without much word from Lilith and Roland other than an infuriatingly vague “the Vault Hunters are working on it.” Working on what?! The others hadn’t been in contact either but Athena could optimistically suppose that was because they were trying to figure it out.

She hated being locked out from that, she hated that nobody was trying to have her help, she hated feeling like some sort of poison that nobody wanted any part of though.

But most of all, Athena hated feeling helpless.

Looking at the dozing Nisha she had a strong feeling the woman felt the same.

While Nisha’d broken out of the dead eyed haze she’d initially been in she’d snapped into this sort of irritable rage that always seemed to lurk under the surface. Athena was amazed and fairly impressed that somehow Nisha managed to not rely on taking it out on her.

Mostly she just went outside and threw what Athena could only describe as a temper tantrum.

Athena didn’t want to think about how this could just be their life from now on.

There was always a possibility that they could just… never have Angel back.

Her blood went cold at that thought. They’d only had Angel for a few months but the girl had latched onto them hard, finding some sort of family in them that she’d been cruelly denied for most or all of her life. Athena’d never had anyone decide she was not only someone worth caring about that quickly but looking up to her as some weird… big sister/mother figure since… Timothy. Since Timothy.

Somehow Timothy’s betrayal was so much worse considering him and Angel…

They were the same, in a lot of ways. Victims of Jack who hadn’t chosen their fate, permanently tied to him. Tortured by him.

Both of them easily strong enough to kill him too.

But unable to, for different reasons.

Athena felt her hands twist into fight fists, struggling to keep from moving and disturbing Nisha but just…

Feeling so helpless.

God, did she hate feeling helpless.

---

The alarms were still blaring but getting used to it, Timothy could hear beyond it.

He’d wanted to turn around, get back to the fast travel station and get the fuck out of dodge but he could hear and see the Loader Bots slamming into the wide, open expanse of the roof.

Not an option, he had to go forward, he had to get out of here.
Angel was light, disturbingly so. Not even vaguely slowing him down as he bolted towards where he knew the gate would be. Distracted only by that stupid arm flailing that all Claptrap units did when they ran, H4L0 keeping up with him easily.

His gut wrenched at the familiarity of that. He’d found the bot annoying just like everyone else but seeing Jack put a bullet in the little yellow bastard…

Claptrap didn’t deserve that.

That was really the theme of all of Jack’s victims, huh?

There wasn’t time to stop and reminisce about his time on Elpis though, sliding out of the spiralling ramp out of the bunker. Stopping only to snatch up a bag he’d hidden behind a crate. All shit he’d need if he was going to get Angel out of here alive.

Pressing himself tightly against the wall, tucked into an alcove he watched a rush of guards past them, sheer luck the only thing keeping them from being spotted.

It was less loud out here at least, Timothy doing a sweep of the courtyard below. A few more guards than he’d want to see but not as bad as it could be. Very spread out. Easy to dodge. Just a couple leaps down the stair-like platforms, run across, get out through the door.

Quickly. Before Jack, the real one, shows up.

Zipping across as he saw the guards turn to check outside the gates, he easily hopped down towards the exit. Pausing only once they were lodged behind some crates, setting Angel on the ground.

“What about H4L0?!” Angel fretted, glad to be able to express this concern now that they were far enough from the alarms. Pointing back at her, awkwardly trying to scoot down the stairs without breaking anything, “She can’t do it by herself, we can’t leave her!”

God, how many times in his miserable little life was Timothy going to be expected to risk his life for a goddamn Cl4P-TP unit?

Bolting back to the accursed thing he, with great difficulty, managed to hoist and drop her down the levels without the guards noticing a thing. Fuck these things are heavy, thick metal casing digging into his hands painfully, wrenching his back. Hadn’t had to pick one up since Claptrap got stuck in a crater after a buggy crash.

Crashing back behind cover, he tried not to look so pissed off about it as he shrugged off his backpack. The clunk of the bag on the ground revealed, to Angel’s immediate and obvious relief, her little metal backpack device and a serviceable amount of Eridium. Not even having to be told, she quickly took it out and flipped it onto her back.

H4L0 clapped her little clamps together, “Angel, you can-”

Timothy cut off the shrill little bot with a shush, “Quiet! You’re too loud, don’t talk right now.”

In response she clapped her hands over where she supposed her mouth would be, doing her best approximation of nodding.

Angel flinched at the sudden, large hand on the back of her neck until she saw the key in Tim’s hand. Tilting her head back to let him click open the lock on her collar. Feeling relief as it disengaged and dropped to the ground.
H4L0 looked like she was about to cheer, Timothy shushed her again.

“Alright, you’re a Siren so like...” Timothy looked around the corner again at the guards, “Sirens do stuff, what’s the thing you do?”

Angel squinted, “Do... stuff?”


“Well, I can manipulate electronics at great distances.”

“Good, there’s a gate we’ll have to get past out there,” Tim sounded relieved, even with the alarm still sounding, “Anything else?”

“I can make people’s bodies come apart at the joints.”

Tim’s face scrunched up in disgust, “Augh, Angel, what the fuck?”

“What?!” she frowned in response, “You asked! Sirens aren’t exactly known for being safe and cuddly!”

There was definitely not enough time to unpack all of that right now, Tim trying to shrug off that slightly terrifying information and avoid seeing it in action, “Whatever, they seem to be going in and out to try and keep the gate guarded can you just like... I don’t know, cause a diversion? Preferably one that doesn’t involve making someone’s limbs melt off their body? Make some electronic go haywire?”

“There’s a large control panel by the staircase,” Angel knew her own cage’s outsides well, “Maybe if I explode it when they head inside they’ll all go to it?”

“Better than nothing,” Timothy watched them begin to filter back inside the gates, pulling out his sidearm, “If not, I hope you’re alright with watching me gun down legions of people.”

“One time I exploded a whole room full of bandits in self defense like a flesh blender, blood was everywhere.”


Angel just shrugged in response.

“Just... just blow up the thing,” Tim looked back around the corner, “Then we’ll run. H4L0, you just... I don’t know I don’t think there’s any other stairs along the way. Just keep up.”

Holding out her hand, Angel squinted and the panel burst open. Sending guards scattering to it.

Picking her up again, Timothy started bolting for the now abandoned gate.

---

Nisha woke up far later, rolling over to an empty bed and rolling out of the tight tuck-in she’d received from Athena when she’d left.

With a whump she landed on the ground and stood up, wandering towards the little kitchen area where she could see Athena digging around for something to eat. Knowing that they were going to
have to make a supply run sometime soon.

Dragging the blanket behind herself, Nisha had a leery look on her face, “Hey, if you’re hungry I got something you can eat.”

“What is it?” Athena replied flatly, dumbly looking over to see the absolutely delighted look on Nisha’s face as she wiggled her eyebrows at her. Immediately dropping into an exhausted sigh, “Nevermind, figured it out.”

“Already ninety-five percent to naked, real sexual speedrun at this point,” Nisha reached out her arms, exposing herself with a shimmy.

She didn’t know what to make of the weird look on Athena’s face, mildly annoyed that she was looking away though. Thinking. That was obvious. Had that look on her face when she didn’t know if she should say anything or not.

Nisha wasn’t one to prod though.

Just deciding to be a distraction, it’s how she got through life mostly.

Sliding out one of the seats and sitting on it, Nisha completely dropped the blanket, “So on a scale of one to ten how pissed do you think Mordecai could be with us bangin’ all over his hidey-hole?”

“I get the feeling he’s pretty much abandoned this place so, probably doesn’t care,” Athena looked around, “Might want his holotapes back though.”

“Could bang on the holotapes, that’d piss him off.”

That weird rasp of laughter Nisha loved jerked out of Athena, the woman shaking her head, “How would he even tell we did?”

“Sticky.”

“Disgusting.”

Nisha only cackled though, “Yeah, little bit. Serve him and his big ol’ oaf right though.”

“Again you’re going in on antagonizing the biggest, scariest people in the room,” Athena shook her head and went back to digging for scraps, “You know there’s easier and less painful ways to die on Pandora, right? Personally I’d just let one of the trains hit me. Damn things are quick.”

“That’s so morbid,” Nisha leaned on her hand, “That the kind of thing that usually rattles around in your head when you get quiet?”

“No, not really,” Athena grabbed a can of unknown fruit, noting the date on it was good, “Mostly I’m just thinking about… stuff.”

“Sexy stuff?”

“No, usually just whatever’s been going on.”

Without her saying, the implications of that were clear. Nisha nodding, “Been thinking about Angel a lot then, huh?”

Yeah, that got her. Athena’s mouth twitching at that, “We’ll… we’ll get her back. Gut feeling but that just… can’t be how things end. It can’t.”
Nisha wasn’t nearly as optimistic but she wasn’t about to air those concerns, just nodding along, “Something’ll.”

The sound of Athena’s ECHO device going off cut the conversation short, the name “Lilith” lighting up on it along with the incoming call.

- - -

It was downright amazing how far they managed to go without being noticed. Even with a Claptrap unit in tow, the bot clearly just barely restraining herself from noise at every second.

Angel wanted to reach out and comfort the vibrating bot but she knew better, just tuck her arms in and let herself be carried out. A weird, passive role that the girl was getting real, real tired of playing but what else could she do?

She looked up at Timothy again, the man wholeheartedly ignoring her as he darted from cover to cover. Getting closer and closer to that looming gate.

What had made him change his mind? Other than guilt, she presumed.

She supposed she’d find out. Eventually.

Standing right at the gate, Angel felt unease. Mounting as Timothy addressed her, “Take it down for just a second. Stored a vehicle outside. Figured it would be better to use fast travel only as a last resort since Jack can track it but… doesn’t matter at this point, there’s one out there in Thousand Cuts. We’re using it and getting the hell out of here. People’ll fire so just… stay behind me. You too… Claptrap? Whatever your name is, I’ve got a hell of shield.”

Angel just nodded, raising her hand and cutting off H4L0 trying to awkwardly introduce herself.

The shield flickering and turning off, pulling all attention to them running out. Even as it burst back to life the second they were through it.

The next few minutes were a blur.

Angel being downright thrown into the car as bullets ripped through the air towards them.

All she could do was sit there in a daze as the sleek Hyperion issued car peeled out and zipped through what had clearly been a battlefield. Soldiers and robots behind them, bandits in front of them, the world a smear on the windshield as Timothy slammed past them all towards that familiar device in the distance.

Swerving, he narrowly dodged the Loader Bots slamming into the ground around them. Not only did Jack know but Jack knew where they were and…

Angel wasn’t given a second longer to think about it as Timothy burst out of the car and ran to the other side, jerking her out and pulling her towards the fast travel station. Only waiting a split second for H4L0 to grasp her hand to begin frantically punching in a code to who-knows-where.

Maybe Timothy didn’t know himself. Things became a bit more unsure as Angel watched a lucky volley of bullets rip into vital parts of the machine as they began to be digitized, sucked in, transported.

For a terrifying second all of them thought it wasn’t going to go through until it did.

Whipping them through space in a familiar vortex.
Tim didn’t have time to figure out if he’d punched in the right number or if it would even have mattered if he had by the time they were thrown forward to their predestined destination.

Bracing himself for the stinging pain that always arced across his face to get worse as he flew forward, expecting to slam inelegantly face first into the hard, dirt ground. However, he instead saw white and blue. Landing on something relatively soft albeit biting, cruelly cold.

Pushing himself up with some difficulty, Timothy looked around in confusion at the frozen over wasteland.

Next to him H4L0 was wildly clamping at the air and trying to get off her back, yelping for help, “MY CIRCUITS! Freezing over, the world going dark!! I’m dying, I’m dyinggggg!!”

Snatching one thin metal arm, Timothy easily pulled her out of the snowbank.

Cringing as she instantly latched around his waist in a tight hug, happily singing, “My hero!”

“Don’t call me that…” Tim untangled himself from the pipes she calls arms, turning his attention to Angel sticking a bit comically out of a snowbank. Legs awkwardly trying to find purchase to upright herself but just short of being able to find the ground.

Somewhat disturbed by the fact he can feel his hand completely encircle her waist as he grabbed her he pulled her out, setting her shivering form on her own two legs, shaking like Bambi against the harsh wind, futilely rubbing her ghost white arms, snow and ice sticking to every inch of her—

Tim was laughing, why was he laughing?

Angel shot him a cold glare which demanded an answer.

“I, uh,” Tim instantly balked, pointing at her, “You’re, uh, a snow Angel.”

Not expecting a pun, Angel tried to stifle the giggle that came out with her hand, “Are you proud of that joke?”

“Little bit,” he smiled, looking to the horizon for anything resembling shelter.

A train. Active one too it looked like, the back end of it pointed at what looked to be a mine. Wherever it was going, there’d be civilization. From there? They’d figure out what the hell they were gonna do.

Angel didn’t protest at all being picked up again, honestly very grateful to try and sap some body heat from the man as he started stomping through the snow towards an open car that had already been filled up. More than enough room for two humans and a CL4P-TP unit.

Fuck it, the heavy one is going in first.

Setting Angel down, Timothy gripped the edges of H4L0 to hoist her inelegantly in. At least unlike Claptrap H4L0 had the decency to tuck her limbs and wheel in as tightly as she could. The white and blue bot still letting out a little “AAAHHHHH!!” when she slammed onto the bed of the train.

Yeah definitely the right choice to throw her in first.

Getting Angel in was comically easier, barely needing to do much more than get her halfway up before she helped climb up herself.
Hopping in last he reached up and closed the door with a metallic clank.

There were a lot of crates in there but a perfect little hidey hole was tucked in the back. Hidden nicely from view should anyone come to check on their car but also more than big enough for them to rest comfortably.

Well, as comfortably as they could, considering the circumstances.

H4L0 quickly darted back and turtled up, shivering. Timothy had to admit, as far as CL4P-TP units went H4L0 was… tolerable. Her voice may be more shrieky but the bot was extremely quiet in comparison to every other one he’d met before Jack iced the whole line.

With a lurch, they felt the train start moving.

Angel was already seated back there, trying to get the snow and ice off of her, “Where’s... where’s the train going?”

“Don’t know,” Timothy shrugged off his jacket, brushed off any remaining snow and handed it to her, “Somewhere with people. We’ll work with it from there, hopefully it’ll be a warehouse though. A lot of those have surprisingly lax security.”

Angel looked hesitant to take the jacket from him but caved rather quickly, wrapping it tightly around her, “What if my dad is waiting there when we get there?”

“Unlikely,” Timothy fell back against the wall and slid down, “That fast travel station’s definitely busted. Not gonna be able to get our location from there, we’re off the grid for now. I’m, uh, actually not entirely sure where we are either.”

Angel didn’t terribly like that answer, “Oh…”

A long silence stretched out between them.

With the adrenaline wearing off, Angel was confronted by exactly how weird it was to be sitting next to a weird fake version of her dad. Everything just slightly off from a face she’s seen constantly for twenty-one years.

While Athena and Nisha talked about Tim she didn’t really have that great of a concept of who he was.

A few scattered facts. He’d been from one of the highly developed planets. He’s gone to college and been unable to pay it off. He was probably a bit younger than her dad. He loves animals. Before Elpis he’d never so much as even held a gun. Her father had tricked him into his current state.

That was about it.

On Tim’s end Angel was even more of an enigma.

Jack’s daughter. A joint melting Siren of terrifying power. Science experiment.

Somehow not knowing anything about her only made him feel more guilty.

“Yes. Sorry,” Tim scratched the back of his neck, “I mean, not just... for gettin’ you lost right now. Just kind of... in general. For everything. Bringing you back to Jack. Not... not coming back sooner.”
Instinct told Angel to say ‘it’s okay’ but that’d be a lie, instead asking him, “What… what made you come back at all?”

“I thought… I just thought I have a golden opportunity to save Athena and Nisha but… I don’t know. I thought I could just hand you over and if I didn’t know anything else about you it’d be fine and it probably would have been but when Jack… made me come with I just…”

“You got too close to the situation to think purely logically.”

“Yeah… It’s just… Athena took care of me after Jack did…” he just kind of gestured to his entire self, “I didn’t have any way to defend myself I hadn’t even ever held a gun before and she taught me everything. She didn’t have to. She just did. Guess she did the same to you too.”

Angel nodded, “Athena’s been very protective of us.”

Us. Timothy knew what the other half of that was.

“So it really was Nisha who saved you though, huh,” Tim sounded even more defeated at that, “Didn’t, uh, didn’t think she had that in her. That’s for sure.”

“I don’t think Nisha knew she had it in herself either,” Angel tucked her legs up into the warm jacket.

“That… was part of it too. I’m not a good man but I can’t… I can’t handle being worse than Nisha. That’s probably an asshole thing to say but it’s true.”

Angel wanted to refute that but really? She couldn’t.

“Well, I’m glad you changed your mind,” Angel gave up and replied, “I don’t know how else I would have gotten out.”

She probably wouldn’t have. Maybe.

“Yeah, you’re welcome” he unenthusiastically replied.

“What are you going to do after you take me back to Athena and Nisha? I’m not so sure they’re going to let you come into Sanctuary, Nisha was already dicey and made it in by the skin of her teeth.”

“Dunno,” he looked tired, “Probably just wander into the wasteland to die.”

“You don’t… have to do that,” Angel looked over at him, “We can at least try to see if they’ll let you in Sanc-”

“Not with this face.”

“Or we can just… leave. Maybe set up our own little place or something, with three Vault Hunters at least… couldn’t be too hard. Just clear out a bandit encampment and start building. Just go somewhere far away where Jack wouldn’t think to look…”

And hope that three Vault Hunters and a Siren are enough to keep him at bay.

Timothy’s face didn’t lose an ounce of bitter cynicism at that, “Just… I’m just gonna drop you off and have that be the end of this.”

“But…”
“We should sleep.”

Any further discussion was cut short as he started clicking off the vest and folding it to place behind him. The world’s saddest, thinnest pillow. Angel never thought about how stupid the long, long white shirt looked uncovered as Timothy took that off too and handed it to her.

“If I were you, I’d use this as a blanket and the jacket as a pillow.”

“What about you?” Angel watched Timothy roll down the sleeves of the baggy old sweater.

“Jack wears a million layers, I’ll live,” Tim groaned as he laid out, flat on his back on the hard, rocking floor of the train, “Hell, I’ve still got an undershirt on under the sweater. Don’t know why the hell he does, just absolutely tanks mobility. Feel like a goddamn penguin, waddling around with my arms out.”

Angel giggled at that, listening to his suggestion as she folded up the jacket and tightly wrapped the long, white shirt around her, “Dad makes a lot of weird, irrational decisions.”

“Man, can you say that again,” Timothy interlaced his fingers over his stomach, “Wake me up if you even think you hear something, okay?”

Angel nodded, curling up on her side, “Okay.”

- - -

The mission Lilith and Roland had given them was simple, inelegant and somewhat foolhardy but at this point they’d take anything.

There was a Hyperion train coming through the Tundra Express and it had a piece they needed to repair Sanctuary’s quickly depleting shields. The little town’s only chance to not be moonshot off the face of this shitty planet.

It was honestly really nice to be gearing up and heading out, doing something more than idle practice on some bandit camps around the area.

A purpose, really. Maybe they’d even be let in, maybe on top of that even be allowed to head out and rescue Angel themselves. With the help of the new Vault Hunters, sure, but be proactive in this endeavor.

Meeting with Tina the girl looked none too happy about working with Nisha but was too excited by the prospect of explosions to really care all that much.

Seeing the track explode, sending the train flying…

Well, they had to say, they both agreed with the little girl.

Shit was dope.

- - -

When Timothy and Angel had woken up they didn’t really know how long they’d been out or how long they’d travelled. Asking H4L0 hadn’t revealed anything extra either, the bot proudly chirping that, “I’ve been up the whole time! Absolutely nothing has happened, not a single stop!!”

But it had to stop soon, right? Angel wrapped herself in the jacket again but handed Timothy back the long shirt.
Normally he avoided the extra layers but now he was grateful for the warmth.

Even if it wasn’t nearly as long anymore.

“Starting to feel like we should try and get off this thing ourselves,” Timothy walked over and carefully tried the door which was hard to move but not impossible, “Starting to feel like a sitting duck. Wouldn’t be the first dodgy tuck-and-roll I’ve done. Can you like… fly or something? I’ve heard about Sirens having wings, you got those?”

“In a limited capacity,” Angel replied which was enough for Timothy to jerk up the door roughly, “Enough to survive a very far fall.”

The second he actually looked out the door though he looked ready to throw up at the world zipping along so far below. Were his face not covered, Angel could have watched every ounce of color drain out of it.

He waved her over, looking down at the craggy rocks below, “Not now but if we can get over an open plane, you think you could do that?”

“What about H4L0?”

Tim looked back at the annoyance, “Claptrap units can survive a hell of a fall.”

“IT’s true! Our titanium shells are built to withstand impacts that would shatter a weaker bot, same material as Loader Bots! It’s why they can crash to Pandora and get up fine!”

Looking ahead, Tim spotted a wide, open spot that arched up nicely into a much, much less far drop, “There. When we’re about a third through, just… just jump down and use your wings to drift down an-”

Whatever else Timothy had to say was cut off as they began to reach their destination. A thundering explosion rocking the entire train, the track shattering, throwing them out of the open side and towards the rapidly approaching ground.

Grabbing the panicking and definitely-not-bringing-out-her-wings Angel, Timothy tucks her against his chest and twists, still screaming, as he slams back-first onto the just barely covered ice into a large burst of snow. Fall only broken at the very last second by sheer, white wings bursting from Angel’s back for just a split second as she tightly held onto him.

Groaning and pushing Angel off to the side, Tim quickly jerks her back as H4L0 crashes screaming next to them hard enough to crack the ice. Barely a few feet away. Both fleshy humans looking terrified at the metallic meteor that could have turned either of them into a guts pinata if she’d crashed just a handful of feet to the left.

They weren’t given much time to explore that particular facet of their mortality though as something much more fearsome started clunking to life about twenty feet away, the train car that had been in front of theirs lifting out of the water.

Unnatural yellow limbs burst forth as the giant thing was thrown with ease and he stepped out.

Wilhelm. Or at least what was left of him.

- - -

Running through the flaming wreckage, Athena and Nisha easily tore through the meager remains
of the Hyperion bots that had been on the train.

Watching Athena eagerly and easily dispatch enemy after enemy left Nisha wondering exact how the hell could Janey not want to be watchin’ her do this twenty-four-seven. Er, ninety… sixty-three… whatever the hell the Pandoran equivalent is.

Either way it was a pleasure to watch Athena work, all trained soldier from head to toe.

Precision aim bursting the bots at the seams.

Strong, bolting run clothing the distance.

Heavy shield ricocheting wildly and controlled at the same time.

Muscles flexing under light armor.

Yeah, Nisha could think of a few ways to celebrate this victory later.

A tracker on Athena’s ECHO device was what they were chasing as they worked further and further into the frozen hills until they reached the end of the line. A wide open, icy valley where the wreckage with their prize had landed.

Serene enough until they watched one of the fiery pieces rise up out of the ground and get pitched at them full force. Dodging under it only to see it slam into the wall behind them, collapsing part of the ice wall.

Wilhelm’s current state was of no surprise to Nisha who’d seen him relatively recently but to Athena? She barely even recognized him.

Mouth agape she just barely could, calling out with a confused, “Wilhelm?”

He stomped forward once with an unreasonably giant Loader Bot-esque leg, crouching from his giant height with a flat and menacing, “Ain’t seen you in a looong time, girl.”

“What did Jack do to you?” Athena stepped back, not so stupid as to lower the assault rifle in her hands, “What did you do to YOURSELF?”

“Always told you,” Wilhelm stood back up to his full height, “I wanna be a robot. Now I am.”

The way he cricked his neck brought her no comfort, drones reminiscent of his old Wolf and Saint zipping out to encircle him.

She knew that old familiarities weren’t going to work here.

Nisha pulled out a second pistol, “Stand down, Wilhelm. I ain’t got any desire to put down an old friend.”

“Should have thought of that sooner,” Wilhelm took another step forward, flexing one of his metal arms in a testing manner, “And definitely should have brought more than just the tw-”

Wilhelm growled at the sudden burst of metal and electricity as one of this drone burst, bullet ripping through it nearly.

A single, clean shot.

Wilhelm didn’t even need to turn his whole body, spinning his torso around on the unnatural pivot,
“I know you ain’t got Aurelia with you but I also know who Aurelia taught to shoot like that. Always was a coward.”

Athena and Nisha looked to each other quickly, both instantly knowing that meant-

Watching Timothy stand from cover, already swapping weapons for an SMG. The way he clearly hadn’t dropped the Jack act yet was unnerving, almost like he was going to try and order Wilhelm down. But everyone here already knew that wasn’t the real Jack.

Nisha had a different target on her mind though, eyes zipping and dart past Timothy looking for…

Were it not for her pitch black hair, Angel would have blended into the snow entirely. Pressed tightly against some of the debris. Watching carefully, tattoos glowing and making her blend into the ground even more.

For the best, she sure as hell wasn’t ready for a fight of this magnitude.

“You’re outnumbered,” Tim’s voice was unwavering but clearly hiding behind a thick coat of pretending to be Jack, “Just leave and-”

In a second, Wilhelm was all but on top of him. Metal hand slamming into the ice in front of Timothy with enough force to knock him right on his ass.

The second shot fired knocked off a piece of Wilhelm’s headgear, sending him twisting back to face Nisha who gave him a cocky, “You know it ain’t smart to turn your back on me.”

For a second it looked like Wilhelm was contemplating targets before whipping back to try and nail a hit on the knocked over Tim.

Only to find him gone, running at a distance and summoning some all too familiar holograms with a loud, “WHO NEEDS A HERO?”

Nisha wasn’t watching him though, her locked on stare had met with Angel’s.

Scared, relieved, terrified, elated.

But all she could do was hide.

Nisha refocused on the now starting to rampage Wilhelm, bracing herself for a hell of a fight.

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It was almost disgusting how powerful Wilhelm had become in the time since Elpis.

In the pursuit of robotics, he’d completely rebuilt himself bigger, better and stronger. Jack apparently eagerly bankrolling it the entire way, happily getting himself the robotic super soldier of his dreams.

The fact the three of them were slowing down as he only seemed to grow more powerful was…

Disconcerting, to say the least.

All the while Angel’d stayed hidden out of sight, barely peeking past the edge of the barrier. H4L0 pressed tightly to her side, trying to further armor her with her thick metal body.

Claptrap units are nothing if not loyal to those who treat them well.
But the fighting was growing closer and closer and Angel had no other cover to duck to.

And when Wilhelm grabbed the crates and threw them at Athena only for her to dodged…

Angel was completely exposed.

For the first time in over fifteen minutes there was a lull in the combat.

Athena, Nisha and Timothy frozen at their group’s fourth and fifth being exposed, helpless to the man who’d spent the last quarter of an hour kicking their asses.

And Wilhelm, frozen only due to his mind absolutely racing at the prospect of exactly how big his reward would be if he returned Jack’s daughter to him.

Before anything else could be done about it Wilhelm easily grabbed her around the waist, whipping her around to use her as a human shield as he backed towards the edge of the cliff. Wide smile plastered on his face, “Been a hell of a reunion but-”

Whatever end to his sentence Wilhelm had was cut short as the twisting, undulating white started creeping up his robotic arm.

In the moment he’d thought, “well, ol’ Jackie caught her just a couple months ago so it must not be that hard.”

But Timothy had had something Wilhelm hadn’t.

That damned collar.

Unrestrained by her father’s tech, Angel’s eyes were glowing white as she tightly clutched Wilhelm’s mechanical wrist, even as her phaseshift was starting to take it apart piece by piece.

Creeping higher and higher still while Wilhelm screamed incoherently at the pain snaking around his limbs. Quickly seeking their target, unravelling things internally along the way until he just…

The sudden rain of blood gushed down on and around Angel as Wilhelm came apart at the seams in a sharp explosion of flesh.

Dropped to the ground, Angel quickly scrambled to get out of the way- assisted by her arms being tightly gripped by Nisha pulling her forward- just in time to dodge the broken pieces of Wilhelm falling to the ground behind her.

Nisha didn’t even care that Angel was covered with blood, or that she was knocked to the ground, or that she’d just watched one of her oldest friends burst to bloody pieces in front of her. Nisha just clung to Angel tightly. Like she was afraid the girl would disappear into thin air if she didn’t crush her firmly enough against her.

Hand sliding up to push Angel’s head forward into a warm, affectionate kiss on the forehead. The first and only time in her entire life Nisha had felt a compulsion to do that.

Gathering around them, Athena and Timothy were both surprised at the scene at their feet to varying degrees.

Athena surprised at the level of normal, downright motherly affection Nisha was showing.

Timothy shocked she was showing any level of affection at all that didn’t come from the business end of a whip.
Head quickly clicking onto Timothy, Athena watched him instantly start backing away from her.
Voice crackling out of the fake Jack one he’d managed to maintain until now, “I’ll just… I’ll go
now. I’m sorry.”

“Timothy, wait,” Athena grabbed his arm, pulling him back, “You brought her back. Why?”

“I couldn’t…” Tim instinctively flinched at his own name, “I just. Couldn’t.”

Her face softened and she tugged his sleeve, “Thank you. Come here.”

Considering the scene below them, Timothy cautiously approached for what he assumed as a hug
before being suddenly and sharply punched right in the left tit.

“OW,” Tim put a hand over the bruise to be, “ATHENA.”

He let out another grunt of pain as Athena sprung forward to tightly, way too tightly, hug him
around his waist, “You’re a coward and a dumbass. But you’re our cowardly dumbass and I’m glad
you made the right choice. Eventually.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that but…” Tim sounded genuine albeit a bit strangled and pained,
trying to force her to loosen her grip that was currently crushing all of his guts, “But you're hurting
me. Like. A lot.”

Tim let out a yelp as Athena only tightened her squeezing more with a slightly deadpan, “I know.”
The concrete wall outside is the coldest. Timothy left out there, hands pressed against it and feeling the imperfections in it.

Flimsy, really. The glisten of the shield occasionally overhead the only thing keeping this place from being a smouldering pit of rubble. It could probably take a decent number of direct moonshots before falling but it would fall.

Anything could fall to Hyperion.

Whenever he thought too hard about the current situation he felt like throwing up.

It seemed like the girls had been gone for forever, leaving him stuck outside while they had to try and pull off the impossible: let a man with Handsome Jack’s face stapled on his come inside of Sanctuary.

He adjusted the purple bandana that had previously been around Angel’s neck as it slid down his nose. Uncomfortable. The goggles too, too tight and too small. Also uncomfortable. His clothes quickly and haphazardly replaced with anything they could find in his size at a handful of bandit camps on the way.

Anything to try and make his silhouette less distinct.

Timothy got it, I mean, if he was the one in charge of a rebel city and Jack’s daughter, former subordinate, and former girlfriend were all like “Hey alright, so there’s a guy who looks just like Jack just waiting right outside and you should totally, totally let him in. We definitely didn’t sell you guys out to Jack for Angel’s freedom or anything.” he sure as hell wouldn’t let himself in.

Even though they knew him. Lilith and Roland. They’d seen him, several years ago on Elpis. They’d know it wasn’t him, that he wasn’t Jack. Everyone up there did, at least everyone that mattered.

That was so long ago though. They had no way of knowing if he’d stayed who he was, deep down. He most certainly didn’t feel like the same man anymore.

Sure as hell didn’t make him feel any better being pressed against the wall here either.

Just waiting out here, just like Nisha had not that long ago.

Felt like waiting for the executioner to pull the trigger.

Eventually the speaker crackled to life next to him, the once familiar voice of Lilith tinny, angry, and shaking with uncertainty.

“`I’m opening the gates,” she said, Tim wondering why Roland wasn’t taking the reins, “I’m letting
you in but you’re gonna hand over your weapons without question and you stay the fuck by your escorts.”

He crumpled his voice down, doing anything to keep the Jack edge out of it, “Of course.”

The gates began opening, somehow leaving Timothy even more terrified.

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Timothy wasn’t a small man but even standing tall and doing his best not to look like a scared schoolboy did nothing to the fact Brick was very, very easily almost a foot and a half taller than him.

Also growling at him. Full on, actually growling. Like a wild fucking animal.

He kept his head tilted down, the hood both hiding what little of his face that was still visible and keeping himself from accidentally making eye contact with the giant.

Walking into the headquarters he instantly feels unwelcome.

It’s obvious everyone there was briefed exactly what and who he is.

Most of them were clustered to the side, five of the new Vault Hunters. In a mass, whispering and looking over to him. Most of them being surreptitious but the piercing glare or lack-of-glare form the assassin was most pointed. Brazenly “looking” right at him, their helmet slowly turning to continue to watch him pass.

That unnerved him. Probably looked like a damned tasty target to the creature. Easily he could imagine the little picture show in their inhuman head. Skewering him like a rakk kabob on the end of the sword they kept fiddling with.

Other side was a bit more of a mixed bag.

Tannis mostly just looked nervous, pressed far back into the room but her natural curiosity keeping her from truly and properly hiding. He flinched in disgust as she nigh instantly threw up when he looked at her. He’s heard enough about her to know this wasn’t personal. Probably.

Angel and her little friend was a little less awful. The ghostly girl just looking at him sympathetically, her Vault Hunter companion at least talked down into just warily watching him.

Were the situation not so desperately uncomfortable, Timothy might find it cute the way they were just barely holding hands. Heads nearly bopping together as they huddled on the bottom bunk, watching curiously.

H4L0 and Claptrap were in front of it, bunched up in some kind of weird robot solidarity. One was a bit anxious about him but the other was barely restrained from rolling over and loudly greeting him. His old teammate but not one he terribly wanted to see again.

Upstairs wasn’t much better but at least Brick quickly peeled away to stand at Mordecai’s side.

On the glowing map table in front of them rested some bits and pieces salvaged from the train wreckage, most notably a power core. Probably needed something like that to keep those big ass shields running.

Roland’s voice is stern, “Show your face.”
Timothy doesn’t like that but obliges, pulling off his meager disguise.

It was obvious by the way they analytically scanned him that they were checking he wasn’t the real thing but that was over quickly. It was obvious, it was always obvious. If you were looking for the cracks, at least. Imperfections loud if you knew what they were.

“Been a long, long time, Not Jack,” Lilith said, “You still… you?”

“It’s Timothy, not ‘Not Jack’,” he corrected, ironically also an answer to her question.

“Nisha here says there’s a hell of a lot of Hyperion places locked up tight and only available to ‘Jack.’ Also claims you can get into these places,” Roland asks, arms a tightly locked shield in front of him.

“It’s true,” Timothy nodded, wanting to mirror Roland’s defensive stance but knowing any sign of opposition could earn him a bonus hole in his head, “Got into Angel’s bunker and that’s just about the most secured place Jack’s ever set up. Not only is Angel his daughter but he needs her to power the vault key.”

“Do you know what Jack’s planning with the Vault Key?” Roland asked.

“Wish I did,” Timothy looked down towards where Angel’d be below, “Guess not much right now considering Angel’s here with us. He’s Siren-less.”

“Why do you want to help us?” Lilith peered curiously at him.

“I mean, I don’t really. I just wanna fuck off to the middle of nowhere to rot away in peaceful obscurity but unfortunately I’ve been talked into… this. So I’m doing it for Angel and them. I guess.”

He nodded towards the very quiet Athena and Nisha.

Lilith seemed skeptical about that but Roland, not so much, “That makes me feel better, honestly. No bullshit in that. No lies, even little white ones.”

“Always was someone who spoke exactly what he was thinking,” Lilith recalled earlier chats with the man, before things had gone sideways, “But I know I’m not remembering wrong that you were… complacent. With doing whatever Jack wanted.”

“Never liked that either,” Tim tilted his head, “My whole life’s been doing shit I don’t really want to.”

“A man with few loyalties can be dangerous,” Roland examined his not-face for signs of deception, “Can’t pretend I’m not having a hard time picturing you eagerly selling us out to Jack in a heartbeat. Be a real pretty bargaining chip, Sanctuary.”

“Because I’ve run away before,” Tim replied, like it answered a damn thing.

“You went back,” Roland noted.

“He didn’t exactly take kindly to it the first time and this time I took Angel.”

Lilith stepped towards him, “But now you could also bring her back.”

The sharp little clicks held everyone in rapt, shocked attention as they watched him reach up and begin undoing the latches bolted to his face.
Three of them had never even seen Tim with the mask until recently.

One had only seen him with it for years.

But this was new. To everyone. Each of them slack jawed and gaping at the sight of the deep brand pressed into his skin, down to the bone, eye destroyed, mouth warped where it grew too close.

“If he did this the first time, what the hell would he even do the second?”

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The mask’s back on and covered up even more by the time they head down the stairs, back to the others who were starting to disperse from the headquarters, most likely to go and get a drink out by Moxxi.

Angel looks up at her odd collection of guardians with utmost trust. Some part of her knows she should hate Timothy for what he did but something in her just… doesn’t. He’s not the one she’d turn to in a moment of need but at the same time she wouldn’t run if he reached out to her.

Gaige’s grip tightened on her hand protectively but relaxed when Angel patted her gently, “It’s fine. If you don’t mind, I’d like to go home and sleep in an actual bed. It’s been a while.”

Her hand lingered as she got up but the contact broke eventually as she made her way back to her little family.

The walk back to their home was hushed, nobody saying more than a couple words to each other. Establishing some vague things, like where Tim was going to sleep. The couch, he said he didn’t mind but one look at him said it wouldn’t be comfortable. Too tall for a too short piece of furniture.

If Angel could read minds she’d be able to hear Tim trying to ask if he had to keep wearing the mask. Tight and rubbery and unpleasant, pulling at his skull.

They watched them self be outpaced by a Crimson Raider shuffling by with the new powercore for their shield. That was nice at least, something to come out of this but a growing sense of dread.

“It’s grim but I kinda feel like we should celebrate,” Nisha tried to lighten the mood, “Maybe get some pizzas at Moxxi’s, get a bit wasted.”

Tim’s smile tugged at the bandana over his jaw, “Pretend we’re still at the Up, Over and everything hasn’t gone to hell?”

Angel couldn’t help but feel like an outsider with this, interlacing her fingers, “I think a little party would be nice, I’m so hungry… I could eat a whole pizza by myself.”

“Go nuts,” Nisha put a hand on her shoulder, “Got the feeling that Moxxi’ll give you as much as you c-”

Above them there was a crackle, everyone in the square pausing to look upwards. Must be switching out the drives. Tension pulled at all of them, waiting for their invisible protector to come back online. Coat them again like an eggshell.

But it didn’t.

Eyes shifted, to the H in the sky.

Firing. It was firing.
The whistling descent of the moonshots was almost drowned out by the screaming before being wiped over again by the ground shaking slams of it connecting.

It was like every radio on Sanctuary was broadcasting Jack’s mocking voice, bragging about them falling for it, about their shitty little city’s newfound vulnerability. Clapping her hands over her ears, Angel closed her eyes tight as her breath began to hitch.

Not exactly the most helpful or useful or safe thing you could do in the case of an emergency.

But she’d seen so many emergencies.

Frozen in place, all the quartet could do was watch in horror and hope that the blasts were off center, which they seemed to be. An odd thing, considering how accurate Hyperion and Jack bragged that their ammunitions were.

Accurate to within a foot.

But they were slamming outside of the city.

Activity burst to life outside them, both the old and new Vault Hunters pouring out of the headquarters. Ready to do something about this, not ready to roll over and take this sitting down.

Roland and Lilith were ordering Scooter and the new Vault Hunters around, the two of them the ringleaders of this chaos circus.

Something about needing to get Sanctuary off the ground, something about Jack, something about-

What happened next made Angel’s eyes spring open again.

One of the Raiders that usually guarded the entrance shambled up, his sprint labored and unnatural and leaving a long, disturbingly consistent trail of blood behind him. Frantically, deliriously screaming about the gates, screaming about Jack, screaming about-

A single shot burst through his mouth, downing him instantly in a splatter of blood.

Dropping out of the way, it was evident exactly what those moonshots had been doing.

They weren’t looking to destroy the city, no. This was going to be a more personal venture than that. They’d merely been the proverbial battering ram that had let Jack in. Destroying the gates that would have kept him and a specialized battalion from just waltzing in the front door.

And waltzing he was, the sight of Jack walking the streets of Sanctuary one that no one ever expected to see. Stark against the backdrop of yellow troopers beginning to bust down doors to get at the occupants.

His confident strides took him in a beeline towards his daughter, clinging to Nisha with one arm and Athena with the other. Looking at him like a disgusting, twisting ghost.

Screaming. Louder than she ever had in her life.

Jack was saying something, he was talking to her, but by some mercy of the universe she couldn’t hear what he was saying over her own screams and the screams of those around her.

The whole damn city was rattling like mad, Lilith still unaware of their visitor as she concentrated on raising the city up from the ground. Eyes screwed shut, flexing every muscle in her body to try and bid Sanctuary to rip itself up out of the ground.
Gunshots rang out at every corner, the new and old Vault Hunters having dispersed to try and keep as many citizens safe from the onslaught as possible.

His laser focus on her distracted him from the butt of the rifle, aimed at his head.

It was a surprise to no one that it was Roland who rushed to be the big damn hero.

But Jack’s laser focus kept him from being even dazed by the heavy blow, twisting around and nailing the soldier right in the jaw. Sending Roland stumbling backwards, crashing over one of the many benches with a hard slam to his back that left him emptily gasping for air.

In another world, another life, this could have been his downfall but Jack wasn’t worried about Roland or the Crimson Raiders for once in his life.

All he wanted was his daughter back.

Athena’s shield and the woman herself standing between him and her.

With an almighty cracking noise they all almost were knocked off their feet though as Sanctuary officially parted ways with the ground below it.

Jack didn’t exactly like his odds at a full on fight but with the Hyperion forces filtering into the screaming city, he liked his odds of a smash and grab on his Angel. Eye glinting behind the mask as he beelined at them, dreaming of being able to slaughter them all in the future.

He’d upped the number of forces coming with him but it was best to get this done as fast as possible before-

Sliding into sight, Lilith had a wild purple glow flickering around her, not weakened at all by literally lifting a city up from its foundation and flinging it skyward.

But he could tell she was still intimidated as he closed the gap between them. Weakened or not. She was thinking too, though, and thinking’s always dangerous.

Nothing he can do to stop that though, watching her frantic brain make a snap decision as she directed her left arm twisting back, glowing brighter, face crumpled up in concentration again.

“Sorry,” was all she said before the twisting feeling of being teleported encompassed them.

Last thing they heard was an enraged shout of “NO!” from Jack.

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While they hadn’t gone far at all, hell, were even still on the now levitating town, they didn’t exactly stick the landing.

Scattered, a bit, they all landed rough in Moxxi’s bar. Littered with corpses of Hyperion forces and citizens cowering.

Athena knocking over a very shocked Sir Hammerlock, Nisha breaking a table, Angel just getting a good old fashioned faceful of floorboards, and Timothy slamming- to his usual luck- behind the counter and into several shelves full of empty glasses. A rain of broken glass cutting through him and only narrowly missing the also-hiding Moxxi.

“What?!” Moxxi squawked out, all pretensions gone and babbling in her natural accent, “Where
th’hell’d y’all come from?!”

“Lilith,” was Athena’s dumb reply as she gripped the worn table and pulled herself up, “Jack’s in the center of town.”

Before she could elaborate further, Athena was already bolting out the door. Something about the ex-soldiers in this world and the need to “be the good guy.” Maybe it had something to do with at one point being the bad guy.

Recovering remarkable quick, Angel dodged the misaimed and wobbly grasp of Nisha to run after her. Even with the incapped cowgirl yelling after her, “ANGEL! STAY BACK!!”

She just couldn’t get back on her feet quick enough to stop her. First attempt only sending her back towards the ground with a yelp as electric pain wrapped around her ankle. Broken. Definitely broken. Ten minutes with Zed and she’d be right as rain but there was a world of danger between them and him right now.

Feeling one strong arm and one set of metal rods slide underneath her, Nisha found herself pick up and deposited in the corner. Revolver clapped back into her hand.

Hammerlock raised his rifle again, “More will be coming, I’m sure. Ready your armaments, pray for the best.”

“Don’t think prayin’s gonna do us much good…” Moxxi’s voice was quiet as she tried to help Timothy up and out of the glass.

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The way the concrete under her feet was shaking left Athena wondering if the city was going to crack in two, like a rakk egg on one of those fancy Eden-4 cooking shows. Dumping the yolk of its citizens down, down onto the surface of Pandora. Splattering like… more eggs? But like, smaller ones? This metaphor has gotten away from me.

Athena knew she was too late before even reaching the center of the town, hearing Roland shout a loud “NO!” as a familiar sound echoed in her ears.

Teleporter. Athena knew what that was but couldn’t quite parse what it could mean.

Turning the corner Jack was gone but so was Lilith, Roland finally back on his feet and breathing again, panting really. Eyes trembling at the spot where the woman had been only a few minutes ago.

When he jerked to attention, looking at her, Athena froze in her footsteps at the unfamiliar desperation on his face.

But when he started walking towards her he simply walked past, that look reserved for another.

“Angel,” his voice was firm but commanding as he gripped her shoulders, “This city is going down.”

“What?” she sounded lost, “Why… me?”

“Look, I’ve been with Lilith for years and I still don’t know half of anything about Sirens but I know you’re one, I know Eridium makes them more powerful, and I know you’ve been pumped with it for years. Do you think you can get the city out of here? I think Lilith was trying to teleport
it. She tried before Jack grabbed her but all that accomplished was dumping the new Vault Hunters somewhere outside of the city. Jack was ranting about blasting us off the planet and we only have so long before he orders the shot.”

“Maya could-”

“Maya already tried.”

She’s not strong enough, echoed quietly behind that. Highlighted by the feeling of the backpack on her back weighing her down more and more. Looking up at him, empty on the inside.

“I can try.”

“That’s all we need,” he lied, quickly dragging her towards the pillar Lilith had been clinging to.

Dozens of pairs of eyes were latched onto her as she reached out and put her hands on the trembling… stone? metal? of the center of the city. Pulling one hand back long enough to inject some Eridium from her pack, flinching at the pain and the stress and the fear.

But it was her dad’s fault and she knew by extent everyone else thought that it made it her fault.

This was all she could do.

Bracing herself, she focused as hard as she could to try and move the immovable.

One of those moments where Angel didn’t wish Siren powers weren’t so infuriatingly vague. Unknowable. There was no tutorial for them, just close your eyes, flex, and hope for the best.

Trembling, she could feel the power encircling her, getting ready over and over but never quite taking off.

The trigger came suddenly, just a random woman’s yell.

“HELIOS! HELIOS IS FIRING!!”

Panting, tears rushing to her eyes, Angel’s fingers dug painfully against the unforgiving pillar and screamed.

With a wide reaching crackle of violent, violet power Sanctuary was ripped out of time and space.

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Angel had the vaguest memories of what happened after that. Knew for certain she’d collapsed instantly afterwards. Someone had carried her. First instinct was Athena but too big. Softer shirt. Was probably Roland. Being put somewhere bright and white and blood splattered.

Waking up was jarringly uncomfortable. A crowded room, too many people piled into the small, single room med bay.

Looking over she found herself laying side by side in Dr. Zed’s office with Nisha. One getting her broken leg repaired, the other merely being monitored for any signs of stress.

But she’d done it, in the last second. Sanctuary hovering serenely far, far away from where it was originally.

“Wish I could have seen you do that,” Nisha rolled her head over, hair crumpled around her face,
“Fuckin’ badass, Angel.”

She knew she should take that to heart and feel like the biggest asskicker on Sanctuary but she just… couldn’t.

“He took Lilith,” Angel trembled, “He took her and it’s my fault. I’m supposed to be the one in her place, she didn’t do anything.”

“You didn’t do anything either,” Nisha’s look was quizzical, her statement a bit of a question.

But it wasn’t one that Angel intended to answer, apparently.

She didn’t speak again, the groaning of pain of the overcrowded, undersized doctor’s office.

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The two of them were shuffled out of the room not long after, their injuries and exhaustion nothing compared to the half-dead citizens that weren’t able to properly defend themselves.

Athena met them outside, both annoyed and not surprised as Nisha decided she needed a crutch for her definitely-not-injured-anymore ankle, “You’re fine.”

“No, I’m not, I’m distraught. Support me,” Nisha leaned in more, resting a bony chin on the top of Athena’s head. Digging it in, just a bit. Intentionally.

Athena didn’t look like she wanted to play games but put an arm around her to try and force her to walk, “You’re laughing but this… this is bad. That core we brought in? Yeah, that’s what brought down the shields.”

“Fuck… do they think we did it?” Nisha looked around like she expected to be cuffed at any second.

“Not… not quite,” Athena’s voice went quiet, averting her eyes quickly, “They… Timothy. They’re a lot more suspicious of him than us. Roland doesn’t think he was involved but Roland's in the minority.”

“But Roland’s also the one in charge.”

“That’s his only saving grace,” Athena replied, steering towards the headquarters, “We’re not even allowed into the discussion for this. They don’t… seem to think we’re related in any way but it sounds like some of them think Tim coming back with Angel was a distraction. That Jack was supposed to instantly get Angel back and Tim would have gone back with him.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Nisha spat, “If he was on Jack’s side why wouldn’t he have split off and taken Angel to come kind of pick-up point? Why would he be walking around in a group with us, in the middle of goddamn town?”

“I know, it’s a stretch,” Athena pushed on the door, “Still locked. Fuck. Just… god, haven’t we encountered enough bullshit?”

Nisha let go, leaning her elbows against the metal railing, “All we can do is wait, huh?”

“Story of my life…” Angel muttered to herself, “Where’s H4L0?”

“You know Claptrap units,” Athena responded, “Already found her own little hidey-hole in Sanctuary and ducked in there the second things started getting hot. She said she’d come by
tomorrow, she wants to get the place set up.”

“Always collectin’ garbage those damn things,” Nisha shook her head, “Probably makin’ a sculpture out of rubble and shrapnel right now.”

Eventually the door’s heavy lock clunked open and the door swung inward, depositing Tim on the doorstep. Alone.

It slams shut behind him again, leaving him in the small entrance and completely crowded.

“Well,” he sighed, stepping a leg up on the side of the wall and showing off a crudely made house arrest anklet, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Really? That’s what they’re going with?” Athena leaned down and examined it carefully.

“I mean, I’d rather have this latched onto my ankle any day over stuck in that shitty little jail they have in there. Just sitting on the giant chest in there like a dumbass. You ever realize how uncomfortable chests are to put your ass on before?”

“No,” Athena shot him a weird look.

“Yeah,” Nisha corroborated, “Almost like we ain’t supposed to sit on ‘em.”

Athena rolled her eyes, “Weirdos. Did they say like… when they’re going to let you just walk around?”

“Roland would have just let me right away,” Tim put his leg down with an experimental bounce of the knee, “But considering the, uh, I feel unfairly unfounded suspicions of me they’re not going to take it off until all the new Vault Hunters are back.”

“That’s shit,” Nisha spat, “We should…”

“Look, I’m just… I’m tired. I don’t care. I just want to go home. Whatever the hell home is now.”

As the little conversation on the way over yielded, the couch was his new home. But when they got the door open and let him inside he didn’t seem to care, crashing down on it. Legs hanging over the edge, far too tall, but man he just did not fucking care. Closing his eyes he sighed heavily.

“I know I had a hell of a penthouse in Opportunity but god this is so much better.”

Nisha and Angel crashed on the other couch, the scrawny girl exhausted and leaning on her arm, “I just want to sleep for like two weeks straight.”

“Hey, that’s alright if you want to but you can’t do that on my arm.”

“Please?”

“Oh, don’t ask that, you know I’ll cave.”

It was a nice little scene, Athena leaning on the door with a smile, “Things… aren’t perfect but I’m glad we’re all together at least. Even if I’m still mad at you. You know who you are.”

Tim just gave a lazy thumbs up from the couch, too tired to really grovel for her approval right now. Hand barely making it down before he was out cold, beginning to snore almost the second
his eyes closed.

"I was gonna say have an ‘Angel didn’t get kidnapped party’ but uh, wow, he’s out,” Nisha nudged him with a foot.

“He’s still in the dog house, he’s not gonna get to celebrate that,” Athena turned back around, “We can though, the three of us. I’ll get drinks.”

“Just… just get enough for two,” Angel pushed herself up with a wobbly few steps forwards, “I think Timothy had the right idea about the sleep. I’ve been hovering in the air for over a month, I just want to curl up on a bed.”

“Nisha?”

“Nah, I’m good to go, get the drinks.”

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Clomping into Moxxi’s she found the woman had already mostly gotten her bar back in order. A woman like her was never one without help, really. Always a gaggle of onlookers more than ready and willing to jump to her aid.

Moxxi herself looked damned tired though, not even behind the bar of the now all but completely empty establishment.

Athena tensed up uncomfortably seeing who was sitting with her.

Of course it’d be Janey. The day she least wanted to deal with Janey.

Freezing, Athena began to jerk around to head back out but it was too late, Moxxi had already seen her, “Hey sugar, you lookin’ to unwind? Just grab whatever, I’ll just put it on your tab.”

“Thanks,” Athena skirted the edge of the bar quickly, making her way to the whiskey she knew Nisha loved the best. Grab a couple bottles, get in and out real quick.

But while Moxxi was casually dismissive of her, Janey was laser focused. Dismissing herself temporarily from a Moxxi who was looking at her with a mixture of suspicion, pity, and concern.

“Hey Athe-”

“No.”

Janey tried to twist it around into a joke with a big smile, “Wow, when did Wilhelm get here?”

“I mean, I just watched him die a horrific death less than a day ago, so.”

Face going pale, Janey scrambled, “Oh! I, uh, I’m… sorry?”

“No you’re not,” Athena examined her options with Janey blocking the gap in the bar surrounding them, “I know what you’re here to bug me about and you know what? I’ve gone through way too much in the past god knows how many hours to fucking deal with this.”

“What it is to be a Vault Hunter.”
“Yeah…”

Huffing, Athena managed to vault over the countertop with a sharp, annoyed noise from Moxxi to, “Be careful!”

“Don’t use my struggles as a pointed stick to jab at me,” Athena didn’t look back for more than a second, just long enough to drop a high bill into Moxxi’s jar, “I feel like I don’t have to answer your questions because you already know. I don’t know why you think coming after me in my quiet moments is going to change that.”

Janey called for her again as she left but at least she had the sense not to chase after her.

Probably because their house was so close and she wasn’t dumb enough to try this shit too close to Nisha.

Double a good thing because the cowgirl was leaning against the door of their house.

Nisha always looks like she belongs in the moonlight. Silvery light illuminating her purple and black frame, even her eyes lit up as she stared upwards. Tapping her boot, humming something low and off tune to herself.

Even in the dark she lit up as Athena started coming down the stairs, booze in hand. Calling out to her, “Thought we could have a little date at the end of the city. Might be romantic or some shit.”

Her lip curled at that, barely visible in the night, “Or some shit?”

“Shut up, ain’t used to talking like that,” Nisha pushed back against the door, tilting to her feet, “Cut me a break.”

“Relax, It’s… cute,” Athena handed her one of the bottles as they sauntered down the poorly lit alleyway.

“Hah, don’t think anyone’s ever called me that in thirty years,” Nisha cackled, “Hot, sexy, badass. Usually I’m a little more in that roster.”

“Well. I added another one.”

Bumping harshly against Athena, nearly hard enough to knock her to the ground, Nisha already seemed a bit loose and loopy, “Well, I think you’re cute too.”

They walked halfway down the rest in silence, towards that open area at the end. Feeling boney fingers sliding against her wrist, the way Nisha grabbed her hand felt more like a stifling deathgrip than a cutesy hand holding but in some ways Athena liked that more. Nobody else is gonna do it like that, weird and hanging onto her hand backward. Nisha’s palm pressed tightly against the back of hers.

Nisha’s weird and kind of broken but then again, so is Athena.

Looking at her though, there was mischief in her eyes.

Following her gaze, Athena saw the ladder going up to the roof of Scooter’s closed up garage.

Trying to cut that thought off at the base, Athena shook her head, “No way, you know when people usually prop a ladder up on a building it’s because it’s dangerous, right?”

“C’mon, we’ve taken worse falls than just down a floor,” Nisha nodded towards it, grin on her
face, “I mean if you don’t come with me, I’m just gonna climb up there alone and you ain’t gonna leave a pretty lady all alone on a rooftop, are ya?”

Sighing, Athena walked towards it as she handed off one of the bottles to Nisha, “Fine but let me at least go up there and see if it’s fine first. You hurt your leg earlier just… wait down here for a sec.”

At least the ladder itself was sturdy as she started climbing up. Even more luckily as she looked around it seemed like the ladder was more of Scooter trying to fix the clearly damaged antennae up top than anything structural.

The man was lucky, Jack could have easily accidentally wiped his business off the face of Pandora with how close he is to the gates.

“It look good up there?” Nisha called from below.

Looking back down, Athena replied, “Yeah, just be careful with the-”

Athena barely had time to register what the sparkling glass object was that was tossed at her, reacting on pure instinct as she grabbed the neck of the bottle. Yelping at the second one nearly sailing back down to crack Nisha’s head open.

“Are you fucking crazy?!” Athena yelled at the approaching woman quickly making her way up the ladder, “Do you want to kill me? Do you want to kill yourself?!)

Swinging up triumphantly, Nisha couldn’t look less repentant as she snatched one of them back, “Nah, we’re fine. You think something like a little glass bottle to the head’s gonna take one of us out? Made of sterner stuff than that.”

Sauntering to the edge, Nisha dropped like a rock right onto her ass. Long legs dangling over the edge as she uncorked the bottle and flicked that over the edge. Taking a long swig before pausing with a sigh and looking back.

“You gonna keep starin’ at me like a creep or you gonna get over here and sit with me?”

Part of her wanted to just stare like a creep. Enjoy the cowgirl lounging lazily in the moonlight, pretend there wasn’t a giant H crossing over everything. But she obliged, walking over the grainy roof and taking a seat next to her.

Always did feel stumpy in comparison whenever they sat somewhere high like this. Legs so much shorter, dangling nowhere near as low.

When handed the bottle, Athena obediently took a drink of her own. Some part of her never understood the appeal of alcohol but after a day like that she felt like she had at least a slightly better idea.

“Jack in Sanctuary…” Athena mumbled, looking at the ruins of the destroyed gate just barely evident at the edge of the city, “Everyone must hate us…”

Nisha made a loud ‘gah’ of annoyance, “Didn’t bring you up here to talk about shit like that. C’dmon, not like there’s anything we can do about that right now, this is like a date or somethin’ act like it.”

A date or something. Honestly never quite knew what to do about those, Janey was always trying to show her but some part of her brain never quite absorbed that.
Firm claw digging into her head, Athena felt her head forcibly turned outwards to look at the incredible view in front of them.

Sometimes the baked surface of Pandora managed to be beautiful, wide expanse of mountain ranges below them all basked in white moonlight. Shadows chasing across it as swarms of rakks circles slowly below. One of those giant skeletons was draped over a particularly high mountain, architecture of it stark from above. Fearsome and brittle, feeling almost ready to come back to life and swim through the sky.

Athena’d always wondered what those big bastards looked like when they were alive.

Then she realized her jaw had dropped and Nisha was laughing at her.

“Yeah, it’s almost like I brought you here to look at the sights,” Nisha drank with one hand and did that same, weird hand holding with the other, “Cause it looks cool. Sharing a moment, that’s what people do to be romantic, right?”

Nisha’s framed it as a joke but there’s a very stark line of seriousness underneath, betraying that her question isn’t completely hypothetical.

That thought is only magnified when Athena rests her head on Nisha’s shoulder and feels her almost jump away. Surprised by even a simple act of closeness still. There’d been that in the hideaway in the Tundra Express but that was different. Felt far away, like something not real, something that wouldn’t last.

Sanctuary was an actual home. Albeit not one that terribly wanted them to be there nor maybe even one they wanted to be.

But Nisha leaned back in, closer and firmer. Like a silent apology for even a moment of hesitation.

Taking a long drink and handing it over, Nisha brought something up again, “Hey, Athena, you uh, remember what I said about Lynchwood?”

“Getting it back after this is all done?” Athena asked, accepting the bottle and sipping at it. Nearly gagging as Nisha tipped it up from the bottom with a cackle, gulping it down to keep up. Making a noise of disgust as she pulled it away, “You know if you kill me, we can’t do that, right?”

“You’ll live, you’re tough,” Nisha chanced a smooch on the cheek, “But yeah. Takin’ back Lynchwood. That, uh, sound any good to you?”

“As you asking me to move in with you?”

“I mean, we’re already kinda living together. Don’t gotta make it weird.”

“You know, part of being a serious couple is ‘making it weird’, you know that, right?”

Nisha’s mouth twisted in a way that clearly indicated she didn’t. Taking the mostly empty bottle back again, drinking to avoid addressing that statement.

But Athena was still there and staring at her when she was done.

“I just… yeah, alright, you want it to be weird? I’ll make it weird. Probably a little worse for the wear but I think I got a pretty nice little house there. Fix it up again and it’ll be a good place for us to stay. Whole town’s mine, not like we can’t home Angel an’ Tim there too if they want. Anyone who doesn’t feel like they fit in here, really. Probably shouldn’t announce that too loud though or
we’ll have Claptrap rolling right after us.”

“Already gonna have H4L0 there, I’m sure,” Athena nodded, “Don’t need a whole battalion of
CL4P-TP units rolling around.”

“Sure as hell don’t,” Nisha nodded, looking down at the bottle before downing the last of it,
“Just… kinda give people like us a place to go.”

“It sounds nice,” Athena leaned back, “Kind of surprised you want to do something so nice but
you’re full of surprises lately.”

At that, Nisha chucked the empty bottle haphazardly over the edge of the town, hurtling towards
Pandora.

“That could hit someone down there, you know.”

“Hope it does, that’d be hilarious.”

Athena shook her head, “And in some ways you’re exactly the same…”

“Yeah, the fun ways,” Nisha shot her a smarmy, intoxicated smile, “Speakin’ of, wanna fool
around? Been a while since I doubled up on public intoxication and lewd acts.”

“Hell no,” Athena smacked the roof, “Scooter’s down there and I can’t think of literally anything
more unappealing than him overhearing us. Like, anything. I’d rather make out in front of
Claptrap.”

“Could do that too,” Nisha cackled, “Pretty sure he’s got that nasty mattress out there still.”

Stumbling to her feet, Athena started making her wobbly way over to the ladder, “We’ve got a
house and a bed, why wouldn’t we just go there?”

“Because that house is now infested with Angel and Tim.”

“Pretty sure you need more than two organisms to have it be an infestation.”

Nisha’s next sentence was a drunken mixed bag of a failed innuendo, “Pretty sure I only need to
infestations to give you an orga-”

“I’m not even going to let you finish that one.”

“Yer no fun.”

Crouching by the ladder, Athena reached out for it teetering on the edge. Hand jutting out too far
and catching the metal, pushing it until…

The crash noise was loud, echoing, but if anyone heard it they didn’t show up.

“Oh nooo you have to stay on the roof with your sexy girlfriend. What a shaaaaame.”

“Nisha, I don’t want to sleep on the roof,” Athena shook her head at her, “I’m just gonna…”

“Jump your drunk ass down and break an ankle? We both gonna do that today? Twinsies?”

Looking back at Nisha, the cowgirl was laying on her back and lazily kicking her legs over the
side. Patting the ground next to her with an unguarded smile on her face.
Sighing, Athena rejoined her.

“Whatever. We can sleep up here but no rooftop orgies.”

“Killjoy.”
Angel never knew exactly what it was that would wake her up in the pitch dark of the closed off room. Some internal clock, she supposed, telling her it was morning. Sliding out of bed she walked out in her jammies, carefully closing the door behind her so as not to possibly disturb the others.

On the couch, Tim was uncomfortably curled with his back to her. Face smushed into the back cushions as he tried to fit on something way too small for him. Pity making her wish they could have just one more bed, somewhere.

Something caught her eye. His mask lay on the coffee table between them.

The scar. Angel had never seen it, didn’t know what he looked like with it at all. But she knew her father had one and felt she could take an educated guess that the same thing had been foisted upon Timothy.

Part of her was curious, part of her didn’t want to see it for so many reasons.

Looking at the clock it was already decently into the day. Should she… wake everyone up?

With more care than need be she approached Timothy, gently grabbing his shoulder, “Uhm, Tim? Timothy? Mr… Lawrence? Get up?”

Groaning, he started to roll over before pausing with only one sleepy blue eye visible. Growing wide as he was reminded of his current circumstances. Regarding her cautiously before deciding to put his face back against the cushion and groping behind him for the mask.

Putting it in his hand, Angel asked, “Are you doing this for your own benefit or mine?”

“Yours,” Timothy flatly answered, sitting up while still latching the metal clasps with little clicks, “Either you’re gonna get upset by seeing your dad’s face jacked up- pun intended- or you’re going to get upset that he did it to someone else. Or both. Probably both.”

“You’re probably right,” Angel walked over and sat next to him, “Mostly about the second thing. I’d be lying to say I haven’t been curious what was under my dad’s mask for years now… but you’re not him. You’re just someone he’s tortured and I don’t… want to see his handiwork.”

“How the hell’d an asshole like Jack have a sweet girl like you?” Tim snapped the chin into place, “You don’t even look like him all that much ’cept the eyes. For the best, two of us being saddled with this face in this world is more than enough.”

“My dad… well, there was a time where he was once just my dad,” Angel replied, looping her
hands under her thighs, “How I’ve stayed this way… I guess I just don’t want to be him.”

“Well, I’m gonna go out on a limb and say you’re in no danger of that,” Tim winced as he pulled some trapped hair out of a clasp, “I mean I guess you’ve still got your late teens to get fucked up before you’re an adult though. But still, you know, unlikely.”

Angel shot him an annoyed look, “Before I’m an adult? I’m already an adult.”

Realization dawned on his face, “Jack… sometimes talked about a kid to me but it always sounded like you were like… young. Real young. I was already surprised you weren’t like twelve. How… old are you?”

“I’m twenty-one!” Angel threw her hands up.

“Oh that’s weird.”

“YOU’RE weird!”

“You wanna get really weirded out?” Tim asked, giving a rare smile, “Guess how old I am.”

Warily, Angel eyeballed him, “I mean… I thought you were like… maybe a little bit younger than my dad like mid-forties but now… I don’t know thirty-five?”

“I’m twenty-fuckin’-six.”

Were she not always ghost white, Angel would have blanched, “That… that’s gonna mess me up.”

Tim laughed bitterly, “Yeah, yeah, I’m gonna look like a fifty-year-old man for the rest of my life. He always made me go to anything that required any sort of physical prowess, make people think he’s still in his prime.”

He patted his own chest, broader and stronger than Jack had been, even in his actual prime.

“I mean… I assumed you were younger than him but…”

“Yuhp, very recent graduate when he tricked me,” Tim shook his head, “I’m brother age to you, not father age.”

“No offense but that, uh, makes a lot more sense than tricking someone in his forties like I thought,” Angel replied, “But twenty-six… wow.”

“Young and dumb,” Tim griped, “Also stupid trying to go into acting…”

“I mean, after all this is over you can always corner the market on playing ‘Handsome Jack’ in movies,” Angel nudged him, “Don’t even have to get into hair and makeup.”

Tim’s laugh was strained, “Make a hell of a living doing that. Also, presumably get to play him dying a hell of a lot, gotta say I’d like tha-”

He paused, remembering exactly who he was talking to.

“No, it’s alright,” Angel stood up, “I… my dad has to die, it doesn’t upset me. At least not too much. To me… my dad died a long, long time ago.”

Timothy had no words of comfort in return, just pulling his mouth taut and put his head down.
“Can I… tell you something that’s been…. bugging me?” Angel asked, “I can’t talk about it with Athena or Nisha for… reasons that’ll be obvious when I say it.”

“Surprised you want to trust me but sure, what’s bugging you?”

“Before… you know… you know Brick right?”

“Big fucker whose dog Nisha strangled because her life is a series of deeply questionable choices?”

Angel nodded, “Yeah, him.”

“What about him?”

“Well, as you can imagine he wasn’t terribly happy to see Nisha in Sanctuary….” Angel tapped a foot on the ground, “But when… but when he went after Nisha I… held onto Athena when she went to try and help her. I kept her there. I tried to talk about it with Athena afterwards but she brushed it off.”

“I mean, to be completely fair to you, I’m pretty sure Brick could shred through Athena and Nisha if they weren’t prepared to be fighting him.”

“But… Nisha is the one who saved me. She saved me and I couldn’t even let someone else save her. I’m… I’m an ungrateful brat,” Angel gripped her own arm tightly.

For a second Timothy bit his own lip, looking away.

“Look, how about this, how about I tell you something you definitely, super, duper cannot say to Athena or Nisha? And I mean it, you can’t tell them. I don’t want to be the next target of Nisha’s bad decisions.”

“Of course, I won’t tell her.”

He waved Angel back over, lowering his voice before speaking.

“When… when I took you. I told everyone ‘one life for three.’ It was… never that.”

“What do you mean?” Angel asked.

“I never negotiated for Nisha’s life,” Tim closed his eyes, “I… only negotiated for me and Athena.”

Angel gasped, “But…”

“Worse… worse than that,” Tim reluctantly added, “You know how your dad was talking about me working with Wilhelm again?”

“You weren’t…”

“I was. First time I’d seen the guy in forever, he wasn’t entirely sure I was alive either. Gave me a hug, that was weird. But once Jack had pinned down Nisha’s location and a schedule where she’d be alone… me and Wilhelm were supposed to pay her a visit.”

“That’s… that’s bad,” Angel looked down, “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything, in fact you said you wouldn’t,” Timothy reminded, “So just… don’t worry about holding Athena back from saving Nisha. There is… much worse you can do.”
Looking back at their room, Angel nodded, “I… I still weird because I just… I can’t blame you. I can’t. I’m so grateful to Nisha but she just… every choice she makes is so self destructive and dangerous and even if it benefits me just… she could have handled things better, every time.”

“It’s not like I don’t care about Nisha too,” Tim shook his head, “Just… sometimes she makes it hard to care about her. You can’t kick yourself over being unable to keep her safe.”

“I… I get it.”

“Figured you would, you’re smart. Don’t beat yourself up over things.”

Not wanting to dwell on the awkwardness, Angel pushed herself up, “I’ll try not to but I’m going to get the others up though, I’m starved. Kind of very literally.”

She patted the once again too thin wrist with blue tattoos snaked up it. All progress she’d made weight-wise since her first period of time in Sanctuary completely undone.

It wasn’t her intent but it made Tim look away in shame. She missed that though, already having turned away.

Knocking on the door before opening, Angel softly asked, “Athena? Nisha?”

Peeking in led to completely opening the door as she found them both gone, bed not even disturbed. Or possibly remade. Either way, they were long gone.

“They’re... not here?” Angel aimed the aimless question at Timothy over her shoulder, worry trembling in her eyes.

Getting up, he peeked in over her head and noted the undisturbed weapons, “Well… their stuff’s still here so I doubt they flew the coop… and it’s not like I’m that heavy of a sleeper and they wouldn’t be taken quietly so... if I had to take a guess they’re somewhere in Sanctuary. Maybe they’re with Roland at the Crimson Raider HQ. I dunno, I wouldn’t be worried.”

Angel was a bit skeptical, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, wherever they are they’re fine. This is just what it’s like for Vault Hunters, sometimes a couple of us will disappear for whatever reason.” Tim pulled her back by the back of her shirt, “C’mon, why don’t I get you some breakfast at Moxxi’s? I’m sure they’ll be back by the time we’re done.”

Angel had to admit that sounded really nice, as weird as it was to hear that invitation coming from someone who had helped reimprison and then subsequently freed her once again.

A weird friendship, she supposed. For some reason she felt guilty that she didn’t hate him more or resent him or…

But she didn’t.

“That sounds nice,” Angel nodded and let herself follow after him as he started pulling the disguise over his face.

Looking back, she couldn’t help but still feel a bit anxious about the missing women though.

- - -

Athena groaned herself awake, feeling way too many bones cracking into place as she pushed
herself up on her elbow. Looking around in abject confusion at the fact she was seemingly floating on a cloud with Nisha just barely tethering her to Pandora.

But she wasn’t. She had just drunkenly fallen asleep on the rooftop of Scooter’s garage with an equally wasted Nisha.

Rubbing at her eyes, the fact they had fallen asleep in the shadows had allowed them a bit more sleep than probably necessary. A blessing and a curse as yeah, they’d gotten a bit more sleep and she was a bit less hungover than she probably would have been but…

Damn was every part of her body sore.

Augh, she just wanted to get home and get into a real bed.

“Nisha,” Athena jostled the woman with the arm hooked underneath her, “Wake up, I want to head back.”

“Five more minutes,” Nisha put a hand over her eyes, “Or wake up sex. Your choice.”

“Still not doing it on Scooter’s rooftop.”

“Spoil sport. When we get back?”

“Nisha, my head is killing me,” Athena groaned, rubbing at her eyes, “Maybe later. I just want to curl up in a real bed and maybe, I dunno, cuddle.”

“Yeah, we can cuddle.”

To Athena’s agitation Nisha just closed her eyes and pulled her back down, snuggling in close. Smug smirk plastered onto her face.

Well, unfortunately for Nisha, Athena is more than strong enough to rectify this herself.

Or maybe not unfortunately, considering her only reaction to being picked up was to cackle, wrap her arms around Athena’s neck, lazily lounge against her shoulder, and mockingly coo, “My hero.”

“Not gonna be that for long,” Athena flatly replied, stomping towards the edge of the roof.

Realizing what Athena was about to do, Nisha tried to squirm away, “Athena, don’t you fuckin’ dare!”

But Athena was way more awake and way faster, taking a few quick steps until she was jumping off the roof. Slamming to the ground, Nisha clutching to her for dear life, Scooter screaming like a little boy and throwing a wrench in their general direction. Missing them by a solid ten feet, as he yelled, “Th’hell you’d do that for?! Just tryin’ to change a tire, man!”

“Sorry,” Athena half assedly apologized, while Nisha laughed, no longer phased by the rough exit, “We didn’t break anything up there.”

That’s exactly what people say when they break things.

But Scooter was still dazed by their sudden appearance, skeptically looking up, “Jus’ stay offa my gotdang roof, gonna break somethin’ up there. Equipment wise or you wise, don’t really want either.”

“Can do,” Athena answered, setting Nisha on the ground and nudging her towards home with a
warning glare, “Don’t expect to make that one of my regular haunts.”

Not ready to depart from the gates, Nisha just resumed hanging off her affectionately, “Someone’s grumpy. Maybe too much ‘cause I thought we had a pretty nice night all things considered.”

“Next time, let’s not get stuck on the roof.”

“Counterpoint. Next time let’s find a roof we can fool around on.”

Athena gave her a tired stare.

Nisha wasn’t deterred, “How about Dr. Zed’s?”

“No.”

“Marcus Munitions?”

“Augh, fuck no. That nearly as bad at Scooter’s.”

Nisha’s grin was devilish, “How about Moxxi’s? Music’s loud enough that nobody’s hear.”

Pursing her lips, Athena looked skyward and raised her eyebrows a bit with a conceding nod.

“Ha, hell yeah,” Nisha patted Athena’s stomach, “So we gonna climb up there now, or-”

“Athena, Nisha,” the man’s voice interrupted them, “Been looking for you two, the others just got back. Took ‘em all day and night, trekking across enemy territory. Gonna warn you now, some of them aren’t exactly your biggest fans right now.”

Looking back, they saw Roland standing there with his hands on his hips.

Honestly? He didn’t terribly look like their biggest fan right now either.

But he was smart, he wasn’t going to throw away a couple of viable weapons.

Looking at each other, they knew they were just that. Something about this moment stark and painful and clear. Sanctuary… wasn’t their home, never would be.

But it was all they had right now.

Well that and…

Nisha’s calloused hand clawed its way into hers, gripping tightly.

Squeezing back, the two of them started following Roland.

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Requesting the table tucked away in the corner was pointed, Moxxi being enough of a friend to stick a sign across from them. Blocking off that table. The bandana sitting on the table, this arrangement allowing Timothy to eat freely with his face uncovered.

Not that eating with the mask was ever easy. Threading the needle important unless he wanted to be cleaning pieces of egg and bacon out from underneath it.

The sight of a grown man having to eat so carefully wasn’t unfamiliar to Angel, although she was a bit more sympathetic to this one, “Timothy, may I ask you a question?”
“Uh, yeah sure. I guess.”

“You… mentioned you knew about me before…”

He wasn’t stupid, he was a regular college aged man and he knew acutely what she was angling at.

“He just… talked about a sick daughter,” Timothy pushed around the half eaten egg, “Never anything specific. Honestly, I thought you were off planet. Like, way off planet. On one of the nicer Edens or something. Not… not right here. Definitely not an imprisoned Siren. And outside me? People just thought Jack had a dead daughter.”

“Did you ever ask anything about me?”

“No, I’m not stupid enough to pry with Jack.”

“How did he tell you about me?”

“Just… said bandits had you captive. He’d been tracking everyone’s movements for a long time, all he gave me was a vague description of you and a really old picture. Hell of a shock when I cornered you in Opportunity and you weren’t a child.”

“You didn’t believe him though, did you? About them keeping me captive.”

“I feel like that’s obvious,” Timothy responded, stabbing a piece, “There a reason why you’re giving me the third degree?”

“I’m just… trying to understand,” Angel crossed her hands on the table between them, “I don’t… know how much people knew about me. How much dad talked about me. I’m an enigma to everyone. It’s hard… to connect to people when they didn’t even know you existed.”

Over Timothy’s shoulder she occasionally caught glimpses of Moxxi looking at her with pity.

The looks she always got were always ones of pity.

Looking down, she could feel the tears coming and knew she had no way to stop them.

But the oversized hand reaching out and grabbing hers did.

“Hey, uh, shit,” Timothy stumbled for caring words he hadn’t had to use in half a decade, “It’s… it’s okay. People don’t know I exist either. I know it’s not the same as you but… We’re both something that’s not supposed to exist.”

That sounded bad, but before he could correct himself Angel looked up, “I’m the living ghost of a dead daughter, you’re soon going to be the living ghost of a dead man.”

“That is grim as hell but yeah we’re… we’re both gonna be okay,” Timothy patted her hand before pulling back again, “As much as I’d like to just wander off and die unfortunately I don’t think you or Athena or Nisha’s gonna let me.”

With a smile, Angel shook her head, “No, you’re coming with us.”

“Yeah, I figured…” Tim leaned back with a heavy sigh, “I’m just looking forward to this all being over.”

It felt weird talking to a girl about how much he can’t wait for her dad to get killed.
But as always, Angel seemed unperturbed, “I want to go.”

Tilting his head back with a confused, “What, like right now? Leave Sanctuary?”

“No, not leaving Sanctuary. Not yet, at least. I want to go with everyone when they go to take down Jack.”

“Angel, you got any idea how dangerous that is? No offense but you look like the kick from a shotgun would send you flying across the room.”

Her face crinkled up in annoyance at that, “Weren’t you an untrained civilian who was thrown into combat?”

“Yeah but, once again no offense, I was still a big fuckin’ dude and not a very sickly recently-rescued labrat,” Timothy gestured at her arms, skeletal fingers still laced on the table in front of them.

“I’m a Siren.”

“And how many Sirens do you think have been killed?”

She looked down at that, knowing the answer, “Many. But I don’t care. Athena and Nisha were training me before you took me back, Lilith too. I can do it. I may not be on the frontlines but I can do it.”

Growling, Timothy leaned down heavily on his elbow. Hand raking harshly through his hair.

What was he gonna do, try to pull the faux-dad card?

He knew that’d be bad, switching to a more neutral, emotional appeal that somehow still missed the bar.

“People don’t want you to get hurt, Angel.”

“My dad didn’t want me to get hurt either.”

“It’s… it’s different,” Tim tried to justify himself, pushing away the now cold food, “Nobody here is going to use that statement to try and hurt you.”

Angel finally unlaced her fingers, tapping them nervously on the table, “I just… I want to make a choice for myself. For once. And this is it, this is the choice I’m making. As much as I appreciate everyone caring about me… I need to do this.”

“I mean, I’m not gonna be the one to stop you,” Timothy pushed his food over to her side of the table, “But people will. Eat, maybe if we can get you not looking like a skeleton it won’t be as bad.”

Angel smiled, picking up her fork, “I don’t have long.”

“No, you don’t,” Tim picked the bandana up and held it up to his face to turn around and flag down Moxxi, “I’m getting you a pizza too. Meat lovers. Try to get like ten pounds on you, at least.”

She laughed, “I can’t eat all that!”

“Hey, worth trying at least.”
Angel groaned loudly, muffled by Timothy’s shoulder.

“Do you have to bounce so much when you walk?” Angel begged, “I’m dying.”

“Well, for one I’m going down stairs and don’t terribly have a choice but for two, you’re not dying.”

She felt stuffed like a damn Mercenary Day Rakk, arms wrapped tightly around Tim’s shoulders as he carried her like a koala. Trying to jostle her as little as possible but not really having much recourse.

Opening the door one armed was hard but he succeeded, both the front and the door to Angel’s room. Placing her gently on the bed.

“Try to relax for a while, you can borrow my ECHO device, find something to watch,” Timothy instructed, handing over the heavy device, “I’m gonna go check the Headquarters to try and find Athena and Nisha.”

Angel nodded, still grinning, “Sounds good. This is definitely a more fun part of training.”

“Weird thing to think of it as but whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Waving goodbye, he heard an overblown laugh track start coming from the device resting on her stomach as the door closed behind him.

- - -

They knew where Lilith was. Roughly, at least.

The divide in the new Vault Hunters was stark and uncomfortable, the split far more negative than they would have liked.

Like a vote, they had split themselves into sitting by Brick and Mordecai or not. Their two biggest antagonists, both literally and figuratively. Around them half clustered. Only Gaige, Maya and Krieg separating themselves from the glaring mass.

And given the wary look Krieg was giving them… well, he was less on their side and more had followed Maya there.

But it had been decided.

They were heading out in just two days.

- - -

Athena and Nisha certainly didn’t take their time getting out, all but running away from the crowd of hatred they’d amassed.

It was so natural this time how Nisha reached out for Athena’s hand, slipping her fingers into hers. Mischievous purple smile growing as she felt Athena squeeze her calloused hand back. Trying to swing their hands, only to find herself clamped in place.

“There you are,” they heard a different man’s voice call out to them, an unnatural tone to it as he crushed down what he should sound like, “Where the hell did you guys go? Did you even come
home last night?”

Timothy approached them with his hands on his hips, a practiced stance that he hadn’t been able to shake yet. Only his eyes visible from beneath the hood, just above the bandana.

Nisha happily answered, “Slept on the roof of Scooter’s garage.”

That was certainly not the answer he expected, stopping short of them, “What? Why?”

“Romantic and shit,” Nisha replied, ignoring the smack on the arm from Athena that earned her.

“Romantic an…?” Timothy started to ask, peering at them quizzically. But all his questions melted into answers quickly as his eyes flickered down to their clasped hands. Eyes widening and eyebrows raising, “Woah, okay, alright. Did not… expect that. Whatever, just… just send a message you’re going to be out, you worried Angel.”


“God, please don’t say that to me considering I have your ex-boyfriend’s face.”

“Alright, my non-familial male authority figure.”

Before they could continue, a metal hand tapped Athena on the shoulder, “Hey, uh, Athena?”

Turning around, Athena faced Gaige rocking on her heels behind her accompanied by H4L0, “Yeah?”

“Where’s Angel?” Gaige hooked her arms behind her back, “Not like I’ve been lonely and missing her or anything. Just been totally cool and normal and not been terrified by the radio silence or anything. Like that. Also H4L0 wants to see her so me asking totally isn’t weird.”

Gaige pointed at the little bot who just raised her arms in a little cheer in response.

Tim cut in, jabbing a thumb towards the house, “She ate too much and is watching TV at home. Go nuts. Don’t think she’ll mind the company.”

“Thanks, Not Jack!” Gaige chirped, running past him with a halfheartedly returned high five. A weird and sudden callback to his old nickname, rediscovered.

“I’m gonna head to the bar,” Nisha nodded towards it, “You should join me afterwards, Athena. And maybe you can come too, Tim, if you’d stop looking at us like we’re a three headed Kraggon.”

Departing, she left the two of them alone.

“Come with me, I’ll need help carrying stuff anyways,” Athena gestured for Timothy to follow her, heading towards Marcus Munitions, “Roland wants everyone’s gear upgraded. Including us.”

The second Nisha was definitely out of earshot, Timothy cut right to it, “Nisha? Really?”

“What about it?” Athena shot a warning glare at him, “Pick your words carefully, you know I can kick your ass.”

“I mean, it’s not like Nisha isn’t pretty in a pants-shittingly terrifying way but that is… a good way to invite a lot of trouble into your life.”
“Maybe I’m okay with some trouble.”

Timothy shook his head, “Well, whatever makes you happy.”

“There’s not… a lot of people who understand me,” Athena continued, “My last relationship left me feeling like my life’s work was worthless and something that I can and should drop at the first opportunity. But I’m not like that. Nisha’s trouble but she’s a Vault Hunter like me. Like you used to be. We’re all the same, deep down. Have I really incurred any less wrath than Nisha?”

Tim had to agree, “Well, I mean you… did sure decide to go after a whole corporation.”

“What?”

“I lived.”

Throwing his arms up, “Augh, that’s such a fucking cool oneliner. Why do you always have to make me feel like such a loser.”

“It’s a skill I’ve been cultivating for thirty-five years.”

“Huh, you’re a little bit younger than I thought.”

He yelped at the sharp smack.

- - -

While Athena dealt with Marcus up front, Timothy started rooting through the cases of guns in the shooting range. It’d been so long since he’d shot a non-Hyperion gun, even experimentally hefting the Maliwan in his hands was weird.

In some weird way he was almost eager to do so, jettison every Hyperion weapon. Had some nice ones, could probably fetch a pretty penny for them.

But he was brought out of his eagerness to try out the shooting range by the sound of an argument outside.

The angle was bad but there was no mistaking that ridge of burn scars going up the woman’s side, just barely visible past Athena. Janey Springs, definitely. What the hell was she doing in Sanctuary? Whatever they were talking about was heated.

He shouldn’t snoop, he should put his head back down, just look at the guns from Marcus, just… ah damn it, he’s already walked across the room and crushed himself against the wall by the door frame. Listening intently.

Whole sentences were lost on him but Timothy could catch more than enough.

Janey was trying to get back with Athena. Intently. If Nisha was the one standing here instead she would have put a bullet between the blonde’s eyes.

As it escalated louder full sentences came to him.

“I told you to just drop this!” Athena pulled away from Janey, heading up the stairs, “I already gave you your answer, just accept it already. Just… leave me alone!”
“But Athena! Nisha is a danger to herself and others, I’m just-”

“Don’t you DARE say you’re worried about me. Not again. Not ever. Don’t follow me.”

Jerking away from being grabbed again, Athena bolted up the stairs. Janey dazed enough that she paused before attempting to follow.

Keyword, attempting. The second she tried to chase after Athena she felt a large hand clamp onto her wrist, stopping her dead in her tracks.

Looking back and up, she tried not to balk at the currently exposed, masked face of Not Jack.

“Oh, uhm, hello! I, uh, heard you were in town. How you been?”

God it was really hard to look at him now.

He looked back though, face obscured as he looked at Marcus who looked tremendously interested in this going down in front of him. Doesn’t get to see much action nowadays, relishing the idea of seeing his own personal drama unfold in front of him.

“C’mon,” Tim tugged on her arm, starting to go up the stairs, “There’s an alcove just out there.”

Indignant, Janey tried to pull back, “And what if I don’t want to?”

“Well, I hate to break it to you but I’m like three times your size, have you by the arm, and if I just start walking in a direction your choices are pretty much either follow me or get knocked over.”

Again, he tugged. This time Janey complying, the look on her face reminiscent of a scolded child. This feeling did not subside as he successfully got her to the tucked away little area. Pointing at a box and making her sit like she’s in time out.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Tim crossed his arms, “Look, I don’t… completely know what happened between you and Athena but on what planet is this a solution?”

“You’re not involved,” Janey gripped her makeshift seat, refusing to look at him, “So why don’t you-”

“I mean as far as I just heard you aren’t involved either.”

The glare she shot him was ice cold but melted quickly under the one he shot back.

Yeah, you, uh, cannot win a glaring contest against ‘has a nightmarish dictator’s face stapled onto his skull.’

“Look… me and Athena… I don’t like how it happened or how it all went down,” Janey picked her words carefully, “But there’s still time to fix this before everyone rushes off to try and deal with Jack.”

“No, no there isn’t,” Tim nodded towards the bar, “I heard enough to know you asked Athena a question and she gave you an answer. Doesn’t take a detective to figure out what you asked her.”

“But Nisha is-”

“Who Athena’s picked. For better or for worse.”

“They’re not-”
“Hey, I can keep interrupting you all night,” he waved out at the sun sinking lower and lower, “I have nothing to do but look at guns and that’ll take me maybe an hour.”

Janey tried to get up but was easily knocked back down to her time-out chair.

“Look, I won’t pretend I know you all that great but I know enough to know you don’t know when to give up. Like with Moxxi up on Elpis. I mean, I get it, Moxxi’s like the single more gorgeous woman I’ve ever met in my entire life but I also know she’s not… ever going to be interested. So I back off and politely admire from a respectful difference. But you? You kept chasing after her long after she’d made it obvious it’s not going to happen. Now you’re just… doing that to Athena too.”

Opening her mouth, Janey looked ready to argue back. Tell him he was wrong, an idiot, and should butt out.

But all he’d said was stuff she already knew.

Instead she crumpled down, pulling her legs up to her chest, “I just… I miss her.”

Sighing, Timothy really hated playing therapist, “I’m sure you do but end of the day? All chasing after her is going to do is make her resent you and then, you know, Nisha. Like, she will definitely kill you if she finds out. Slowly.”

Closing her eyes, Janey pushed her face into her knees, “It hurts knowing you’ve made a choice so… so STUPID that nothing you’ll ever do will fix it.”

“Hey, at least your bad decision didn’t end up with you getting a fascist’s face stapled onto your face.”

Despite herself, Janey gave out an ugly laugh, “I definitely don’t envy you there, mate.”

“So, are you gonna leave Athena alone?”

“Yeah I… think I just needed someone else to tell me what the back of my mind was thinking. Thanks, Timothy.”

“What’re you going to do now?” Tim shrugged, “Join one of those Pandoran dating ECHO apps?”

“For now I’m just… gonna wait out Jack dyin’ an’ all,” Janey uncurled, eyes red, “I don’t think I should stay around Athena so maybe just… leave Sanctuary then.”

“Don’t bother, from the sounds of it they’re leaving the second it’s over,” Tim finally uncrossed his arms, “Sanctuary will be someplace good and safe for you. Besides, I imagine it’s going to be hot real estate not long from now.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know, don’t think it’s up to me.”

---

“So, just a couple of days,” Gaige swung her legs, “Isn’t that kinda cool?”

“I think it’s cool as F**K!” H4L0 chirped up, nestled against Angel’s side, “Then you won’t have to worry anymore! Nothing bad will ever happen on Pandora ever again!! It’s a statistical improbability!!!”
“I know I'll feel better when it’s all over,” Angel ran a hand along one of the top edges of H4L0, “Then I’ll feel like… my life can really start.”

“Hell yeah it can!” Gaige pumped a fist in the air, “I’m gonna blast Jack’s head clean off then you and I are gonna go on a road trip!!”

“I think I’ve had enough roadtrip for a while,” Angel deflated that idea, “But I wouldn’t mind going to a resort with you. We could all go, make it a couples trip. And then Timothy by himself, I guess.”

“Oh! Ohhh!! I can share the room with him!!!” H4L0 volunteered, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically.

“I’m down!” Gaige bounced, “Whatever you want to do, Angel!!”

“That’s going to be something a bit hard to accomplish soon,” Angel looked away with a smile, “I want to come with then everyone goes to fight my dad.”

“Oh shit, really?” Gaige’s green eyes widened, “Yeah like, you’re gonna have to fight approximately… eight adults over that.”

“I know, I know, but also they can’t really stop me. I already talked Timothy into giving me his blessing so that’s one down, like ten to go.”

“Well, I’ll vouch for ya!”

“I’m sure you will.”

“I will too!” H4L0 chirped up, “And nothing on Pandora is more reliable than a Claptrap!!”

“Nothing,” Angel agreed with a grin, patting the metal.

Back to nervously kicking her legs, Gaige bit her lip, “Sooo… if we’re like, going to go off and do this super duper dangerous fight in a couple days, maybe we should…”

She trailed off with the vaguest gesture towards her face that, without context, kinda looked like she was requesting to be punched in it.

But Angel knew what she meant.

Blushing, she replied equally vaguely, “Maybe we should.”

“So like, we agree. We should.”

“We should.”

Clapping her little clamps, H4L0 squealed, “Oh! Ohh! I’ll get out of here, be right back, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!!”

Wheeling herself out, H4L0 went to wait on the couch.

Scooting over in the space made between them, Gaige tried not to blush too hard as she leaned in and pressed the world’s most awkward, tentative kiss on Angel’s lips.

But her mission to not go firetruck red failed immediately as Angel pushed back.
Stomping away, Athena felt immense relief at the lack of footsteps trailing after her.

Who the hell did Janey think she was?

Why wouldn’t she give up? Would she ever give up?

Diverting herself away from walking home, Athena set her sights on Moxxi’s bar where not twenty minutes ago Nisha had said to meet her. She’d still be there, right?

Of course she was, perched on her favorite stool. Tucked into the corner but by the slot machines, the weirdest mix of secluded and loud noise. Idly chatting with Moxxi as the woman faced just slightly away, cleaning off her tip jar with a rag.

Something benign, sounded like trashing on Jack.

Looking away from the woman, Athena watched Nisha’s eyes light up as she realized she was there. Chipper even though Athena most certainly looked enraged, “There you are, was startin’ to think you were gonna stand me up.”

A jump in Athena’s heart pushed her forward, giving no verbal answer to that as she practically pounced on Nisha. Grabbing the back of her hair and pulling her tightly into a painful kiss that was almost more teeth than lips.

Anyone else would have been uncomfortable being so aggressively accosting. But not Nisha.

Bony hands scrambling for a second, she only laughed. Going from muffled to raucous as Athena pulled back to give her air, Nisha delighted, “Holy shit, what’s got into you?!”

Athena’s hands were a deathgrip on her upper arms, holding her in place like it was an accusation, “Nisha, I love you.”

Slack jawed, that certainly wasn’t what Nisha had expected to come out of Athena’s mouth. Behind her Moxxi had tottered backwards, grabbing at Sir Hammerlock’s sleeve and getting him to quietly gawk with her. Certainly going to gossip about this the second the women left.

For a long, painful few seconds Athena thought Nisha was going to panic and run but eventually she raspily, confusedly returned it, “I… I love you too.”

There was a chorus of uncharacteristically childish giggles behind them but when they looked over suddenly Moxxi and Sir Hammerlock were jerked away, supposedly chattering loudly about bullymongs. Both of them peeking and looking away to see if they were still being watched.

“Maybe we should take this show somewhere with less gossipin’ hens,” Nisha nodded towards the adults who had seemingly lost all pretense of being those, “Maybe… maybe do what he talked about earlier.”

The last offer was punctuated with a wink that melted into a wide, smarmy grin as Athena flatly replied.

“Maybe we should.”
Hearts Are Made To Be Broken

Chapter Notes

Alright, lads, you know the drill if you've read my other stuff A COMPARATIVELY SHORT EPILOGUE WILL BE POSTED IN THE NEXT 24 HOURS OR SO. SO BE READY FOR A DOUBLE POST.

I've got to eat but I intend to get going on it directly after consuming the feed. Expect it quite soon, I'm extremely ready to get this story nicely wrapped up in a bow. I'm so incredibly happy with how this story is wrapping up.

There will be more detailed notes on the epilogue about the complete experience.

“Nuh-uh, hell no, no way,” Axton was surprisingly the one to speak up, shaking his head, “No way we’re taking an untrained borderline civilian into a battlezone. Been there, not looking to repeat that.”

“I gotta say, I agree with Axton,” Roland crossed his arms, “I know she’s received some rudimentary training but this…”

“You ever tried to stop a Siren from doing what she wants to do?” Maya cut in, glaring, “When I killed Sophis and got off Athenas I wasn’t anything but a scared, angry girl. What makes Angel any different than me then?”

“You weren’t going up against an infamously violent intergalactic dictator,” Roland countered.

“She’s also not alone,” Gaige piped up, swinging her metal arm out and nearly smacking a few in the face, “We’re all here. There’s like a bajillion Vault Hunters here! There’s…”

Gaige paused and turned around, counting out loud to herself before turning back and pointing.

“There’s eleven Vault Hunters going! That’s so many!”

“Don’t make her any less of a liability,” Mordecai spoke up from the back, “All it takes is one of us needing to break concentration to try an’ save her ass and them, boom, dead. Both of us.”

“You’re all talking like I’m not here,” Angel approached the table herself, standing tall to try and assert herself better. Sunken in cheeks doing her no favors, “For my entire life my dad’s made choices for me without my input. For once in my goddamn life, can I have a say in what I want to do?!”

Silence fell over them, none of them really wanting to directly tell Angel she couldn’t, none wanting to take Jack’s place.

Roland looked over to Athena and Nisha, neither of them looking happy about the idea of her going but neither relishing the idea of being the one to tell Angel “no”. Eventually, slowly, Athena nodded. Nisha’s hand sliding down her arm, grabbing her hand before following suit.

“Alright,” Roland reluctantly made the call, “You… you can come, Angel.”
His heart dropped into his stomach at the wide smile she gave him in return.

---

Walking through Fyrestone was such a duality of emotions. Neutral on the good side, Nisha and the newer Vault Hunters having no connection to this particular section of Pandora. Horribly painful on the side of the first Vault Hunters and Angel.

“Jack’s destroyed every inch of this place…” Roland muttered, carefully stepping over a puddle of slag, “Don’t know why Dr. Zed tried to stay for so long.”

“Didn’t want his home ripped away,” Mordecai looked at the demolished building they’d seen him standing in for years and years, “Can’t blame him, I hated this fuckin’ place and even I don’t like seeing it all ripped up like this.”

They tried not to be weirded out by the new set of Vault Hunters, unphased by this and happily ransacking the place as they went.

“I never got to see it in person,” Angel looked around the weird familiar place she’d never been, “Only saw things through screens… it’s weird. It doesn’t quite… hurt but it’s… bittersweet. Watching everyone I imagined one day maybe I’d be able to visit the places I’d seen but not… not like this.”

The older Vault Hunters eyed her with varying degrees of wariness. They knew she was harmless but there’s no comfortable way to be reminded that both her and Jack watched their every move for over a year.

Each of them wondering exactly how much stuff Angel knew about them that they wouldn’t want her to know.

But Angel was sandwiched between Athena and Nisha, the two of them on high alert even as they lagged slightly behind everyone. They’d already cleared out the forces of the abandoned and required town. Weird, beat up Loader Bots had shambled at them but really were no match for such a large group of trained Vault Hunters.

To Angel’s frustration she hadn’t even had any time to prove herself.

She could feel people still looking at her like she was a rakk egg being flung full force at the wall.

Looking down, she looked at the outfit they’d had to cobble her back together after coming back for the second time. Some hand-me-downs from Moxxi and Lilith, mixed together. A black skag leather jacket over a purple and black striped dress, stitched up so it wasn’t so revealing. Leggings underneath going down into some simple black combat boots. Some belts and armor strapped over it

Angel’d eat her own arms before admitting it but she liked it much more than the cowgirl outfit that Nisha’d given her. That one had been a bit… corny. But this one? This one made her feel… cool.

Which only made her lack of chances to prove she was a badass more frustrating.

Not that it should be surprising. There were nearly a dozen people here a million times more experienced in combat than her. Several by multiple decades.

Feeling stupid, she wondered if she should have even bothered.
What had she even expected to do?

“Getting nervous?” Nisha noted her discomfort, nudging her with an elbow, “Still got time. Timothy can take you back to Sanctuary.”

“More than happy to, really…” Tim gripped his gun tighter.

While they’d had to dissuade Angel from going they’d had to persuade Tim to. Despite the man’s reluctance for combat nobody there could deny the fact he was a natural when it came to fighting.

“I’m not going back,” Angel shook her head, “I’m doing this. One way or another I’m going to be there when he falls.”

“Has literally anyone considered-“ Tim started, a sharp punch from Athena shutting him up with a yelp.

“Whatever you were thinking of saying, don’t,” Athena warned.

“I just think- OW!”

His second attempt at negativity was cut off by Nisha on his other side.

“You ever know when to not run your mouth?” she snipped, “Remember you being a hell of a lot more quiet last time I saw you.”

“Well, you see, the difference is instead of Jack breathing down my neck, I’m now being dragged along to try and kill the bastard,” Timothy made two boxes in the air, “Everything I’ve done for the past three or so years of my life is ‘try not to get killed horribly by Jack.’ Be it silence or, you know, taking Angel home so me and her don’t get fucking strangled to death by a fascist asshole.”

“He’s not gonna strangle Angel,” Athena just looked forward.

“Thanks, that definitely helped assuage all of my concerns about everything Jack would do,” Tim growled, jumping at the sudden noise of metal banging as a wire snapped on one of the makeshift buildings, “Now, we’re all going to live forever and definitely nobody’s gonna die!”

“Hey, do me a favor and stop yelling about all of us dying back there,” Roland called back, glaring over his shoulder, “Not super great for morale.”

“Sorry…” Tim grumbled back, hiding behind his gun.

Nisha laughed, tugging at his jacket, “Yeah, jackass, don’t be bad for morale.”

---

Angel’d always wondered how much the highways of Pandora saw use. Who had even put them there? She’d seen Atlas construct some but it was always isolated ones, just covering a particular area.

But some of these… maybe it was just them linking together in the end. Countless corporations building off each other, expanding on the other’s progress as their empires rose and fell.

This one was Hyperion, obviously. Short, for transporting Eridium and troops.

She’d watched it be constructed, never thinking she’d stand on it herself.
That was most places on Pandora, she found.

But this one had something entirely new on it, something neither she nor anyone else had prepared for.

Saturn. The robot was a hulking monster, hundreds of feet tall, guarding the door. Jack had taken to torturing Lilith over their ECHO devices, his broadcast reverberating almost a dozen times over through the scattered crowd.

Angel felt like even more of an amateur as everyone spaced out, taking practiced positions on the battlefield. The snipers even going as far as to hop back down off the bridge to get to better positions down below.

But she’d only ever had the choice of standing in the vague vicinity of Athena and Nisha while small enemies were faced, never something of this frightening magnitude.

Her powers were quite long range, should she stand back as if she was a sni-

“Get Angel out of here!” Athena barked at Timothy, “She’s not ready to deal with something like this, go! We’ll meet you back in the remains of Fyrestone!”

Before Angel could say something, anything to protest this, she was instantly off the ground. Face half surprised, half angry as she was picked up as easily as a housecat and already rapidly being whisked away from the fight.

“What happened to 'you won’t be the one to stop me?!'” Angel futilely struggled to get out of Tim’s arms, Saturn growing further and further in the distance as it rampaged.

“Hey, technically it’s Athena not me,” Tim panted, “I operate on the orders of the scariest person aiming them at me.”

Augh, Angel landed a solid kick on him but it didn’t phase him in the slightest as he started to reach the end of the road. No doubt just going to drop them right into town, far enough from the action that her powers couldn’t reliably or safely reach.

In some sick way that thought almost made her miss her cameras and screens.

Shaking her head she looked at Saturn again.

It’d be easy.

One last shot.

Twisting her arms free behind Tim’s head, Angel hit the button the little gauntlet latched onto her. Pinch of a needle. Rush of Eridium. Grabbing her right hand painfully tight into his shoulder she reached out the left towards Saturn. Tattoos glowing bright as ever, wings bursting from her back and making Timothy instinctively stop in his tracks. Nearly throwing her to the ground.

“Angel, what the hell are you-”

The horrible, rending sound of metal-on-metal screamed across the open sky.

As Timothy tried to whip around he was roughly smacked in the head by the gauntlet on Angel’s arm. Straight as an arrow, determined to stay locked onto her target. Dazing him and dropping her harmlessly to her feet.
Around Saturn the other Vault Hunters remained shooting even as the bot contorted. A few yelling out confused notes, asking what was happening. Questions aimed at no one that they didn’t expect answers for.

Hanging out by the back, Nisha was the first to get an answer. Jerking to attention at the glowing white figure walking almost serenely towards the giant, twitching robot. Slow and steady. Focus tightly latched onto the metal beast.

Athena, second. Fear, pride and awe cracking through her stern veneer as her blue eyes traced the girl’s path. Flinching as she watched Angel press the button on her arm every few steps.

That continued, each and every Vault Hunter ceasing fire to watch Angel pass.

Even the last two, closest to Saturn, eventually turned. Both Brick and Krieg putting aside berserker rage to see the cause of the deafening silence.

All of them backing up slowly, slowly as the sound of metal screaming grew louder.

Finally pausing, Angel rose up. Slowly. Just a bit.

Eyes glowing white as the screaming of the metal hit a fever pitch it went out with a loud cracking noise.

Every piece of Saturn that hit the ground was an earthquake within itself. Threatening the integrity of the small section of highway, cracking and shattering pieces off of it like hail. The grand finale in the main body hitting the pavement, smashing a crater into it large enough to nearly pull in the closest Vault Hunters.

When Angel drifted back to the ground herself, it was much softer. Finding herself not alone either, downright mobbed by people. Nisha and Athena on each side, their praises drowned out by the pounding in her ears. Gaige an orange flash bursting into her chest. Metal clinked on metal, reverberating in her head, as she was accosted from the back. Timothy so comparatively big and heavy that he nearly knocked everyone over.

Everyone else came slower, curious, scared, sheepish, intimidated.

Roland finally broke the silence of the crowd, “Well. Guess we’re not allowed to question you being here anymore, huh.”

Angel’s voice was muffled by the mass of bodies encircling her, “No, no, you can’t.”

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Everyone had scattered to the winds, leaving Angel, Nisha, Athena, and Timothy alone, waiting.

Looking back they could see where some of the people had gone. All held up someplace or another, some possibly even dead. The last thing they heard from Mordecai and Brick not exactly positive.

Honestly Nisha wasn’t complaining about that one.

But the others… they were so far behind. Apparently a much more thorough group than the Elpis Vault hunters had ever been. Not used to the time crunch, not used to the pressure.

Used to taking things at their own speed but standing here, at the end, they didn’t know if they had
the time to wait for them.

“We should go in alone,” Athena said what they were all thinking, “There’s four of us. Standard Vault Hunting group numbers. The first Vault Hunters took down the Destroyer like this and I’m a hell of a lot less afraid of Jack than I am something like the Destroyer.”

Timothy held reservations though, “I’m more afraid of Jack than the Destroyer. That thing can’t hold a grudge at least.”

Over their ECHO devices suddenly blared another mocking message from Jack. Meant to throw the Vault Hunters off their game mid-battle but those four weren’t in such a state. Trapped in the proverbial eye of the storm, knowing only that this was another sign that their time was short. Lilith was dying and the Vault was opening. Every second wasted was another second that threatened to rip Pandora apart.

Looking between each other they knew they couldn’t wait, not another moment.

The other three went first. Confident, fearless, not their first rodeo.

Angel gripped the Jakobs pistol tightly in her trembling hands. Closing her eyes as she followed suit.

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It was like they’d been dropped into the deepest pits of hell. Dark, craggy rocks and lava encapsulating them. Large, heavy looking arc of the Vault cutting a dark and intimidating silhouette against the darkly golden glow. Freakish, inhuman statues watching over them with molten tears.

The “H” in the sky watched them, as it always did.

High above them Lilith contorted, a familiar sight turned new. Twisting in the air with sickly purple wrapping around her. Looking nowhere near as pale and sickly as Angel as she tried and failed to fight against it.

Twisting blue lights betrayed that she wasn’t alone.

Red encircled Athena’s shield, the others instinctively moving behind her just slightly as Jack turned.

“Well, look who’s just in time,” Jack growled, each step he took towards them feeling like a bombshell dropping, “Key’s almost ready. Gotta admit, expected a lot more company than a quartet of traitors but life’s full of surprises, right?”

Angel didn’t like the way she was grouped with the others. Quartet.

Somehow, she didn’t think she had a safety net anymore.

“Amazing how just… none of you,” Jack waved his hand with a laugh, “Seriously, none of you I would have thought would turn on me.”

Turning to point at Tim, bandana and goggles abandoned in the end. His false layer of confidence, his broken mirror of Jack, would have tricked most people but not the real thing. Not anyone who knew him.
“I mean you, you’re a little bitch,” Jack sneered, “You’re real damn good at playing a part. I’ll give you that. Hell, you’re even damn good at being a brainless killing machine. Take orders like a champ. But deep down? You know you’re nothing. You’re an empty husk that just puts on a mask—quite literally—and does whatever anyone tells you to as long as you’re scared of them. And you are just scared of every. Single. Thing. If you weren’t hiding behind mommy’s shield you wouldn’t even be here, huh? Probably be cowering in the desert, waiting to die alone. Who am I kidding, you wouldn’t even have left. You’d be standing on this side, with me and Wilhelm and doing whatever I tell you to. ‘Cause you’re a bitch. You know what’s the funniest part of your miserable non-existence, Not Me? I don’t even know your friggin’ name.”

His accusing gesture turned, staring down Athena, “You… now, you’re the opposite. One of the most consistently terrifying, all-out badasses this soon-to-be-scorched planet has ever let crawl up from the depths of its charred underbelly. But you’re ‘nice.’ You’re ‘the good guy.’ You think you’re better than you are, you think you’re not as much of a coldhearted killer as every single other bandit you’ve rubbed elbows with. Think there’s something good left in you. Something righteous. You put a cause on your murders, you’re avenging your sister, you’re saving Elpis, you’re going to save Pandora. But that’s not true, is it, ‘Thena? You just like killing. Even when you get presented a pretty little perfect life with a ugly little perfect wife you turn it down because nothing makes you happier than when someone’s skull cracks under the heel of your boot, the precision of when a bullet tears through someone’s vital organs, when they’re bashed open like a goddamn meat pinata on the edge of your stupid shield. All your little white knight cover-ups can’t hide who you are inside.”

The snarl on his face twisted even uglier, hand jerking to the next, “Ol’ Nish, Nisha, Nisha, Nisha, Miss Kadam ‘cause I’m nasty. The bandit that kills bandits. Where do I even start with you? First person I tried to open up to in almost half a decade, was even gonna let you get to know my Angel. Never thought you were gonna make a halfway decent mom for her or anythin’ but though you could be friends or some shit. Braid each other’s hair. Paint each other’s nails. Maybe you could teach her to shoot on the weekends. But no… you decided Nisha knows better, huh? You couldn’t even keep a dog alive without being forced to bash its head in all by yourself, what made you think you could take care of a little girl? What made you think you could be a better parent than me? I’ve given Angel anything and everything she could have ever wanted or needed for all these years. And what’s the thanks I get? You shoot me in the head. Not even a clean shot, didn’t even give me a clean one right through the eyes. You didn’t even give me the benefit of a good old fashioned double tap. But somehow you though someone as fundamentally broken and unlovable as you was going to be able to be a good mom?”

His hand fell along with his face at the final turn. Blue and green eyes locked onto a matching pair embedded into bruised purple skin. Angel’s hand digging into Nisha’s arm, without her even knowing exactly when she’d grabbed onto the woman.

“I remember the day you were born Angel. Your mother was sleeping, just out completely cold. Pushing a whole baby out of you’ll do that. It was just you and me. You were just wiggling around, kickin’ at the air like it owed you money, gurgling. Y’know, baby stuff. Never was a guy who got the whole ‘dad instinct’ thing but somethin’ about holding you changed that. Always thought that was bull, the whole ‘it’s different when it’s your own’ but you proved me wrong. Not too proud to admit that. From that moment on, I knew anything I did, everything I did… I’d do it for you.”

“N… n…” the small noises Angel was making not even audible over the thundering lavafalls, eyes trembling in her skull. Words refusing to form, mouth opening like an empty void.

“It’s okay, baby, I know you’re scared,” Jack took a step forward with his hand out, not flinching at the weapons jerking to attention and aimed right at his head, “This happens with kids sometimes.
Get to be a teenager, get some rebellion going on, don’t appreciate what their parents have sacrificed time and time again for them…

“I’m not… teen…” Angel rasped, nails digging into Nisha’s jacket. Sentence fragments not loud enough to be heard.

“Just remember that no matter what, until the day you die, everything I did? I did for you.”

“NO, YOU DIDN’T.”

The gun rattled in her hand, aimed directly at her dad but her ability to hit her mark inhibited by the shuddering racking her whole body.

For a second Jack just froze, staring down the barrel at her.

“You’re not gonna shoot me,” Jack’s face pulled back into a sneer, “You still love m-”

“I am an’ I don’t,” was the unexpected response.

Before Jack could react to Nisha’s barb there was a crack of gunshot. Bullet glancing harmlessly off the center of Jack’s forehead, ripples of electric blue energy radiating off it.

In a second, all of Jack’s pretense and show about being Angel’s devoted father ripped away.

But despite the rage twisting and contorting his face, his voice was calm.

“I’ve got a shield on this time, bitch.”

- - -

You can’t do anything, you shouldn’t be here, why did you even come?

Every word echoed in her mind as Angel stayed at a distance. Barely able to even keep her gun in hand with how bad she was shaking. All the words filtered through different voices, everyone they were still waiting to arrive.

They’d been right though, in the end.

And so had Jack.

She hated it, she hated that he was right, she hated that she couldn’t bring herself to pull the trigger even with a clean shot.

And there were so many. Her father completely open and preoccupied with three actual threats that he wasn’t paying her a lick of mind. Hell, five actual threats if you counted the weird digital clones firing at him too, flickering blue and yelling catchphrases.

More than anything Angel wanted to be a part of it. Watching Jack’s shield take hit after hit, growing weaker and weaker. The thundering slams of Athena’s aspis, the quick and frantic shots from Nisha’s revolvers, the echoing shots from Timothy’s sniper rifle.

And her? She was cowering behind a pillar.

Above them, Lilith still screamed. The woman had tried to help her even with no reason to trust Angel and now the girl couldn’t even try to help her in return.
Closing her eyes, she felt tears begin to leak out of the corners.

A loud, echoing, whooping hollering brought her out of her own thoughts though. Hunkering down even more behind the pillar as she looked around wildly.

Peeking around the edge of the pillar, Angel looked past the fighting trio to watch six more figures drop down into the arena. Leading the pack was the source of the jubilant yelling, neck and neck with the rampaging psycho helping make that ruckus louder and louder.

The tide quickly began to turn, Jack not prepared to be this outnumbered.

But still, Angel found herself behind that damn, fucking pillar. Clutching the overpowered Jakobs rifle to her chest.

Even now, she couldn’t do a damn th-

Slamming into the ground in front of her, Gaige cackled. Delighted by the fight. But as she noticed she wasn’t along back here, she looked surprised, “Angel?! I was wondering where you were, what’re you doing?!”

Caught up in a weird eye of the storm, Angel answered as if there wasn’t a war in miniature going on behind her, “I… I can’t…”

Shakily she presented the revolver like it was some admission of her crimes.

Gaige’s face flickered through a few emotions. Confusion, sympathy, thinking, realization.

Pushing herself up she grabbed Angel’s arm, turning the confused girl towards the chaos and raising her arms along with her own. Each of Angel’s hands clasped in hers, the gun between them. A willing puppeteering, Gaige’s finger hovering over the trigger as she lined up the shot.

Angel was too stunned to move, boney back pressed tightly against Gaige’s chest. The girl having to look around her to see. Surprised by the moment of closeness in the heat of battle.

But she didn’t have to think or move or do anything but trust the finger over hers.

Pulling the trigger tightly.

Angel’s body jerked back against Gaige’s at the only somewhat familiar kickback of a gunshot.

The bullet embedded itself into Jack’s side with a burst of blood. His shield long since depleted and his strength all but gone.

Mismatched eyes wild, he looked right at them. His beloved daughter pressed up against a bandit, gun aimed haphazardly in his general direction, barrel still smoking.

Reeling from that final blow, Jack spat, “That it, huh?!”

Overhead there was a larger distraction though. All eyes jerking upwards at the pieces of the Vault Key coming together with a dull thud and a flash of light. Lilith calling out with fear, “No! The key’s charged!!”

“I’m not dyin’ yet,” Jack gripped the edge of the key drifting too slowly downwards, a flash of light knocking him over and dropping Lilith to the ground as it slid into place.

Jack stumbled to his feet, still splattered with blood that seemed to be splattering out of a dozen
holes in his body. Yelling to the arc beyond them “The greatest alien power Pandora has ever seen! And it’s MINE to control! WARRIOR!!”

Watching the beast burst into existence from the lava, everyone’s heart caught in their throat.

- - -

“No, no, no… I can’t die like this… not when I’m so close… and not at the hands of mob of filthy bandits! I could’ve saved this planet! I could have actually restored order! I’m not supposed to die at the hands of a gang of child-manipulating psychopaths! You’re all bandits AND I’M THE GODDAMN HERO!”

The Vault Hunters crowded around the man as her tried to make a last stand, splattering in his own blood and the remains of his ultimate weapon. The last two stumbling up together, Mordecai somehow the only thing keeping Brick upright.

Even with these circumstances, Nisha cursed them not dying in the lava on the way here.

The somewhat broken circle around Jack seemed like they didn’t know what to do. Everyone looking between themselves, everyone hesitating to make the final move on the dying Jack. The moment feeling too monumental to just waste it.

They looked at the man doubled over in pain, bleeding growing faster, just as determined to spit poison until the very second he dropped dead.

Lilith’s tone was cold as her own compatriots began shambling towards them, “This is the end, Raiders. As much as I’d want the final blow, I think we know who deserves it.”

All eyes turned back towards Angel, lurking near the back. Hovering close to Gaige still, frozen in place, not having been ready to spend the time dodging and avoiding a massive Vault monster. But unharmed. Also unarmed, having lost her gun at some point in the mad dash to get away.

Shocked and awaiting a future they were now telling her to decide.

Gaige squeezed her shoulder, nudging her forward.

As she passed Nisha, the woman stopped her, “I’m real proud of you, kid.”

Again she found her hand grabbed and a gun put into it, one of Nisha’s matching revolvers. The one that’d first shot Jack in the head way back when they’d first met. Glinting dully in the limited light, tarnished metal ready to do it right this time.

“C’mon, Angel Baby,” Jack shambled a bit towards towards her, reaching out an oversized gory hand with a disturbingly genuine smile plastered on his face, “You’re not really going to let them kill me, are you? It’s not too late, sweetie. I’ll always forgive you because that’s what a good father does. Daddy still loves you.”

Over a half dozen hands had found their way to a sidearm, watching Jack approaching Angel with wary glances between the two of them.

Slowly, to everyone’s incredulity, he raised his arms for a hug.

With a clattering of metal on stone, Angel dropped the borrowed gun as she stepped forward.

Nobody moved, not even a twitch, as the distance closed between them.
The smile on Jack’s face was tinged dark at the edges at his victory, encapsulating Angel in a tight embrace. Too thin, ghostly arms hugging him back just as firmly. Her face buried in his chest, pressed against the bloody leather and cold metal clasps of his vest.

She was jostled by the thunderous laughter that came out of him as he crowed to the stunned crowd, “See?! Nothing you animals could do could ever destroy a daughter’s love! In the end, the hero always wins! He slays the dragon, he saves the princess, happily ever freakin’ after! Credits, roll!!”

“Dad, I have to tell you something…”

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“You’re an asshole.”

A pale hand clawed into his back, the pristine white glowing through her skin downright blinding in the darkness of the lava pit. Equally immaculate wings bursting from her back as she flexed every muscle in her body tightly.

“Angel, what are y-” Jack started, breath quickly picking up, “St-stop what the hell are you-”

Frantically, Jack tried and failed to get a proper grip on Angel, to get her off of him, end this hellish hug, as her hands balled tighter and tighter into his clothes. Tattoos growing impossibly brighter.

By the time he got a firm grip on her shoulders and managed to shove her off it was too late.

Eyes bugging out of his head, Jack stumbled backwards gripping right over his heart. His screams echoing against the edges of the cavern. Hyperventilating as he clawed at his own chest like he was trying to get something out of it.

Something already gone.

Something that had already broken.

Everyone gave Jack a wide berth as he took one last sharp breath before slamming back against the ground. His head hitting the ground with a sickly thunk. Mask half unclasped, falling off his face and revealing a deeply carved blue scar. His one good eye wild and staring into the abyss.

His hand still over his chest, over his burst heart.

Looking up towards the heavens, Angel’s breaths were slow and controlled. Her arms still raised up as tears began to stream down her awestruck face.

Like she was looking into the eyes of god himself.
Epilogue: A Place For Us

Chapter Notes

And we are DONE my current longest fanfic ever! Wrapped up neatly in a bow.

Longer notes to follow at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s been a year since Handsome Jack fell, heart exploded in his chest by his own daughter.

Nisha remembered having to carry Angel out of there, the girl just looking skyward like there was a message for her personally written in the sky.

Later, when the girl had come to she’d simply shook her head and refused to elaborate.

As time had gone on, Nisha had only learned that sometimes Angel was just… like that. Sometimes she’d just have some weird cryptic “thing” that she’d act like it defied explanation.

By now, Nisha just assumed it was some weird Siren thing. She’d seen them do that, some more prone to it than others. Hell knows what Angel and Maya are talking about half the time. Lilith’s alright, most of the time. Not nearly as mystic and unknowable.

Getting out of Sanctuary had been a bit awkward. Some people wanting them to stay and others being more than happy to get them out. Groups dividing and bickering among themselves but at the end of the day nobody was crying when they left.

Well, nobody but Gaige who’d all but thrown a fit about how unfair this all was.

A bit of an overreaction on everyone’s end considering quick travel meant everyone was only a few minutes away.

Right now she could see Angel high above the town, having flown up to the rooftop of the highest building of Lynchwood. Gaige next to her, the two of them testing out some little flying bot they’d built together.

Being given free reign over her powers had proven Angel adept with all sorts of electronics to Gaige’s absolute delight. A perfect shared interest, something to do together on lazy afternoons when there’s no adventures to be had. Lazily leaning on each other, working on a new project, an update for Deathtrap, repairs for H4L0.

A peace with her powers that Angel had never experienced before, no longer a chain that kept her bound but a means for creation.

Her physical transformation was impressive. No longer sickly and pale, the girl had bulked up a bit and her skin had tanned nicely. While it’d been so easy to ignore when she was sunken in and hunched over… she really was fairly tall. Many times Nisha had caught the girl staring at her own reflection, a bit of conflict there as she studied her new form. Impressed by her newfound muscles
but knowing that not so diminished…

Angel looked a lot more like Jack when she wasn’t reduced to a dying waif.

Nisha knew that feeling all too well.

Well, looking like her mom. Not so much the sudden transformation into that state. She’d just always looked like that, ever since she’d hit puberty. Someday she’d try to talk to Angel about that. When she could find an opening.

That window had narrowed a bit. When they’d first gotten here they’d just rebuilt Nisha’s house, mercifully and surprisingly untouched, and lived all together but very quickly they’d spread. Angel delighted by having a house of her own, even if it was next door to her guardians.

Tim had taken a house in the far back of the town as his own. Best Nisha could figure was the man wanted to be far enough alone that he could walk around his own house maskless if he wanted to.

And for whatever reason, he’d decided to take in that damn pet skag her old men used to be obsessed with. Lucky bastard mutt, that thing was spoiled.

Whenever she called it that Timothy would just assert, annoyance on his face, that his pet’s name was “Dukino.”

Frankly, that skag was probably the only reason they ever saw Tim anymore.

It seemed like the man had become obsessed with disappearing.

They’d become oddly reliant on H4L0 to know when Timothy had left, the bot more than happy with her new job of being Lynchwood’s unsleeping guardian. Constantly rolling around, keeping an eye on things. Nisha’s given her a badge with no title but even without authority the robot was obsessed with the thing. Puffing out her chest as much as a solid box can.

Not that Timothy wasn’t getting better at dodging the bot to disappear on his own.

Sighing contently, Nisha walked along the walkway by the railroad. A calloused hand being held by Athena walking with her. A weird, normal thing that’d just kept going.

Stealing a peek down at her, Nisha could see the deputy badge glinting on Athena’s vest.

The second they’d cleared the town of Hyperion, Nisha had joked that she was going to make one for her. Athena had said if she did that she’d chuck the corny thing on the railroad tracks.

Athena did a lot of that. Shrugging off a cheesy gesture only to latch onto it quietly the second she thought someone wasn’t looking. It was sweet, in a weird way. An odd way to express herself but one that was much more personal that somehow made her feel more special than if she accepted it with a plastic smile.

Nisha had the feeling that Janey’d always wanted the plastic smile.

This was real though, more real than anything Nisha’d really had in her life.

Taking back Lynchwood had been easy, the hard part had been rebuilding and rebranding it.

Didn’t help that there was now a very, very sizable graveyard just outside down now. Looking out at it in the distance, Nisha tried not to think about how Timothy had helped her drag Deputy Winger’s severely rotted and picked over corpse over there.
Her efforts failed, eyes closing tightly as the image of flesh turned impossible colors twisted in her mind.

Instinctively her hand tightened, surprisingly the intensity was matched as Athena squeezed back. Pressing the golden ring against Nisha’s boney finger. Not knowing why Nisha was upset, not feeling the need to question her. Just being there when she needed it.

Squinting up at the clock, Nisha asked, “What time are they showing up?”

“Should be soon,” Athena continued to allow herself to be lead towards the train station, “I think the real question is how many will actually show up?”

“And how many will we have to gun down in the first day.”

“Grim, but… accurate.”

The message sent out had been vague, a call for any and everyone looking for a second chance. A goal of setting up Lynchwood as a haven for the lost souls of this shitty planet. People wanting to turn their lives around.

So, of course, fuck knows what’s going to come in off that train.

Bandits, probably. A lot of soon to be dead ones.

Both women flinched at the sudden, swooping arrival. Dropped next to them, sticking the landing, Gaige looked proud of herself, “Hey, after these total whackjobs show up can I take Angel for a cruise around the Dust?”

“Alright, first off, don’t call them ‘whackjobs’ to their face,” Athena shot her a weary look, “Second off… maybe. Be patient.”

“Auuuugh, I HATE being patient,” Gaige threw back her head, turning it around into collapsing into Angel’s arms, “If only someone big and strong could fly me away from here…”

“Gaige,” Angel lightly chastised, supporting her weight easily nonetheless, “We said we’d help.”

“Fine but only because a pretty girl asked me to,” Gaige pouted.

“Watch no one show up.”

Nisha jolted away at the sudden, always uncomfortably familiar voice right over her shoulder. Timothy. Damn bastard had gotten so quiet nowadays. But the past year had worn away the painful look he’d give her whenever he startled her. Just a tired, weary stare.

“At least a few people will show up,” Athena asserted, “Maybe not what we’re looking for but I can’t imagine there’s not at least a few civilians out there who’d kill to be under the guard of four or five different Vault Hunters at once.”

“Nice, I got counted,” Gaige put her hands on her hips, “I’m moving up in the world.”

The air of the train station was always musty and vaguely unpleasant, no matter how thoroughly it was cleaned. Now was no exception, the five of them waiting on the train platform for their unknown visitors.

Nisha stood at the forefront as the train started pulling in, just in time. As always.
Nobody liked how quiet it was.

“Told you nobody would come,” Timothy muttered.

Athena shot a dirty look back at him as the train doors opened to an empty car. His returning glance only slightly visible over the bandana over his lower face but speaking volumes in the realm of ‘I told you so.’

But as they felt their hopes sink, all beginning to try and come up with an alternate plan of action they heard it.

The sharp, distinct clanking of heavy heels on thick metal.

Only three of them recognized the woman as she stepped off of the train with a disgusted sneer on her face.

She didn’t even announce herself, not wasting a second as she snapped her fingers impatiently, “Timothy! My bags, darling. It’s bad enough that I had to have those… hooligans help me get them onto this filthy thing. Don’t let them sit there for a second more.”

The speed at which Timothy scrambled to do just that was astounding, a frantic servitude that even Jack couldn’t bring out of him.

As the man began quickly hauling large, heavy, embellished chests out of the train car the woman turned to the others still gaping at her like fish, “Well, are you going to just stare at me? We have so, so much to discuss. Come along.”

Aurelia didn’t even look back at them as she easily strode past.

And, just like Timothy, they snapped into place.

Following the Baroness without question.

Chapter End Notes

Alright lads, as you can probably guess by how this particular story has ended that I have a potential sequel in mind.

I don't intend to do it right away, maybe give myself a couple months to recoup, but I will say that when I finally get around to it, it would be a Gaigel focused fic with more of a focus on Aurelia and Timothy as Angel's Aunt and Brother rather than Athena and Nisha as her moms.

If not, I still have a great many other Borderlands femslash fics queued up, although I would like to get some distance covered on my BrickMordy fic for a while. But I have poor willpower and if I'm not beaming femslash directly into people's brains I get antsy.

I hope you enjoyed the ride!
Please *drop by the archive and comment* to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!