Summary

Based off of David Rambo interview stating that season 3 would have dealt with a nano town vs. a human town (controlled by Miles and Monroe).

Notes

A few weeks ago, I stumbled upon an interview that David Rambo (Exec producer and writer for the show) that gave a few hints of where Revolution would have gone if they’d managed to get season 3. One of the things he’d said specifically was that there’d be a tale of two cities: One controlled by the Nano (Bradbury, Idaho) and another controlled by men (specifically Willoughby being controlled by Miles and Monroe). Rambo also said that there’d be an emphasis on the backstory of Rachel and Monroe, and there’d be a “treasure” hidden under Willoughby and that our characters would receive time to reset and reform their family dynamics. This fic is based off of those cues. Because this is me that’s writing this, there will be Charloe leanings, however as far as I’ve been able to ascertain from interviews with David Lyons and others, most of the canon shippiness was very one sided on Monroe’s part – as such it will be an interesting journey and his character will be a lot darker than I’ve written before (I hope). My goal is to not piss off fellow Charloe shippers, but to explore all aspects of these characters. This specific chapter is a prologue…
“… I give you my word.”

“Your word doesn’t mean piss.”

Connor backs away, taking himself out of the line of fire. He’s silently telling Neville and Scanlon to take him down; giving his assent or maybe even a wordless command. Either way, he’s just sold his father out.

Bass scrambles for cover while Connor watches. To give the kid some credit, he does have a clean shot, but doesn’t take it. As he ducks behind some rocks to avoid the next volley he locks eyes with his son one last time. I that brief instant he sees a mixture of loathing, disappointment and disgust.

As the bullets ricochet off of his cover, he briefly wonders: What was the point? But he’s a survivor and Miles is counting on him. If he dies here, the closest friend he’s ever had will think that he betrayed him. Miles would have neither the time nor inclination to double back and find out what happened. His body will rot here; unburied with no one to mourn.

He springs into action and begins to return fire. As they wait for the smoke and dust to clear, Scanlon makes a fatal mistake and lowers his rifle. Bass takes this opening and gets off one carefully aimed shot, taking the clansman down. This gives him the precious time he needs to get inside.

Without a word he unties Davis from the support beam and yanks the man to his feet. He’s on autopilot now. He shoves the scum out the back door and barricades it. Creeping around the corner he watches Neville and Connor aim their stolen rifles at the door. They are intent on shooting him and Davis on sight. He waits for the sound of the back door hitting the branch that holds it in place, indicating they are away from the other door. He slams it shut, locking them in together and blocks that door as well.

He shoves Davis in the back of the wagon and hog ties him. Climbing onto the bench, he comes back into himself. The adrenaline rush is now over; he takes in what he’s done and the consequences of his choice. Any chance he’s ever had of earning his son’s love or trust is now gone. And he’s finally had to face what he’d known all along but refused to acknowledge: not only is Connor just like him, he’s a god damned caricature. He’s all of the bad things to the nth degree, but all of the good things that Bass used to be are not there – maybe they never were.

Maybe the only difference is that Miles was around to remind him – to be the conscience from Bass’ past; that brotherly love from before his heart and soul were burned to ash. Connor doesn’t have that. Who was there to remind him that the world wasn’t always so dark, that he didn’t have to be so blind? Bass can’t be that for him; he represents the darkness that has ruined Connor in the first place. No, the only person that could have been that lifeline to pull him back was his mother. Sweet and loving Emma – and Bass has stolen that from him.

He drags a hand over his mouth, distraught and trying to keep his cool. He still has a job to do. He flicks the reins and gets the horses moving. He’s got a long way to go and decides he can think about all of this and beat himself up for it on the road.

Bass sat in front of his tent, eating a plate of God knows what. The Rangers weren’t exactly culinary geniuses, but it filled the belly and that’s all it needed to do. He’d been stuck in a holding pattern since the word had gone out to recall the Rangers back towards Austin. The war was over.
The few scattered patriots were just foot soldiers – the low men on the totem pole that would pose no future threat. If they ever came out of hiding, they’d be put down like rabid dogs – because in reality that was all they were.

He’d had plenty of time on the road to that church and in the months that followed to analyze the choice he’d made that day at the reservoir. He didn’t realize it at the time, but slowly came to understand that Miles had been right about him the entire time.

He’d wanted to change so bad that he’d been incapable of seeing the backsliding he’d done ever since the night he was sentenced to death and learned of Miles’ betrayal. He’d lost everything at the tower and had been just waiting for death until he’d found something to fight and someone to fight for. But, when he realized that he was to die for helping someone that hadn’t wanted him there in the first place – and that someone had looked him in the eye every day for years, concealing his knowledge of the only blood he’d had left – he’d snapped again. That was the funny thing about being nuts – you didn’t know you were.

He was so foolish to think that he and Connor could take back the Republic and hold onto it. He’d made the decision to get it back at all costs. Winning the war and creating his legacy, that was the big picture and nothing else mattered or would stand in his way. He hadn’t been able to see that the same mentality had been the very thing that had caused him to lose the damn thing in the first place.

No, Miles had been right. He hadn’t changed. That Republic first attitude had made him willing to sacrifice an entire town – hundreds of people to satisfy his own ends. When he realized it, he’d been horrified. It had made him recall how he’d felt when the smoke had cleared from his mind in the weeks after the town.

He wakes up in a field, cold, alone and hungry. He’s just lost everything. The only thing he has to hold onto is the fact that Miles helped him escape. Okay, he’d ended up using him as a distraction, but those words ring in his mind. “We’re still brothers, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

He pulls himself to his feet slowly and gets moving. As he walks it suddenly hits him. He was actually going to use the pendant to nuke Atlanta. Emma is dead, and if it wasn’t for Miles their entire home town would have baked in the basement of his old high school. He’d almost killed people he’d known his entire life, and had killed his first love all so he could get to Miles. He drops to the ground, hyperventilating. He starts to laugh – then he starts to cry, then he starts to heave. His stomach is empty so nothing comes out. This spasms rack his body over and over for god knows how long. What has he done? Who has he become? How did it get so out of hand?

No, now he understood. If getting the Republic back required helping the war between Cali and Texas escalate, then it wouldn’t be worth having in the first place. When it came to ruling a country and keeping it, he had to stop letting the ends justify the means. That’s what they’d done the first time and it had been a disaster long before Miles had left. Even before the tower, a small part of him still knew deep down that all his crumbling nation had become was a perverted vision of a twisted ideal. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Rachel that she wasn’t the only one that liked him better as an affable womanizing drunk.

No, the only way to reclaim what was lost and make it different was to do it the right way. They had to stop the war the Patriots had started and then unite to take them out. He had to be better if the Republic was going to be better, because he understood that he and Davis were two peas in one very demented little pod. If he was going to rule again he had to fight that part of himself as much as he had to fight the patriots.

So, he’d fought the good fight – fought by their rules. Granted, they hadn’t made it too difficult:
kill everything in a patriot uniform. But the Rangers fought like the militia should have. They protected the people under their jurisdiction instead of oppressing them. Rangers were volunteers; they chose to do their duty, whereas the majority of the last generation of his militia had been conscripted against their will.

Blanchard had given him command of a company of Rangers after he’d arranged for a stay in execution. He knew that for all Bass’ crimes and faults, he could lead men into battle – and win. It’s what helped to raise him to power in the first place. The general had hoped that if he could just keep his former counterpart in the field and out of an office, it may very well keep him from the insanity that the power of the Republic had caused. Blanchard’s gamble had paid off and Bass had indeed been invaluable to the war.

Bass set his tin plate aside and picked up a small jug and headed into his tent. As an “officer” he was given a daily allotment of whiskey as a part of his pay. With nothing else to do with his time, he decided getting buzzed alone was a better option than being sober alone. As he drank, he reflected on how far he’d come in the past several months. He liked to think that he’d learned a thing or two about himself while fighting alongside Texas. Things he’d never been able to see before.

He finally figured out why he’d been so desperate to conquer and control. He’d been filled with darkness and rage so long, he’d long since forgotten its source. It was like there was a hole straight through the middle of him and he’d been convinced that if he just gained a little more ground; had a slightly larger piece of the pie, somehow it would be filled. But how do you fill a bottomless chasm? It would be like trying to fill the Grand Canyon up with ping pong balls (or marshmallows, or whatever) – it quite simply put couldn’t be done.

At least he understood it now, and armed with that knowledge, maybe he could keep the lust for control and power at bay. This time when he set up his capital, he could keep himself from becoming consumed by it all and finally make the Monroe Republic what he and Miles had envisioned all of those years ago – a way to bring order out of chaos; a way to stop the raids and starvation that followed the blackout. From what he’d heard, the region he’d once controlled was no better than it was fifteen years ago. Maybe he could fix it, even without Connor or Miles.

He awoke the next morning with a hangover and a summons. Miles and Charlie had returned late in the night. Blanchard had apparently sent for all of them to be debriefed. They were finally getting out of their service to the Republic of Texas. Monroe entered Blanchard’s command tent after having been cleared by his assistant.

Blanchard sat behind a desk that had been brought out for his use. The sight almost made him laugh. How many times had he done the same thing? What was it about commanding generals that made them insist on packing so much shit with them? He could now recall in embarrassing humor the long list of things that he simply hadn’t been able to travel without. God he’d been such a fool. All he had really needed were his weapons, a change of clothes and a bedroll (oh, and a lot of alcohol), but he was too arrogant to see it.

There were a few rickety old chairs in the tent. Blanchard gestured to one as he addressed him. “Have a seat, Monroe.” Charlie and Miles were already sitting in the other two. He eyed the chair suspiciously. He wasn’t entirely sure it was sound enough to hold his weight, but Frank Blanchard also held his fate in his hands, so he really didn’t have much of a choice.

“Oh, I’m here. I see you’ve all started without me. What’s with the powwow?” He asked as he carefully lowered himself onto the seat, waiting for it to collapse.

Miles turned to him. “We’re trying to figure out what to do with you, Bass.”
“Gee, that’s nice, Miles.” He shook his head, feeling a little insulted. “I just fought for you people for the last four months after I helped stop your war with California and this is the thanks I get?”

“Can you really blame us?” Blanchard asked. “Yes, without your help things could have gone a lot worse – and probably would have. But the fact is I can’t have you running back east and causing a ruckus there either. The Monroe Republic is gone and it’s gonna stay that way.”

Choosing to ignore Charlie for the time being, Bass clenched his jaw and sent Miles a heated look. Tattle-tale. He considered denying the accusation, but it would be pointless. Even if Blanchard had it all wrong (which he had not), he’d ever believe him anyway. And Miles was right; he’d always been a terrible liar, which was funny because all Rachel and Charlie ever seemed to accuse him of doing was lying. “And what the hell am I supposed to do then? Crawl back under a rock until the next time someone decides to send a bounty hunter after me?”

Blanchard reached over and handed Bass a piece of paper. “This is an official pardon. It clears your name for the dropping of the bombs and pardons you for the rest. But it has a condition attached to it.”

Bass scanned the letter. Reasonable service as the Republic of Texas sees fit? “Okay, and what’s that?”

Miles spoke up now. “They need someone to straighten out Willoughby. Because of what the Patriots did there, the whole town is a fucking mess. The people are don’t know which way is up and the town itself is half-destroyed. On top of that, almost everyone in charge of keeping the town running has either fled or been convicted of being in league with the Patriots. The ones that weren’t helping them either died or disappeared.”

Blanchard stood up from his desk and crossed in front, putting himself directly in front of Bass. “Because Miles has expressed interest in returning to Willoughby, he has been assigned as an overseer of sorts to take over running the town until things die down.”

He did not like where this conversation was headed. “So, uh, what’s that got to do with me?” He crossed his arms over his chest, knowing he was going to hate the answer.

“The last two sheriffs were killed by the Andover Clan. The town needs a new one,” Blanchard began. The smile on his face indicated that he was enjoying Bass’ obvious discomfort. “The position does come with a salary, plus you get five percent of any fines collected by the judge, once a new one is assigned, of course.”

“Oh no. I don’t do cop. Thanks, but no thanks.” Bass stood up and went to leave. Fuck this, I’m out of here. I’ll take my chances in the Plains.

Blanchard’s stern tone stopped him. “If you don’t want a second execution, you’ll sit your ass back down.”

“What?” He froze in place. Clenching his fists, trying to fight back the rage that was rising at being railroaded, he slowly turned.

“Your pardon is contingent on your serving as sheriff in Willoughby under Miles Matheson. If you refuse or skip out later, we will assume it’s because you’re going back east to revive the Monroe Republic, and you’ll be hunted down and dragged back to face your original conviction. And this time, Rachel Matheson won’t get to play with the dosage.”

Bass sat back down. “And here I thought we were all friends again, Frank.”
“It wasn’t up to me. If it was I’d boot you out of our borders and be done with you. But Texas law requires congressional approval for pardons. And for some reason, they don’t trust to head a nation. It won’t be allowed. If you try, we’d destroy you before you had a chance to get started.”

Miles interjected again. He really felt sorry for his friend. He really had tried to do things better, and he was still getting screwed. “Bass, there’s already a company of Rangers headed east. Any militia left waiting will be disbanded and disarmed. It’s over. Take the job; move on with your life. There’s nothing left for you back there.” He put a hand on his shoulder. “They’re giving you a chance to start your life over. Take it.”

Bass looked away. He refused to meet any of their gazes. He could imagine that Charlie was watching with smug satisfaction. “Fine, I’ll take the job,” he said through gritted teeth.

Blanchard went over to a trunk in the corner of the tent and pulled a stack of clothing out. “It’s custom for Texas sheriff’s to wear a uniform,” he said as he handed it to him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge, setting it on top of the pile. “And of course you’ll all receive a stipend for your services during the war. Texas pays well for military service.”

Bass looked down at the tan clothes he now held. “You can make me work for you, but I’m not wearing this.” He said. He pulled the badge off the top and dumped the clothes on Blanchard’s desk before stomping out of the tent, in search of a lot of alcohol.

When he returned to his own tent several hours later, the stack of clothing was sitting on his cot. A note was written in the chicken scratch that Miles called handwriting. “Oh, yes you are.”

Monroe scooped them up. There was no way in hell. He found Charlie and Miles sitting in front of their tents, eating in front of a fire. Without a word, he tossed the offending clothes into the flames. “Really mature, Bass.”

“Fuck off, Boss,” he said as he went back to his own tent. He laughed to himself. That had felt pretty damn good. He supposed there were worse jobs and worse things he could be doing with his life now. At the very least, it would give him a daily opportunity to be a thorn in Miles’ side while he was at it.
“Bass, get up you lazy, drunk ass lecher!”

The pounding on the door to the studio turned loft matched the cadence that was already playing its torturous beat in his head. Bass let out a groan as he turned his head gingerly to look at the door. Deciding that he wasn’t ready to move yet, he rolled back over and buried his head under the pillow to block out the racket Miles was making on the other side of the door.

Moments later the door came crashing in with a resounding bang followed by the sensation of falling as Miles tipped the thin mattress off of its bedframe. Bass came spilling out onto the floor with a loud thump.

He looked up at his tormenter, bleary eyed and more than a little hungover. “Okay, was that really necessary?” he grumbled as he slowly got to his feet. He shoved the mattress back in place and sat down in it heavily, doing his best to ignore the stiffness in his joints as he did so.

“Well, if you’d come to the door…” Miles replied with false civility.

Bass rubbed his eyes and blinked a few times to clear his vision. “What crawled up your ass?”

Miles leaned up against the broken down dresser that was currently doubling as Bass’ kitchen table. “Mary Parker’s husband is what ‘crawled up my ass’ as you so delicately put it.”

“Oh,” he replied, catching the drift. He got back to his feet and went in search of halfway clean pants, shoving Miles out of the way so he could dig through the bottom drawer. “Hey, she approached me. I was minding my own business, having a quiet nightcap. Not my fault her old man spends more time banging his sister-in-law than he does his own wife.” Finding what he was looking for he started to get dressed. “Funny how he’s got the balls to complain to you about it, considering he’s been doing the same fucking thing.

“What the hell are you doing, Bass? That’s the fourth one in the past three weeks. This town is running out of women – married or otherwise that you haven’t fucked yet.” Miles looked around the studio that he once called home. He didn’t think it was possible for it to be a bigger mess than when he lived here, but Bass always did seem to outdo him in everything. He made a note to see about getting him some proper furniture. The Patriots had gutted the place at one point, so Bass had been forced to make do with what he could find.

“Hey, I do my job and earn my keep around this one horse nowhere ass town. What I do on my off time is my own damn business.” He disappeared into the one walled off portion of the loft, which served as his “bathroom”. He went to the basin and washed the sleep out of his eyes. He looked up into the cracked mirror and grimaced at the image that stared back at him. His eyes were a little bloodshot and he was in need of a shave and a haircut.

When he appeared, Miles was still standing there, leaning on the dresser/table. “What are you still doing here?” he snapped as he went in search of a bottle that wasn’t empty.

Miles shook his head in pity at Bass’ desperate search for the hair of the dog. “You know, as miserable as this place is making you, I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.”
Finding the remnants of last night’s bottle of rot gut, Monroe sat down on the stool next to the dresser and pulled the stopper out. “Where else am I gonna go? If I leave, you’ll just snitch, Blanchard will send his dogs after me, and Rachel will laugh her way to my execution.” He took a drink, coughing as it went down. “God, this shit is vile!”

Miles laughed at his expense, taking great pleasure in the pained sound coming from his friend. “Well, maybe if you spent less of your pay on cards, rot gut and whores, you’d be able to pay your tab at Charlie’s place and she’d let you back in the bar.”

Bass ignored him. “Anyway, even if I go back east, I’m liable to get shot in the back, and there’s practically nothing left in the plains. You and Blanchard have both effectively screwed me.”

“Well, if you plan on keeping your pardon, you might want to get moving. It’s almost ten, dumbass.” Miles said as he headed towards the door. “Friend or not, I’m still in charge of this town. I can fire your sorry ass, sheriff.”

“Shit!” Bass hadn’t realized how late it was. He scrambled to finish getting dressed. He still refused to wear the uniforms that Blanchard kept sending (The last one was cut up and re-sewn into a throw pillow for Bass’ lumpy couch). Instead, he pinned on the stupid badge that Miles made him wear and pulled on his jacket. He didn’t need to flash the damn thing around as far as he was concerned. Everyone in town knew who he was and what position he held.

Miles watched Bass buckle his sword belt and grab his gun before bolting out the door. Sighing in exasperation, he followed him out of the loft. He’d hoped that Bass would have been able to settle into his new life here. As it turned out, he was actually good at his job. Unlike the previous two sheriffs, he was actually capable of holding his own. The people in town had slowly started overlooking who he was and started to respect the position he held. He was fair and had an uncanny talent at deescalating problems before they got out of hand.

But then three months ago Bass had started to change. He had become more withdrawn and started to drink more and started fucking anything with breasts and a heartbeat. There was a cathouse in between Willoughby and the neighboring town. There were many nights where Bass could be found there, losing his pay on poker and indulging himself in the women there (Miles had overheard two of the whores talking when they’d come to town once. They’d confirmed his suspicions that Bass never actually had to pay for it). He’d tried to get his friend to talk about it, but Bass had always insisted he was fine.

More than once Miles had been forced to go in search of him and drag him back to his loft. This strange role reversal had him worried. In their younger years it had always been Bass dragging him out of bars and seeing him home. They’d both liked their booze, but Miles had always been the one to drink himself stupid whereas Bass had typically been the responsible one. To make matters worse for Miles, Rachel had been drawing a line in the sand and fully expected him to abandon Bass to his stupidity in favor of her. He suspected she was harboring a hope that he’d drink himself to death, thus removing himself from her hometown permanently.

Bass winced when the sun hit his eyes. February or not, it was still bright as hell. He made his way over to his office, acknowledging a few passersby as he went. Unlocking the door, he picked up a few messages from the locals as he entered, shutting the door against the offending sunlight. Since he’d closed the office yesterday there had only been a handful of requests for his services.

He sat down at his desk and picked through them. Most were the typical petty issues that any small town dealt with: an argument over property lines that really had nothing to do with him, someone accusing his neighbor of theft when some animal had gone missing and so on. The most severe issue involved an assault that had taken place in the market earlier that morning.
He set aside the property issue to pass on to Miles later and headed out to find out what had gone on with the supposed fight. An hour later after talking to a few stall owners, he headed towards Charlie’s bar to track down one of the few people in town that was a bigger drunk than he was. Entering the establishment, he nodded to Charlie in greeting from where she stood behind the bar.

After the war, she’d taken the pay she’d received from her services to Texas and had bought Marion’s old place. She’d cajoled him and Miles to help her fix it up and make it her own. Bass had spent weeks over here after work helping her make repairs and renovations. She’d learned the trade quickly enough – it seemed that running a bar was in her genetic makeup every bit as much as fighting was. She was really turning it into something.

He walked over to the far end and put a hand on his target’s shoulder. “Come on Bill. Finish it up and pay your tab. We’ve gotta have a little chat.”

The drunk hung his head sheepishly. He’d been waiting for it all morning. “All right, all right. Get your hand off me, Monroe. I’m coming.” The protest was out of principal more than anything. He knew he’d screwed up by sucker punching the blacksmith when a dispute had arisen over his bill.

As Bass led Bill out of the bar, he tossed Charlie a small leather pouch. Despite what Miles thought, he did have the funds to pay his tab. He didn’t spend that much on his nightlife. He’d just been avoiding her of late. But, the not so friendly reminder had made him feel like a heel. She was trying to earn a living, just as he was. It wasn’t right to keep owing her.

November…

He sits at the bar, heavy into a bottle of whiskey. He’s had a long and exhausting day. It seemed that the full moon had brought out the crazy in everyone. He’s dealt with an attempted rape by an angry ex-lover, investigated a hit by bandits (with no luck in finding them), been called to the bar to break up two particularly nasty fights and finally caught the punk kid that has been vandalizing several farms outside of town. The new judge that came to town last week is particularly annoyed with him for filling his courtroom today.

He’d been stuck working late while waiting for the Ranger stationed in the next town over to come collect the would-be rapist to send him to Austin to face charges. At least it had given him time to finish all the paperwork that went with his job. He’d have thought that with paper being so expensive after the blackout that Texas would have at least tried to limit the amount of reports he had to do.

He normally doesn’t drink this much but he’s so damn tired and aggravated that he’s decided he needs to cut lose. Charlie has spent the evening reminding the few regulars that she’s extended credit to that their payments are due. Bass is no exception, but Blanchard is late sending his and Miles’ pay for some reason, so it’ll have to keep until he does finally condescend to send it.

“You don’t have to keep staying until I lock up,” Charlie says as she wipes down the bar. He’s been doing this every night since she opened. Well, almost. It really started a week after she’d taken it over when one of her customers had snuck through the door that led from the bar area to her private living quarters.

She’d found him in her bedroom waiting for her. She’d managed to subdue him and gotten Bass to arrest him. Shortly thereafter, the entrance between her home and business had been blocked and a new one created on the side of the building, courtesy of her uncle and his best friend. Ever since, Bass had made a habit of hanging around the bar until closing and then saw her home.

He takes another drink. “It’s no big deal. Not like I’ve got anything better to do.” He’s slurring
just a little, and trying very hard not to do so.

The fact that he’s more drunk than usual is not lost on Charlie. She takes the gold and diamonds she’s taken in out of the till and puts them in the safe under the bar. This is another amenity that Miles and Bass have insisted on. Miles helped her install it so it was well hidden and almost impossible to remove. The task done she stands up. She takes the bottle off the bar and shoves the stopper in. “Alright, all done. Out with you,” she says as she comes out from behind the bar.

Bass stands, swaying just a little. Charlie reaches out to steady him. Her hand on his arm feels like it’s burning him through his shirt. He freezes, looking at her. The desire that shoots through him is like a lightning bolt. She looks tired from her long day, but she’s still something to see.

He knows that it’s an inappropriate physical attraction, nothing more. She’s half his age and Miles’ niece; Rachel’s daughter. As big of a man-slut he has been in his life, Bass doesn’t consider himself to be that big of a dick. On top of that she’d been banging it out with his kid before the little punk disappeared with Tom Neville and tried to kill him. It was just wrong on too many levels.

He is holding his jacket, trying to regain his equilibrium when he realizes that she’s standing much closer than he finds comfortable. For some reason, he gets nervous and takes a step back, swallowing back the feeling of his heart pounding in his chest. He’s having a hard time remembering exactly who she is right now.

“Are you all right?” Charlie asks, appearing concerned.

His mouth suddenly feels very dry. He’s regretting the fact that she put that bottle of whiskey away. “I- I’m fine,” he stammers. Her breast is pressed ever so lightly on his arm, branding him with its warmth. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear she’s doing it on purpose. But that doesn’t make any sense. He’s pretty sure that his attraction is completely one-sided.

He backs away and gets out of there as fast as his drunken legs can carry him before he can give in to the urge to make an ass out of himself even more. He is desperate to put some distance between them. He can almost feel her eyes boring holes into his back as he makes his hasty retreat. His loft is across the street, catty-cornered from her building (the proximity is one of the excuses he’s used for staying late with her). Instead of walking her to her door, he sits out on the iron fire escape to watch and make sure she gets in alright.

The weather is cool, but he sits out there anyway. He’s got a bottle of cheap – well whatever it is, it’s alcohol. He strikes a match and lights his nightly cigar, a habit he’d picked up in the Marines and had quit when they’d become scarce right after the blackout. He hadn’t picked it back up again until he’d returned to Willoughby after the war ended.

From his vantage point he can see her walking from the bar’s entrance to her private one on the side. He decides that he will see her home this way from now on. It’s a lot safer. He doesn’t know when the physical attraction he’s always had for her became so strong, but it took all of his willpower tonight not to reach out and grab her. The fact that she seemed to be pushing herself at him did not help. He smokes his cigar and gets a little more drunk while he tries to figure out exactly what has happened this night.

After booking Bill and later escorting him to see the judge, Bass headed back to his office. His headache was blinding by now and all he wanted was to hide from the daylight for an hour or two. It was a slow day and anyone could find him if he was needed. He’d already been told that the missing animal from the supposed theft had wandered back on his own, so the only other thing waiting for his attention was the report on the case with Bill and the blacksmith. That could definitely wait until morning.
After dozing at his desk for a while, it was finally time to close his office for the day. As he locked up and headed home, it occurred to Bass that he’d yet to eat a thing all day. That at least explained the headache that was still tormenting him. He thought for a few minutes, trying to remember if he had anything to eat at home. He didn’t know why he bothered, he damn well knew he didn’t (and thus really needed to work on his housekeeping skills), so he was forced to do what every other confirmed bachelor did to survive—go to the local pub.

He hadn’t stepped foot in the place as a customer since that night, so it was almost disturbing to do it now. On top of that, it was a particularly slow evening, which made it all the more uncomfortable for him. “What’s up?” Charlie asked as he sank down on a barstool. Since he’d done such a good job of avoiding the bar for the past few months, she assumed he’d come in an official capacity.

“He’s hungry,” was all he said, letting her figure out the rest.

Charlie smiled as she went in back to the kitchen to get him a bowl of the hash that her cook, Greg had made for the daily meal. Her bar wasn’t fancy like the ones in Philly had become. There was no menu, just the daily whatever that Greg threw together from whatever was available.

“So you’re finally ending your boycott?” she asked as she set the food down in front of him.

Bass picked up the fork as he tried to come up with a reasonable response. “Just been busy,” he finally said with a shrug.

Charlie raised a brow at him. “That’s what I’ve been hearing.” She let the half-accusation hang there. Pretty much everyone in town knew how he’d been spending his nights. What they didn’t know was that he always came home just before midnight. She could see him slipping inside his building from the bar, so she was acutely aware of it. Once or twice she’d stepped out to dump her wash water or some other task so she’d assumed that this was the norm, but he was still always home when she locked up.

When he didn’t respond, Charlie started to make random small talk. “Aaron and Priscilla left town yesterday. They wouldn’t tell us where they were going.”

He looked up. They ran the school in town. With their absence that meant it would be closed until someone stepped up to take their place. Idle teenagers typically did two things: fight or fuck. The latter was none of his business, but the former could make his job more difficult. “School closing?”

“No,” she said as she went over to a recently abandoned table to clear the glasses and wipe its surface. “Mom’s going to take over for a while. It’ll be good for her. She’s been obsessing.”

The way she said it told him exactly what she’d been obsessing about—him. Ever since Rachel discovered he’d been closing up the bar with Charlie she’d been laying into Miles about his presence in town. Miles had confessed this to him. Of course, his friend had immediately defended the fact that Bass was just trying to make sure nothing happened to Charlie on their behalf, but Rachel still didn’t care. She had apparently decided that the town would be better off with a new sheriff and him six feet under. Because of her attitude regarding him, Miles had slowly been distancing himself from Bass. “Well isn’t that… nice,” he commented.

Charlie went back behind the bar and placed herself directly in front of him. “Miles is worried about you,” she ventured.

Bass looked around the bar, embarrassed she’d brought it up. He realized they were alone now. The few customers that had been sitting behind him had left. Sighing, he finally made eye contact.
“He shouldn’t be. I’m fine.”

“You look like shit,” she countered.

“Thanks a lot, Charlie.” He went back to his food, dropping his gaze. “How’s your boyfriend?” he asked, effectively changing the subject.

Bass is sitting on the fire escape, cigar in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other. He’s been working on paperwork all evening. Ever since that night two weeks ago, he’s taken to eating his meals at home and working afterwards until Midnight. He’s also made it a point to not get as fucked up as he’d been that night. He’s done a fairly good job of convincing himself that the awkward moment they’d shared was completely alcohol induced.

Two days after he stopped hanging around he noticed that one of the local boys had taken his place. This annoys him to no end. Apparently his presence in the bar had discouraged the kid up until now. She’d been sending him out a few minutes ahead of her each night. But tonight he doesn’t leave. Bass watches as the young man walks out with her and waits for Charlie to lock the door to the bar.

She grabs his hand and leads him towards her door. Bass can hear her laughing at something he’s said. He presses up against her, familiar; suggestive as she unlocks the door to her rooms. She looks over her shoulder to smile at him while she turns the knob. They disappear from the alley, the door closing silently behind them.

Bass lifts his glass to his lips as he tries to tell himself he doesn’t care. It’s really none of her business at all what she does after work. It takes him a few seconds to realize his glass is empty. He climbs back in through the window and grabs the bottle he’s left on his dresser/kitchen table. Abandoning the glass he goes back outside to the fire escape and lights another cigar. The next thing he knows, the sun I slowly rising. He looks down at the empty bottle on the step next to his feet. It was mostly when he brought it out her He doesn’t even remember finishing it.

He’s still a little drunk. He stretches before heading back inside. It’s Sunday, so he doesn’t have to work early today. He usually doesn’t go in until noon. He flops down on his bed, still fully clothed. He decides that if she doesn’t care, neither should he. It’s just a sexual infatuation at any rate. Later that night he will find himself drunk and in the company of some random woman. So what if she’s married? So what if she’s blonde (but not the right kind of blond)? So what if she’s got blue eyes (but not the right color, exactly)?

“He’s good,” Charlie said as she turned away. She went to the tub of water and started washing out the dirty glasses from her non-existent dinner rush. With a sigh, she decided to make a confession. “We’re breaking up, actually. He’s moving to Austin to take a job with his cousin.”

Bass looked up from his empty bowl. “I’m sorry.” He suddenly felt like an ass. He shouldn’t have brought the subject up at all, but he’d been desperate to get the topic of conversation off of himself.

Charlie turned back around. “Nah, it’s okay. We weren’t really all that serious.” She grabbed the bowl off the bar and replaced it with a glass of bourbon. She’d managed to get ahold of the good stuff last week. She can see that his hands are shaking a little, most likely from not having had a drink today. Maybe if it was decent, he wouldn’t slam it as had recently become his custom. She tried to bite her tongue, but she just couldn’t quite help herself. “You know, I’m worried about you too, Bass.”

“Charlie, can we please not do this?” He was almost begging. Much to her disappointment, he picked up the glass and downed it in one swallow. He set his payment down on the bar and went to
the door. “Some things are just better being left alone,” he said quietly before stepping out into the cold evening.

Over the next two weeks, he eased up on his drinking a little (not much, but enough to where he felt he could claim he was making progress if anyone asked), and he avoided the cathouse. He wasn’t in the mood to gamble and had grown bored with the company there. He did manage to pick up a pretty young widow for a few nights of company when he couldn’t stand the loneliness of his loft or the tedium of his own head. He made sure that she as different as she could be from the object of his irrational and unhealthy obsession.

As with the others, she was probably more excited over the danger of sleeping with the notorious Scourge of Scranton than she was attracted to him. He should have found it insulting, but it gave him the leeway he needed to keep things simple. She was a placeholder – an emotionless fuck and nothing more. She got the mystery and danger she wanted and he got off. No gentleness, no attachments, no expectations. As long as he performed, she didn’t care if he was wasted or was picturing someone else.

At least Miles couldn’t bitch at him for this one – there was no husband to storm into town hall and demand interference. The rules of the game never changed. He was gone well before midnight and refused to bring her home with him. He might go back later, he might not. Either way she wouldn’t complain.

Bass was on the way to her home when he was stopped by Miles. “We’ve got company at the gate.”

Willoughby’s town gate was always closed after dark. When someone arrived during the night hours, it required Bass’ presence before it could be opened, just in case. It also tended to attract a lot of attention. Charlie hadn’t had a customer in several hours so even she was interested. She decided to lock up early and see who was causing the commotion.

Bass climbed to the top of the gate to get a better look at their intruder. “Step into the light and identify yourself,” he called down.

“Hey Dad,” Connor said as he stepped to where Bass could see him.

“Dammit.” He climbed down off of the wall and addressed one of the men assigned to watch duty that night. “Open the fucking gate,” he said rather curtly.

A few minutes later, Connor was safely inside the town walls. Upon seeing him, Charlie walked over and gave him a hug. “Well, look who’s back.”

After chatting with Charlie and Miles for a few minutes, Connor approached his father. “Listen, Dad…”

Bass just turned away, fists clenched as he tried to force down the fury that had arisen within him the moment he saw his son. “I don’t want to hear it.” He flashed the badge at his progeny. “And don’t call me that. It’s Sheriff Monroe, and I swear to God if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay the hell away from me.” He stalked off towards home, no longer worried about the pretty, raven haired widow waiting up for him. He had some hard core drinking to do.

Charlie and Miles exchanged a confused look. What was that all about?

Chapter End Notes
I promise I’ve got an overall plotline, but the first chapter or two will be mostly character development, which if we all recall was a huge part of the series to begin with. This chapter mostly deals with where they’ve found themselves in the first five or six months after the war has ended. This takes them through The fall and winter (with most current events happening in February/March). A lot of the overall plot to the story has a lot to do with who Bass has become. I think that his character in the series really has had the most transition. Most people’s personalities are more static, with gradual evolution over time, but his seemed to mutate every two episodes or so, and I decided I’d have some fun with that (He is by far my favorite character to write – he’s so complicated and multi-faceted in comparison to the others).

For the Charloe fans out there, it will be obvious that despite either of their actions, there is an underlying theme to their thoughts… I think it makes them more true to character if anything, so please bear with me. Please let me know what you think. Moving too slowly???
Rebreaking Bones Helps To Reset Them

Chapter Notes

I struggled back and forth with whether to make this one chapter or two. It's very, very long which suggests two, but then again it's all kind of tied together which tells me that it should be one. After splitting it up and reading it both ways, I've opted for two. This may very well be the longest chapter in this story (then again, maybe not.. it's me after all...)

A warning before you read, this is the total downward spiral of stupid chapter that Bass needs to get where he's going. As I said in the beginning I wanted to explore the nano (eventually) and also the way his character had developed up until the very end of season 2, and he will be a little darker and way more fucked up in this than he has been in pretty much anything I've written before.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was almost quitting time and it had been a long, tedious day. Bass had been running all over town dealing with petty squabbles and utter nonsense. It was only a few days into the month of May, and it seemed that the weather had decided to abruptly turn unbearably hot and humid just to make his existence more miserable. And judging by the behavior of the people in town, he wasn’t the only one affected.

Over the past couple of months his son had approached him multiple times, but he’d pushed him away every time. If he had one wish it would have been that the kid had stayed away. He didn’t trust him –not by a long shot. And on top of everything else, it seemed his son had inherited more than just his addiction to power and propensity for violence. He also seemed to also have inherited his share of Bass’ so-called legendary charm and he had been laying it on thick with the entire Matheson clan at every turn.

Hot and annoyed, he was headed back to his office to grab his things to wait out the last half hour of his day, convinced that if there was a god then he’d be able to complete his shift with no further incident. He’d almost made it when he heard the sound of crashing and yelling coming from the bar. “Dammit,” he whined as he turned back and stalked over to Charlie’s place, praying he was wrong.

Sure enough, a late afternoon bar fight had broken out; most likely fueled by alcohol and the oppressive heat. When he saw who was involved, he had to resist the urge to whip out his gun and just start shooting. “All right, that’s enough! Break it up!” He shouted in his most authoritative voice. He could see Charlie out of the corner of his good eye. Her impatience and irritation matched his own. They’d already broken a chair and looked like they were working on a matching set.

Unfortunately for the furniture, the idiots intent on destroying each other and the bar weren’t inclined to listen. Grabbing a cue stick off of the worn pool table, he used it to swiftly knock them both off of their feet. “I said, break it up.”

Both men ended up in a heap on the floor. “Hi Dad,” Connor said as he squinted up at him.

Bass reached out and yanked the other man to his feet. He didn’t recognize him, which suggested
he must have been with the seasonal drifters that had come through town the day before on their way to look for work in Mexico. “Who the hell are you?” the drifter asked.

Monroe pointed to the badge he had pinned on his shirt. “That’s who I am.” Without another word he pulled Connor to his feet as well.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re the sheriff’s son?” the stranger said as he glared at Connor, obviously feeling that the kid had only fought him because he knew he’d get away with it. “Well, I know how this is going down,” he continued glumly.

Annoyed, Bass drew his gun “Sure you do.” He nudged the both out the door and onto the sidewalk. “Okay boys, assume the position.”

He patted them both down and took their weapons. He knew his kid well enough to tell him to hand over the small pistol he kept hidden in his boot as well. “Seriously?” Connor snapped as he handed it over.

“Like I’d trust you anywhere near me with a weapon,” he snapped right back. Satisfied, he holstered his gun. Charlie had joined them outside. He handed her the weapons he’d taken off of them. “Here’s a down payment for the damages they caused,” he said as he grabbed them both by the ear like they were children and drug them into his office.

As soon as he wrangled them through the door he forcefully shoved them both into the cell at the back of the building. “Play nice. I swear if you start fighting again, I’ll shoot you both.”

“Come on Dad, this isn’t funny.” Connor was gripping the bars of the cell, irritated and a little embarrassed.

Bass just ignored him and sat at his desk, just out of their line of sight. Suppressing a groan he laid his forehead on his desk. It was too late to send them to see the judge today, but because the one was just passing through, if he let them go, he’d skip out. Knowing he had to hold them both or release them both, he was resigned to let them sit there. Dammit, now I’ve got to feed them.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he called as he left the office. He wasn’t about to cook for them, hell he didn’t even cook for himself these days so he had to get food from the very establishment he’d just drug them out of. The last thing he wanted to do was play slumber party with his son and the man he’d just fought.

By the time he reached the bar, things had been put to rights. The broken chairs had been removed and the customers had gone back to their drinking. Charlie looked up at him as he approached the bar. “Can you have Greg bring food over on his way home? I’ve got to keep those two knuckleheads overnight.”

“If you tell me what that was all about,” Charlie said under her breath.

“Excuse me?” He didn’t quite understand what her problem was. He’d just stopped Connor and the other drunk from destroying her bar.

“You walked your own kid out at gunpoint,” she gestured to the door.

“No, I got the two drunken retards that were trying to break each other and every chair in your place out so I could relieve them of their weapons before they did something even more stupid. You’re welcome, by the way.” He leaned on the bar, challenging her to contradict him. He swore he’d never understand the way her mind worked. All he’d done was his job and she was mad at him rather than the two that had caused the problem. “Wanna tell me why they were fighting in the
first place?”

Charlie was clearly exasperated still. “The out-of-towner said something out of line and Connor took offense to it. It just sort of escalated from there.”

Bass took her meaning. The other guy had hit on her and Connor had been jealous. “Will you send Greg or not?” He waited for her to nod her assent. “Your boyfriend will be let go after he sees the judge in the morning. They’re both being charged with drunk and disorderly.” He abruptly turned and stalked out of the bar, letting the door slam behind him.

Later that night, he set himself up in the small bedroom adjacent to the office’s lone cell. The law said he couldn’t leave them unattended all night, so here he was - stuck. The office was decidedly hotter than his loft was. At least that was on the top floor of the three story building and got a good breeze. He could hear his prisoners sniping at each other through the thin wall. “Hey Lavern and Shirley, knock it off. You can braid each other’s hair and paint your toenails on your own time!”

He settled in for a rather uncomfortable night’s sleep. The cot was lumpy, the room was hot and because he had prisoners his nightly ritual of drinking himself into a coma was out of the question. Despite the fact that he hated the job, the town, et cetera he still did take it seriously. Unable to sleep, he waited for dumb and dumber to fall asleep before slipping out the door. He found that he had one thing that needed his attention before he could settle down. He made his way down the main street in town and stood in the shadows while the bar closed and its owner got herself safely inside.

Having returned to his office he decided it was too hot and miserable to give it another go. He dragged two chairs outside to the sidewalk. Sitting down in one, he propped his feet up on the other and stared out into the night. He was just starting to doze off when someone quite rudely removed his foot rest. Bass jolted awake to see Miles settling down in the other chair. “What are you doing out here?”

Bass yawned and stretched. “Prisoners – bar fight. Just because they have to bake in there, doesn’t mean that I have to,” he said under his breath. He was irritated for having just lost the opportunity for the first sober sleep he’d had in months. He’d been almost looking forward to not feeling like shit in the morning.

“Yeah, about that. I talked to Charlie.”

He winced at the thought. Here it comes. “I was just doing my job,” he defended.

Miles looked at him, not quite buying it. “Come on, Bass. Stranger or not, the other guy wasn’t much of a threat.”

“Well maybe he wasn’t the one I was worried about.” Bass shot back.

Miles decided he’d had enough. He got up and leaned in, getting right in his friend’s face. “That’s it. Out with it. This has been going on for long enough, Bass. You’ve got a problem and it’s going to stop now.”

“I don’t see how what I do is any of your business as long as I do my job, Miles. So back off.”

Miles wasn’t having it. “Bullshit. You’re my friend – my brother. Even after all the shit we’ve been through; even when I can’t stand you - that won’t change. I’m making it my business. And I’m not talking about the drinking this time. I’m talking about Connor.”

“Just leave it,” he said as he pushed Miles away so he could retreat to the oven the town called the
“Not this time.” Miles moved to lean up against the door, effectively blocking his escape. “You know, Gene’s got a friend that works in the hospital in Austin. He ran into him when he went to get Blanchard last year. He used to work at a rehab facility…” Miles trailed off and let the threat sink in.

Bass’ jaw dropped. He could not believe that Miles was suggesting railroading him again. “You wouldn’t.”

Miles sat back down, knowing he was about to win this round. “Oh, I would. Spill it or I swear I’ll have Blanchard’s goons drag you off to dry out so fast you won’t know what hit you. What gives? Connor’s been back for a couple of months. You spent all that time trying to find him and now you’re just writing him off.”

Defeated, he went back over to his chair, arms crossed over his chest, fighting off the urge to pout. “The kid tried to kill me,” he began.

“That’s what this is all about? I already knew that. And technically he didn’t try to kill you, he just tried to sell you,” Miles replied.

Bass sighed and tried again. “No, after that. When I took off with Davis I went to the reservoir first, just like we planned. Connor was there with Tom Neville and Scanlon. He wanted me to give him Davis. Neville wanted to kill him out of revenge and Connor just wanted to kill him so we couldn’t stop the war. He thought it would make it a lot easier to take back the Republic, and he was right – it would have.”

Miles raised his brow in surprise. “And instead you kept with the plan.”

“Of course I did. You trusted me so I wasn’t going to let you down. After I told him I couldn’t betray you, he just walked away and waited for Tom and Scanlon to shoot me. I didn’t give him what he wanted, so he’d rather see me dead and take his chances on his own. Who does that? I’ve done a lot of fucked up things in my time, but who shoots their own father?”

He understood now. The look on Bass’ face that night when he’d asked him if he’d run into trouble; it all made sense. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Bass just shrugged. “Why would I? I handled it, didn’t I? You got what you wanted. I brought Davis to you, we won the war. You got Rachel and Charlie got the both of you. Yay.” He was so deadpan that if the circumstances were different, Miles may have laughed.

“And you got exiled to Willoughby.” Miles suddenly felt like a total ass. Bass had come through in more ways than he’d imagined. He’d literally given up his only family left alive and all they’d done was treat him like a barely tolerated parolee.

Bass pulled his nightly cigar out of his pocket. He’d forgotten about it up until now. He paused to strike a match. As Miles watched him bring the flame up to the end of the cigar, he could see the circles under his eyes. “And everyone always says nice guys finish last.”

“I’m sorry, Bass. If I’d have known –“

“You’d have done the same thing. It doesn’t matter. You weren’t going to trust me then, and you probably won’t start now. I get it, I deserve it. But now you know. Just keep your mouth shut about it. I don’t need any more ‘I told you so’ bullshit from Rachel. I get enough of it as it is.” And more than that, he didn’t want any more pity from Charlie, which he’d most certainly get.
Miles stood up and opened the door to his office. “Go home. Get some sleep. I can keep an eye on Beavis and Butthead tonight.”

Bass nodded in thanks and headed home. When he got there he took his nightly station on the fire escape. He looked up at the night sky and pretended that he wasn’t really looking at the alley across the street. Pensive, he was too distracted to notice the blonde woman staring up at him from the street.

Rachel had gone looking for Miles. Although she was still living with Gene and he had gotten a small house of his own a block away they still saw each other nightly. The separate house thing was her idea – a way for them to date and give things a real chance to work out. He’d told her he’d be back in a while and had yet to return. It was just chance that Bass had not noticed her on his way back home.

Something about the way he sat there made her uncomfortable, like there was something she was missing; something important. From her vantage point and in the glow of the street torches that had yet to burn down she noticed the direction of his gaze. No, this did not bode well at all and bore watching. Rather than continuing on in her search for Miles, she headed back home. The wheels were turning in her head and she’d already come up with a few viable excuses to get away so she could set up her surveillance. She needed to know what he was up to.

The next morning, Bass made his way to work early to collect Connor and the drifter, who had identified himself as one Sam Jones (yeah right). “Good morning sunshine,” he said to Miles as he walked back towards the cell. “All right, ladies on your feet.” Both men were still sleeping it off. They must have been more shitfaced than he’d thought.

The both rolled off their cots, disheveled and hung over. As he unlocked the door to the cell, Bass idly wondered if this was how he looked most mornings. Having actually slept without downing a bottle, he felt pretty good for once. If his hands were shaking just a little, well he’d deny it to anyone that happened to notice. He led them to the courthouse with a sleepy Miles in tow.

An hour later both men were released after having paid their fine to the judge, most of which would end up in Charlie’s pocket to pay for the damages they caused. Jones was sent on his way to meet up with his friends down south and Connor was released to wherever he’d been sleeping. Bass had made it a point to not know that piece of information.

Before his son had a chance to corner him, he made a quick getaway. He had work to do and was actually motivated to do it for once. As he made his rounds around town he considered his life of late. Rather than moping in his loft getting plowed he decided that he’d actually mope in public and get slightly less plowed for once.

As his day came to an end, he did exactly that. Bass went to the bar and convinced Charlie of the benefits of feeding him before settling down to a glass (or three) of whiskey. As he finished up his last drink for the night, feeling only a happy buzz rather than the desperate swirling that he’d been subjecting himself to of late, he felt like he was being watched. He slowly rose, glancing around nonchalantly as he went to the bar to pay his tab (he’d made it a point to not keep an open account with her any more, just in case he felt the need to avoid her again). Rachel was sitting at the other end of the bar. That’s... Creepy.

An hour later, Rachel watched him as she hid with the binoculars she’d “borrowed”. Miles had of course been exhausted after playing deputy the previous night, which gave her an opportunity to get out alone. Sure enough, he was out there, cigar in hand (a disgusting habit as far as she was concerned).
She could see him watching her daughter as she locked the door, his head turning to keep his gaze trained as Charlie entered in through the side. She was almost ready to write it off as creepy but protective behavior when he went to relight his cigar. His face better illuminated, she could see the almost wistful expression he wore.

Over the course of the next week, Bass continued to spend a few hours in Charlie’s bar before heading in for the night. He tried to ignore the fact that after apologizing to her for the mess he’d made, Connor had been present as well. At least he kept his distance from him. Rachel was also in the bar – a more common sight of late. He was in the corner contemplating getting another drink when a familiar voice came from his left. “Well hello there, Sheriff.”

He turned his head to see the smiling face of Mary Parker. She must have been sitting in his blind spot, because he hadn’t noticed her before. “Mary,” he acknowledged. “How’s the husband?” He raised a finger to Charlie, indicating that he’d like another drink.

“Busy fucking my sister tonight.” She left him to figure out the rest.

Charlie came over with his drink. She set it down and looked Mary over. “Mrs. Parker, how’s your family?” she said with a smile. Something about the look on her face sent a shiver down Bass’ spine. Although Mary took her greeting at face value, he sensed that she did not like the woman.

“Oh, they’re just fine. Kids are good, husband’s good,” Mary said with her brightest smile. As soon as Charlie walked away, she turned back to him. “So as I was saying, Billy’s busy tonight. Wanna get out of here for a while?”

He took a drink. Apparently Mary had forgotten one of the rules. Once he was done, he was done. He’d been there, done that and hadn’t any inclination of going back there, especially if it meant picking her up in Charlie’s bar. Still, he had a feeling that she’d definitely make a scene. “Some other time, maybe. I’ve got a long day tomorrow. I was just heading home.” Before she had a chance to not take the hint, Bass downed his drink and paid his tab.

He got home earlier than normal, desperate as he was to get away from Mary Parker and her proposition. Apparently Miles had a point about his having gotten around a bit too much. Annoyed at the way his night was ending he grabbed the bottle he’d been so proud of not having opened over the past few weeks and headed out to the fire escape for his nightly cigar.

Rachel was watching him again. She’d seen the incident with Mary Parker and had also seen her daughter’s reaction to it. Charlie had seemed overly interested in Connor after he’d left, with Mary following a few minutes later. Of course the married woman had just cut her losses and headed home, where she should have been in the first place but her daughter certainly hadn’t known that.

As she watched, Bass brought the bottle to his lips. Soon enough it was closing time. This time, however Charlie was not alone. She almost appeared to be glancing up towards his loft as she led Connor out of the bar and into the alley. After a few minutes of giggles (was her daughter drunk?) the pair disappeared. Bass sat outside a few minutes later before snuffing out his cigar on the bottom of his boot. Through the open window, Rachel heard the sound of glass shattering.

This was all the proof she needed. Sebastian Monroe had the audacity of pining for her daughter. And, for some reason, Charlie seemed to have enough inclination to take Connor home on the very night that she seemed to be a little jealous over his choice of company. Rachel climbed out of her hiding spot and headed towards the door of his building. This was going to stop now.

Philadelphia, twelve years after the blackout:
Rachel sits in her prison cell. Well, that’s what she calls it. He calls it her quarters. But, no matter how lavish a prison is, it is still a prison when she cannot come and go as she pleases. Miles has been gone for over a year. From what Bass has told her, he tried to kill him and then abandoned the city. He has left her alone with a mad man.

And he is mad. This is not the carefree marine she knew all those years ago. Back then, his only concern in life was having fun and making sure he had someone to bang when he was home on leave. Well, that and keeping his bff away from her. Bass had never approved of the relationship that she’d shared with Miles back then. A part of her wondered how much of it had to do with him having known the Matheson brothers his whole life and how much of it was due to some sick form of jealousy.

Since Miles disappeared he’s gone out of his way to be disturbingly pleasant to her. Anything she asks for (other than her freedom) is to be hers. Books, clothing, any little luxury that can be found in this powerless world: all she has to do is ask. Once every few weeks he asks her again, in his most charming manner what she knows about the blackout. And every time she refuses him.

Tonight, she’s expecting the same old song and dance as he comes to her apartments. Instead it’s like he’s trying so hard to be the old Bass. “Have a drink with me,” he says as he sits down on the couch in her sitting room. She warily joins him. She starts to wonder what his game is when she realizes the date. June fourteenth. It’s Miles’ birthday. He isn’t here to interrogate her. He’s here because his best friend is gone and he’s alone and misses him.

Rachel sits down and accepts the drink he’s poured. Tonight he’s not in the formal uniform he never fails to don. He’s in a pair of worn jeans and a simple v-neck shirt. He even has his old dog tags on. She can see the outline of them beneath the thin cotton of his shirt. He looks every bit the part of what he used to be. Although she starts out wary, as she finishes her third drink, Rachel has loosened up. They tell stories about the good old days. Some of his and Miles’ exploits from their youth, some dating as far back as childhood.

Rachel knows he’s been a little unstable lately. Rather than remind him that those years are over, she is complacent (and to be honest it’s a welcome distraction from the tedium her life has become). As the night wears on, between that famous Monroe charm and the alcohol, she’s having a very hard time reminding herself who is sitting there.

His arm is on the back of the couch as he watches her. She’s telling some random story about Miles having come to stay with them one Christmas (one from before his family was so abruptly stolen from him). It involved a two year old Charlie, a tube of lipstick and one very inebriated Miles.

One minute he’s laughing – not the forced laugh she’s become used to. No, this is a genuine Bass laugh, reaching all the way to his eyes. She’s forgotten how handsome he is when he’s actually happy. She may have been married to Ben and in love with Miles, but hey, she’s not blind. He’s a fine looking specimen. It’s why he used to get laid so easily – good looking, fun and (despite what Miles always said) smart too.

Before she can react, he’s leaning over and pressing his mouth to hers. Maybe it’s the alcohol. Maybe it’s the fact that they’re both missing Miles so much that they feel like a piece of the each of them is missing. Whatever it is (or maybe it’s all of these things combined), she’s kissing him back. With a moan, he pulls her into his lap.

The next morning, they wake up to the pale morning light. The spell is broken, and they are both wracked with guilt. Despite Miles’ trying to kill him and his defection, they’re still brothers. And his brother has been in love with Rachel Porter Matheson since the moment he first laid eyes on
her. He’s already betrayed Miles with Emma Bennett and now he’s done it again.

Rachel cannot look at him. “What have I done?” she’ll say after he’s left while she gets dressed, noticing the marks his mouth has made along her collarbone. Miles has left her here with him, so she knows he owes him no loyalty, especially after he’d ordered his men to find Ben, his own brother. Despite this fact, she can’t shake the feeling that she’s cheated on him somehow.

Over the course of the next few years, she and Bass share an interesting relationship. He’s never tried to touch her again, however from time to time he will bring it up. Maybe it’s the simple touch of her hair, or his hand on her shoulder. Sometimes it’s a smoldering look or the tone of his voice – but he reminds her of that night without even having to say it. It is only towards the end of his reign of terror that he takes to locking her back up in the dungeon. Otherwise, he keeps her close and pampered. It’s like she’s is pretty little pet – a piece of Miles that he can keep close and toy with whenever he wants.

And one day, in the woods between Willoughby and Austin, she makes a mistake and pushes too hard. To be fair, he tells her he really doesn’t want to have an all-out with her. He’s worried about finding Miles, not fighting with her about the past. He just has to bring that night up. She has no response for him. He’s right. She was more than willing. She insinuates otherwise. This really pisses him off and rightfully so. He’s been a lot of things in his life, but he’s never taken a woman by force – he’s never needed to, for one. A kiss and a slap later and it deescalates. It’s time to find Miles, not fight over something that they can neither forget nor change.

Rachel went up the stairs to his loft, taking them two at a time. By the time she found herself pounding on is door, she was out of breath from exertion and anger. How dare he have feelings for Charlie that he had no right to have. Something had to be done about this. Bass had proven time and time again, if there was a woman he meant to have, he’d have her eventually. And what she was sensing from her daughter, Charlie wouldn’t be too resistant.

He finally opened the door. He was disheveled, having likely followed up his little tantrum with an attempt to go to bed. She knew him well enough to know that he wasn’t completely tanked, but he was still drunk. Not too unlike that night. “Rachel,” he said mildly. “What are you doing here? Isn’t it a little late for social calls?” She pushed past him and entered the loft. “No, please come in, make yourself at home.” His words were just a little slurred.

Rachel looked around the room. He’d lit a lamp before answering the door. In the dim glow, she could see the sorry state of his home. In Philly he’d been obsessed with order. His office had been almost Spartan in its cleanliness. Everything had been just so, nothing out of place. His living space now as about as far removed from Philly as one could get it. She supposed in some ways it was a sign that he was different now. Not better, but different.

Empty bottles littered his apartment; clothes that needed to be washed were kicked into a corner. His jacket and gun belt had been haphazardly tossed on the old and lumpy couch. The wall was still wet from where he’d thrown the bottle, glass everywhere on the floor. It was amazing he hadn’t cut his feet as far as it had scattered. Well, I was right about the bottle.

Rachel turned around to face him. “What the hell is wrong with you? It’s sick.”

Bass just waded through the mess and sat down on the lumpy old couch. “I’m sorry if my home offends you Rachel. The cleaning lady comes on Thursdays. Next time, wait until then before you come barging in at two in the morning.”

Rachel swept her hand towards the middle of the room. “I wasn’t referring to this – although now that you mention it, ick.” Her hand moved to gesture at the window he used to get onto the fire
escape. “I was referring to THAT!”

He merely shrugged. “What? I can’t sit outside on my fire escape?” Bass made an effort to pretend he hadn’t just been busted.

“I’ve been watching you. You do it every night. See something you didn’t like tonight?” she now gestured towards the broken glass. The reminder of having watched his backstabbing, sorry excuse for a son follow Charlie into her home and the implication that Rachel knew it bothered him only served to piss him off. He jumped to his feet. “Get out!”

Rachel laughed at him, mocking him. “You’re pathetic. Pining over my daughter? Really Bass, as if she would ever even think about you. Even if you weren’t poisonous monster, you’d still be a washed up old drunk. She has no use for you.”

He saw red. It was bad enough that she was right. It was even worse that they both knew it and she was throwing it in his face. Every single vile word out of her mouth resonated with truth. “Shut up!” he shouted.

Sensing she was winning, she pressed further. “I mean God, Bass. Look at you. You’re a mess. It’s disgusting. Spying on Charlie every night while she’s in there, banging your son. I wonder how many nights he’s been there without you even knowing it.”

Bass took a step forward. Drunk or not he could still move fast. Before Rachel realized what he was doing he’d drawn his gun. He cocked the hammer back as he raised it. “I said get the fuck out!”

She smiled cruelly. “What are you going to do? Shoot me? Arrest me?”

They both knew damn good and well he was going to do neither one. She also knew he wouldn’t hit her. Poor and pathetic Bass, trying so hard to redeem himself to Miles; even though he could never pull it off. He uncocked the gun and put the safety back on before tossing it on the couch. Instead of hurting her, he did the only thing he could think of to stop her targeted words. He kissed her.

After all, it had worked once before, hadn’t it? He’d kiss her, and she’d stomp off in a snit and he was left alone. He let her go and waited for the slap that never came. Instead, she did something he never expected. She stepped forward and kissed him back.

A while later, when he was pounding her into the mattress he may have been picturing a younger version of the woman he was fucking – with slightly darker hair and bluer eyes. The experience had been awkward – more so than that one night so many years ago. They both had to struggle to find any type of release, and when it had come, it was almost an afterthought to the experience.

Rachel looked over at him. When he’d finished emptying himself onto her belly he’d flopped down on the bed. His head was turned and he was looking towards the window. She knew what he was doing. He was looking out the window, watching as the lamp in Charlie’s room upstairs went out. Somehow this both angered and contented her at the same time. He’d just fucked her and he was still pining over her daughter. “Bass…” she began, keeping her voice level.

“How…?” he said quietly. The alcohol was wearing off and he couldn’t believe what they’d done.

Rachel opened her mouth to say something but she thought better of it. Something in the tone he used made her stop. She pulled on her clothes and silently left. As soon as the door closed he reached over and opened the window further, hoping that it would air out his loft and erase the
stench of sex that permeated his environment.

The guilt of it made him feel sick. The more he thought of it the more nauseated he became. He pulled on his boxers and climbed out the window to the fire escape, rushing down the metal stairs. He barely made it to the bottom before he started to gag, throwing up the whiskey and guilt. He was blissfully unaware of the fact that Rachel had turned at the sound of him scrambling down to the pavement and now watched him with a mixture of her own guilt and smug satisfaction at the way the evening had affected him.

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Miles sat at the bar watching Bass. His friend had seemed to have been slowly pulling himself out of the downward spiral he’d been experiencing for a few weeks, but the slow climb back up had abruptly ended and he was just as bad off as he ever was. He was brooding into his drink, not even aware that his best friend was in the bar, let alone watching his every move. “What’s eating him?” Charlie asked as she set a drink down in front of her uncle.

Miles picked it up. “I have no idea,” he said into his glass as he took a drink. It was barely nine. Bass had only been off of work for a few hours, but he already looked like he was having a rough night. Miles took his drink over and sat down at his table. “What’s up dick?”

Bass looked up, blinking a few more times than necessary. “Oh, hey Miles.”

The fact that he’d not had the courtesy to insult him back (something that he never failed to do, even when they’d been trying to kill each other) had Miles worried. With an annoyed roll of his eyes, Miles downed his glass. “Alright buddy, let’s get you home.”

“No, no I’m good.”

Miles grabbed him under his arm and started to pull him up, noticing that Bass was a little less than steady on his feet. “Up you go.” He slung Bass’ arm over his shoulder and eventually got him out of the bar, shooting Charlie an apologetic look as they left. “I thought you were past all this, Bass.” Miles let out a grunt. He’d forgotten how heavy he was. Twenty minutes later, Bass was sleeping it off and Miles was headed home.

Over the next few weeks, Rachel started picking fights with Miles over Bass’ presence in Willoughby. Frank Blanchard had, after all put Miles in charge of the town. He could get Bass to leave. She was desperate to find a way to isolate him from Charlie as well as put some distance between herself and the object of her guilt. His job made it hard for her to avoid him completely, as did her own temper.

When word started to spread that the local sheriff was more interested in getting toasted than getting laid it only served to make her try harder. She knew damn good and well why he’d stopped catting around town a while ago. The fact that it was now the subject of small town gossip made her more anxious. “He’s supposed to be our sheriff, Miles. All he does is sit around and get shit faced. It makes the whole town look bad,” she argued one night after dinner.

Sensing the tension between them, Gene had already made himself scarce. Miles was indeed getting tired of the same old argument. “He does his job, Rachel. And if he’s here at least I can keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t do something stupid, like head back east and try to get the Republic back.”

As he watched her pace, he was starting to wonder if they’d ever be able to make things work. He’d been on the verge of asking her to give up the pretense and move in, but now he wasn’t so
sure. Several weeks prior something inside her snapped. She’d suddenly gotten bitter and had renewed old verbal attacks on Bass that had slowly ceased (or at least become less frequent).

Miles found it harder to agree with Rachel after he’d found out about what had happened at the reservoir. He’d confronted the little brat with what Bass had told him, and much to his surprise, he’d confirmed it as true. Connor explained that one of the reasons he’d come back was to try and mend that fence, but his father hadn’t exactly been forgiving – not that Miles could blame him, nor did he exactly trust the kid now either. And it rankled him more the second time around when he’d found out that Connor and Charlie were fooling around again.

“How can you trust him?” Rachel yelled, snapping Miles out of his thoughts.

Miles pushed away from the Porter’s kitchen table and stood up. “How can you keep attacking him? You’ll never forgive him, we all get it. But for Christ sake, just let it go! He’s here, he’s staying. If he doesn’t, his pardon is void. The Rangers will track him down wherever he tries to go. That’s not how you thank someone for helping save a country.” He changed his mind on trying to get her to come over for the night. “Look, I’m tired. I’ll see you later.”

The fact that Miles had refused to choose her over Bass pissed Rachel off beyond measure. He’d told her last year that he was choosing her, and for a while it seemed he was. He’d even betrayed Bass with the mustard gas and she’d felt like she finally had won. But now things were different. Miles refused to see past that one moment of decency his former co-general had shown. He refused to see how destructive and poisonous he was.

After cleaning up the kitchen, Rachel left the house. She didn’t have a particular destination in mind. She was pissed and wanted to blow off some steam. She was standing in front of his building before she even realized her intent. She climbed the stairs and knocked. There was no answer so she tried the door. Finding it unlocked, she went inside.

The loft was dark, but he was there just climbing in the window. The stricken look on his face told her that Charlie was definitely not alone. He saw her when his eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight in the room. “Go away, Rachel.” He sounded weary, and as usual drunk.

She didn’t say a word. She just wound up and slapped him hard across the face. When she pulled back to strike him again, he caught her wrist. Before either one of them could think about it, their lips met. He couldn’t look at her this time so he bent her over the dresser and went to work. Even when he’d been sleeping around town, he’d still been a generous lover. But this wasn’t about sex.

He knew he was here because she was mad at Miles and wanted to attack him in some way. He was complacent because she wasn’t the one he couldn’t have and he was just low enough to allow this new form of self-destruction. It was revenge sex at best, nothing more. He wasn’t even sure if her orgasm was faked or not, nor did he really care. He was about to give up on his own when it finally snuck up on him. He pulled out and spread the evidence of this shame on the small of her back. “I hate you,” he told her as he backed away and pulled up his pants.

As an afterthought he tossed his shirt at her. “Clean yourself off and get out of my home.” He turned away and looked out the window.

Rachel pulled her clothes on. For some reason his dismissal riled her more than it should have. “Look at you, staring at the window, hoping for a glimpse of the daughter right after you fucked the daughter.”

He turned on her. “Get the fuck out of here. I didn’t come looking for you. I don’t want anything to do with you. You’re a sick, vindictive bitch. I know you don’t care what this is doing to me, but do
you even care about what Miles would think about it? What it would do to him?"

She sneered at him. “You sure didn’t think about that the night you came to me in Philly.”

He’d heard enough. “Get out!” he bellowed again. “I swear to god if you ever come near me again I WILL FUCKING SHOOT YOU!”

In that moment, Rachel knew he was serious. She fled out the door and down the stairs as fast as she could. She turned the corner and found herself face to face with Charlie. “Mom? What are you doing out here this late?” She’d gone back into the bar to get the bag of diamonds she’d forgotten to lock up. She’d been about to head back inside when she heard Bass yelling, threatening to shoot someone.

“Charlie, what are you doing up so late?” She tried to play it off as innocent. In her own shame, she’d started to cry on her way down the stairs. She wiped her cheeks, just knowing she’d been caught.

“Are you okay?”

Rachel started crying harder. In some ways, she was disappointed that Charlie didn’t get it. “Miles and I had a fight, that’s all. I went on a walk to clear my head. I’m headed home now.”

“Were you in Bass’ apartment?” Charlie had a sinking feeling she was missing something.

“It was stupid. I was mad and I needed someone to scream at. I shouldn’t have.” She turned around and headed home before Charlie could question her further.

Convinced that Bass had been the one to blame, Charlie was livid. She decided to give him a piece of her mind. He’d been skulking around getting wasted again every night for weeks. By the time she reached the top stair, she was ready to murder him. She knew he and her mom would never see eye to eye, but if he said something so horrible to make the unflappable Rachel cry and then threatened to kill her, then he would feel her fury.

She barged in, not even bothering to knock. He was nowhere to be seen. Confused (and a little embarrassed for intruding), she turned to leave. The sounds coming from his makeshift bathroom stopped her. She crept around the corner to see him bent over the basin, retching. He must not have even heard her come in. He was leaning over the small counter that held the basin, his scarred back to her.

He stood up and grabbed the ewer, using the tepid water to rinse his mouth. Spent, he went to pick up the basin when he sensed her presence. “What are you doing here?”

Charlie furrowed her brow in confusion. He didn’t sound that drunk. She’d certainly seen him way worse without being sick. Something had happened. “Are you alright?” She backed up into the rest of the loft, sitting down on his couch to give him some space.

“Never better. Please go.” Bass picked up the basin. He disappeared for a few minutes to dispose of its contents. The look on his face when he returned to find her still there betrayed how little he wanted to see her right now. He picked up a bottle off from his dresser turned table as he eyed her suspiciously. Does she know? As he opened the cheap whiskey he wondered if there was enough booze in Willoughby to keep him sane.

“So you and mom get into a screaming match? I saw her outside.” She wasn’t going to beat around the bush.
He sat down on the bed and took a drink to get the bad taste out of his mouth. “It was nothing. A difference of opinion.”

The anger flashed in her eyes at his nonchalance. “What did you say to her?”

“Will you simmer down? Just in case you didn’t notice, you’re at my place—not hers. She came here. Anything I said she had coming. I didn’t exactly invite her.” He was tired and didn’t have the energy to do this. Plus, he had to pack. That thought in mind, he stood and started rummaging around.

Charlie watched him get some clothes together. “What are you doing?”

He dug around in his dresser until he found an empty pack. “I’m leaving in the morning.”

“What? What about your pardon?” His words shocked her and left a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Bass started shoving clothes and other supplies into the backpack. “I’ll take my chances. Listen, it’s been a long day and an even longer night. I think you need to leave.” His eyes were downcast as he spoke. Not knowing what else to do, Charlie stumbled out the door and went home. When she got inside, she told Connor she needed some time alone.

The next morning, Bass rode out of Willoughby as soon as the gates opened for the day, giving an excuse to the man on watch that he needed to check on something and would be back no later than the next morning. He’d already left a note with his badge and keys for Miles at his office. He made it clear that he was not going east, not that he thought it would do any good. He was still going to be a wanted man again by the time the sun went down.

“I don’t want you to go,” she says quietly from behind him.

He turns from the horse he’s about to saddle in the small community stable in the center of town. For the first time since he’s known her, her eyes betray that just maybe she reciprocates his feelings towards her. But, too much has happened since then. It’s quite simply put too late. “We can’t always have what we want in life, Charlie.” His voice is bitter when he speaks; his eyes downcast. He won’t look at her.

Something about that pisses her off. “You know what your problem is?”

He turns back to the horse, heaving the saddle over its back. “No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me anyway, whether I want to hear it or not.”

“You don’t ever try to get what you want,” she says, baiting him.

Bass turns around. He lets out a laugh at that. “Really, most people would tell you otherwise. That I’m a sociopath that will do and say whatever it takes to get what I want.” He’s deliberately throwing the words she once said to him almost two years ago right in her face.

Charlie takes a careful step forward. “Well, most people don’t know you all that well yet.” She’s caught his drift. She didn’t know the man without power back then, but now she can see past what he was and is acutely aware of who he is. “No, you always go for the things you’re expected to want; the things you think it’s safe to want.” She is standing defiantly close to him, challenging him to do something about it. “But when it comes down to really wanting something, you’re just too damn scared to even ask for it.”

“Watch it,” he warns. “Don’t play games with me, Charlie.” She’s close enough for him to touch,
to grab. He has to ball up his fists to stop himself from giving in to that impulse.

She can see the eternal battle he’s fighting, so she pushes him further. “Who’s playing games? What do you want, Bass?” She is closer now, just barely pressing up against him.

Bass grabs her arms and shakes her just a little; not violently, but enough to get her attention. “Stop. Just… stop.” His voice is strangled.

Charlie takes her chances and stands up on her toes. She presses her mouth to his before he can react and push her away. The contact shocks him to the core. For just a moment in time he lets himself forget who they both are and why he’s leaving in the first place.

His arms come around her and he kisses her back, pouring months of loneliness, depression and longing into that kiss. He’ll be gone in an hour, never to return. Living in that illusion for just a second isn’t going to change anything, but he can’t resist. Time stands still as he holds her, but then a soft moan erupts from her throat and he comes back down to reality.

He pulls away from her, eyes wide and a little shell shocked. They stare at each other for just a minute, chests heaving. “Look me in the eyes and tell me you didn’t fell that,” she pants.

“I didn’t.” He’s looking away, unable to face her.

Charlie goes into a rage at his rejection. She knows better, she knows he’s lying. “You’re a liar and a coward!” she lashes out.

He sighs in regret as he goes back to the horse. “Don’t do this to me, Charlie. There can’t be anything there. Not now.”

She moves to put herself in between him and the horse once more. “And why not? Because you’re that afraid of having something?”

It’s his turn to be angry now. What she’s doing isn’t fair. She’s using his own emotions as a Hail Mary play, and it hurts. “Because. You’re. Fucking. My. Son.” He bites the words out as he tries to reach around her to tighten the cinches around the horse.

“Yeah, well you’re fucking Mary Parker. Nobody’s perfect,” Charlie counters.

He stops trying to get past her and stands there, stunned. “What are you talking about? That was months ago.”

Charlie flushes red, suddenly feeling like she’s made a huge mistake. “The two of you – in the bar.”

“She offered, I declined; and then I went home – alone.” He feels sick. Is that why she chose that night of all nights to start fooling around with Connor again – Because she was jealous?

“I’m.. I thought- I’m sorry.” Charlie didn’t know what to say.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Charlie shakes her head. “Of course it matters. Don’t you see? It was all a mistake.” She tries to get him to listen to her argument.

Bass finishes with the saddle despite her interference. He stands back and looks at her, defeated. The hole he always carries within him is deeper than it has ever been. He feels like it’s about to
take him over. “Charlie, I fucked your mom.”

She backs away, looking like she’s just been slapped. Instantly he regrets what he’s told her. Not because she’ll tell Miles, but because he can see how he’s hurt her. She tries to run out of the stable. “Charlie, wait.”

Bass runs after her and she doesn’t make it far. He’s got her by the waist and won’t let go despite the fact she’s fighting with all of her might. “How could you? What about Miles?” The more she struggles the tighter he holds her.

“That’s why I’m leaving,” he admits. She stills in his arms and he lets her go.

“Why?” She knows Bass and her mom hate each other. It doesn’t make any sense.

“You’ve gotta believe me Charlie, it’s not what I wanted to happen. She came to me. She’s punishing Miles for my being here and trying to keep me away from you.” He explains.

“She wouldn’t…” but she stops. Her mother has been acting strange of late and she has the weirdest ways of dealing with her problems. “Why did you do it?”

“Because she’s not you!” he doesn’t even realize he’s shouting until the words are out. “Because every night I sit on my fire escape and watch you bring my son home to take to bed.”

“You’ve been spying on me?” she accuses.

He shakes his head, and busies himself with his bedroll. “I’m not spying. After that jerk ended up in your bedroom, I used to close up with you every night and walk you home, remember? But things got weird that one night, so I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Charlie brushes his hands away from the bedroll he’s attempting to roll up. His hands are shaking and he’s just making a mess of it. Needing a distraction, she finishes it for him. “Why did you disappear?”

They lock eyes. “To keep my hands off of you. I knew I didn’t have a right there, so instead of walking you home I just kept watch to make sure you got in okay.”

Charlie finally understands. Right around the time she’d started dating that farm boy, he started to go off the deep end – drinking binges, the gambling and sleeping with every woman he could. “Everything you did…”

“Was to stay away from you,” he finishes. “But I always made it home in time to watch you lock up – to keep you safe.”

The outrage she was feeling just moments ago has subsided substantially. “How long has this been going on with my mom?”

“IT only happened twice. She saw me watching you and barged in to bitch about it. She said a few things that I didn’t want to hear and I was drunk. It was either kiss or her kill her and one thing led to another.” The thought of it all still makes him want to gag. What they’ve done is filthy and wrong on so many levels. And in some ways, he knows she’s taking revenge on him for Philly. “Last night was the other time.”

Charlie sees the disgust and guilt written on his face. It reminds her of the condition she’d found him in. She wants to respond, but there’s nothing left to say. He moves past her and grabs his backpack before taking the horse’s reins. “Miles doesn’t need to know. It’ll only destroy everything
he has with your mom. Once I’m gone, she’ll have gotten what she wanted and she’ll settle back down.”

She follows him out of the stable. “So you get to disappear for a while and Miles is none the wiser?”

Bass mounts the horse and looks down at her one last time, feeling what’s left of his damaged heart breaking. “We both know I’m not coming back. The second Miles finds out I’m gone, I’m back on Texas’ most wanted list. That’s happening whether he knows what I did or not. I’m sorry Charlie –for everything. For your dad, Danny; for the fact that your childhood sucked – for all of this mess.”

Before she can respond, he rides away towards the gate without out so much as one backward glance.

Chapter End Notes

After the lynch mob dies down, I'll crawl out from under the rock I'm hiding under and will post the next chapter (It's written in parts, but needs to come off the notepad on my phone - my favorite rough draft medium) and typed up and edited still. The "Bachel" is not a deal breaker between our two star-crossed lovers, I assure you. In a way it's a catalyst...
Bass guided his horse towards the small town cautiously. He was far enough away from Texas that he shouldn’t have been worried, but he always had that little voice in his head reminding him that this luck never held out. He’d barely made it into the plains before word must have gotten back to Blanchard about his having abandoned Willoughby.

It was obvious that the man was not only angry he’d broken he terms of his pardon but also still feared he’d go back east and cause trouble. He’d had a few close calls as he worked his way north, but the Rangers must have given up because they’d seemed to have stopped pursuing him by the time he’d entered the wastelands.

He saw a battered sign up ahead:

Welcome to Arco!

The First City Powered By the Atom!

Pop. 942

“Well doesn’t that make them special?” he mumbled aloud as he went through the city gates. He doubted the population was even half what the sign suggested now, by the looks of things. The center of town had a few market stalls, most of which appeared to be closing up for the day. The people he saw looked tired, as if their everyday existence used them up. He dismounted and walked his horse to what looked like the local inn and tied it to the hitching post outside.

After over six weeks on the road, he was exhausted and would give anything to stop. He was still a few weeks away from Canada, his ultimate destination. He was far enough removed that he knew it was unlikely he’d be recognized or that anyone would even care about his presence here if they found him out, but somehow Canada seemed safer.

He went into the building, hoping there was a room available. He was tired of sleeping out in the open. The main entrance to the inn opened up into a common area with several tables and (thank God) a bar. He took a look around as the door closed behind him. Instincts kicking in, Bass measured up the twenty or so people that were in the establishment. There were a few that looked like they could hold their own if there was trouble.

A large black man in the corner had an ill-concealed Patriot rifle, likely having stolen it during the war before coming to this miserable country. A younger guy with greasy blond hair was watching his surroundings like a man that was used to having to watch his own back. There were also a couple of men that were obviously members of one warclan or another. They sat in the back by the
pool table.

He almost laughed the way the occupants of the bar were measuring him up at the same time he was them. After noting where the exits were, Bass ambled up to the bar. The bartender came over, shooting him a wary look. This town was apparently suspicious of strangers. “Help you?”

The bartender had balding red hair and a full beard streaked with white. He had at least four or five inches on Bass’ six feet and must have outweighed him by at least fifty pounds of muscle. He might be at decade or so older, but the man didn’t look like he was a pushover. He added him to his mental list of people to keep an eye on.

“What’ll get the job done,” he said. He kept his eyes downcast in an attempt to appear non-threatening. The last thing he wanted after being on the road this long was to get in a bar fight.

The man just stood there. Bass sighed in annoyance as he lifted his gaze to meet the man’s stony expression. “Payment first.”

Bass dug into his pocket and pulled out a diamond. The bartender pulled a jeweler’s glass out and examined it. Deciding that it was good, he pulled out a bottle and a halfway clean looking glass from under the bar. He left the bottle. “Don’t got change,” he said as he walked away.

He used the tail of his shirt to wipe out the inside of the glass before he filed it. Taking a drink he realized he needn’t have bothered. The vile liquor he’d bought would have killed anything festering in the glass. It burned as it went down, but after a few weeks with nothing, he welcomed it.

He knew the bartender was watching him as he sat there. After a while he motioned for the man to come back to him. “So you just run the bar, or do you own the joint?” he asked quietly.

Still not trusting Bass, the man kept his answer a bit vague. “Depends on what you’re looking for.”

“No trouble. Just a room and a few hot meals,” Bass told him.

“How long?”

Bas thought about this. For some reason, this town made him uneasy but he needed time to recharge. “Two, maybe three days, and then I’m pressing on.”

The bartender considered him for a few minutes. “I might have something available. You gotta name?”

“King. Jimmy King.” The name rolled easily off his tongue. He knew using it was a risk, but with New Vegas destroyed the chances of anyone from there being in Idaho was slim. They dickered over the price for a bit, just because custom dictated that they should. When they finally agreed, Bass paid the man and was given the key to his room and a bowl of stew and bread. The meal wasn’t exactly five-star fare, but it at least kept the swill he was drinking from tearing a hole in his stomach.

After eating and taking time to wash up in the galvanized tub out back, he found his bed. He lay there, not yet able to quiet his mind enough to fall asleep. Images of what had led him north swirled around his mind. That was the drawback of not sleeping in the wilderness. Out there he’d been more concerned with not getting killed in his sleep to think. But in the quiet of his room, that’s all he could do.

He tried to tell himself that it was pointless. Thinking about what he’d left behind wouldn’t do him any good. If Charlie hadn’t hated him before, well she probably did now. He had no doubt in his
mind that Miles knew about what he’d done. Even if going back became an option someday, it was unlikely that any of them would ever want to see him. He even thought about Connor. He would never have been able to trust him again, but he’d seemed to have wanted them to have dealt with that day at the reservoir. Now, he’d never know what could have been.

No, none of it mattered. Miles would forgive Rachel because she was his own special drug and would figure that it was just Bass being Bass – unable to keep his dick in his pants and always wanting what Miles had – another Emma. It was just another reason why their brotherhood should have been severed long before the lights went out; just another reason why the world would have been a better place had Miles left him to his jack and his dad’s Ruger and let him be with his family that night.

He was finally starting to doze when he heard a sound at his door; a soft scraping, indicative of someone trying to work the lock. Instinct had him jumping out of bed and reaching for a weapon. He pulled the blanket up over the pillow, concealing the fact (he hoped) that it had just been used. The scraping continued on, suggesting that his would be intruder was either an amateur burglar or just not a very good one.

With an incredulous sigh, he took the time to pull on his pants and buckle his sword belt. He drew his gun once more and waited – and waited. I could have slept a while longer. Eventually the lock clicked open. He waited in the shadows as the door slowly opened. When the figure of a man appeared in the room, he moved quickly, grabbing him from behind while jamming the barrel of the gun in the intruder’s temple. “Who are you? Who sent you?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

“Monroe?” The voice was eerily familiar. It took him a second to place it.

“Staypuffed?” With a chuckle, Bass released him. Within seconds, Priscilla came spilling into the room, ready to defend her chubby companion. He easily batted the knife out of her hand before yanking her all the way into the room and shutting the door.

He lit the small oil lamp in his room, a luxury that had cost him quite more than it was worth. Aaron got a strange look on his face. He picked up the lamp and held it to Bass’ face, causing him to flinch as the light and heat got too close. “He’s good,” Aaron said as he turned to Priscilla. “Pupils contract in the light.”

Bass held a hand up and nudged the lamp away from his face before Staypuffed burned him or blinded him. “No, that’s not weird. Um, what are you doing?”

Aaron set the lamp back down. “We heard that the new boarder went by the name Jimmy King. That’s the name you used in New Vegas, right? Lucas said you looked like you’d seen some action so we wanted to see if you were you – which you are, obviously.” He sat down on the edge of Bass’ bed, there being no other seat in the room. Before the owner of said bed could protest its new occupant, Aaron twisted his body to face him. “Jeez, did you have to do the bit with the gun?”

Bass stood there, still a little stunned. “Well, I wouldn’t have had to if you’d just bothered knocking. And you are horrible at picking locks, by the way. Seriously, I had time to get dressed.” Unreasonably irritated that Aaron was sitting on the bed, he suddenly reached out with one hand and shoved him off onto the floor. “Sitting on a man’s bed after you just broke into his room is rude, man. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

Priscilla’s mouth formed a thin line. “That was uncalled for,” she snapped as she went to help Aaron up.

Bass only shrugged. He knew he was a dick, Aaron knew he was a dick. Why would anyone be
surprised? “So why did you break in? For that matter, why would you care if I am me, which I obviously am, as you so weirdly put it?”

“Because we didn’t think you’d be you,” Aaron explained.

“Then why did you bother in the first place if you thought I’d be someone else?” Bass was almost shouting – okay, he was shouting.

Priscilla took a step forward. “No, we were sure you’d be you, just not… you.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” He went to the door and yanked it open. “Okay, I’ve had enough,” he said as he dragged a hand over his weary face. “It’s late, the two of you are weird and I’m getting aggravated.”

Aaron finally picked himself up off the floor. “Just give us a chance to explain.” He was using his most placating voice. Thinking for a second, he pulled his flask out. “I have refreshments.”

Bass closed the door, snatching the flask from Aaron’s hand before flopping back down on the bed. He sat there with his legs extended and crossed at the ankles casually, as if this was an everyday occurrence. “You have five minutes.” He took a drink, relishing the fact that it was actual whiskey. “Starting now.”

“There’s a town about thirty miles west of here. There’s been a lot of weird things going on there. People have told stories about seeing lights there,” Aaron began cautiously.

“Wait, they have electricity?” Bass took another drink as he thought about that. “Then what the hell are you doing here?”

Priscilla crossed the room to look out the grimy window. He noticed that she looked nervous, like she was afraid of being watched. “Because if the rumors are true, it’s that last place anyone wants to be.”

“Really? Well if they have power, that’s exactly where I want to be. Maybe I could finally get a hot shower. I miss showers- more than I ever thought possible.” Aaron just rolled his eyes at him. “What?” he asked innocently.

“Could you at least pretend to take this seriously?” Aaron asked. He stopped talking and locked eyes with Priscilla for a second. With a shrug, he turned back to Bass. “How much do you know about the cause of the blackout?”

“Absolutely nothing, other than Rachel and Ben somehow caused it.”

Aaron and Priscilla spent the next several hours explaining everything they knew about the nano, including what had happened to Priscilla and what she’d seen. “And the optical exam?” he asked when they were finished.

“We’ve come across a few people that have escaped or been released from that town. They aren’t the nano – at least not like Priscilla was. But, there’s something wrong with them, like the nano did something. Their eyes are always dilated.” Aaron was sitting on the floor again, leaning up against the door. “We had to make sure you weren’t one of them; that they hadn’t taken you over.”

“Why would you think I was?” Bass was confused. He still wasn’t sure that Staypuffed and Creepy Girl weren’t just nuts, but some explanation for the blackout – however crazy was better than none at all.
“Because you’re supposed to be in Texas.” Priscilla said. She was looking at him now, her dark almond eyes boring into his blue ones.

“Yeah, well it didn’t work out. I’m just passing through, actually. I’m headed to Canada.” He tossed Aaron his flask back.

The other man frowned when he went to take a drink and found it empty. “That’s just it; you’re not the first person to come here from Willoughby.”

Bass sat up, interested. “Who else have you seen?”

“Ed Truman and Tom Neville. They headed towards Bradbury just a few days after we got here.”

Suddenly, Bass’ demeanor changed. He grew cold, reminiscent of the general from long ago. “Take me there.”

Bass was laying on the rise above the town of Bradbury. It had taken them two days to get here from Arco. They’d given the town a wide berth as they’d gone around to get to the rocks overlooking the settlement. Aaron and Priscilla insisted that this was as close as he should get. The nano were distracted, but if he got closer he’d be on their radar. Considering he’d watch them burn people alive, he was more than happy to be cautious.

They walk three hours from where they’d set up camp to get into position. Aaron and Priscilla have insisted on it. As they show him where he could best see the town, it hits him. “Rumor has it my ass, you’ve been here before.”

Aaron reluctantly acknowledges this to be true. “We come by time to time to keep an eye on them, but we can’t get close enough to see what’s really going on. The nano are distracted. The more people and things it tries to control, the harder it is for them to focus.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said these things were everywhere.” Bass is beginning to regret not shoving them out of his room two nights ago. “

Priscilla hands him a pair of binoculars so he could see what they were talking about. “The physical nanites are everywhere, yes. But the NANO is kind of like a collective consciousness that ended up in the code somehow. It can manipulate things on a molecular level at will and it can think faster and process more than a human mind, but it’s not omniscient – it doesn’t know everything.”

“I know what omniscient means,” he says under his breath. “I’m not Miles, I can and do read.” He lies down on the ledge and focuses the binoculars. It’s dark, but it’s not hard to find his target. The damn town is lit up like a Christmas tree. “How do they have power?” he asks.

Aaron slides into place next to him, keeping low out of fear of somehow being discovered. “The nanites’ original programming was to absorb energy. When I tried to bring them back online after Randall Flynn launched the nukes I accidently did something to the code and it programmed them to form a collective AI. The nanites can suppress their ability to absorb power at will. Technically speaking they are keeping the power off everywhere else intentionally – and I have a feeling that they need it somehow to reproduce themselves.”

“So they literally eat electricity… That’s scary.”

They’d been watching them for over a week. Aaron and Priscilla wanted to know what they were
planning, whereas Bass just wanted a glimpse of Truman and Neville to confirm their presence here. From what he could see all they were doing was walking randomly in and out of the buildings. “I don’t get it. There’s no pattern to their movements. From the looks of things, they’re not actually doing anything.” He’d turned back to face Aaron who was sitting in the shade under an outcropping of rocks.

“Oh, they’re doing something. We just need to find out what,” Aaron said as he cleaned the dirt off of his glasses with his shirt.

Bass turned back and watched the town for a while longer. He hadn’t seen either of his targets yet and was about to give up on it. He was just about to lower the binoculars when he saw someone he did recognize. “Wait a minute… that’s Jack Davis. What the hell?”

Davis was walking across the center of town. Bass watched as he disappeared inside a building – a movie theatre by the looks of it. The neon lights on the sign attached to the front of the building were lit up.

“The U.S. President is here?” Priscilla asked from where she sat next to Aaron.

Bass turned back again. “Fake president. I didn’t vote for him.”

Aaron put his glasses back on and dug for his flask. He wasn’t going to let their companion get anywhere near it while they were out here in the wilderness. “Well technically you’re guilty of treason, so you wouldn’t have been allowed to vote anyway.

“Suck it, fatboy,” Bass said under his breath as he turned back around to resume his spying. His surveillance reminded him of when he and Miles were doing the same thing outside of the Patriot training camp when he’d returned from New Vegas. He shifted uncomfortably. Now he knew what Miles had meant when he was whining about rocks in his junk. The memory of the two of them sent shard of regret through him. He pushed it away. That bridge was officially burned.

“Hang on,” Bass said. Just outside of town he saw a figure dodging in and out of the scrub, trying to get close without being seen. “It looks like someone is trying to sneak in.”

“It’s probably one of them coming back. Then nano sends them out from time to time. We saw it yesterday,” Aaron reasoned. They’d been coming here for the past week. Every day they saw more come. It was unclear what they were doing, but as the number of people inside Bradbury increased, they became more uneasy about it. Two days ago, they’d seen a few of the nano’s people leave only to return the following afternoon.

Bass motioned for Aaron to take a look. “No way. If he was one of them, he wouldn’t be trying to hide.” When Aaron had joined him, Bass handed over the binoculars and pointed him in the right direction.

“Huh, You’re right. Can’t get a good look at him though. Whoever it is, they’re just going to get themselves killed – or worse.”

Bass snatched them back and took another look. “Wait a second… It’s a kid.” He watched him for a few more minutes, his mind already racing, calculating. Without another word, he scrambled backwards away from the ledge towards where Priscilla sat. “Ow,” he said under his breath as a rock dug into a particularly sensitive portion of his anatomy.

“You alright?” Aaron said as he squinted his eyes at the brush in between them and the town.

“I wasn’t using it anyway,” he grunted as he stood up the second he’d was far enough away. He
picked up his pack and grabbed a few spare clips before checking his weapon. A few minutes later he rejoined Aaron on the ledge and watched the kid for a few more minutes. Abruptly he slapped the binoculars in Aaron’s hand.

“Um, where are you going?” Aaron asked as Bass scooted sideways on the ledge to where the drop between the ledge they were on and the ground below wasn’t quite as far.

I’m gonna go get the kid,” he said innocently. Before Aaron could protest Bass braced himself and shoved himself over the ledge. He landed hard but on his feet. “I’m getting too old for this shit,” he grumbled.

Aaron leaned over and looked at him. “Are you crazy?”

Bass was crouched down to avoid being seen. He stopped and looked up. “Uh, yeah?” He said with a shrug. “Would I be out here spying on the nano-zombies with you if I wasn’t? We can’t just leave him here.”

“No, I get that. I mean why didn’t you just go around stupid?” Aaron clarified.

Bass just stared at him. Aaron’s face was beet red and he looked like he was about to have a panic attack. “It was faster.” With no further explanation, he got moving, keeping low along the brush and slowly making his way towards the town.

Aaron lifted his vision skyward. “Yeah, cause that’s why we throw ourselves off of small cliffs, folks – it’s faster.” With a sigh, he watched Sebastian Monroe work his way across the overgrown grass and brush to save a kid he didn’t know from the nanotech.

As he got closer, Aaron started getting nervous. If the nano caught him he’d either be fried or turned. There was one man from Arco that had joined the strange commune just a month ago. He’d been acting strange before then. His wife had died of influenza and he’d walked blindly all over town talking to her. Then one day he was gone. Priscilla had noticed him in the town when they’d come to spy a week later.

When they’d seen the president was there, it occurred to Aaron that there was a pattern. The man from town, David, Neville – even Truman all had something in common. They had nothing left to lose. And that profile fit Sebastian Monroe to a t.

Aaron watched as he finally caught up with the kid. The child had startled and looked like he was taking a defensive stance. They appeared to talk for a few minutes before the kid stepped closer to Bass. The former general put a hand on his shoulder and nudged the kid away from the town. They kept low and slowly made their way towards the rise above town. They disappeared from view as they went around. Aaron scooted back from the ledge. They’d made it away. It would take a few minutes to go up the slow leading to the rocks, but it meant he wouldn’t have to help get the kid and Bass back up.

“Alright, pack it up. We better get back to camp, Bass said from behind him.

*Bass creeps up on the kid. He doesn’t want to scare him and risk him bolting. That could result in drawing too much attention to themselves and could get them both captured or killed. “Hey, kid!” he says in an loud whisper when he’s close enough.*

*Just as he’d predicted, the kid recoiled from him. Bass holds up his hands. “I’m not gonna hurt you, okay? I just want to talk to you for a second.”*

*He notices how thin the kid is. It’s probably been a while since someone has taken care of him. The*
child watches him warily. “Where’s your folks?” The boy responds by pointing to the town. “Are you from here?” A shake of the head. “Listen, it’s not safe here. You can’t go in the town, okay?”

The kid shakes his head again. “I’ve been in town before. They made me leave.”

The fact that he’s been inside surprises Bass. He’d like to question him in more detail, but he doesn’t like being this close. “Who made you leave?”

“The fireflies.” As he says it, his eyes well up a little.

Bass is ill equipped to deal with a child’s tears. He clenches his jaw and looks away for a second. “Listen to me. I’ve got a few friends waiting for me on top of that rise.” He points towards where the Pittmans are hiding. “They aren’t like the people in town. I bet you’re hungry.” The look in the kid’s eyes verified that as truth. “Come with me and we’ll get you something to eat. It’s not safe here.”

The boy thinks about this, but shakes his head. “My mom is in town. She told me to never leave her side.”

Bass feels for the kid. He must have followed her all the way here. “The people in that town are sick.

The kid responds by crying in earnest. “I can’t leave my mom. I don’t have anyone else,” he snivels.

“Listen, my friends and I have been watching the town. I don’t know if the people in there can be fixed, but my friends and I are going to try. Come with me and I promise that if I can I’ll get her out, okay? But we have to leave now. Bad things will happen if they find us here.” Every instinct is telling Bass to get out of there now. They’re too exposed this close.

The kid stands in indecision. Bas knows that he doesn’t have anywhere else to go. Eventually, he comes over to him. Bass places a hand on his shoulder in some type of support and then points him in the right direction, nudging him gently along. “Keep low, we’re going to cross the field and then climb up to the rocks, over there.”

The walk from the rise to where their wagon is hidden takes about three hours. They’d been afraid to bring it any closer. After about an hour of walking it becomes obvious that the kid was dead on his feet, so Bass picked him up and started carrying him. He was no expert on children, but the kid seemed a little light for his size.

Aaron and Priscilla had a lot of questions, but Bass told them to hold it until they were a safe distance away and had made camp for the night. He was still uneasy and wanted to put more distance between them and the camp before anyone had a chance to speak.

Later they had a fire going. The kid sat a ways from them, huddled under a spare blanket. Bass approached him with a plate of food and some water. “When’s the last time you had something to eat?” he asked as he settled down next to him with his own meal.

The kid looked at the food for a second before he started to dig in. “Day before yesterday. Then the fireflies chased me. One of the men in tan said I wasn’t chosen and I had to leave.”

Bass watched as the boy shoveled food into his mouth like it was the last meal he’d ever see. “Slow down. You’ll make yourself puke,” he warned. The kid looked up at him and obeyed, slightly. “What’s your name kid?”
“Jeremy,” he replied as he took the last bite of his food and started to wash it down with the water. “What’s yours?”

The name made Bass recall an unhappy memory – a guiltless friend condemned and killed in a fit of paranoia. He pushed the image back into the darkness from which it came. He watched the kid for a second, trying to decide what name to give him. It’d be easier to tell him his alias, but he second guessed it. If they were going to get him to talk, the kid needed to trust him. “My name is Bass, and is Aaron and Priscilla. They’re friends, sort of.”

Jeremy gave him a weird look. “Bass? Like the fish?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess.”

“That’s a dumb name,” he scoffed.

“Hey!” Bass wasn’t really insulted, but the kid took him by surprise. Jeremy suddenly tensed up like he was afraid he’d punish him or ditch him or something. He ruffled his hair and laughed again. Jeremy visibly relaxed a little. “It’s short for Sebastian. But when we get to Arco, you can’t call me that. Call me Jimmy alright?”

“Okay,” he said quietly.

“So where are you from, Jeremy? How did you get here?” Bass asked after a few minutes of silence.

The boy’s eyes filled again. “I came with my mom. We’re from Salem. Mom started talking to Grandma when she thought I wasn’t listening. Grandma told her to come.”

Priscilla went over to him and tried to comfort him, but the child cringed and inched closer to Bass. He shrugged at her confused look. He patted the kid on the shoulder, not knowing what to do. “It’s okay. You’re safe. No one’s going to hurt you, okay?” He was helpless. He had no idea what he was doing. “How old are you?”

“Nine,” he said, his breath hitching as he fought back tears. “I think I’ve been bad.”

“Jeremy, honey, why do you think that?” Priscilla asked. She kept her voice gentle.

“Because my mom stopped loving me. She used to give me hugs and tell me stories at bedtime and stuff, but when we left Salem she stopped. She was going to leave me there, so I followed her.” He started to sob harder.


Bass pulled the kid into an awkward hug. It occurred to him that if Shelly and the baby had lived his own child would have only been four or five years older than this one. He sat there with Jeremy until the kid fell asleep. Thankful, Bass laid him down on his bedroll – he’d just have to make do without it tonight.

He started to clean up after their meal. “So why did you go after him?” Aaron asked as he bent to help.

“What did you want me to do? Leave him there?” Bass found himself getting rather irritated quickly.

“Most people, no. You…” Aaron trailed off, not wanting to directly insult him, but obviously
Bass went over to the wagon to put the rest of their food inside it. “Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence, Staypuffed.”

Priscilla got in between them. “Will you two keep it down? You’ll wake him up.”

Bass checked his pistol and grabbed his remaining blanket. “I’ll take first watch. We’ll head back to Arco in the morning. I’ve seen enough here.”

Aaron nodded as he handed two bedrolls to Priscilla for her to lay out. “What are you planning to do with the kid?

Bass thought about this. In reality he hadn’t planned any further than getting the kid away to a safe distance. “Take him with us, I guess.” He saw the incredulous look Aaron was giving him. “What? He’s been inside. Maybe he heard something or saw something useful. He might even know what they’re doing. And it’s not like we can leave him here. From what you’ve told me if his mom’s really in there, she’s not his mom anymore.”

Priscilla went to lead Aaron away so they could sleep before it was his turn to watch. “He’s right you know. No one’s been taking care of him. He’s underfed and looks like he’s scared to death.”

The next morning they ate a quick meal and then headed out. Bass was driving with Aaron sitting next to him. Jeremy squirmed in between them an hour into their journey. It was like he was afraid if Bass was too far away from him, then he’d be left.

As they got closer to Arco, they got Jeremy talking. Mostly he just confirmed what they already knew. The nano had some kind of control over the people in town. Most of them walked around like they were living, but they didn’t talk and rarely slept or ate. They didn’t really do much of anything other than wander in and out of the buildings. Only a few of them talked. When Bass asked Jeremy to describe what the talkers looked like, a few of them sounded like Davis, Truman and Neville.

He said that the talkers seemed to be following orders that only they could hear. And the fireflies buzzed around all the time, especially around the people that talked. When they’d chased him out of the town, the fireflies had swarmed him.

The only new information that the kid had was that he’d overheard two of the talkers say something about a glitch in the system. “It was something about how some of them weren’t awake. They couldn’t talk to them.”

They arrived back in Arco right before dusk. Bass rented a room for a few more days. His funds were getting low, and feeding the kid was only going to deplete them faster. They were either going to have to find a way to raise some cash or get out of here sooner rather than later. Once they had him fed and settled Bass went to leave the room. “Just stay here and sleep. I’ve gotta talk to Aaron for a bit. I’ll be back later.” He turned back around before he left. “You’re safe here.” He didn’t know why it was important to remind Jeremy of that, but it was.

He joined Aaron and Priscilla at a table in the common room. “I wonder what the kid meant about a glitch,” he said as he raised his drink to his lips.

The Pittmans exchanged another weird look. Bass noted they did that a lot. “I think I might know,” Aaron said. “When we were on the way to the tower, Rachel got hurt pretty bad. She had me use the pendant to program a plastic capsule. She told me that it had been inside Danny and that hid
had kept his lungs from failing somehow.”

Bass vaguely remembered that before the blackout, Rachel’s youngest child had been sick a lot - some kind of asthma or something. “Okay…”

He leaned over and whispered the rest, as if he thought someone was listening in. “Then she had me put it in her leg. Dude, she had a compound fracture. Without a hospital, it would have eventually killed her. I watched that thing heal her in minutes. She said that the capsule was designed to reprogram the nano without affecting the rest. She said it was dangerous and that if they were programmed wrong it could explode, but done right the nano inside it could be told to do just about anything.”

“So where is this thing now?” Bass had a sinking feeling about this.

Aaron shrugged. “As far as I know, it’s still in her leg.”

Bass groaned. “We’re going to have to go back to Texas, aren’t we?”

Chapter End Notes

Arco Idaho really was the first community in the world to be powered by a nuclear power plant. Just a happy accident. I decided there should be some random thing about the town on the welcome sign so I googled it to see if there was anything to be said about Arco (It was chosen for it’s location, nothing more). I may find a way to work that fact into the story. May not.. Either way, kind of funny, don’t you think (Just like two cities I’d picked at random for one of my previous story ended up being in a county named Monroe, but I didn’t realize it until later...) haha!
By the time that Bass returned to the room he and Jeremy would share over the next several days they had a basic plan in the works. They’d spend the next few days getting supplies for the long journey south. He’d reluctantly told Aaron and Priscilla that going back to Texas with him may very well get them into trouble with the Rangers, but if what Priscilla thought she’d seen when she was pulling herself away from the nano was right, they’d have to take the risk.

Because of the dangers that a journey of 1,200 miles entailed, all three of them agreed that they’d have to find a family to take Jeremy. They’d spend the time needed to get supplies also trying to find a home for him. Surely there was somebody willing to take one small boy in.

xxxxxxx

They changed horses in the next town after traveling for eight hours straight and then kept going throughout the next day. When night fell they finally had to stop. They made camp by a small stream. They needed sleep and more than anything, time. All four of them were broken down. None had spoken beyond what was absolutely necessary and Jeremy had not spoken nor moved at all. They’d tried to get him to eat or drink something, but all he did was lay there trembling.

Priscilla was riding in the back when they’d stopped. She tried to get the boy to move but he refused. When she touched his arm, he fought her off. “You’ve got to get him cleaned up. The poor thing is traumatized,” she told Bass as he jumped down from the wagon.

He drug a hand through his hair. “I can’t do this. What do I know about kids?”

The mother in her was aching for the child. If she’d had to pick a caretaker for anyone, Sebastian Monroe would be at the very bottom of a long list, but for some reason Jeremy trusted him. “He won’t let anyone else near him. It has to be you.”

With a sigh, he went to the back of the wagon. “Um, Jeremy? Hey we’re stopping for the night. Why don’t you come out of there, huh?”

The boy ignored him. Bass dug through the wagon and grabbed a blanket and the towel and small bar of soap Priscilla had insisted they’d need. He dropped them by the stream and went about building a fire. His task complete, he went back to the wagon and gently picked Jeremy up. The boy flinched a little at the contact, but at least he didn’t fight him.

“It’s okay. I’m just going to get you washed up,” he explained softly. When he reached the water’s edge Bass set him down and went took off his shoes. The rest of it would need to be washed. Jeremy sat unmoviing while Bass got him undressed and soaped him up. He carried him back and sat the boy on the blanket, close to the fire with the towel wrapped around him.

He went back for the kid’s clothes but Priscilla was already there. “I’ll do this. Go sit with him.”

He hesitated. “What am I supposed to say to him? Sorry I killed your mom?” He started to panic. This was not part of the plan. “I mean, the kid needs a shrink or something. I’m the last person to help anyone through something like this. I’m not exactly the poster boy for healthy grieving.”

Priscilla thought about this. He really was in over his head. “He’s all alone now. So are you.
Maybe you’re the perfect person to help him through this. Or, maybe he’s the perfect person to help you through this.”

The attack comes two nights after they returned to Arco. Bass wakes up to the sounds of screaming and jolts upright. Outside his window he hears a man screaming like he’s just seen his worst nightmare. For a second he has a flashback of war and death. Shaking himself alert he rushes to get dressed. “Get up and get your things. Something’s happening,” he orders Jeremy as the boy rouses.

He peeks out the window, he sees a woman slowly approach a man on the street. The man goes to push past her when she suddenly reaches out and grabs him by the head. The man lets out a sound that Bass will later describe as inhuman. Suddenly the man stills and collapses to the ground. The woman looks up at Bass, like she can tell he is watching. Even from the distance, her eyes look dead. With a sword and gun in hand, Bass ushers Jeremy out of the room.

He meets Aaron and Priscilla in the hallway. “What’s going on?” Aaron asks, clearly terrified. Bass just shakes his head, not willing or able to describe what he’s just seen. He peers over the railing and looks at the common room below. Lucas is standing with a shotgun, slowly backing away as a steady pounding comes from the other side of the door. The few other people staying in the inn have started to emerge from their rooms as well.

“Stay here,” he tells them as he runs down the wooden stairs to join Lucas. “How long ago did this start?”

The innkeeper holds the double-barreled shotgun across his chest, waiting. His eyes are steady, his red beard not quite concealing the frown on his face. “I heard the first screams ten minutes ago. I saw the blacksmith burning in the street from the window.” Lucas’ fear is evident as he recounts what he’s just seen.

The door to the inn is buckling. After a few more bangs, it flies off its hinges. Bass decides the best course of action is to shoot first and ask questions later; Lucas apparently concurs. The first two to enter fall in the doorway. Tom Neville steps on top of the bodies like they aren’t even there. “I should have killed you a long time ago,” Bass says as he fired several times. Tom jerks but he keeps coming. One of the shots gets him in the neck; any one of the shots should have dropped him. Lucas and Bass looked on in horror as the wound starts to close. “Find him and bring him to me, kill anyone that won’t join us,” Tom says as he steps forward. Bass fires off several more shots. Tom is not affected, but it seemed that the others can be taken down a little easier. He empties his clip into them as Lucas reloads and fires again.

His gun now empty, Bass stashes it in his waistband and grabs his other sword. Wielding both, he hacks and slashes at anyone coming in the door while Tom just stands there and smiles. No matter how many they take down, these nano-zombies kept on coming. Tom starts to advance again and rips the shotgun out of Lucas’ hands. He puts his hands on the man’s head, just like Bass had seen the woman do. Lucas lets out a scream and starts to jerk.

Bass swears he’d smells burnt flesh. He realizes then that the nano were electrocuting him. Not thinking, he takes a strong swing with his sword at Neville’s neck, severing it halfway. Another slash renders his former underling headless. “Try and heal from that, traitor.” He snarls before racing up the stairs. “We’ve gotta go. These things are looking for someone, and I don’t want to wait around to find out who.”

He leads them down the stairs and towards the back entrance to the inn. With Tom dead, the
others that came with him have stopped attacking, like there is no one there to give them orders. The inn’s occupants are almost out when someone else enters through the front. This one is like Tom, somehow more aware. “Move!” he shouts at his companions and the other inn patrons.

The man that had rented a room down the hall stops following. Bass turns to urge him back into motion, when the guy’s eyes suddenly roll back in his head. When he looks forward again, his eyes appeared vacant, just like the others. Whatever the nano did to these people has just happened to him. He suddenly lurches forward and makes a grab for Bass, who takes him down and then runs to catch up.

Bass closes the back door to the inn. Looking around, he see an old dumpster in the alley. Aaron helps him push it to block the door. It wouldn’t help them for long, but would buy them a little time. Bass signals to the others to stay close to the wall. He carefully peers around the corner of the building. They are about a block away from the stables, where their wagon waits for them. If they are going to make a break for it, they need the supplies.

At his signal, they all run across the street. They have to take it one building at a time. All around them people are either dying or being taken over. It’s a scene right out of a horror film. Bass does his best to keep his mind focused on their destination and ignore the fact that their reality is now one very fucked up game of Resident Evil. I miss video games, he thinks to himself. The thought flashes through his mind out of nowhere. Focus, dumbass, he berates internally.

They lose another inn patron before they get to the next alley. He’s tripped and before anyone could help him one of the nano’s slaves is on him. There’s nothing they can do for him. Upon seeing her husband being torn apart, the last of the people from the inn runs away screaming. As much as Bass would have loved to go after her (okay, not really), he has Aaron, Priscilla and Jeremy to worry about.

His mind back on the kid, Bass looks around. They are almost to the stables. “Where’s Jeremy?” He spins around in a panic. He sees him cornered fifty yards away. He is huddling between two old newspaper dispensers, eyes wide in terror. A woman is grabbing him and has started to drag him out of his hiding spot. Bass doesn’t think. He slashes his sword and takes her down. The boy is crying and has wet himself. Bass picks him up, and starts to run. Aaron and Priscilla have already made a break for it and hopefully are getting the horses hitched. He bites down the urge to gag when he hears Jeremy sob one word over and over again, “Mommy.”

Entering the stable, he finds Priscilla and Aaron using a chair to fend off Ed Truman. Taking a lesson from his experience with Neville, Bass sets Jeremy down and swings both swords, taking his head. They could heal a gaping bullet hole, but he sincerely doubts the nano can regrow a head. He picks the boy back up and gently lays him in the back of the wagon. Aaron and Priscilla climb up on the bench as Bass opens the stable’s double doors. He jumps in next to Jeremy and digs around for ammo in their supplies while Aaron gets the horses running.

Bass keeps shooting as the wagon barrels towards town gate. The nano-people had forced the gate open before the attack so at least that was one thing he didn’t have to worry about. The nano pursue, but they are on foot. No matter what they did to the people they’d enslaved, the Nano couldn’t make them outrun two horses at a full gallop. The animals won’t be able to keep the pace up for long, but Aaron pushes them to put more distance between them and Arco.

When they finally are able to slow down Bass turns to check on the kid. He is huddled in a fetal position, wet and crying. Bass sits down. His mind cannot begin to process everything he’s just seen and experienced, and it leaves him cold and numb. He saw what he saw, that there was no denying. “We are all seriously fucked,” he says quietly when Priscilla asks him if he’s okay.
He heard Aaron approach from behind. “Staypuffed, your girlfriend’s going all Zen and it’s creeping me out.” Still he did as she suggested. After changing into is only spare set of clothes, he laid his wet ones out to dry and then sat down next to Jeremy by the fire. The boy ignored him and continued staring into the flames. “I’m sorry,” Bass said as he pulled the towel back around him.

Jeremy looked up at him with wet eyes. “Why would she hurt me? She was my mom.”

Bass was at a loss. “Those things – the fireflies, they made her sick. I don’t know how or why. And I don’t know why the people from Bradbury attacked Arco. But we’re going somewhere safe, okay? Somewhere far away - Texas.”

Jeremy didn’t respond, he simply returned his attention to the fire in front of him. Priscilla had finished washing and hanging Jeremy’s clothes. As she walked past on her way to the wagon to start their meal, she locked eyes with Bass. Reading the message there, he put an arm around the kid and tried to offer him what comfort he could.

An hour passed before Jeremy spoke. “You killed them. You killed her.” The boy’s words brought Bass out of his own thoughts. They weren’t spoken as an accusation, just a statement of fact. Still, he’d felt like he was punched in the gut. “You were very good at it. Are you a bad guy?”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. “I used to be. I used to be good too though, before then.”

“What are you now?” Jeremy looked curious, not afraid.

Bass looked away and tried to think of an answer. It was really a good question. The kid’s gaze was making him uncomfortable, like he could see through him. “I don’t know anymore. Maybe a little bit of both. But I promise that I won’t hurt you. I’ll make sure you’re protected.” And he meant it too. But he also needed to make sure that Jeremy was cared for. He knew that as soon as they stepped foot in Willoughby he’d likely be drug off to Austin, and that was assuming they even made it that far. As soon as they got there, Aaron and Priscilla would have to help find a home for him. In the meantime, all he could do was his best and pray that he didn’t fuck him up any more than he already was.

It seemed that the Nano didn’t want to waste any time. Later that night Bass was on the way back to camp from a perimeter check. He was almost back when a figure stopped him in his tracks. “Hello, Bass.”

He stared at Emma Bennett, his heart in his throat. But no, Emma was dead. He’d been the cause of that death; she’d died in his arms. It was just the nano messing with his head. He turned from the apparition, refusing to take the bait. As he walked past it appeared in front of him again. “I’m not biting. Go pester someone else.”

“I know the emptiness inside of you. It doesn’t have to be that way,” Emma’s voice said. He stopped. He knew he shouldn’t acknowledge it, but he found he couldn’t resist. As he looked at her, he couldn’t dismiss the longing he felt. She was his first love the (first) woman he’d betrayed his best friend for in a moment of weakness. “We could be together now. All the pain and the loneliness and suffering would all go away. I could fill the hole inside you.”

“Nothing can fill that. You’re not Emma. She’s dead. I killed her,” he said trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Emma’s demeanor changed, became almost sterile. “We could bring her back to you. You wouldn’t have to be alone any longer. You loved her.”
Bass started to laugh. “For being all knowing and all seeing, you are really stupid you know that.”

The brief pull he’d felt to give in already started to dissipate. “You’re right, I don’t want to be alone, but you can’t find the right face to haunt me with.”

He pulled his gun out and aimed it at the figure before him. “You can’t win this,” the nano-Emma told him. “We’ll take you one way or another.”

He cocked his head at the image. “You know what? I don’t believe you. If you could, you’d have just zombified me already.” It suddenly hit him. “I’ve got to let you in, don’t I? That’s why you had them kill some people in Arco instead of taking them all. You can’t take a person that isn’t willing. Well, I’ve got news for you. I know what you are. There’s no one you could pretend to be that would make me do that.”

Emma’s face faded away. “What about me, Bass? Don’t you miss me?” He turned around and faced Shelly. He tried to look away, but couldn’t. The pain of seeing her was almost too much to bear, but he fought against it. “You’ve been dead for so long, I hardly even think of you now.” He knew it was bullshit, but he had to say it to distance himself. A lie for a lie.

“We will stop you.” The face changed again to Jeremy Baker.

“Then why haven’t you? Why haven’t you just burned me to a crisp right on the spot?” He started to walk away again. “We’ll find a way to fight you, to take you offline or whatever it is that will make you go away.”

He went back to camp, the nano now gone. “Problem?” Aaron said as he saw him return, visibly shaken.

“I see dead people,” he said with a grim smile. He told Aaron what had happened.

“So they’re working on you now,” he said with a worried look.

Bass sat down next to the fire. He felt cold, like he really had seen a ghost (or three). “They thought they’d lure me in, but it didn’t work. It couldn’t have.” He read the question Aaron hadn’t asked. “For some reason, they appear as the dead, right? To tempt you by giving that one person you loved and lost back? Well I’m the last person that will work with.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because they can’t give me that person. She isn’t dead.” He got up to check on Jeremy who was sleeping nearby before getting something to eat. “At least we learned something useful. They can’t tap into someone that isn’t willing. We might be able to use that against them somehow. And for some reason, they want us alive; or whatever it is they’re doing has weakened them enough that they can’t kill us from a distance.”

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Having no other choice, Bass sent Aaron and Priscilla into Willoughby to bring Miles out to him. It was déjà vu; the same spot outside of town; the same worry that Miles would simply put a bullet in him or walk away without hearing him out.

As he waited with Jeremy by the wagon he got more anxious. “Why can’t we just go into the town?” the kid asked.

Bass fiddled with a blade of grass as he waited. “Because I did some things and got into trouble. I helped Texas later, so they let me go under the condition that I work for them here. Some stuff
happened and I had to leave. If I go into town I’ll be arrested by the Rangers.”

The thought of the man that cared for him going away made him pale. “But your friend won’t let that happen, right?”

Bass tossed the blade of grass to the ground and watched Miles and Aaron climb up to where he waited. His heart almost leaped out of his chest when he saw who followed behind them. “I hope so,” he murmured as he braced himself for the confrontation.

“Miles,” he said evenly as his friend stopped in front of him, acutely aware of this was playing out the same way it had before.

He could see that it was taking everything Miles had not to kick the shit out of him. “You’ve got about two seconds to explain why the hell you came back here.

Bass glanced at Aaron. “You could have at least given him the Cliffsnotes on the way.”

Aaron went to stand in front of the wagon, hoping to block Jeremy’s view of Bass’ inevitable ass kicking. “I tried but you know Miles, not exactly a listener.”

“I came back because there’s trouble coming – big trouble.” He held his hands out determined to show Miles he didn’t come looking for a fight. “Can we do this away from the kid?” He asked, his voice almost a whisper as he backed up a little.

Miles looked around. “What kid?” When Bass glanced towards the wagon, his eyes followed. He hadn’t noticed the scrawny boy until now. Wordlessly he walked past Bass, stopping behind a one of the crumbling pillars that once supported a bridge here. Between the pillar and the bushes that had grown around it they would be obscured from view, even if they weren’t exactly out of earshot.

Bass followed with Charlie right behind him. He swore he could feel her presence, the heat radiating off of her. He tried to tamp down his body’s reaction to seeing her. He looked back towards her as he approached the spot where Miles waited. Her eyes were downcast and her mouth formed a grim firm line. As he turned back around, Miles blindsided him with a fist in the face. “That’s for what you did!”

Bass grabbed his nose as the blood began to gush. He had a feeling that it may now be broken. “Okay, yeah I deserved that.”

Another hit handed in his gut. Unprepared for it, Bass doubled over, only to take a hit across the shoulders. The blow sent him to his knees. A few more carefully placed hits came, all intended to inflict the most pain with the least amount of effort. All easy enough to block, if he’d actually tried. But he took each hit. He had no defense for his actions, and refused to hit Miles back.

“This isn’t fun if you don’t defend yourself,” Miles finally said.

Bass got up. “I’m not going to. I know I’ve got it coming and then some.”

“Spoilsport,” he said under his breath. Charlie just watched them both, leaning up against the crumbled concrete while Miles got it out of his system. “You’ve been gone for four months, you asshole!” Miles shouted.

Bass stood there with his nose bleeding, at a total loss. “You mean this isn’t about…”

“Of course it is. And about the rest – the drinking, the going crazy, the leaving, the obsessing over
my niece, which by the way, gross.” He walked up to Bass and shoved him hard, sending him on his ass. “I mean really, what the hell is the matter with you?”

Winded and aching all over, Bass just remained there in the dirt, his knees bent in front of him. “Miles I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen. That’s why I left – so she… so it would stop.”

“Yeah, she told me,” he pointed at Charlie. His expression softened just a little. “She also told me why you didn’t want me to know.”

Bass glanced up at Charlie. She looked almost bored. He had a sneaking suspicion that he was right about her hating him now, but Miles was making it sound like she’d sort of defended him. Why would she do that?

Miles extended a hand and pulled him to his feet only to punch him in the mouth. “That’s for not telling me that Rachel went completely basket case right along with you. You should have come to me before you both got to that point in the crazy.” Why, oh why do the two people I love the most in this world have to be fucking lunatics? “When you started slipping, did it ever occur to you that I could have helped?”

Bass wiped his now split lip on his sleeve. “Yeah, because you were really all that there for me the first time around. When things started to get bad, how could I tell you the reason why? You can’t tell me you’d have handled that well.”

Miles shoved him again. This time, Bass kept his feet. “You are so fucking stupid. I’d have handled that a lot better than this. And you can’t tell me the way you dealt with it alone was better. I’d have gotten over it. I’d have still kicked your ass, but then we’d have been good. Now?”

“You don’t have to get over it. Once we save the world again, I’m gone again, okay?”

Miles looked at him. “What?”

Bass gave up on waiting for his face to stop gushing on his own. He took his shirt off and held it over his nose. “I told you trouble was coming. We’ve got a serious problem.” His voice sounded funny as he pinched his nose to get the bleeding to stop. “And what’s that?”

Bass looked from Miles to Charlie. Miles was still raging, Charlie still looked like there were a million places she’d much rather be. “The nanotech.”

Miles looks startled. “What do you know about the nanotech?” Rachel had only given him a basic rundown but as far as he knew, Bass didn’t know anything about it and she’d planned on keeping it that way.

“More than I ever wanted to know. If you’d seen what I have, you’d have waited to kick my ass until later.” Bass went on to explain everything that had happened in Idaho, leaving out only his confrontation with the ghosts from the past. As he talked, Bass held on to the fact that Miles was at least listening. When he’d finished, he called Aaron over to them to explain the details that he still didn’t understand.

While Aaron went on to tell Miles his side of the horrific tale, he sat down on a concrete slab to wait. He knew Jeremy had to be getting nervous, but he at least wanted to clean himself up before going back over to him. Charlie grabbed his now bloodied shirt and disappeared, coming back with it wet from the stream.
“Thank you,” he said as he wiped the dried blood off of his face.

She squatted down across from him, cocking her head to watch. “Do you really think that these things are going to be that big of a problem?”

He locked eyes with her. He’d give anything for her to look at him the way she did that one night in the bar, where all of his problems began. “Would I be risking a second execution if I didn’t? Priscilla said she saw what they wanted, that they want to control everyone. Charlie, I’ve seen what these things can do. I still see it every time I close my eyes. We can’t let it happen. They make everything that I’ve done and what the Patriots did look like fucking stupid pranks.”

Miles came back over, not liking the fact that they were even speaking to each other. “Well, let’s go tell Rachel.” He turned his back on them and headed back to Bass’ wagon.

Bass got up and ran after him. “I get it that you hate me. If you didn’t after everything I did with the Republic, you’ve definitely got a reason now. But can we skip the step that gets me sent to Austin until after this is over?”

Miles stopped walking. “You’re not going to get arrested. I called off Blanchard. Which, by the way if anyone asks, you’ve been sobering up in a shack somewhere over the past four months. Try to keep your drinking to a minimal in public, so I don’t look like a liar.”

Bass’ had to consciously keep his jaw from dropping open. “You – you covered for me? Why?”

Miles shrugged. “I guess I’m a bigger moron than even you.”

Charlie enters her grandfather’s house right as they are about to start breakfast. She storms into the kitchen in search of her mother. “What is wrong with you?” She shouts.

Gene is stunned. “Charlie!”

“Oh no, Grandpa. She’s gone too far this time.” She turns back to Rachel. “You knew he was already in a really bad place – why did you go out of your way to make it worse?”

“What did he tell you?” Rachel asks, disturbingly calm.

“The truth. The whole truth,” she emphasizes. She doesn’t even see that Miles is standing in the doorway. He’d been taking his breakfast with Rachel for months and had entered only a few minutes behind her. If she hadn’t been so worked up she’d have noticed him coming up the sidewalk. “I mean, my God. You really have a problem. Why do you have to try and fix things, especially when they aren’t broken? All you do is fuck it up and make it worse.”

“Charlie, you don’t understand. He would have…”

She looks at her mother in disgust as she cuts her off. “He would have what? Continued to stay away from me, despite the fact that I’d already thrown myself at him? Unsuccessfully, I might add.”

“Um… what’s going on? Who did you throw yourself at?” Miles asks. He can’t remember the last time he has seen Charlie this upset with her mom. Actually, yes he can. It was right after they’d found out that Rachel had let the Patriots in on a jailbreak plot.

Charlie turns to acknowledge her uncle for the first time. “Bass is gone. He left town.”

“Dammit. I should have known this was coming. He’s been a mess for months,” he says. He feels
bad for his friend, he really does. But Bass has always been his own worst enemy. Miles figures he’d probably woken up from a drunken stupor with delusions of grandeur and is headed east. “Well, I guess I’d better go drag him back before Blanchard finds out.”

He heads out the door. Charlie follows him out and stops him outside. She decides that her mother is just vindictive enough to tell Miles about what they’ve done. It’ll be gentler hearing it from her. At least he’ll get to hear the whole truth, rather than Rachel’s twisted version of it. She reluctantly gives him the news that will tear him apart.

Miles comes storming back inside. “How could you do it, Rachel? After everything that’s happened, he’s still my best friend – my brother.”

“No. No, Ben was your brother and he killed him and Danny. And he was going to go after Charlie and take her away too.” Rachel is crying, working her way up to hysterical.

“He’d never hurt Charlie. That’s just some bullshit you came up with to justify your own actions.” He can’t believe she’d go there.

Rachel shakes her head. “No, I saw him. He watched her, obsessed over her. He would have made a move on Charlie and stolen her from me.”

He can see it now. The weeks of fighting with her right around the time that Bass started to plunge back into his drunken depression. She is almost as big of a mess as Bass has been. “So your answer is to fuck him before he had a chance to fuck her? Well, that’s logic.”

She stands up. “No, it wasn’t supposed to happen. I just went up there to threaten him.”

Miles doesn’t want to hear it. He storms out and heads back home. Charlie is waiting for him on the porch. He enters without a word and she follows him inside. “You knew about this?”

“Only for a few hours. He told me before he left. I knew something was wrong, and I tried to stop him.” She’s been sick and upset over this ever since she found out.

Miles sinks down on the couch. “How could he do this to me again?” He’s breaking apart. He should have known that he could have either Rachel or his best friend - never both.

“She didn’t want me to tell you,” Charlie says.

Miles loses his temper. He can’t believe she’s defending him. “Of course not. He didn’t want me to come after him and shoot his ass.”

Charlie puts her hand on his shoulder. “No, I don’t think that’s it. He said he didn’t want it to break you and mom up. He didn’t want you hurt.” She goes on to tell him how she found him the previous night: sick and desperate. “This is all my fault.”

“What? He told you that?” Miles’ anger is ignited further. He can’t believe that Bass has actually manipulated Charlie into taking the blame.

Charlie starts to cry. “No, all of it. I threw myself at him months ago and he just sort of flipped out. But I didn’t know that’s why he was going off the deep end. This morning he told me he was trying to stay away from me because of you and mom.”

Miles knows that Bass was low, but the fact that it started with him trying to repress feelings for his niece is too much. It is only overshadowed that she apparently reciprocated at some point. “When he turned me down, I was hurt. I started seeing Bobby to soothe my own ego and maybe
make him a little jealous. I didn’t know that it would affect him like that. And he just got worse and worse.”

Charlie blames herself for what Miles is going through now. If she’d have just let things be, he wouldn’t have started down that road. And once it had started, she could have paid more attention and talked to him about it. She was flaunting Bobby in front of him and she knew it. And she should have known better than to fool around with Connor again. She’d seen how it had affected him when she’d done it before. All the comments he made back then about banging a Monroe stank of jealousy. She didn’t even like Connor all that much (back then in New Vegas or now). It was just a way to show him she didn’t care about Mary Parker.

Miles knows Bass a hell of a lot better than Charlie does. He knows more about his past. Charlie has picked up bits and pieces along the way, but she doesn’t know everything. The last woman to push him over the edge was Shelly, and he loved her with everything he had. If Bass went down that dark road because of Charlie, his feelings ran deep. Bass in love was dangerous; he’d been hurt so much that he never took it to a good place.

Miles sighs and puts an arm around her. “When did all of this shit between the two of you start?”

Charlie tells him everything – from the first time she saw him in New Vegas all the way through the night that she took Connor home because she thought he was sleeping with Mary Parker again. That was the night that Rachel decided to do something about his feelings for her and that was the night that he was just hurt enough to let it go too far.

In the end, Miles does his job and lets it slip that Bass is gone. It isn’t until a month later that Rachel approaches him that he begins to regret that decision.

“It’s not all his fault,” she says. Miles has not spoken to her for weeks. He’d tried to talk to her again later that night, but she was still playing the martyr. He was done letting her act like the victim when it came to Bass. If she couldn’t even accept responsibility to her side of things then he could even consider forgiving her. After all, Charlie had said it was Rachel leaving his building and since it was clear he hadn’t dragged her there unwillingly, she had to have gone looking for something.

She sits down a few feet away from him on his front porch. They both know that the only reason he’s still in Willoughby at all is because of Charlie. “I knew what buttons to push. We both know how he is, how he gets. And I’m not going to lie to you, after being his prisoner in Philly all those years, it felt good to finally have power over him.”

“You do know how sick that is, right?” Miles doesn’t even look at her.

“I was so worried that he’d worm his way into her life. He’d already found a way back into yours,” she argues.

Miles can’t believe she’s still going down that road. “Rachel, he was my best friend. We’ve known each other since we were five years old. He gave up his son just to have my back. Of course I was going to let him back in my life. And if you hadn’t noticed, I still kept him at a distance because of you.”

She sighs, knowing now that he’s right. “I know that now. But all I could think about was that he was going to try to sleep with my little girl.”

Miles thinks back to the way that Bass had been over the past year. He feels so stupid for not seeing it before. “Before he left, he told Charlie that he was trying to stay away from her. He
literally drove himself crazy out of respect for you and for me. He knew we’d think how he felt was wrong. And I know Bass – I know how he thinks almost better than he does. He didn’t think he was good enough for her anyway. He’s like that when he bothers to care.”

Rachel starts to cry. Of course she hasn’t known Bass as long as Miles has, but she’s known him long enough. Now that the rage and desperation have faded with time and his absence, she sees it now. If it wasn’t for the fact he’d been trying to do right for the first time in years, he wouldn’t have let her punish him that way in the first place. “I’m so sorry, Miles. I’m begging you to give me another chance.”

Miles loves them both. “I’m not sure if I can.” Still, he starts talking to her again – just a little. And he sends word to Blanchard that Bass didn’t abandon Willoughby but was away under Miles’ orders. The sheriff’s recent drinking problem is well known, so he uses it as a sheepish excuse. He tells Blanchard that Bass has been sent away under supervision of “friends” to get it dealt with.

Eventually the rangers are called off the search. Miles doesn’t expect to ever see Bass again – indeed, he’s not sure if he even wants to, but it least it will give Bass a fighting chance to get far enough away before the truth comes out. To keep the pretense up (and thus himself off of Blanchard’s radar for having lied) he hires Connor as a deputy. If he requests a new sheriff now, it will raise too many suspicions.

Over the next several months the sharpness of the anger and hurt will slowly dull, even if they will not disappear. He will not jump back into a relationship with Rachel, but because of Charlie and their past together he will tolerate her and then later spend more time with her. He knows that if for some reason he ever does happen to come across Bass again, he’ll probably beat the fuck out of him. Since he’s unlikely to even get that satisfaction he won’t waste his time wondering what would happen next.

Everyone walked back to the wagon where Jeremy waited anxiously. He paled at the sight of Bass’ swollen face. “I’m fine, don’t worry,” Bass reassured him. He climbed into the driver’s seat. Sensing Jeremy’s unease, Aaron sat in the back. The boy may not have taken to him exactly, but at least he was familiar. Miles climbed up next to Bass while Charlie joined the child an Aaron in the back.

“Jeremy, this is Miles and Charlie. They’re going to help us,” was all he said as he flicked the reins and got the horses moving towards town. Jeremy relaxed a little, but never took his eyes off of Bass’ back while they rode in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! This chapter required a lot of editing and rewrites to get it ready and it was a busy weekend full of work and such. I’ve tried to have our Characters deal with the issues from chapter 3 delicately, without grinding your faces into it. It will obviously still be there in the background, but there will be no more Bachel and there will, yes eventually be Charloe (I’m incapable of not doing so). I will do my best to not make it a ridiculously slow burn but I also don’t want it to overshadow the rest of the plot. Most of my past stories had the actual plot revolve around the ship, and so I don’t
want this to be a been there, done that story. So no, it won’t be all “and everyone said their sorries and all was forgiven” thing, but (foreshadowing ahead) I would like to think that Charlie has more of a reason to forgive Bass than Miles or Rachel. For one, she kinda did the same thing (in my mind – and I’m sure in many of your minds, the Charlie/Connor ship from season 2 was all a way to snub Monroe… Our lady doth protest too much). Keep in mind that the “Charlie looked bored” thing is all from Bass’ perspective. He hasn’t the slightest idea what she’s thinking…
“What’s with the kid, Bass?” Miles asked as they sat in Gene Porter’s living room.

“We found him outside of Bradbury. He’s been inside the town; seen things,” Bass explained as he got up off the couch and went to the window.

Miles shook his head in derision. “So you just what, kidnapped him? Typical Bass. Whatever it takes, right?”

Bass had been willing to take a lot from Miles. He knew he deserved it and then some, but this accusation riled him. “You know that’s fucked up. We didn’t plan on bringing him. We didn’t have a choice.”

“What do his parents think about you bringing him here?” Miles shot back.

Bass turned his back on him to look out the window. “It was kind of hard to ask permission seeing as how his mom’s dead.” He watched Jeremy kick an old soccer ball apathetically as Priscilla kept an eye on him. “We were going to find him a home in Arco, but we barely made it out of there alive. Those nano-things had taken his mom. She tried to hurt him, so I killed her. I didn’t even know it was her until after.”

Miles reached over to the coffee table and grabbed the bottle of whiskey he’d snuck out of Gene’s pantry. He poured himself a stiff drink. Everything that had happened today was a lot to take in. “So what are you going to do with him now?”

He continued to watch Jeremy as he spoke. He felt bad for the kid. He was not only alone now, but he was as far away from home as he could be, surrounded by complete strangers. “Find someone to take him here, I guess. There’s gotta be somebody willing, right?”

Miles was less optimistic. “Yeah, people aren’t that nice. It took us six months to find a home for the last orphan, and the people in town actually knew him. I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

Bass turned from the window and sat back down. “Well somebody’s gotta. How the hell am I supposed to take care of a kid? Apparently I can barely take care of myself.”

Miles couldn’t agree more. “Talk about your understatements,” he said under his breath. “The only other choices you’ve got are sending him to Austin or to that home in Shelbyville.”

Before Bass could shoot him the “hell no” that popped into his head at that thought, Gene came in the front door. He’d been sitting on the front porch, watching the boy from a distance. He’s also overheard every word they’d said through the open window. “You can’t send him there.” Rachel’s father did nothing to hide the fact he was appalled. “You drug this kid over a thousand miles and now you’re just going to ditch him?”

Old Dogs, New Tricks And So On

Chapter Notes

I’ve got nothing much to say here other than thanks to all of you who have reviewed, read, commented, criticized etc. And thanks again for bearing with me… I teaser of sorts at some point towards the end of the chapter :-)

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“I wasn’t-“ He began, but Gene refused to let him finish.

“I’ve been watching him for almost an hour. This child is traumatized by whatever happened. I’ve heard him ask Priscilla twice if you were leaving him. For some reason, he’s become attached to you. You can’t just dump him somewhere.”

Bass felt the walls closing in around him. He’d never have considered just sending him to the orphanage in Shelbyville or to Austin for that matter, but keeping him was something else entirely. “What am I supposed to do with him? I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t know anything about raising a kid.”

Gene turned to leave the room. “Well you should have thought about that before you brought him here.”

Bass sat with his elbows propped on his knees and his head resting in his hands. “I couldn’t just leave him. He was all alone and starving.” He felt at a complete loss. He wanted someone to do right by the kid. He found that he cared what happened to him more than he’d expected, but he knew better to think that he had what it took.”

Rachel and Aaron reappeared from where they’d been sequestered in the little office she’d put together in Gene’s basement. “What’s he still doing here?” she asked coldly.

“He’s waiting on me to tell him if he still has a job, and I’ve been waiting on the two of you to find out what the game plan is,” Miles snapped. As she’d slowly started acting more like the Rachel he’d loved rather than the bitter psycho she’d become months before, they’d been talking more. The hatred in her voice only reminded him now of her betrayal, and it got his temper flaring. “Well?”

Rachel stood leaning against the doorway, deciding that the best course of action here was to ignore that Bass was even in the room. “We don’t have the full code, only fragments. We’ll have to work on that and see where it leads. If Aaron is right about the capsule being the key to deactivating them, well I guess that means it’ll eventually have to come out. I’ll have to talk to my dad about that one. I don’t know if it even can be removed.”

For the most part that meant that he and Bass were in a holding pattern, Miles thought. He barely passed math in school and had been terrified of computers before the blackout. Bass was a lot better with both, meaning that he didn’t almost flunk in school and at one point could use a computer to send an e-mail, look up porn and post embarrassing pictures of Miles on Facebook. Neither of them would be any use in this battle.

He turned back to Bass. “Your job is still open. I had to keep it that way when I covered your ass to Blanchard. I didn’t think you’d be coming back; I was just buying you a little time to make yourself scarce, that’s all. Still, you’ll need it if you’re going to stay here and are going to feed your new shadow out there.”

Bass nodded in understanding. He couldn’t ask for more at this point. “Thank you.”

“Since you were gone and I so stupidly put my neck out for you, I had to hire a deputy to work in your absence. Oh, because I was the one that hired him, I’m the only one that can fire him.” The sudden cruel smile on his face told Bass he was not going to like who would be working under him. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a keychain. He tossed this to his reluctant sheriff as he spoke. “And you will wear the fucking uniform, or I swear I will fire your ass and drag you to Austin myself.”
Bass sighed and pocketed the keys as he stood up. He did notice that the key to his loft was still there, which meant that at least he would have a roof over his head. With nothing else left to do here, he headed towards the door. It was getting late and he had to get the kid settled in. “Let’s go,” he said as he emerged from the house. Jeremy picked up the ball, afraid to show how happy he was that Gene had told him he could keep it. Silently he followed Bass down the street.

They could always come back for their gear later. Bass just wanted to get away from the Porter residence as fast as he could. “You hungry?” he asked as they walked.

He looked back at Jeremy, who was still behind him, watching his feet as he walked. He barely caught the mumbled “I guess so,” that was sent his way. Having little other choice, he led them to Charlie’s bar. With any luck maybe Greg would still be tending bar and he wouldn’t have to confront Charlie’s animosity or deal with his reaction to it.

As he held the door open for Jeremy to enter in front of him, he was reminded of how bad his luck normally ran. Charlie was already back and the bar was almost deserted. The handful of patrons all turned to watch him enter with the child.

By now all of them had heard of his transition from sheriff to outlaw to somewhere in between the two. He’d just barely earned the respect and trust that his position demanded only to fuck it all up. He knew that this would make his job only harder as he tried to settle back down here.

Bass silently ushered Jeremy to a table before going to the bar to order a meal. “Listen, I kinda spent everything I had left just getting back here. Can I open an account again?” he asked quietly. He hated having to ask her for credit, but the kid had to eat. He knew he’d be able to get at least some type of advance in pay to get by but for today, he was broke.

Charlie didn’t reply, just went into the kitchen and came out few minutes later with two plates of food. Taking the hint he rejoined Jeremy at the table while she poured a water for Jeremy and a whiskey for him. As she approached, he stood up to help her. “I’ve got it,” she said. He noticed how she kept her tone casual to the point of almost sounding professional.

Bass tried to keep his eyes off of her, but was failing miserably. “Could we talk later?” He found himself asking it before he was aware is mouth was moving. “I could…” Could what, stupid? Come back at closing? Not with a 9 year old kid sleeping across the street, you’re not. “Come by tomorrow or something?” he finally finished.

Charlie glanced at the child that was staring at the food on his plate like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to push it away or inhale it. She could tell how damaged he was by the shy posture and the wounded look in his eyes. Bass would have his work cut out for him. “I don’t know. Maybe,” she offered.

Bass nodded, feeling defeated. If he read that accurately, he’d basically been told to “fuck off,” not that he could blame her really. It wasn’t as if he felt he could fix things anyway or that he should even try to. Still, the way he’d left things with her had been tearing at him since the moment he rode of town. Being back only intensified it. It was one thing to know he’d never see her again, quite another thing entirely being so close to her after that one kiss and having made his confession. Nothing could ever come of it, but he felt it at least deserved a discussion.

Suddenly no longer feeling like eating, he went to push his plate away, but noticed Jeremy still hadn’t taken a bite. With a sigh, he picked up the fork. “Eat up, kid.” The boy hesitated before he started to comply.

Charlie watched them from her vantage point behind the bar. She’d left her grandfather’s house
before hearing the explanation of who this kid was and why he was with Bass. She had, however overheard Priscilla mentioning finding a permanent home to him on her way out the door. The kid had looked brokenhearted at the thought of being sent away, and now here is was in her bar with Bass.

She watched as Jeremy leaned over and whispered something in Bass’ ear. He replied by pointing in the direction of the side door, speaking low. The kid obviously had to use the outhouse. Before he got too far, Bass stopped him and said something to him, still keeping his voice inaudible to others, as if he was trying not to embarrass either of them. The kid shook his head and shrugged before heading towards the door.

Unable to quell her curiosity, Charlie grabbed the bottle of whiskey off the bar and headed over to their table. Before she could refill his glass, Bass held a hand over it. “I’m good,” he said as he locked eyes with her. There was so much behind those eyes now. She couldn’t fathom how she’d ever thought he was empty behind the mask she’d once been convinced he’d worn.

“Really?” She was almost taken aback. She’d never actually seen him stop at one – ever.

“Priscilla has a theory that those things might have an easier time taking people over if they’re fucked up,” he explained as soon as he noticed her astonishment. “Plus, it looks like I’ve got whole new set of responsibilities.”

She followed his gaze to the side door. “So what, are you adopting him now or something?”

“No. I don’t know,” his voice sounded torn, and beyond exhausted. “We were supposed to find a place for him before all hell broke loose, but until someone steps forward to take him in, I guess he’s stuck with me.”

She fought the smile that threatened to find its way to her lips at his choice of words. The Bass that she’d once known would have said it the other way around. He’d be the stuck one, not the boy. Where is Bass and what have you done with him? Charlie thought silently. “So where are you going to stay?”

“The loft, I guess.” He was already thinking about what would have to be done to make the place into a home for a kid. It wasn’t promising. He looked up at her and saw the disbelief that had overcome her features. “What?”

“You must have forgotten that I’ve seen your place. You’re going to take a kid there?” She laughed, and then she shuddered in exaggeration.

They watched as Jeremy came back in through the side door. “Not like I’ve got much of a choice.”

Thoughtful, Charlie started to head back to her position behind the bar as the boy sat back down to finish his dinner. Silently berating herself for what she was about to say, she turned back around. “Look, it’s going to take you a day or two to make that place livable. I’ve got a spare room. He can stay with me until you clean it up.”

Bass looked at Jeremy to see what he thought about the idea. He was shaking his head rapidly, clearly terrified over the idea of being left alone with someone he didn’t know. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave him right now.”

She was already regretting the fact that she’d brought it up. “You can stay on the couch,” she said with a sigh.

XXXXXXXX
Jeremy wrinkled his nose up at the sight of Bass’ loft the next morning. “I’m going to be living here?”

Bass flushed a little. He hadn’t exactly tidied up before booking it. Empty bottles still littered the place, evidence of his mental state when he’d left town. “It just needs a little cleaning up. I’ve been away a while.”

The boy walked from one corner of the loft to the next, taking it all in while Bass started collecting the bottles. He idly wondered how much he could get for them by selling it back to Mel, the local homebrew expert. He was forever running out of bottles when he had a new batch ready (Bass obviously having been a large part of that problem). He started to put them in an empty crate. He’d take any diamonds he could get at this point, broke as he was and now with two mouths to feed.

It was obvious that the bottles made Jeremy nervous. As if the kid could read his mind, he spoke up. “My mom once told me that my dad drank a lot and that it made him mean.”

Bass sighed and sat down on his bed. “Come here.” He waited until Jeremy cautiously sat down a few feet away from him. “I’m not like that – not anymore.” He pointed to the crate of bottles. “This won’t happen, alright?”

The boy looked relieved as he chose to believe him. “Okay.” His face was so trusting. Bass felt a pang of something he couldn’t quite define. This kid was stuck with him for the time being and seemed to trust him without question or even a good reason. It was almost humbling. He’d done nothing to earn it. Hell, he’d killed the kid’s mom right before his eyes, but instead of it sending him running Jeremy seemed to cling to him all the more because of it.

“Look, I know it’s not much. We’ll get you a bed at first and I’ll try to fix it up a little here and there. There are two floors below us that are empty. I guess technically speaking they’re mine too. I lived here alone before, so I never worried about it. We’ll be eating out at Charlie’s a lot until I can get a stove in here.” Being used to the elements, he’d never worried about heat in the winter. Southern Texas didn’t get that cold and as long as he was out of the elements, he’d been able to suffer through it. With the boy, he’d have to do something about that too. “We’ll figure it out.”

They spent the majority of the day cleaning up. Well, he cleaned and Jeremy just poked around as a nine year old should. He had helped to carry the bottles down to the market, where Bass was able to get a few diamonds for them. He tried to play it off as resource recycling, but figured that Mel didn’t really buy it. The distiller had tried to get him to take it in trade, but Bass had been firm. “I’m not going to be your best customer anymore, Mel.”

The rest of the afternoon Bass showed Jeremy around town. They passed by the local school. Despite the fact that Aaron and Priscilla were back in town, Rachel would still be in charge of running the facility. They would of course still teach. Rachel had been forced to get people to volunteer while they were gone, but since they were back, the majority of their volunteers would happy to find their services were no longer required. “Have you ever gone to school?” Bass asked him.

He’d been trying to figure out what to do with him when he got back to work in a few days, and it just hit him what any kid should be doing during the day. “Only the landowners got to go to school in Salem,” Jeremy said quietly, as if he was embarrassed.

Bass had forgotten he’d grown up in the California Commonwealth. Affleck had turned it into an almost feudalistic society. Most of the families were of the lower social class. The majority of their children would learn to serve at an early age. Jeremy probably had spent his days working in a field, little more than a slave. “Can you read?”
“No, sir,” he replied as he stared at the building, almost as if he longed to see inside it.

He watched the kid reluctantly walk past the building. “Would you like to learn?” The child’s eyes lit up at the suggestion. “I’ll see what I can do, okay?” It would mean talking to Rachel, but he had no other choice.

As they slowly made their way back to the center of town and to the bar for dinner, he thought about the previous evening. He’d been trying to keep his mind off of it all day, but had finally given up.

Bass sits stretched out on Charlie’s couch. Jeremy is already sleeping in her spare bedroom. It is just past closing time and she isn’t home yet. He shifts uncomfortably. The couch is not quite long enough for his six-foot frame, which only adds to his frustration. He’s wondering if she’s okay, why she’s late. He’s trying not to think about who might be making her late. “I’m not going to check up on her,” he says aloud.

He sits for what feels like an eternity, but is likely only another five minutes before he gets up and puts his boots back on. “I’m just going to peek out the door to make sure she’s not in trouble,” he tells himself. He’s just gotten to his feet when she comes in the door.

She almost laughs at the relief on his face when he sees her. “Waiting up?” She tries to play it off but old attractions and habits die hard. He really looks too big and too tempting to be standing in her tiny living room.

If she didn’t know any better and if it wasn’t so dark in the room she’d would have sworn that he’s blushing. The small lamp he’s left burning doesn’t quite give off enough light to prove it one way or the other, however. He sits back down and crosses his arms over his chest as he slouches in what appears to be a pout. “No.” She just stares at him, skeptical. He looks up at her. “Maybe,” he admits in spite of himself. She looks by far too alluring in the flickering glow of the lamplight.

She laughs then as she goes into the kitchen to pour an after work drink. As an afterthought, she pours him one as well. He speaks again as she hands it to him. “Thanks for doing this.”

Charlie sits down on the other end of the couch and watches him over the rim of her glass as she takes a drink. She really has Miles to blame for her appreciation for the stuff. The dynamic duo aren’t the only ones that enjoy a good buzz every now and then. “You wanted to talk, so talk,” she says after several minutes of silence.

Bass hesitates, not knowing exactly where to begin. “I, uh – I never meant to hurt you, and I’m sorry if I did.” He feels like an idiot. What does saying he’s sorry do? It doesn’t make up for it, and he doesn’t see how he’s deserving of forgiveness at any rate.

She shifts on the couch, cutting the distance between them in half as she turns to sit sideways on the couch. “You did, but I guess I can’t really hold that part of it against you.”

He wasn’t prepared for that answer. “What?” The question is almost a whisper.

“I slept with Connor for the same reason you slept with her, so holding a grudge against you would make me a hypocrite, wouldn’t it?” She confesses. Her expression hardens just a little. “But Miles is another matter. I can’t quite so easily forgive you for hurting him. And he won’t either.”

“Fair enough,” he says with a sigh. He takes a drink of the whiskey she’d poured for him. He doesn’t even really want it, but needs something to do with his hands. The urge to pull her to him is entirely too strong. “I wasn’t expecting forgiveness anyway.”
Charlie hears the sorrow and regret in his voice. He reminds her now of the lost man she’d found in an empty swimming pool two years prior. But now she knows that it wasn’t an act. He’s the most guilt ridden person she’s ever met. He wears it like a second skin, in fact. This softens her a little. “So what do you want from me then?”

This brings their last conversation before he left to mind. That had been what she’d asked him. What did he want? And when he couldn’t answer, she’d struck him right at his core. She couldn’t have been more dead on. “Something that I can never have. Even if it was possible before, I know it can’t be now. So I’d settle for you not hating me.”

She scoots a little closer. “I don’t hate you.”

She’s close enough to touch now. There’s a voice in his head, the part of him that always gets him to do things that he’ll feel stupid for later. It’s practically screaming to kiss her. What are you waiting for, dummy? He leans in closer, their lips almost touching.

Charlie waits. He’s going to kiss me, she thinks. He’d better kiss me, or I swear I’ll kill him. She’s very well aware that he’s fighting with himself – probably trying to convince himself of all the reasons why doing so would be a horrible idea. She hears him mumble. “Dammit.” This is the usual sign that he’s just lost an internal struggle of some sort. She closes her eyes, and can almost feel his lips on hers, close as they are.

Suddenly the spell is broken by the sound of a wail from the back bedroom. Bass jerks back to reality. He jumps up and goes to check on Jeremy. The kid is prone to nightmares, and it seems that tonight is no exception. Charlie follows at a careful distance. She sees Bass sitting on the bed next to his charge, trying his best to calm him down. He’s lit the lamp next to the bed so she can see them well.

She can tell how awkward it is for him, but he does it all the same. She wonders if he sees the pull that this kid has on him. For all his denials about keeping him and how he’s not equipped for this, he seems to be doing a better job than he realizes. She watches them for quite a while, trying to stay out of view. For some reason, she doesn’t want him to know. The boy eventually calms down a little as Bass talks to him quietly. She doesn’t hear what he’s saying exactly, but whatever it is seems to be working.

Jeremy looks up at him with a tear stained face. He whispers something. Bass sighs. She can barely hear him. “Well, scoot over.” He kicks off his boots and stretches his long legs out on the bed. She steps out of view as he blows out the lamp. Charlie goes a bit further down the hall to her own room now. She can’t help but warm a little more to him after seeing this.

In the morning, Bass will pretend that he didn’t almost kiss her. She will find that mildly irritating. What’s the point of caring about someone if you are too scared or stupid to do something about it? So of course, she will also pretend it didn’t happen.

Bass and Jeremy made it back to the bar just in time for the early evening rush to pick up. They sat down at a table. Charlie was expecting them and he knew she’d bring their plates when she had time. It seemed that half the town was there and they all watched them with curiosity. “What do they want?” Jeremy asked.

Bass watched him with concern. He knew that the stares coming from the other patrons were making him nervous. “Don’t worry about it. Willoughby is just full of nosy neighbors. I’ve been away a while and you’re new in town.” He changed the subject to distract him. “I’ll talk to Charlie’s mom about school tomorrow, okay?”
Rachel sits in her little office alone. She cannot believe that he’s back. She’s heard that he and the boy will stay with Charlie until he can get his place fixed up. She knows that Charlie is only doing it because of the child. And if it wasn’t for Monroe and what had happened and all of the bad blood between them, she could have seen herself making the same offer in another life.

She closes her eyes and tries to blot out the figure that has been haunting her off and on for the past two days. He doesn’t speak, just stares at her with an unspoken accusation on his face. He first appeared a few hours before Miles showed up with Aaron and Priscilla. She’d been so happy to see them until she saw who they’d brought – or as Aaron had told her, who’d brought them. It was like the ghost was warning her of his impending arrival.

After hearing what Aaron had to say, she knew then what it was and what it wanted. She’s trying so hard to resist the pull she feels to acknowledge him. A part of her knows that if she speaks to the image then it will not just stand by staring. She will hear his voice. All she has to do is just speak once and she can talk to him again.

Instead she huddles in the corner, rocking back and forth on her heels. She doesn’t want him to talk, she doesn’t want him silent. She doesn’t want him here; she is terrified he’ll go away. Her eyes are squinted shut so tight that it almost hurts. Gene knocks on the door. “Rachel? Are you down here?”

“Yeah Dad,” she says. She opens her eyes and breathes a sign of relief. He’s gone.

“I’ve got supper on the table,” her father says through the closed door.

Rachel slowly stands, stretching. When she headed down here it was not quite noon. I’ve been down here that long? “I’ll be up in a little bit,” she says. She needs time to pull herself together.

“Miles is here,” Gene informs her before heading back up the stairs.

Rachel’s face lights up. Miles is here. This is the second time in a week. A far cry from the nightly dinners they once shared, but maybe it means that things will be better. Maybe conversation will be less stilted, maybe he’s forgiven her. Maybe…
If At First You Don't Succeed, Shoot It Dead

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. This was sort of a transition chapter and was a little difficult to write. I had to tie several scenes together and it was increasingly difficult to make them cohesive. Most of this chapter is character development between Bass and Connor, Jeremy and Rachel (and of course, Charlie towards the end). I’m also playing a little with the format I’m using, and transitioning to a more correct and traditional narrative format (I’m not sure why the majority of us write fanfic in block format), but I can tell you that for some reason I found the simple addition of indents to be very distracting lol

“Up and at ‘em, kid.” Bass pulled the blanket back to reveal Jeremy’s sleeping form. It was not quite dawn and it was going to be a long day for the both of them; he was due to report back to work and Jeremy would start his first day of school.

They’d spent most of the previous morning scavenging for enough furniture in the vacant homes outside the town walls to make Bass’ loft livable. Bass would still have to get a wood burning stove from the blacksmith when he got paid, but at least the kid had a bed and they had an actual table to eat at rather than just using the surface of his dresser. He’d even found a small cupboard to use as a cabinet for food.

“Time to get up,” he said as he pulled back the curtain he’d hung to create a bedroom of sorts for the child. “Food’s on the table.”

Jeremy slowly roused, blinking the sleep from his eyes. His first night in what would be his home for the foreseeable future did not pass easily. He’d woken several times with nightmares of his mother and that last night in Arco. Each time Bass had been there to comfort him in his gruff and stilted manner.

While he waited for Jeremy to use the chamber pot in the next room, Bass finished getting dressed. After getting the loft ready (and not a day too soon, a third night under Charlie’s roof would have been too much for him; as it was he’d spent that second night pretending to sleep on the floor next to Jeremy’s bed just so he could keep his hands to himself), he’d had to deal with Rachel. It was not a welcome experience.

After leaving Jeremy at Charlie’s bar for lunch, he makes his way reluctantly towards Gene’s house. He is not looking forward to talking to her, but he has little choice in the matter. She’s in charge of the school. He knocks on the door. After a few minutes, Gene opens it.

“What do you want?” the doctor asks. Of course he’s aware of the brief nonsense between his daughter and the former general, which has only given him another reason to hate the man on his porch.

“I need to talk to Rachel. Is she here?”

The door slams in Bass’ face. He hears Gene calling for Rachel through the open window. He supposes that he’s not considered good enough to come inside. Annoyed, Bass sits
down on the front porch steps and waits. Several minutes pass before the door opens again and Rachel appears behind him.

“What are you doing here, Bass?”

He stands up slowly, as if any sudden movements will spook her or send her into a rage. “Rachel,” he greets evenly, “I just wanna talk.”

Rachel narrows her eyes at him, cocking her head to the side as she leans against the front door, arms crossed in front of her body. “You’re really something. Do you really think you can come here and…”

“Not about that,” he interrupts. “I never want to talk about that – ever. It’s about the kid.”

She glares at him suspiciously. “What about him?”

“I go back to work tomorrow,” he explains, “and I can’t just leave him alone all day. I need to get him enrolled in school.”

Rachel tells him that she needs to talk to Jeremy before she can agree. A short while later, Bass returns with the boy in tow. She sits him down at the kitchen table while Bass keeps a careful watch over them both. He doesn’t trust Rachel any more than she trusts him. After a few minutes she gets up and asks Gene to give him a physical – a requirement for all children attending the school, according to Texas law.

“Listen kid,” he says. “The doc here won’t hurt you.” Bass had noticed the way Jeremy had flinched when Gene got too close. These people are little more than strangers, and he’s wary of them.

While Gene gives Jeremy the exam, Rachel ushers him outside. “I’ve seen you do a lot of stupid things over the years, but this one takes the cake. What do you think you’re doing, Bass? You can’t care for a child – especially one as traumatized as he is.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” He has really had it with people telling him that. He is quite aware of his shortcomings and doesn’t need the constant reminder, especially from someone as self-righteous and condescending as Rachel Matheson. “What else am I supposed to do? Not like anyone else is stepping in to volunteer.”

“You want me to let him around the other kids? Well, you need to tell me where he came from.”

Bass explains to her the circumstances surrounding his fostering of the boy. Knowing her as he does, he doesn’t leave anything out. She’s too smart and will see a gap in his story a mile away. “What was I supposed to do,” he finishes, “leave him on the plains to starve or wait for those things to work their way south? Look, I’m asking for your help here. Can he go to the school or not?”

Rachel sighs as she accepts defeat on this one. Texas law requires for children his age to go to school. She might be able to use the fact that he’s nine and can’t read as an excuse to temporarily exclude him, but even she can’t bring herself to punish a child just to get back at Bass. “He’s going to have problems, Bass. He seems bright, but can’t even read.”

“Look, I’ll work with him at night, okay? Maybe we can catch him up. I’m begging you here.” He peeks in the window to check on Jeremy. The child looks about as exhausted as Bass
feels. Neither of them signed up for this mess. He’s in over his head and everyone (Jeremy included) knows it.

Rachel can see the worry written all over his face. And, she can’t help but feel for the little boy. He’s been through so much in his short life. It hardly seems fair. “He can start tomorrow,” she finally says. “But you need to follow through and work with him – and he’s going to need a lot of extra work if we’re going to catch him up with the other kids his age. Aaron, Priscilla and I have our hands full with the nano, so we won’t be able to tutor him.” She doubts that Bass is capable of doing it, but there was no other alternative.

Thank you,” Bass says as he goes inside to collect Jeremy, who is sitting in his underwear. The doctor is just now finishing up the exam.

“All things considered, he’s in pretty good health. He’s a little underweight thought,” Gene says.

“We’re working on it,” Bass counters, “he was half starved when we found him.” He waits for Jeremy to get dressed again so they could head out. By now it is almost time for dinner and they need to finish getting the loft together before nightfall.

Bass suppressed a yawn as he sat at the table while Jeremy finished eating. When he hadn’t been calming the boy down from a nightmare he’d been flipping through the remedial reading textbook that Rachel had given him. Having no sleep the night before was not a promising start to his first day back as sheriff. Charlie had already let it slip that Connor was the one he’d be stuck working with. That fact only made going back that much harder.

An hour later he stood at the door to his office, having already escorted Jeremy to school. It was still early, so he hoped to have a few minutes to himself before having to deal with his son. Finding the door already unlocked, he bit back a groan as he went inside. And there he was, in all his cocky glory, sitting in Bass’ chair, his feet up on the desk.

“Hey Dad,” Connor said with a grin.

Bass walked past him. As he did so, he shot out a hand and knocked his son’s feet to the floor. “Keep your damn boots off my desk,” he grumbled. “For that matter, keep your ass out of my chair.”

“Well good morning to you too.”

Bass waited for him to get up before he moved behind the desk. He noticed the folded uniform on top of the filing cabinet in the corner that Miles must have had delivered since he’d returned. He took the shirt and badge off the top. Opening the top drawer, he swept the dark brown pants inside and slammed it shut again.

“Aren’t you supposed to wear those too?” Connor asked with a raised eyebrow. Miles had already told him that he was going to make Bass wear the ugly uniform just to annoy him (or would at least try).

“He can make me wear this stupid shirt, but I’ll quit and turn myself in to Blanchard before wearing those,” he said under his breath as he jacked a thumb at the cabinet. Bass took off his shirt and put the uniform one on, not bothering to button it up. With the white v neck shirt underneath, he looked more like the slacker he’d been in high school rather than one of the town’s
legal authorities. He pinned the badge on as an afterthought as he took a seat.

Connor drug the other chair in the office over to the corner and sat down, watching his father curiously. Technically the office wasn’t open for another half hour, so neither would begin working until then. “Listen Dad,” he began, “We need to talk about what happened at the reservoir.”

Bass looked up at the younger man. As much as he didn’t want to deal with it, he knew it’d have to come out eventually. He held a hand out, indicating that Connor get it off his chest.

“I’m sorry about the way things went down. I was just pissed that you’d choose Miles over me. I’m your son and he’s not even related to you.

Bass stared him down for a few seconds. “I didn’t even know you existed until the night your mom died.” He saw the flashes of hurt and anger in Connor’s eyes at his mention of Emma. “You know what’s fucked up? You hate me for her, but to get the Republic back I would have to become that person again.

“I chose to follow Miles because he was right. I hadn’t changed – the Republic would have been the same disaster it was the first time. I chose Miles because despite everything we’d done to each other, he’s still my brother. I’ve lost two families and both times he was all I had left. His trusting me meant something.”

“And my being your son didn’t?”

“I’ve known Miles since we were in Kindergarten. At the time I’d known you for what, six months? I’m sorry. I wanted to give you something, to make up for not being there and for your mom, so I offered you the one thing that I should never have and I lost my head again in the process. You can either accept me as I am now, or you can go to hell. End of story.”

Connor got up and crossed the room and leaned on the desk. “So, what’s the deal with the kid then? Decided you needed a replacement for me?”

“Not everything is about you. It’s none of your business, but now he’s my responsibility.” Bass stood up and leaned in, their faces now inches apart. “Is that going to be a problem? The kid’s had it rough and it’s hard enough as it is. I’ll be damned if I take any crap from you over it.”

They were interrupted when the door to the office opened. “Problems already?” Miles asked as he walked through the doorway.

Connor backed off and returned to his chair, slouching down with his arms crossed over his chest. “Nope.”

“Good,” Miles replied. He turned to look at Bass. “I thought I told you to wear the fucking uniform.”

“I am wearing it,” Bass ground out.

“Those look like jeans.”

Bass shrugged as he sat down casually, holding his hands out in mock innocence. “The pants didn’t fit.”

“Nice to see you grew up a little while you were gone. Still an asshole though, I see.”
“Well, I learned from the best,” Bass shot back with a smile as he put his feet up on the desk. “So to what do we owe this honor?”

“I just wanted to see if you two had killed each other yet. Well, that and to let you know that John McDaniel’s broke his ankle last night.” Miles said.

“What’s that got to do with us?” Connor asked.

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” Miles replied, “and everything to do with him.” He looked down at Bass. “You’re the only person who’s not on the watch schedule through the end of next month. That means that you get to take his place.”

This didn’t particularly bother Bass. Town law required every able bodied person participate in taking watch over the town walls. It worked out to once every two weeks or so. “Okay. Send over the schedule later.”

Miles produced a piece of paper from his jacket. He handed it to Bass. “Every other Thursday, starting next week at zero-hundred.”

“Wait. What how am I supposed to do with the kid?” Bass slid his feet down to the floor and started to rise. “Can’t I just trade with someone assigned during the day?”

Miles headed back towards the door. “No, you work during the day, remember? Figure it out.” He let the door close behind him with a bang.

“Dick.”

Connor looked at his father with a bemused expression on his face. “What’s the matter, Dad? Need help finding a babysitter?”

“Is this some kind of joke to you?” Bass grabbed his jacket and went to leave to start the morning patrol. “Get your ass to work. I’ll take the center of town; you go keep an eye on the residential side.”

“Why? Nothing ever happens over there.”

“Because I’m your fucking boss and I said so, that’s why.”

They both went out and got started. In reality, incidents were rare. The majority of the work Bass had ever done had been when someone came in the office to request his intervention and even then there were times when he’d gone days without that even happening. Sure, there were the occasional days where it was one thing after another, but it was never anything he couldn’t handle.

Over the course of the next week, everything went smoothly enough, all things considered. Jeremy had been upset over the fact he’d been put in a class with children much younger than him, but it made him want to learn all the more. Each night, Bass worked with him out of that reading book. Despite the fact he’d never been to school before his mother had at least been able to teach him his letters at some point.

After a few days in his new home the child’s nightmares had not stopped but they were limited to one or two a night. He slowly became less nervous as well. Bass had been reluctant to introduce him to Connor, but he knew at some point they’d meet. At first, Jeremy seemed worried – as if Bass’ having a son would change his living circumstances. To his credit, Connor was at least nice to the kid, even if he had seemed almost jealous of his presence when they’d discussed
him that first day at work.

He’d slid back into the role of sheriff easily enough, although working with his son was still an uncomfortable concept for him. Bass had worked out a schedule that would keep them open a little later and also limit the amount of hours that they worked together. Because Bass had to take Jeremy to school in the morning, he simply opened at eight instead of nine and left around four so he could be off when Jeremy’s day was done. Connor came in around noon and locked up at eight.

It was late in the afternoon and the day had so far been disgustingly dull. Bored, they both sat in silence and had been doing so for well over an hour. By now the Rangers had all returned to their pre-war assignments so Willoughby no longer suffered from a lot of the outside threats that Bass had dealt with when he’d first taken the job. And, it seemed that since his return, the locals had all been on their best behavior.

“I wonder whatever happened to Tom Neville,” Connor said out of nowhere. He didn’t really care one way or the other, but small talk would at least break up the monotony of the day. He hadn’t expected an actual answer.

“He’s dead,” Bass replied.

Connor looked over at his father, intrigued. “What makes you so sure of that?”

“I’m the one that killed him, took his head clean off.” He made a slicing gesture with his hand.

Connor sat up. “Guess you had a busy vacation.” He knew that everyone was very well aware of what Bass had been up to while he was gone, but no one had bothered on cluing him in yet. He was already feeling more than a little annoyed at being left out of the loop. “Guess he never made it to Idaho then,” he added.

“What do you know about Idaho?” Bass sat up abruptly. “Did he say anything to you about it?”

Connor was confused by Bass’ sudden interest in Neville’s mad ravings. “He just said he had to get there. Some town called Bradburn? Or maybe it was Bradley… Something like that.”

Bass felt his heart start to pound in his chest. “Bradbury?”

“Yeah, that might have been it. Why?”

“Did he say anything else?”

The more urgent his father sounded, the more uncomfortable he became. “Just a bunch of crazy shit. He kept talking to people that weren’t there. Why is this so important?”

Bass didn’t answer. Instead he got up and grabbed his jacket. “Come on. School’s about to let out anyway. I’ve got to go pick up Jeremy and we need to talk to Aaron and Rachel.”

They walked in silence across town. With any luck, Connor will have overhead something useful. They knew the Nano’s end game but they had no idea how it planned on getting what it wanted. Even the minutest of details could mean the difference when it came to fighting back.

They arrived just a few minutes before classes ended for the day. Jeremy came out with the other kids, followed by the teachers a few moments later. Jeremy looked like he’d had a hard
“Hey kid, what’s wrong?” Bass asked as the boy approached.

Jeremy looked like he was on the brink of tears. “Nothing,” he said quietly.

Bass made a mental note to question him further later. “Stay with Connor for a second. I gotta talk to Rachel and Aaron. He saw Priscilla and Aaron leaving the building behind the last of the students. “Rachel still inside? We need to talk.”

“No, she didn’t come in today. We had to combine classes,” Priscilla said.

Bass wondered if that was what was wrong with Jeremy. The kid didn’t seem to adjust to changes very well. “We need to find her. Connor might know something. He said Neville was talking about Idaho before he disappeared.”

Within minutes all four of them were headed towards the Porter household. He suddenly had a bad feeling when they arrived to find the door ajar. “Everyone, wait here,” he said. “Gene? Rachel?” He called out to them as he drew his gun and carefully stepped into the house. He searched the ground floor, eventually coming to the basement stairs.

“Bass?” Miles’ voice called from below.

He headed in the direction of the stairs as he holstered his gun. “Sorry, the way the door was open. Trouble?” he said as he came down the stairs to join them in Rachel’s office.

“Oh, there’s trouble all right,” Miles said. Charlie was standing next to him at the bottom of the stairs while Gene was hovering over Rachel, looking worried. Bass did a double take when he saw the extra person in the room. He headed back up the stairs.

“Connor, take Jeremy home,” he said, tossing his keys to his son. “You two, come with me.” Without another word, he went back to the door leading to the basement.

“What’s going on?” Aaron asked.

He didn’t reply, just gestured for them to follow. Bass had known instantly that if the Nano managed to succeed in their attempt to take her over, they were in serious trouble. This was Rachel’s technology. If they were ever going to deactivate them, they needed her. Conversely, if they took her over it would spell nothing less than disaster.

“You were right. He was on his way,” she said quietly, tears in her eyes.

Bass watched her talk to the image of Danny Matheson. He looked around at the others; save Aaron, they didn’t seem to grasp what was happening. “Am I the only one other than her that’s sees him?”

“Sees who, Bass?” Miles said.

“How long has he been here, Rachel?” Bass asked as he slowly made his way down the stairs. Miles made a grab at him, convinced that letting him talk to her would only make it worse. Aaron put a hand on Miles’ shoulder, stopping him. When she didn’t respond, Bass tried again. “That’s not Danny. Whatever he told you is a lie.”

She turned her head to look at him, her eyes wide – frighteningly so. “They’ll make you pay for what you did. He promised me that they can make you pay – for him, for Ben, for all of the
people you killed.”

Bass shook his head. “No, it’s the Nano telling you that. Danny is dead. They can’t give him back to you. Don’t listen.”

“It’s all your fault,” she said. A tear ran down the side of her face.

“Let them in Mom. We can be together and they will punish him for what he did in Philly,” the figure said.

Bass was standing on the other side of her now. His mind raced as he tried to find a way to reach her. Their lives depended on Rachel snapping out of it. If they took control of Rachel, the Nano would have control of the capsule in her leg as well as the mind of the one living person with intricate knowledge of what they were facing. He glanced over at the stairs and at the people standing on them as he came to a decision. “Rachel, listen to me. You’re right; it’s my fault - all of it.

“If it wasn’t for me, Danny and Ben would be alive. We never would have gone to the tower, and Aaron would never have brought them to life. If it wasn’t for me, those things wouldn’t be doing this to you now.”

Before he could change his mind, he pulled out is gun. He barely heard Miles calling his name. He took the safety off and turned the gun around and held it out to her. “Take the gun. I deserve it and everyone knows it. Get your revenge, but don’t let them win. You don’t need them to make me pay for the past – do it yourself. If you let them take you over, all you’re doing is punishing Miles and Charlie and everyone else. Don’t hurt them because of all the things I did.”

When she didn’t move to take the weapon he put it forcefully in her hands. “Why let them kill me when you deserve the right to do it yourself?” He pointed at her family on the stairs. “They need you here to fight these things. You have to stay with them, or the whole world ends. Shoot me, and just maybe he’ll leave you alone.”

He’d said all he could. He could see the big picture. Rachel needed to beat the Nano. He wasn’t a scientist or a computer nerd. He was nothing more than a broken down drunk that could swing a sword. They had Miles for that now. If and when their human slaves worked their way south he could fight them, Connor too. He closed his eyes and waited, knowing that he was about to die. There was no way that Rachel wasn’t going to pull the trigger. He just hoped it would snap her out of it.

When the gun went off, he flinched just a little. Instead of hitting him, it the bullet was lodged in the concrete wall across the room. Rachel sank to the floor sobbing. The ghost of Danny, with all of his promises was gone; a broken chunk of concrete from the impact of the bullet was all that remained in his place.

Bass opened his eyes as soon as he realized he wasn’t dead. He couldn’t quite decide if he was relieved or disappointed. Shoving that morbid thought aside, he looked over at Miles and Charlie, both of whom were standing in complete shock at what had just happened.

Choosing to ignore them for now, he squatted down in front of her and carefully took the gun back. “They show up as the dead, but it’s all a lie,” he said gently. “I came back here because we need your help. You’re the one that can stop them. I swear to you that after this is done, I’ll leave and never bother you or your family again.”

He stood up and turned to head back up the stairs. Gene stopped him. “How did you know she
wouldn’t shoot you?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” he replied before heading back up. He stopped when he got outside. He’d faced death more times than he could count, but there was something about handing a gun to the person that wanted him dead the most that wrecked his nerves. He leaned up against the house next to the front door and waited for his heart to stop racing. Eventually he slid to the concrete, his legs deciding that they no longer wanted to function.

He lost track of how long he’d sat there when Aaron and Priscilla appeared from within. “You okay?” Aaron asked, looking down at him.

“At the end of the day, I’m just a soldier. I can fight and I can kill and I can lead men. But this? How do you fight something that isn’t really there?”

“If I’m not mistaken, you just did,” he said quietly as he and Priscilla walked past him to leave. There would be time to discuss what had happened later. For now, Rachel was a mess and would need time before she was able to have a rational conversation. As an afterthought, Aaron turned back around. He pulled his trusty flask out of his pocket and let it drop into Bass’ lap.

With the whiskey and time, he began to calm down. He was just about ready to get up and head back when Charlie came out, letting the screen door bang behind her. Distracted, she didn’t even realize he was sitting there. She sat down on one of the wicker chairs on the other side of the door and put her face in her hands.

“Never a dull moment in Willoughby,” he said after a moment.

Charlie sat up and turned to the sound of his voice, startled. He tossed her the flask, it was almost empty, but something was better than nothing. She took a grateful drink, still not quite believing everything that had happened in that basement. “How did you know what she was seeing?” she asked after a while.

“Because I could see it too.” It had occurred to him that it was possible the Nano were trying for a two-for one mind fuck special.

Charlie just looked at him. She noticed now that he was still a little shaken up. That wasn’t something that happened to him easily. It reminded her of the way he’d looked when they’d watched the Patriots burn at the old high school. “What were you thinking? She could have shot you.”

Bass slowly got to his feet. “I didn’t have time to come up with anything else. They almost had her.”

“You could have been killed,” she said, sounding as if she was making some kind of accusation. She stood and crossed the porch to place herself directly in front of him. “Did you mean what you said?”

He wasn’t sure which part she was referring to. In the end it didn’t really matter. There was truth behind all of it. “Every word.”

She just didn’t get it. “Why would you die for her?”

“Because she’s your mom – and she’s the love of his life. And because you all need her - without Rachel those things will eventually win and we’re all fucked then.”

Charlie stood up on her toes and pressed her mouth to the corner of his. “We need you
He felt cornered. His reflexes were always faster than hers; Bass grabbed her forearms and pivoted so that her back pressed on the door. “No, you don’t.” He released her and took a step back. “I did my part. I got Staypuffed and Robot Girl here in one piece.”

He turned and walked down the porch steps. When Charlie realized he was going to just walk away, she got up and followed. “Aaron told us that they messed with you too. That’s how you knew what to tell her, wasn’t it?”

“Just leave it, Charlie.” He kept walking. She was the last one he wanted to discuss that night with.

Charlie refused to let him push her away. She almost had to break into a run to get in front of him, as fast as he was walking. “What did they do to you?”

He considered just maneuvering her out of the way, but they were already starting to attract the attention of Gene’s neighbors. He looked her in the eyes. “I hope for your sake that you never have to find out.”

“They attacked her with Danny. What did they attack you with?” She reached up and touched his cheek.

Bass closed his eyes and let himself enjoy the contact for just a second. He brought his and grabbed hers, gently pulling it down, but not releasing it. “That I’m alone and hollow – and that will never change.”

“You’re wrong. You are not alone,” Charlie argued.

“I’m too broken to be anything else. When I lost my family they ripped a hole right through the middle me, and I can never fill it. Believe me, I’ve tried. I tried to make a new family and they died, so I tried power and then whiskey, women. Nothing works, and they knew it. That’s what they promised me – to make it all go away. They just couldn’t give me the person I wanted most.” He told himself to shut up, but his mouth just wasn’t cooperating.

His admission stopped her in her tracks. “Bass…”

“No, don’t you dare pity me. I made my bed, and I’ll lie in it. I’ll see you around, okay? I’ve got to get the kid fed. I’m sure he’s freaking out by now.”

Charlie moved to let him pass. “I’ll send Greg over with some supper for the three of you.” She followed at a close distance but left him to his own thoughts. When she got back to work, she took over the bar from her cook and now occasional backup bartender and sent him over with the daily stew. Sending over supper so he didn’t have to worry about fixing something so late was such a small thing to offer him, but it was the only gesture she knew he’d accept right now.

That evening Bass ate in silence with his son and Jeremy. What happened in that basement ran through his mind over and over again. It felt odd to not be more appreciative of the fact that he was still alive. For one, if Rachel had actually shot him, who would have taken care of Jeremy after that? He shoved those thoughts aside and forced himself to get through the rest of the night. Connor left shortly after eating, leaving Bass to get Jeremy ready for bed.

Tomorrow night he would have to take that watch shift, so before Connor had left, Bass had made arrangements for his absence from work. Jeremy would stay home with him and they’d meet up at Aaron’s when he and Priscilla got home after the school closed. They’d just have to go
over what Connor had heard without Rachel for the time being.

Feeling drained after the emotional rollercoaster of handing Rachel a loaded weapon and then letting Charlie in to see the darkest parts of him, he went to bed early and tried to get some sleep. Since he’d been back, he’d done his best to avoid his earlier habit of watching her close up from afar. Going down that dark road of obsession was the last thing anyone needed him to do right now. Still, he slept with the window open, ears tuned for the slightest hint of trouble.
We Aren't In Texas Anymore, Toto!

Chapter Notes

Okay folks, I know I promised you 100% Charloe in this chapter but it was getting too long (13k words +) so I had to break it up into two chapters. I wanted to get another chapter posted before work so I am posting this “half” of it now, and the next chapter will be up when I get off work or first thing in the morning, depending on how late I get home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie closes her bar alone as usual. As she locks the door, she wonders if he’s watching her. She looks up in the direction of his fire escape. She does not see the telltale glow of a cigar burning in the night (she noticed that he’d picked the habit back up a few days after returning). A part of her is disappointed. It’s not like she hadn’t spent four months without his constant vigil, but the idea of him making sure that she’s safe is comforting (not creepy as Miles had told her once he’d found out about it).

With a disappointed sigh, she goes around the corner and into the alley. She swears she hears something. Pausing, she looks around, but sees nothing. She knows that it’s probably her nerves – it’s been a trying day. She’s been distracted since returning to work. The look on Bass’ face as he closed his eyes and waited for her mother to shoot him in order to snap her out of whatever trance those things had her under will haunt her for the rest of her life. A strange mixture of fear, sadness and acceptance, it was nothing like she’d ever seen before.

She took the gesture for what it was – an apology for over a decade of bad memories and ruined friendships. He’d offered no excuses, no insistence on others to share the blame of that fateful night in Colorado - the night that had driven her mother insane, destroyed half of the eastern seaboard, and brought to life the cause of a blackout that broken the laws of physics (as Aaron was forever reminding everyone).

The instant he’d walked up those stairs, she’d seen the look in her uncles eyes and had known that in that one moment, Miles had forgiven him. How could he not? He’d been willing to let someone that he hated kill him just to make up for what he’d done; to save Rachel for Miles and for her. If she hadn’t already forgiven him, she would have in that moment as well. Now if only she could get him to see it.

She snaps herself out of these musings and unlocks the door to her apartment. Setting her bag and jacket on the table by the door, she lights a lamp. She jumps when she sees him standing in the shadows, just barely visible in the poor illumination of the solitary flame. “Daddy?”

Ben Matheson stares at her. His eyes are cold. “Charlie. What are you doing?”

She takes a step back. She knows what it is. She knows that her father is dead; she watched him die. “You’re not real.” She continues to back up until she feels the door on her back. She closes her eyes and wills him to go away.

“That doesn’t work,” his voice is closer now. Charlie opens her eyes and he’s standing right next to her. “How could you do it? Care about that monster? He killed me and your brother.
He took your mom away. Even Maggie’s dead because of him.”

The words hurt, even though she knows he’s not real. The Nano are trying to get to her – to make her feel guilty for feeling something for the man that once held a chunk of the continent hostage. “He’s partially responsible for you and Danny, but it wasn’t all him. You and mom sold the nanotech to the people that caused the blackout. It’s your fault he became General Monroe in the first place. I told Maggie to stay home and Danny not to fight. We’re all at fault for the tower.”

“Making excuses is all you’re doing. Betraying your own family for a man that doesn’t even seem to really want you in the first place.”

“I’m not listening to you.” She covers her ears and closes her eyes.

She can still hear him. He isn’t even muffled. The sound doesn’t even come from her left any more. It’s in her head. “Where is he? You’ve thrown yourself at him like a fool, and all he did was leave town. Oh, that’s right, after he chose your mother over you.”

“That’s not what happened. Leave me alone.” She can’t stop the tears from falling.

“Stop it.”

“Are you so sure? I thought I raised you better than that. I guess Danny was always the smart one.”

“STOP!” She screams the word as she huddles on the floor. The harsh words stop. She opens her eyes and finds that she is alone once more. She picks herself off the floor, wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her hand. She blindly stumbles into the kitchen and pours herself a drink. Picking up the bottle and a glass she goes into the living room and sits down on the couch, shaking. As she finishes her first drink and pours a second, she catches herself wishing he were here.

It had been a long day already and Bass was not looking forward to spending the next six hours on watch. It had started with him finally talking to Jeremy about what had been bothering him the day before as school let out.

“So you gonna tell me what was wrong yesterday?” He asks as Jeremy sits at the table with him, picking at the fruit and cheese on his plate. It wasn’t much of a breakfast but the stove the blacksmith was converting wouldn’t be finished for at least another week, and then they still had to install it and hook it up to the existing ductwork so its use wouldn’t burn the building down.

“Are you going to be my dad?” Jeremy is almost mumbling.

The question takes Bass by complete surprise. “I, uh… I don’t know.” He still wasn’t trying to think that far ahead. He is 47, unmarried with grown son that he’d only even known about for two years. He’s an emotional wreck and half the time acts like a kid himself, not to mention that despite his newly found ability to resist temptation, he knows he’s basically a drunk and somewhat of a male slut. Basically – he’s not exactly father material.

The idea of formally adopting a nine-year old boy is terrifying and just somehow seems wrong. But, on the other hand he can’t picture anyone else doing the job – and he finds himself worrying about Jeremy and caring about him more than he’d planned or thought possible.

Jeremy had gone on to tell him that some of the kids had been messing with him over the identity of his caretaker. Bass had forgotten how mean kids could be, it having been so long since he’d been one himself. Jeremy hadn’t quite been aware of who Bass had been in the past before the
other children in the school had felt the need to inform him. The look on Jeremy’s face when he’d tried to explain it to him reminded him of the look his sister Angela had worn when Carrie Brinkman had told her there was no Santa Claus in the second grade.

The kid had remained pensive for the rest of the day. Just because Bass had chosen to keep him home for the day didn’t mean the kid really got a break. He’d worked with him for quite a while on the reading book before lunch. This was the first day that he’d ever spent with Jeremy where there wasn’t really anything to do.

He took him to an empty field on the outskirts of town with the soccer ball and tried to teach him the basic rules of soccer, but neither of them was really in the mood. Bass was still tired and wrecked over the events of the day before and Jeremy was still unsure of his place.

Bass gives up on soccer. Jeremy is sitting down on the dying grass, idly pulling blades out. He sits down next to him. “Listen, I know this is hard for you. I don’t know what’s gonna happen. How about we just take it one day at a time?”

Jeremy nods. It is obvious that he’s still upset over the way the other kids had been treating him.

Bass sighs as he fiddles with a blade of grass. When he was a kid, he and Miles used to turn blades of grass into a whistle. Trying to get the kid to perk up, he finds a blade of grass that is still green and does it now. Jeremy looks up and practically begs him to teach him how he did it. After spending the next twenty minutes or so trying to teach him, the kid finally gets it.

Bass ruffles his hair. “Hey, no matter what happens, you know I’ve got your back, right? I’m not gonna disappear on you.”

Jeremy smiles at him with hope in his eyes. “I know.”

Bass had taken Jeremy over to Aaron and Priscilla’s after school let out for the day. Connor met him over there and, much to his surprise, Rachel and Miles did as well. Rachel had looked tired, but at least she didn’t look crazy, and a lot of her hostility for him seemed to be under control.

The only thing that Connor had heard Tom say other than Bradbury was something about being chosen and needing power. The Geek Squad (as he and Miles had taken to calling their joint effort) didn’t think it meant anything, but there was something about it that struck Bass as odd. Exhausted, he decided it could wait until later.

He’d attempted to get some sleep after leaving Jeremy under Priscilla’s care, but had found it didn’t come easily. After he’d given up, he’d gone to Charlie’s to get something to eat. What he found there wasn’t promising.

He sits down at the bar. She comes up to him to see what he wants, looking very tired. “You okay?” he asks.

“Just had a bad night,” she says as she walks in back to get his meal. “I had a company last night,” she continues as she sets a plate in front of him.

When he sees the look in her eyes, he knows that she wasn’t talking about a person. “You mean they visited you?” he drops his voice.

“Visitors are invited. This was more like an invasion.”
“What happened?” He’s worried. That’s two attempts in the same day. Three if you count the attempt to lure Rachel as an attempt to mess with him as well.

“I heard a bunch of lies and told them to go away.” Something in her voice worries him.

“What was it?”

She sets a glass of whiskey down in front of him. “My dad.”

Bass finishes eating and pays her. “You know I’m just across the street, Charlie,” he reminds her as he heads out the door. He’s still got a few hours to kill so will try once more to get some rest before being up all night. What she’s just told him has ruined any chance of him actually succeeding, however.

He showed up at the town gate, climbing up on top to spend the next six hours staring into the night. Miles was leaning over, already watching. “Wow, on time and everything,” he commented.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s my shift,” Miles said, trying to act casual. He realized that he should have told Bass that he’d been paired up to take watch with John. He couldn’t for the life of him remember exactly why he’d left that piece of information out.

Bass sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the rest of the evening in uncomfortable silence with Miles. Having no choice he took his position on the other side of the gate and stared into the darkness. Somewhere towards the end of the first hour, Miles’ voice broke the silence. “Hey Bass?”

“Yeah?”

“What did the leper say to the whore?”

Bass turned his head and looked at Miles, confused. “What?”

“Keep the tip.”

It took him a second to realize what had just happened. “Did you just tell me a dick joke?”

Miles was leaning back up against the barrels that made up the back of the walkway above the gate. “Knock, knock.”

Bass shook his head. “I’m not gonna say it.” They went back to silence for a while, but for some reason, he just couldn’t help himself. “Who’s there?”

“Dick.”

“Dick who?”

“I dunno, you’re just a dick.

“Wow,” he said as he let out a small laugh, “that was horrible.”

They spent the majority of the next several hours trading jokes back and forth, most of them pretty bad. Bass got the message behind it. He was forgiven, or at least Miles was just trying
to move past things. This was his way of saying it without having to talk about it, which was
typical Miles – just pretend it nothing happened.

Before Bass even knew it their relief came. He turned to go. As he walked past Miles to
get to the ladder that led down to the ground, Miles stopped him. “Thank you, for stopping her.”
Bass nodded in response. “Anyway, are you okay? I mean after that…”

“I’m good, I think,” Bass said before going down the ladder and heading home to get
something to eat and get ready for work. By the time he picked up Jeremy from school he was
beyond exhausted. He hadn’t managed to do more than doze for a few minutes here and there the
day before. He struggled to stay awake during dinner, and went to bed as soon as Jeremy was out.

Over the course of the next several weeks life eased into a comfortable pattern, which
was a miracle, considering what had forced him to leave and what had induced his return. Most of
his time was split between work and taking care of Jeremy while the Geek Squad worked on trying
to find anything in the fragments of known code to deactivate the Nano, or at least to undo
whatever it was that Aaron had done.

After the attack on Charlie, the Nano had seemed to back down a bit, at least that was
what they hoped. It was either that or it was working towards using a different tactic. The majority
of this fight would boil down to the combined efforts of Rachel, Aaron and Priscilla; however
Miles was the first to point out that had Rachel or Aaron told anyone else about what the Nano was
capable of then just maybe they could have been better prepared for it.

Reluctantly, Rachel agreed that they’d meet once a week to fill everyone on where things
stood (even Gene), so every Sunday they met for dinner. This also gave Rachel an opportunity to
monitor Jeremy’s progress more closely (although she had to admit she was surprised how far he’d
come along and that Bass had been able to stick with it so far). As November came to a close he
was almost ready to move up to a first grade level.

The sound of thunder in the distance had Bass standing outside under Gene’s covered
porch on the last Sunday of the month. The weather was unseasonably warm and he was starting to
feel hot under his jacket. The others were still finishing up at the table, the exception being Jeremy
who was hopefully working on his homework in the living room. The kid still ate every meal like it
was his last, a reminder of the lack of care he’d received before Bass found him.

“Helluva storm rolling in,” Gene said from behind him.

Bass was leaning on the porch railing as he watched the lightning flash across the sky.
The wind had already picked up considerably. “Are we sure that’s all it is?”

As the storm got closer, he couldn’t help but think about what he’d seen during the so-
called power surge. Out of nowhere a lightning storm of epic proportions had whipped up. He’d
found it odd at the time (and a little bit frightening considering it had been going on all around
him and he’d been in the middle of a field at the time), but hadn’t really equated it with the power
before now.

But now that he knew the truth, the severity of the storm had him worried. He couldn’t
help but have the feeling that there was some connection they weren’t making, but for the time
being the consensus was that they were no closer to finding a way to stop the Nano than they had
been the day he’d first come back.

There was a bigger picture here, and they just couldn’t see it. Why had the Patriots
picked Willoughby of all places to infiltrate Texas? Their initial plan had been created with the
power in mind. That much they knew. Somehow the town had to be connected to Nano Project. Otherwise, it was just a nowhere ass town. Sure, it was a week from Austin, but there were more strategic towns.

And for that matter, why were the Nano so adamant about controlling someone from their group? Knowing what they did about the Nano and how they took people over surely with all their supposed knowledge and insight the Nano had to know that anyone who was aware of their intent would be harder to manipulate. Charlie was a good example of that. They tried to mess with her when she’d already been on the alert from the incident with her mom. Why did they waste the time and effort?

In his way of thinking (and in his own personal experience) futile acts stank of desperation. And desperation was the result of fear. Why were the nano afraid of them? It must mean that one of them was a threat. Rachel was the obvious answer as to whom, with Aaron pulling a close second. But, if that was the case, why not just fry them all and be done with it? They’d done it before, after all.

All of this had come up over the course of dinner, but no one had any answers. As the storm got closer and intensified, Aaron and Rachel came out to watch it. The looks on their faces, illuminated by the constant flashes of lightning told him they shared his suspicions about the nature of the tempest.

“Can they cause the storm itself, or just the lightning?” he asked as his unease grew.

Aaron stepped back as the rain began to fall. They were just on the edges of it now, but it would get worse very soon. “They probably can’t cause it. But they can definitely add the light show, and they might be able to increase the heat needed to strengthen the updraft. It’s all a matter of manipulating energy.”

“A simple yes or no would suffice. Do I look like a meteorologist?”

“The answer is maybe.”

Bass thought about this for a few minutes. Out of nowhere something popped in his head. A sign. First city powered by the atom! He laughed. It was right there the whole time on a beat up old metal sign. “I got it.”

They turned to look at him like he’d lost his mind. “Bradbury is only thirty miles from Arco. And, Arco, Idaho was the first city to be powered by nuclear energy, right? That means there’s a power plant nearby. What happens when you shut off those cooling towers?”

Rachel started to catch on. “The reaction causes so much heat that if all the towers were shut down at once it would cause a meltdown.”

“So why didn’t it happen? Think about how many nuclear power plants there are globally. Why didn’t we have hundreds of Chernobyls?” His mind was whirling as fast as the wind around them. “When you told me how the pendants worked, you told me that the power wasn’t gone, it was just being diverted by the nanites, right?”

“They’re using the energy from the power plant,” Aaron concluded. “It makes sense. It’s been fifteen years. Even though technically it all still works, it’s all breaking down. No one’s maintaining it, and eventually all the batteries and power sources in the world will all degrade. But think about all the waste and radiation. It’s all just another form of energy. Arco and Bradbury should be nuclear fallout zones by now, but they aren’t.”
“The nano must be using it up. They need energy to replicate. If you think about it, every
time they take someone over or burn someone they must be committing little nano suicide. They
have to replace the ones they lose,” Rachel said.

“So what’s changed between the tower and now?” Bass asked. They didn’t have time to
answer. The storm suddenly unleashed its fury on them, sending them inside. As he reached for the
door, he heard it. “Everybody in the basement, NOW!”

He shoved Aaron to get him moving. “Where’s Jeremy?” He said as he closed the door
behind him and saw the living room empty.

“I thought he was with you,” Connor said as he came out of the kitchen.

“Dammit. Get downstairs.” Miles, Charlie and Gene were already headed that way with
Aaron and Rachel not far behind him. He raced through the ground floor of the house, coming up
empty.

“Did you check upstairs?” Charlie said from behind him.

Bass turned towards her. “What are you doing? Get in the basement. We’re running out
of time.” He started to sprint up the stairs.

“Exactly. We’ll find him faster if there’s two of us!” Without a thought, she ran up after
him. The storm was loud through the open windows and she’d had to shout so he could hear her.
“In here!” she screamed as she found Jeremy in one of the bedrooms.

He was staring out the window, his face pale. She tried to grab him, but Jeremy started to
fight. “Come on kid, we’ve got to go!” Bass yelled as he appeared in the doorway. Despite the
command, the boy just stood there, frozen in place. “Dammit,” he said as he went over and
grabbed him. Throwing him over his shoulder he raced out of the room behind Charlie.

They were halfway down the stairs when his ears started to pop and the house started to
shake around them. “There’s no time,” he shouted. “Closet!” Charlie ripped open the closet door
next to the stairs. He set Jeremy down and they both reached in, yanking out the things Gene
stored on the bottom - A broom and mop, several boxes and a vacuum. Why does he still have a
vacuum? He wondered as he shoved Charlie and Jeremy inside and entered behind them.

As he closed the door, everything seemed to come apart. As the house shook and
creaked, he wrapped his body over both of them, holding them close to offer another layer of
protection while they waited for it to end. He heard a loud crash and then knew nothing more.

Bass came to with a groan sometime later. “Bass? Are you awake?” he heard Charlie say,
her voice sounding relieved.

They were still in the closet. He reached up behind him and found the doorknob. He
turned it and tried to push the door open, but it was blocked and he was only able to get it to open a
few inches. “What happened? How long have I been out?” His head was pounding. It was still
night, that much he know. The closet door opened just enough for him to see no light was filtering
in from outside, but that was all he could see.

“The shelf came down and must have hit you in the back of the head. It’s only been a
little bit. Maybe ten minutes? The rain just stopped.” She didn’t voice what they were both
thinking – Where were the others?”

“You two alright? Jeremy?” He couldn’t see either of them.
“I’m okay,” his voice wavered.

Bass tried to get the door open again. Pulling himself to a crouch, he tried to ram it with his shoulder, to no avail. Reaching above him, he tested the height of the closet. With the bottom shelf having fallen, he could not quite stand upright. He tried again, using his whole body now. He only managed to get it open a few more inches.

Frustrated, he sat down. With three people in the closet he there wasn’t enough space for him to try to kick out a hole in the wall on the sides, and the back would be too reinforced for him to break out that way. As the clouds began to clear, the dim moonlight appeared, offering just enough light to tell him two things: part of the roof and therefore upper floor was gone and the stairs had collapsed and were what was blocking their escape.

“Miles!” he called from the opening.

Following his cue, Charlie began to pound on the wall of the closet and yell as well. “Mom! Grandpa!” They kept it up for a while, but all they succeeded in doing was yell themselves hoarse and scare Jeremy further.

“It’s okay. We’ll get out of here,” Bass told him as he settled up against the closet wall. “We just have to wait ‘til morning. Someone will come.” He felt around until he found Jeremy at the back of the closet. He shifted the boy around to give him some leg room, allowing him to use his lap as a pillow. “Just go to sleep.”

“Bass?” the boy said, sounding urgent.

“Yeah?” he responded.

“I gotta pee.”

“Of course you do.” He helped Jeremy up and pushed him towards the door. “Try and aim outside the closet.” He ignored the laugh that erupted from Charlie. A few minutes later the boy was settled back down with his head in Bass’ lap.

Charlie was left to shift around in the cramped space, trying to get comfortable. “Come here,” he told her after listening to her frustrated groans for several minutes. She followed the sound of his voice, reaching out to touch his arm. When she’d found him, Bass pulled her to his side, wrapping his arm around her. She settled against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

If they hadn’t just survived a tornado, he’d have found her proximity uncomfortably pleasant, but circumstances being what they were, he just found it oddly comforting. “Try to get some sleep too. We’re probably going to be stuck here all night. I’ll stay up and listen for a while.” He kept his voice low. He could already hear Jeremy’s even breathing, indicating that the boy was out already. He fought the urge to press his lips against her temple. In the end he lost the battle. She sighed sleepily at the gesture. Unconsciously, he tightened the arm he had around her.

Bass’ eyes flickered open at the sound of someone calling his name. A thin stream of light came into the closet where he’d left the door wedged open to allow fresh air into the stuffy closet. He’d stayed awake for a long time after Charlie and Jeremy had fallen asleep but had eventually given up on a middle of the night rescue.

Bass was still snuggled against him, her hair draped over her face. He looked down to see Jeremy curled up in a ball, having slid off of his lap in the night. Not quite fully awake yet he brought his free hand up and brushed the hair out of Charlie’s face. The motion roused her.
“Hey,” she said, smiling up at him.

He couldn’t resist the pull of that smile. “Hey,” he repeated as he stroked the side of her face. He bent his head before he realized what he was even doing and pressed his lips lightly to hers.

“Bass! Charlie!” The voice he’d heard in his sleep called out then, forcing him to pull back and dashing the moment away.

“That’s Miles,” he said. He gently pulled himself from out from under her and crawled over to the door, pounding on it as hard as he could. “In here!” A few minutes later Miles appeared at the crack in the door. “I’d never thought I’d be so glad to see your ugly face. What took you so long?”

“Charlie with you?” he asked.

“Yeah, the kid too.”

“Well then you’re lucky, because otherwise I’d leave you there to rot for that comment. And who you calling ugly?” Miles said as he turned to pull away some of the rubble that was blocking them in.

“Please. I was always the pretty one,” Bass laughed. “Seriously, where have you been?”

Miles grunted as he worked. Within a few minutes Connor showed up and started to help. “We had to wait for someone to dig us out. Half the house collapsed. The other half is just gone.”

“What about the rest of town? How bad is it?” For reasons that he couldn’t quite grasp, the idea of the town being leveled filled him with an unexpected sense of dread.

“Haven’t a clue. You guys alright?”

“Yeah, just cramped. What about the others?”

Miles tested the door, finding that it still didn’t open enough to allow their escape. He and Connor continued to work. “They’re fine. We made it down in plenty of time. Gene’s salvaging what he can. If this is as bad as we think, he’s gonna need everything he can find.”

An hour later they were freed. Bass let out a groan as his muscles protested after having spent so many hours in the closet, unable to stretch his limbs out all the way. “Feeling your age?” Miles asked wryly.

Bass turned around to help Charlie and Jeremy over the rubble as they emerged from their temporary prison. “Shut up,” he said with all the humor he could muster. “You’re still older.”

They did what they could to help Gene get as many medical supplies together as they could. It seemed the tornado had ripped down only one side of the street. Across, there was very little damage beyond a few broken windows and fallen trees. There was one house on that side that had a tree land of the roof, but as far as Bass could remember, it was vacant anyway.

With their jobs being what they were Miles, Bass and Connor needed to check on the rest of the town. They agreed to split up. Miles would work with Rachel on this street and Connor would work his way down to the other side of the residential part of town. Bass would head towards the center of town and the marketplace.

Priscilla and Aaron agreed to keep an eye on Jeremy while Gene set up a makeshift clinic with the supplies they’d managed to gather up. Bass headed down the street taking in the devastation
around him. It seemed that half the town was destroyed. “Bass! Wait up,” Charlie said as she ran to

catch him. “I’ll go with you. I need to see if I still have a home, anyway.”

They walked in silence for a while. “What’s wrong?” she finally asked him. She could see the guilt

building; in fact she was almost expecting it.

“We could have died. If I’d have been paying closer attention, the kid wouldn’t have been upstairs

in the first place.”

She grabbed his hand to stop him. Bass turned to look down at her. Annoyed, Charlie slapped him

hard. “God you’re an idiot. If you hadn’t been outside and paying attention to the storm, none of us

would have known it was coming in time and we’d have all died while sitting around the kitchen

table.”

He knew her well enough by now. She’d refuse to allow him to blame himself. And, of course she

was right. He couldn’t take responsibility for an act of God or an act of Nano, or whatever the hell

it was, no matter how strong the inclination was to do so. He rubbed his cheek where she slapped

him. “Jeez, did you have to hit me so hard?” Bass turned to continue down the street.

Charlie laughed at him as she followed. “Well, sometimes it’s the only way to get your attention.”

They walked on for a while. The damaged seemed to vary. Some homes were fine, or had damage

so minor that it was not noticeable. Others were completely destroyed like Gene’s. They went from

building to building on the main road to the market searching for survivors amongst the rubble. So

far they’d only found a few. Quite a few of the homes were vacant, at least. They did, however find

a handful where none of the occupants had survived.

Bass swallowed back the bile that rose with everybody they found. Needing someway to mark the

homes that needed to be cleared, he flipped up the red flags on the mailboxes in front of the homes

where there’d been a death. They reached the end of the street and pressed on to the town square.

The tornado had ripped a gaping wound right down this part of town. His building was toast, but at

least Charlie’s bar and home seemed okay. The glass was broken in the front window, but

everything else seemed intact. She found Greg at the bar, sweeping up glass. “Everyone okay?”

Greg was sporting a nasty gash on his cheek. “Just a few scrapes for the most part. Bill took a nasty

shard of glass to the arm but we got the bleeding to stop.”

They spent the entire day supervising volunteers and helping to dig people out. They turned his

office as a base of operations. At least they could lock any valuables found up in the cell until their

owners could come and claim them. They worked until the light started to fade. By then Connor

had joined them, the section of town he’d been assigned to having been mostly unharmed.

In the last bit of light, Bass headed over to his own building. Because he and Jeremy were the only

does that lived there, it hadn’t been a priority and wouldn’t be for some time. It had been

completely leveled. He picked through the rubble, figuring that the third floor would likely be on

top. “I’m sorry,” Charlie said as she and Connor came up behind him.

Literally everything he owned was in the haphazard pile of bricks, not that it had been much. The

only things of value that were really in there were his weapons (he could replace them, but still),
his pay (he’d be needing that) and a faded, wrinkled prayer card from a funeral almost twenty

years ago. He’d carried it in his pocket for years, but it was falling apart so it was in a box with his

meager savings.
As he turned to walk away, he saw something out of the corner of his right eye, a soccer ball, still fully inflated. He picked it up and started to walk down the street towards Aaron’s.

He’d tried to convince Charlie to stay behind and get some rest. Her place hadn’t been damaged after all, but she refused. “We should all stick together,” she’d said.

As they walked through the door, Jeremy came running. He handed him the ball. “Well, at least we’ve still got this, right?” he said with a halfhearted laugh. The thought of losing another home had the boy’s eyes brimming. With a sigh, Bass kneeled down. “Hey, we’re going to be fine. It was a dump anyway, alright?”

Priscilla made up a room for Jeremy and him to share after they had a bite to eat. Connor’s place was unlivable, as was Miles’. Just as Charlie had said, they were all going to have to stick together. Charlie, Rachel and Miles would share the other room while Connor and Gene camped out in the living room.

Bass sat down on the side of the bed, watching Jeremy sleep. It took a lot to get him settled down. As he looked at him, all Bass could think was that this kid was probably the only person he knew that had luck as shitty as his own. “He’s not yours, you know.”

He hadn’t heard Connor come up behind him. He turned to see his son leaning up against the wall in the hallway, just across from the door. He got up and closed the bedroom door behind him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m still your son, not him.” he still sounded hurt, jealous over the kid.

“I’m well aware of that, but thank you for the reminder. What the hell is the matter with you?”

“I don’t get it, how you’ve become so attached to this kid. Why did you take him in?” Connor liked Jeremy, really. But he couldn’t help but feel like this kid had come around and Bass had transferred any fatherly affection he could have to this kid that he’d basically found on the side of the road.

“Because he didn’t have anyone else,” in that way, Bass felt like he and Jeremy were very much alike. Maybe that was where the overwhelming urge to protect him had come from.

“Neither do I,” he reminded his father.

Bass turned back to the bed. “He’s just a kid. You’re an adult. Start acting like one. Besides, you’ve made it abundantly clear from the moment I met you that you didn’t need shit from me.”

“Dad, I’m…”

“What is it with you? From the second we got back from New Vegas it’s like you’ve got a problem if there’s someone that doesn’t hate me. All the snide little remarks about Miles, now with the kid…” They’d been going through the motions over the past several weeks like everything was just fine, but he’d had enough. It was time for some things to be said. “I bled for you, let you whip me like a sideshow attraction in front of all your cartel buddies, and still you tried to kill me. I know I ruined your life by simply existing, and I’m sorry for it. You have no idea how sorry I am. But I can’t change it.”

“Dad, my house is destroyed. You know what’s funny? I don’t even think you know where I lived.” Connor walked away then and went into the living room to bed down for the night.

Bass dragged a hand through his hair. Of course, Connor was right. He’d made an effort to keep him at a distance, even after he returned. Sure, they worked together and were civil, friendly even.
And he did care about what happened to him, but it just seemed safer to keep things a little more formal.

Hard pressed to find any privacy with everyone staying in the same house, Bass went outside and sat down on the back porch. The weather had turned after the storm and it was getting cold, but he found it almost welcoming.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Charlie said as she joined him. She’d overheard the entire conversation with Connor, and did little to hide it.

“I handled that well, didn’t I?”

“He’ll get over it, and you’ll both get past it.” She sat down next to him. “Oh, almost forgot. I brought you something.” She produced a cigar and a book of matches that she’d gotten from Greg earlier in the day. “I figured any you had were under a ton of concrete right now.”

Smiling in spite of himself, Bass took the offered ‘gift’ from her and proceeded to light it. “Thank you.” He was unwittingly touched by the gesture, and slightly surprised she’d noticed he still smoked a cigar before going to bed every night. He’d made sure to end his nightly ritual before she closed every night.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, but then she leaned her head on his shoulder, a repeat of what happened in the morning. As much as he wanted to wrap his arm around her and just enjoy it, he forced himself to pull away. “Charlie, I can’t.”

She stood up and jumped off the porch to face him. “And yet you want to, so why not?”

“Your family, for one. Something happens between us and your mom will never forgive you, and eventually you’ll hate me for it. Then there’s the fact that I’m twice your age, or that I killed half your family and tried to kill the other half, or how about that everything in your life that sucks right now was probably at some point because of me.”

She stood with her hand on her hips. “You know what? This is the only shot that I’m going to give you and then I’m done. Yeah, my mom hates you. She’s got a lot of good reasons to, but I’m not her and I will never allow her feelings to dictate my life – no anymore at least. Second of all, so what you were born twenty five years before me? I’ve still more of an adult than you and Miles put together. And yeah, I still hold you partially responsible for my dad and Danny, but just because you share a part of the blame doesn’t mean I can’t forgive you for it, especially when it wasn’t what you’d exactly planned. And as far as trying to kill the rest of us, well we tried to kill you too, so I guess we’re even.”

As he watched her rail at him, he had to admit she was really something when she was pissed. “Charlie,”

“I’m not finished yet. I want you, you want me – and we both know I’m not just talking about sex. We could have died last night. A few seconds later and we would have. And when it all comes down to it, those things may either kill us or turn us into brainless zombies or whatever before all of this is over. If you want to spend what little time you have left on this earth being terrified of having anything worth keeping and your head stuck so far up your own ass to realize it, then you’ll just have to do it the hell away from me.

He just looked away. How could he do otherwise? “I’m sorry…”

Charlie stomped off into the night. “If anyone asks, I decided to stay at my place after
all." He’d rejected her for the very last time, and she was determined to never give him the chance to do so again.

Bass watched her retreat until she’d turned the corner on the side of the house. He tossed the half smoked cigar into the dirt and held his head in his hands. “Real smart, dumbass. Two for two,” he said to himself.

He sat there for a while, head hung. Out of nowhere, he felt a hand on the back of his neck. He looked up, expecting to see her there. “Oh, Bassie what are we going to do with you?” His mother sat there next to him on the back porch.

“Nice try,” he said, shifting away.

She ignored him. “Why did you push her away? She’s a nice girl,”

It brought to mind a conversation she’d had with him a long time ago about one girl or another that she’d tried to set him up with when he was home on leave. He shook his head to clear the memory. “What, no promises to fix everything?”

“Life doesn’t work that way,” she said.

He just gaped at her for a moment. What’s it trying to do? “What do you want?”

“You almost had it yesterday. Connect the dots, work together. Remember how we used to all work on puzzles together? You used to be really good at them.”

He thought back to all those years ago. He’d had mono in high school and had been stuck in bed for two weeks. His parents took turns sitting with him so he wouldn’t die of boredom (which they’d assured him he wouldn’t as much as he’d assured them he would). That’s when it started and it kind of kept going. “I remember…”

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better. You need to find something to anchor yourself to, or you’ll lose.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” When she didn’t respond he stood up and looked around. “Mom?” Bass found himself alone once more.

He jerked his head up. He was sitting again. He could no longer smell the cigar as it had long since gone out, and he was freezing. I was dreaming. He stood up and stretched and turned to go back inside. As he reached for the door, something caught his eye. He bent down to pick up a scrap of paper that had blown up on the back porch. They’d been seeing stuff like this all day, photos and trash that had settled after the tornado dissipated.

It was a torn and faded prayer card. He knew, but he felt he had to be sure. Flipping the card over, he read the name printed at the top, Monroe. “What are the odds of that?” he said aloud as he stood up and went inside to check on Jeremy.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick blip – I may be about to be reamed over a tornado in November, which is yes rare. But remember a) it may be the nano and b) as a side note, several years ago, we had one here in St. Louis on New Year’s Eve (no joke!) Anyway, thanks for any
comments and suggestions I’ve received along the way and the new chapter will be up in the morning at the latest!
Charlie slammed her front door after stomping inside. She was through. How many times could a person watch a man play the part of the wounded martyr before giving up on him? “God I’m so stupid,” she whined aloud as she threw her jacket across the room. She was angry at herself, angry at him and tired besides.

After spending the night in a cramped ass closet (and waking up hopeful despite dire circumstances), she’d spent the entire day helping him take care of those entrusted to his care. And he had cared. The compassion he’d shown as he’d helped organize volunteers to search and rescue his neighbors, despite having just lost everything had reminded her of who he could be if he’d just let himself.

*How can he be so blind?* Miles had been telling the truth that day in Blanchard’s tent. He’d finally been given a second chance. Willoughby wasn’t meant to be a punishment, it was a gift – a chance to be what he could have been had he never lost himself in the shitty world the blackout had left them.

Making it a condition of his pardon had had nothing to do with Blanchard or the Texan Congress, no matter how seriously Texas had taken it once it was added. It had been Miles’ idea. He’d known that Bass would head back east, out of stubbornness more than out of any desire to actually run the Republic again. Miles had known all along what Bass refused to admit: he’d hated it. The idea to bring it back had been put into his head by Connor and once it was there, he was just too damn stubborn to change course.

Miles had never articulated it, but Charlie knew that he’d never have insisted on Blanchard forcing the job of sheriff on him if he hadn’t thought that Bass wasn’t trustworthy enough to see it through or if he’d thought that he couldn’t eventually be happy here.

At first it seemed that Miles’ plan was working. He’d been so good. Miles had helped to keep him settled, and back then she’d liked to think she’d helped too. Those early weeks he may have bitched and moaned about all the work she’d roped him into doing after closing his office to help get her bar up and running, but he’d done it all the same. More than once Miles had said something about it when he was out of earshot. That it was like getting the old Bass back.

Some of those nights after Miles had gone, he’d stayed and kept working just a little longer. He’d always had the excuse that if he just stuck with it, he’d get one particular project or another finished. In those late hours, when it was just the two of them hammering away, talking about everything and nothing, she’d learned to care for him more than she’d ever thought possible.

Sure, she’d been attracted to him before (and had fought tooth and nail to deny that truth,
even stooping so low as to sleep with the one person that would make him off limits), but it was different. She’d since gotten to know a different side of him. She’d known before that unpredictable as he was, Sebastian Monroe had a part of him that was capable of being a better man, but now she’d seen it.

Even after she’d gone out of her way to sleep with Connor when she’d known he’d find out, he still came back. Maybe at the time it was mostly because of Miles, but she could recall the look he’d given her after he’d shown up with Davis at that church. Her mom had just thanked him for not screwing them over. And then they’d locked eyes for just a moment and she could see him almost pleading. She hadn’t known what at the time, but she knew him well enough now to understand in hindsight. He’d wanted trust, and more than anything acceptance.

As those first months went by after the war, they’d become so comfortable around each other. When the work on her bar and later, her home had been completed, he’d replaced those hours spent together helping her build something with helping her close and keeping her safe. Those nights at the bar had meant something to her. Sure, she was capable of defending herself, but it was a sweet gesture.

Every night she’d waited for him to stop staring at her with those intense, longing eyes and do something about it, but he never did. So, maybe she’d taken advantage of the one night the whiskey had forced his guard down. And, maybe she didn’t handle his rejection very well. How was she to know that it would send him on a downward spiral that he’d barely overcome?

When she’d opened her eyes in the closet earlier in the day, she’d felt like he’d finally gotten over his own half-assed attempt at logic when it came to the two of them. But there she was, all alone in her home and seething instead of enjoying the start of something meaningful and real.

She sat down on the couch and had a good cry, purging her system of the hurt and anxiety caused by this final rejection. She’d already made her choice. If he was so stupid that he’d pass up on what could be a really good thing, that was his problem. She was not going to rail at him or throw a temper tantrum. If he thought they should be just friends, well then that’s what they would be.

Charlie decided then and there that she would shut it off. *Fake it 'til you make it*, as her father always said. Although her instinct was to force him to see the full force of her fury, she decided against it. She will not become her mother – the woman who would forever be scorned. She wanted to be a woman that treated every man with a certain amount of dignity, even when they didn’t deserve it.

Cried out, Charlie went into her bedroom and started getting ready for bed. It would be another long day of picking up the pieces of Willoughby, side by side with a man that was too scared of life to take a chance. She turned and around and instinctively covered her body when she noticed the intruder.

“I never would have turned away from you. Even towards the end, I would have jumped at the chance to be with you again, if only for a moment.” He didn’t accuse her, not like the echo of her father. No, he seemed sad instead; disappointed even. “Why waste your tears on someone so unworthy of them?”

“I loved him, and you’re right – he wouldn’t have turned away from me. None of it matters though. You’re not Jason.”

“I could be. I can be anyone you want me to be. Even him.” He said those words in disgust. Even so, his form changed. Dark brown eyes were replaced with startling blue. He seemed
younger. She realized then that this was the man from a memory so old that she didn’t even know before know that had been real. A handsome young man stands before her – full of life and laughter. Dog tags hang from his neck, his face clean shaven and unmarked by pain and madness and death.

“I’d rather live alone than with a lie,” she sneered. His mouth moved, but she could no longer hear him. It was like he was speaking to her from behind a wall of glass, but he was no longer looking at her. He looked off to the side as he spoke, as if he was having a conversation with a third person that she couldn’t see. Before his voice returned, the image disappeared.

Outside her window hundreds of fireflies swarm and hover – an impossible sight, considering the time of year. A single orange one, brighter by far approaches them. As it does, their lights flicker for just a moment and start to dim. “Leave her be.” The figure appears – her dark curly hair landing in gentle waves behind her back – a few strands of gray are mixed with the sable; her eyes are a brilliant blue. “You’re breaking the rules, appearing as you are.”

“We are the rules. Where are you?”

“Where you cannot see.”

“We will find you.”

“Catch me if you can.”

Both figures, one seen and one unseen dissipate into nothing, leaving Charlie alone with her thoughts and her lonely bed.

Over the next month the town was slowly pieced back together again. Bass had found a small house for himself and Jeremy. On a whim he’d offered Connor a place to stay as a form of peace offering. Things were still a little stilted after their confrontation the night after the storm, but Connor had accepted the offer and they both put forth a little effort to find some type of understanding.

Miles’ house ended up being repairable so he’d distracted himself for almost a whole week with helping his friend fix the damage. He’d thrown himself into the work, the whole time trying to ignore the fact that it reminded him of those first several weeks after first coming to Willoughby after the war, where he’d worked side by side with the Matheson’s to help get Charlie up and running.

While they’d been living in each other’s pockets in the days following the storm, they’d gone over Bass’ pre-storm revelation several times. They’d come to the conclusion that they must have been on to something, and that the storm very well may have been a way to distract them from it. The last time it was Rachel, when they’d realized Connor knew about Neville’s descent into crazy land before they did. And now, they’d put a few pieces together about the power and boom, half the town was wiped off the map.

From what they’d discussed that night, Aaron and Priscilla had come up with the theory that the Nano were running out of power. They must have settled in Bradbury because it was close to the nuclear plant there and was vacant as opposed to the closer town of Arco. It had to be easier to take over one person at a time and bring them there than to try and take over an entire town, one mind at a time.

From what was understood about the nature of the nanites themselves, they could assume that frying someone (as Bass called it) must be accomplished by the nanites exploding.
within. That was the only thing Aaron and Rachel could think of that could generate the heat needed for the victim’s body to combust. The loss of pre-blackout power sources would affect their ability to reproduce their numbers rapidly if it was done on a wide scale. The only thing they couldn’t figure out was why the Nano needed someone to be willing to let them in, whereas before they could do it at will.

They left it to the Geek Squad to set up shop again, this time at Aaron’s while the rest of them concentrated on helping the town pull itself back together again. Ideas and theories were fine, but until they had a way to test them, they were guesses at best.

As time had passed, he’d tried to talk to Charlie several times. Each time he did, she’d blown him off. She wasn’t mad, she insisted. They were friends, nothing more. In order to prove just how not mad she was, she’d even helped him pick through the rubble of his loft. But she wouldn’t let him apologize. No, Charlie had made it very clear that she’d decided he just more trouble than he was worth (which wasn’t very much by his own estimation).

He is leaning on the railing at the top of the town gate. Because of the storm damage to the town walls, they’d had to double up on the watch schedule. Between working during the day, taking care of Jeremy at night and helping with repairs he’s beyond exhausted. To make matters worse, when he finally does find his bed sleep never comes easily for Bass. He lies there, staring at the ceiling trying to not think of how badly he’s fucked up.

It’s almost midnight, and his and Miles’ shift is almost over. He tries not to think about how he’ll be passing her place right as she’s locking up. The string of inner dialog always goes the same way: You got what you wanted, didn’t you? You said it yourself – there can’t be anything there, right? No… Yes… Fuck…

“So you and Charlie, huh?” Miles’ voice breaks him out of his reverie.

“Excuse me?” He’s taken by surprise by that one. So much that he almost needs Miles to repeat it, just to make sure he’s heard him right.

“I just don’t get it,” Miles says, “how was that going on right under our noses the entire time?”

Bass has never intended on talking about it with anyone, ever – especially Miles of all people. The friendship between the two of them has been tentatively patched, but he hardly considers it stable enough to survive this type of conversation. So he picks the tactic that will hopefully prevent a fist fight; deny, deny, deny. “Nothing was going on.”

“Bullshit. You might not have done anything, but I’m not blind. You watch her, she watches you. It’s really kind of sick to watch. And her Little Charlie Sunshine routine isn’t fooling anyone. She’s pissed at you.”

Bass winces. If Miles can tell there’s a rift between them, then that means everyone else can too. His mind starts to wander as he pictures all of the horrible ways that Rachel could plot to get back at him for this. “She’s not mad, there’s nothing going on. We’re just friends, sort of.”

Miles actually starts to laugh at him now. “Seriously, how do you ever manage to get laid? You’re obviously retarded when it comes to women.”

“What?”

“Female Behavior 101, dipshit: The more a woman argues how not mad she is, the more
mad she actually is. And people always thought you were the smart one growing up.” Miles can’t help but to enjoy this moment. He knows that Bass has it bad. The fact that it’s over Charlie, one of the most stubborn people he knows is hilarious – or it would be if it wasn’t for the fact that she’s his niece.

Bass just turns away. He does not want to continue this conversation. For one thing, it’s embarrassing as hell. He’s not a young man anymore and he’s been around (a lot). The fact that he’s so twisted up over a woman – one half his age at that, is just pathetic. For another thing, this is the woman in question’s uncle and his best friend (despite is every attempt to destroy that). It’s just too weird.

“You know, she actually tied to take the blame for all of your stupidity this spring,” Miles continues when it becomes obvious Bass is not going to continue the conversation.

“What?”

“Yeah, she got it in her head that maybe if she’d gone about things differently that you wouldn’t have gone off the deep end. Of course, I could have told her that you’ve got going nuts down pat, not that she’d listen.”

Bass is speechless. She’d actually entertained the idea that it was her fault? “There’s nothing she could have done…” God he doesn’t want to be having this conversation. “I couldn’t stand the idea of watching her be with someone else any more than I could stand the thought of crossing a line.” He doesn’t know how else to explain it.

“Since when is crossing a line a problem for you?” Miles asks. “I mean, come on. Emma, Rachel.” He sees the flash of guilt in Bass’ eyes. “I’m not picking a fight over it. I’m just proving a point.”

Bass starts to fidget, becoming increasingly uncomfortable. There are some things they’ve never talked about. Emma is one of them. It’s not the point, but he feels the need to say something. “First of all, Emma and Rachel are two completely different things. I loved Emma, long before the two of you ever started dating.”

“Huh?” Miles is derailed for a second. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Had he known his friend had harbored feelings for her, he’d never have asked her out.

“Because she was Emma, I’d known her since I was two – even longer than I’d known you,” he explains. “It was always easy for me – picking up a girl, fooling around. But not when she mattered. How could you know me for all these years and not have figured that one out? I mean come on, if Shelly hadn’t finally made a move, I’d probably still be in that camp, trying to work up the nerve to say something to her and history would have been a hell of a lot different.”

The truth is that Miles had never known that about him. Before Shelly, he’d never seen Bass hesitate to pick up a woman, and man had he been good at it. It was rare when they’d gone out in their younger years that he hadn’t at the very least come home with a pocket full of phone numbers, if he didn’t end up going home with one. “So how bad is it, with Charlie?”

“Bad enough that I damn near drank myself to death. Bad enough that I banged every hooker and slut this town has to try and forget about her. Bad enough that I…” he cut himself off before he rubbed salt in that still healing wound. “It’s bad, okay?”

Miles drags a hand through his hair. He really feels sorry for him; enough so that he was about to say the unthinkable. “So what are you going to do about it?”
“Not a damn thing. Even if there weren’t a million reasons why it’s a bad idea, I’ve screwed it up so bad that she’s washed her hands of me.”

Their conversation is interrupted by their relief. It’s now midnight and time to go. When they climb down, Miles has just one last thing to say to him. “You know I always knew you were stupid; never realized you were a giant pussy though.” He leaves Bass standing in the middle of the street, staring at him. Feeling decidedly better for having their conversation, Miles decides he’s going to stop by and see if Charlie needs help closing up.

Bass was sitting at his desk trying desperately to keep his mind on the task in front of him and off of the conversation he and Miles had had on their last watch shift last week (and off of the topic of that conversation). Connor watched him from where he sat in the corner. It was yet another one of those boring days. The people of Willoughby were too busy trying to rebuild to get into trouble of late. “Oh for Christ’s sake, Dad. Just give it up. If you keep spinning your chair like that you’re going to make me dizzy.”

Bass spun around in the chair in the direction of his son’s voice and looked over at him. He’d honestly forgotten Connor was even sitting there. “Time to pick up the kid anyway,” he mumbled as he grabbed his jacket and headed out the door. As he walked towards the building that was now temporarily housing the school he saw signs of renewal all over Willoughby.

The rubble that had been his home had already been cleared, along with the building behind it. What could be salvaged was being used as building materials to repair other damaged homes and businesses. The rest had been carted away from town and dumped in the old quarry.

There was even a petition going around to turn that part of the block into a park, since there was no need to rebuild it. Bass had signed it himself. Everywhere he looked he saw that people were just trying to undo the havoc that the storm had wrought. It struck him that his life would be so much easier if he could just do the same, like pressing the reset button on the old Nintendo he’d had when he was a kid.

Before he knew it he’d reached the makeshift school and had come up with a plan – a last ditch effort to fix the unhappy mess that part of his life had become. Instead of waiting for Jeremy to come out, he went in the building and waited outside of Priscilla’s classroom. He knew the kid would wait for him out front, so he had a few minutes at least. Poking his head in after the room had emptied he took a deep breath. “Hey, I was wondering if I could ask a favor?” he asked.

“What’s up?” She asked as she collected her books and a stack of papers to grade.

“Can you guys keep an eye on Jeremy for me tonight?” He was not above resorting to begging if he had to.

Priscilla looked at him. He was doing his best to charm her and sucker her into it. She really didn’t mind taking Jeremy overnight, but she was curious. “Why?”

Bass started to get flustered, and before he knew it he felt a blush rising to his cheeks – something he hadn’t done over a woman since he was a teenager. “I’ve got something I’ve got to take care of. Life or death, sort of. Please?”

Priscilla had a sneaking suspicion of what that ‘life or death’ something was, but she decided to allow him to save a little face. “Okay.”

He helped her carry her stuff out as they met Jeremy outside. After seeing them safely to Aaron and Priscilla’s he made his way back to the office to try and do some measurable amount of
work, sending Connor home early after getting him to agree to swap their schedules around for the weekend.

He locked the office up at six and headed over to Charlie’s bar. He hadn’t been inside it since the last time he’d tried to talk to her two weeks prior. With so many people still a little displaced, it was busy. Charlie gave him a nod as he sat down. “Feed me?” he almost begged.

She went into the kitchen and grabbed him a bowl of the daily stew. “Where’s Jeremy?” she asked casually.

“At Priscilla and Aaron’s. He got tired of my sorry attempts at supper.” He took a bite and tried to act like this was just another random conversation.

She went to pour him a drink. “So why aren’t you there?”

“Guess I wasn’t invited,” he shrugged.

As the night wore on the dinner rush died out and was replaced with the nightly group of barflies. She kept an eye on him. He wasn’t leaving, but he wasn’t really drinking all that much, either – just enough to justify being in the bar. What is he up to?

Finally closing time came, and it was just the two of them. She’d just about had enough. “Okay, what the hell are you doing?”

He stood up and walked from the table he’d been sitting at for the past two hours and over to the bar, where she stood impatiently. “Rewriting history.”

“Oh?” Charlie was confused as ever. “Have you lost your mind?”

Bass cocked his head as he looked at her. “Do you even have to ask?” He started to move from one barstool to the next until he found the right one. “Okay, if I remember correctly, I was sitting here and you said…”

Her mind flashed to the last time he closed the bar down with her a year ago. “Out you go.” She repeated the words, but it sounded almost like a question, betraying the fact that she was perplexed.

“And then I stood up, and I guess I tripped or something?” He got off of the barstool.

She laughed at that. Oh, now that’s rewriting history. “Yeah right. No, you were so trashed you could barely stand up straight.”

“I agree to disagree on that.” He grabbed her hand and placed it on his arm. “Anyway, you then asked me something.” He waited for her to think back.

The enforced déjà vu almost felt surreal to her. She didn’t know exactly what he was intending, which only added to it. “Are you alright?” (And she really was starting to think he wasn’t).

His heart was pounding in his chest as he made her go through the motions of that night with him. “And then I said I was fine and…”

“And then you stumbled out that door so fast, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.” It came out as being somewhere in between teasing and an accusation.
Bass shook his head. “No, that’s not what happened. I did this, instead.” He pulled her to him and lowered his mouth to hers, gently moving his lips, pulling her into the kiss. One hand pressed on her back, keeping her close while the other cupped the side of her face. His thumb on her jaw, he coaxed her to open for him. He swept his tongue inside and deepened the kiss, tasting her.

Charlie should have shoved him away, but she didn’t quite have the willpower. She found her arms wrapping themselves around her neck as if they had minds of their own.

After several minutes he broke away, but didn’t release her. “If I’d have done that instead, what would have been different? Every other mistake I made all seemed to stem from that one moment.” He rested his forehead on hers and waited for her to say something.

When she remained silent, he continued. “You’re right. I’m an idiot, and I’m a fucking coward. I was terrified of asking for this; to let myself even admit that I wanted it. I know I don’t deserve you, and I understand if you want me to turn around and walk out that door, but I had to try. I’m too old and I’m too messed up for you, and you’re so much better than me, but I love you and I would give anything if I could go back and undo that one stupid mistake.”

Charlie pulled out of his arms and turned around, walking to into the kitchen. His shoulders sank in defeat. He’d laid it all out for her; there was nothing else he could say. He didn’t know what he’d been thinking. It was too late; he’d fucked it up one too many times. He started to turn towards the door to leave when she came back and tossed him her jacket, turning her back to him when she got closer, so he could slip it over her shoulders. “Are you ready to go?”

The smile that slowly spread across his face could have lit up the entire town. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said as he held the door open for her to exit in front of him. Charlie fumbled with the keys while she tried to lock the door to the bar. It may have had something to do with the fact that he’d pulled her hair out of his way and was placing light kisses along the side of her neck. Distracted, she leaned back into him as she tilted her head to the side to offer him more access. The sensation was sending delicious chills throughout her body.

“Charlie?” he whispered into her ear, his breath tickling her just a little.

“Hmm?”

Bass let out a laugh. “Lock the door already.”

She almost dropped the keys as she came back to earth. He ran his hand down her jacketed arm. Taking the keys from her, he did the honors himself, as her fingers just didn’t seem to be working. Charlie started to head down the alley to her door, but he stopped her and began to lead her in the opposite direction.

She paused and looked at him quizzically. “I thought…” She pointed her hand in the general direction of her door as she trailed off.

Still holding her hand, he pulled her against him once more. She craned her neck up to meet his gaze. “Come home with me?”

It dawned on her that in all his months of catting around town, he’d preferred to keep his brief affairs away from his living space (she would not think of the invasion that had been Rachel). He was inviting her into the home he was trying to build for himself as a way of letting her into his life. “Okay,” she assented as she stood on her toes and gave him a quick kiss – just a fleeting pressure on his lips that offered a promise of later.
They walked in silence down the main drag in town, turning left as they reached the street leading towards the neighborhood he now lived in. It was only a fifteen minute walk, but when he reflected on it later it would seem like the longest walk of his entire life. He’d gotten her to come this far, but she still had time to back out if he did or said something stupid to fuck it up.

This wasn’t just about getting her into his bed (although he was so going to get her there later). If they got to his house and all she wanted to do was sleep, he’d be happy just to hold her throughout the night. No, this was about finally beginning something that should have started a year ago, and he still couldn’t quell the fear that he was too late. So he made sure to keep his trap shut before he said something to ruin it.

Finally arriving, he walked her thought the front door. Tossing his jacket aside, he went to light a lamp to give him just enough light to get a fire started. There was a chill in the house. Connor had agreed to make himself scarce, so the fireplace had been cold all night. As he knelt at the hearth, she looked around in the dim lamplight.

He’d somehow managed to take the vacant house and turned it into a home, and deep down a part of her was touched. This place could not have been more different from the loft. This was not the ramshackle mess of a bachelor pad, but the home of a family – as unorthodox as his was. She’d overheard Miles say that the house hadn’t been in the best of conditions when he’d bought it. It had been empty since the previous occupants had passed away during the cholera epidemic almost a decade ago. It must have taken Bass a lot of work to bring it to life.

The furnishings were old and none of them matched, but they’d been repaired carefully. A stack of schoolbooks, obviously belonging to Jeremy had been left on the worn coffee table, one of them still opened. On the other side of the table was a stack of papers that with closer inspection appeared to be paperwork related to Bass’ job – an indication that he’d been working alongside his foster son while the boy had been studying. She could almost see him doing it.

Bass stood up and saw the tender look in her eyes, one that she didn’t even realize she had. “Come here.”

She walked over to him, eyes locked to his. The room was already warming up considerably when he unzipped her jacket and slipped it from her shoulders, tossing it down on those papers and books on the table.

Bass cupped her face with both hands as he watched her. It was now or never. He slanted his mouth over hers. Charlie parted her lips for him, encouraging him to take it further, but he held back, just enjoying the moment.

There was time enough for a conflagration tomorrow or the day after. Tonight, he wanted to savor the slow burn. Smiling against her mouth, he backed up to the couch, sitting down on the end closest to the fire and taking her with him. She settled sideways in his lap, one hand resting on his chest. She could feel his heart pounding steadily beneath her touch.

Bass ran his fingers through her long hair. In the warm glow of the fire, it looked like spun gold framing her face like a halo. Charlie leaned forward and kissed him now, their tongues meeting and moving slowly; exploring.

She moaned in her throat as he slid one hand down her neck, lightly massaging the skin as he went. She could feel him hardening beneath her. The knowledge that he was affected so much by her kiss made her feel powerful. She found that kind of power over him uncontrollably arousing. As his hand continued its downward path and found her breast, her pulse raced and her breath quickened.
He cupped her through her clothes just a moment before he continued to find the hem of her shirt. Untangling his other hand from her hair, he pulled her shirt over her head. Instead of reclaiming her mouth after the break in contact, he leaned forward and pressed feather-light kisses along her collarbone. The feel of his lips and the scruff of his beard on her sent shivers through her.

Another moan escaped her. She arched her back, trying to encourage him further. One hand found the clasp of her bra, experienced fingers flicking it open and freeing her from the garment. She closed her eyes in anticipation of his touch, but instead he hooked one arm under her knees and the other behind her back and stood up with her in his arms.

Charlie wrapped her arms around his neck and stared into his eyes again. “It’s time for bed,” he told her as he carried her across the house, into his bedroom. Laying her gently on the bed, he paused long enough to light the lamp on the dresser so he could see her.

She held her arms out to him, but instead of joining her, he sat down on the end of the bed and began to remove her boots and socks. He dropped them to the floor and slid his hands up her legs and to her waist, finding the snap on her jeans. With the zipper now down, he began to peel them off of her, taking her panties at the same time. She now lay before him completely nude while he was still fully dressed.

Wordlessly, he flipped her over. “What?” she breathed, not sure of what he was intending.

“Just wait,” he panted into her ear, his clothes pressing against her bare skin, as he pulled her hair aside. Bass sat next to her on the bed as he lightly ran his hand from her neck to the small of her back, his fingertips just barely skimming her flesh. He did this repeatedly, each time her skin becoming more sensitive to his touch. Ending the sweet torture, he started at the nape of her neck, fingers working in slow circles, massaging deeply.

Charlie let out a groan as he made his way down to her shoulders. He worked slowly, leaving no inch of skin untouched. His mouth followed the path of his hands, driving her wild. By the time he reached the small of her back, she was already moaning and begging for him to take her. “Please.”

“I said, Just wait,” he said again as he placed a kiss at the base of her spine. He worked his way further, tracking his hands lightly over the smooth skin of her ass before moving on to stroke the back of her thighs. He rubbed her legs and then her feet before rolling her over and beginning anew, this time working up her body.

He spent entirely too long rubbing and tracing the skin on her thighs and hips. Charlie couldn’t help but raise up, hoping that he would pause between them, but he denied her still. He massaged her sides and ran light kisses up her firm belly, her panting and writhing all the while.

Charlie’s skin was slick as she became frantic with need. He ran his hands up and cupped her breasts, taking extra care to knead and massage them, testing their weight in his hands. He stopped just long enough to stretch out beside her.

Leaning over, Bass took one hard nipple in his mouth, and she felt like she could almost explode right then and there. “Bass, please. Now,” she begged as she reached for his shirt. Her fingers fumbled at the buttons but she somehow worked them. He allowed her to free him from his shirt and then pulled the t shirt he wore over his head. She wanted to feel the hard muscles of his chest against her, but he pulled away, not yet letting her touch him. He drug one hand up her neck and to her face, where he caressed her cheek as he kissed her once more.
Enflamed, Charlie thrust her tongue in his mouth and kissed him back with all of the passion she had. She wanted him and she wanted him now. “I can’t wait,” she said when he broke the kiss off.

“Yes, you can,” he said as his lips slid down her throat again. He paused to suck on her neck, before nipping his way down to her chest. He worked lips and tongue down her body. He kissed between her breasts as his thumbs teased her nipples. She was desperate for release and he knew it. He did his best to ignore his own desire for her. He was throbbing and his pants were uncomfortably tight. All he wanted was to feel her around him, but this night wasn’t about him.

He slid down and parted her thighs for him, one finger sliding lightly down her slit, becoming instantly drenched with the evidence of her arousal. He parted her folds and ran his tongue down the path his finger had just taken. Charlie almost came off the bed at the contact. “Oh, god,” she moaned as he delved his tongue into her, his thumb seeking the sensitive bundle of nerves above her entrance. She arched her hips, thrusting her pelvis closer and opening her legs wider as he made love to her with his mouth.

Within minutes she felt herself bursting, her hands tangled in his hair as she screamed his name. The sharp explosion left her dizzy, sating her but not erasing her need to feel him inside her.

She watched through hooded eyelids as he sat up and began to remove his own boots and pants. He joined her open arms now, settling between her legs. He supported himself on his elbows as he claimed her mouth once more. When tongues met, she tasted herself on him; the musky flavor strange and sensual. She ran her hands down his chest, scraping him lightly with her nails. It was his turn to groan as she ran them down his flanks before reaching further and taking him in hand. She stroked him as he flexed his hips and pushed his erection further into her hand. “Now?” she begged again.

No longer able to hold back, he lined himself up with her, one hand under her ass, raising her hip to open her up more for him. “God, yes,” Bass panted as he sank into her depths. He almost lost it from the moment he felt her tight sheath gripping him like a vice.

Charlie’s body stretched to accommodate him. The feeling of him filling her so completely went a long way towards reigniting her need. He began to move slowly, withdrawing completely before pushing back into her again.

They locked eyes as their bodies found their rhythm. He’d fucked more women than he was comfortable admitting, but he could count the number of women he’d made love to on one hand – with fingers left over. This was something different entirely. This wasn’t just making love; it was a worshipping of her body. Every touch and kiss was an exploration into the unknown and left him wanting more – and she gave as good as she got.

Charlie wrapped her legs around his waist, locking him in place as she ran her hands up and down his scarred back, carefully rubbing his skin. She knew from the way he moved that sometimes the scars still pulled; if she could heal him with her touch, she would have. He saw that tender look return to her eyes. Understanding what had caused it, he kissed her again. He felt like he was pouring his soul into that kiss.

With each thrust she felt herself getting closer towards another climax; this one fuller and more complex than the one before. Instead of a sharp release, this built up from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, every inch of her body sensitive and tingling with her impending release.

His thrusts were no longer slow and measured but were becoming faster and more desperate. He knew then that if he didn’t pull out soon, he’d be unable to. Charlie buried her face in
the crook of his neck, muffling her cries as she got closer. “Don’t stop,” she sobbed against him.

He kept slamming himself into her, but knew it was about to end. “I have to,” was his groaning reply.

She was right on the edge then when she felt him prepare to pull out of her. Unable to bear the thought of it, she clamped her legs around him and dug her fingers into his ass, pulling him back to her and refusing to let go. “Just a little more,” she cried as her entire body started to convulse.

Bass lost the battle and crossed that point of no return – there was stopping now. He rammed his throbbing member into her several more times, all pretense of rhythm or finesse lost as primal need took over. A few seconds later, Charlie shattered into a million pieces, the orgasm ripping through her entire body. As she clamped down on him, Bass felt everything tighten and with one more final thrust into her, he went over.

His face buried in her hair and her name a roar on his lips as he released himself inside her, bottoming out against her cervix. The corded tendons in his neck stood out as his whole body tensed with the power of it. Spent, he collapsed on top of her, unable to move. She reveled in the feel of his weight on her, feeling like she could melt into a puddle.

Breathing harshly, Bass pulled out of her and slid down, using her breasts as a pillow. Charlie ran her fingers through his hair gently as she waited for the world to come back into focus. “Okay, now I am mad at you,” she panted as she struggled to catch her breath. Worried, he looked up at her. “You’ve been hiding that from me all this time?” she continued.

Laughing, Bass rolled off of her and reached over to crack the window just a little to allow the cool breeze inside and wash over their slick bodies. They laid side by side, holding hands as their heart rates returned to normal. When he was coherent again, he finally responded. “Maybe some things are worth waiting for,” he whispered as he pulled her into his arms.

After he pulled the blanket over them, Charlie snuggled in close. Reaching up to stroke the side of his face she finally returned his words from earlier that night. “I love you.” His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer into his embrace. They slowly drifted off to sleep, sated and happy.

Outside his window a steady orange glow floats in the night air. Suddenly it is surrounded by green lights, enclosing menacingly; more fireflies. No one notices them, but if they did they would know they shouldn’t be here. One of the green lights gets too close to the orange one. As soon as they touch the aggressor flickers out and falls to the ground, dead. Within seconds another orange one appears, meeting up with the first.

A second green firefly challenges, and then a third. The results are the same – two more green lights go out, two more orange glowing insects appear. The remaining green ones give up and flutter away in masse. The four orange flies keep their position, almost as if they are defending the window from their green counterparts.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay folks. It was a busy week. This chapter is kind of a transitional one (there may be a few of those coming up as I try to get the rest of the nano plot hammered out – sorry, believable sci-fi is harder than I thought!). I thought after so many depressing chapters that this story needed a lil bit ‘o fluff to balance it out a little. Unfortunately, fluff does not come easy to me, so please bear with me on this. I did my best to keep everyone IC, but I may not have pulled it off as well as I’d liked. There’s a bit of action towards then end (followed by more humor and fluff).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie sat at Bass’ kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee. As she enjoyed the beverage (one of the few products that made its way north from Mexico), she looked around. None of the chairs matched, but somehow Bass had managed to make it inviting. She was waiting on him to return from picking up Jeremy, still a little overwhelmed that he’d managed to talk her into staying.

Bass wakes up slowly, having been in the middle of the most pleasant of dreams. He was there and Charlie was there and she was – Hello, what’s that? He opens his eyes and realizes that sometimes dreams really do come true, especially naughty ones.

He glances down just in time to see her lips on him, gently kissing and nibbling down the side of his erect shaft. When she takes him into her mouth he lets out a low moan. He lifts his hips as her head bobs back down, thrusting into her mouth.

She continues for several minutes. He’s panting by the time she slides up his body, kissing her way up his chest, to her neck. “Now that I have you’re undivided attention…” she trails off as their mouths meet. She’s straddling him now. Their tongues tangle as she takes him into her.

Bass wraps one arm around her, gently stroking her back as his other hand comes to rest on her hip. She’s wet and hot and feels like heaven. Charlie starts to ride him slowly at first, but she soon increases the pace, having been rearing and ready to go some time before he was.

As she glides up and down on his length, she makes soft mewling sounds in the back of her throat. She’s trying her best to be quiet, which tells him that Connor must be home. He’s gripping her with both hands now as he helps to lift her up and down, flexing his hips and trusting up as he pulls her back down.

Charlie breaks her mouth away and buries her face in his neck. He reaches between them and finds her clit, rubbing it gently with the pad of his thumb. The stimulation has her moaning in his ear, which drives him wild. She starts slamming down on him, wanting nothing more to find the release that has been building up in her.

She feels it coming, the orgasm ripping through her as she impales herself on him one last time. She bears down, biting him on the side of the neck to keep quiet as she loses control. Bass grips her hips tighter and raises her up and down, thrusting into her several more times.

His breath catches in his throat as he feels himself start to come. At the last possible
second he lifts her off of him. She reaches between them and strokes him, catching his seed in her hand as she thrusts her tongue into his mouth, kissing him like her life depends on it.

Charlie climbs off of him and finds the shirt he’d discarded the night before, and cleans the evidence of his climax off the both off them. “It’s a good thing I don’t have to work today,” he says as she notices that it’s his uniform shirt she’s using. Take that ugly shirt, he thinks evilly.

She laughs as she lays down, resting her head on his chest. She can hear his heart pounding in his chest, the sound almost lulling her back to sleep as they lay there together in the afterglow. He presses his lips to her temple. “Good morning, by the way.”

She looks up at him. “Yes, it is.” She’s trying to remember where her clothes are. She has no desire to leave but she has to open the bar in a few hours and has no desire to do the walk of shame to work. She sits up and looks around from her vantage point on the bed to see if her pants are in sight.

“Stay. Spend the day with us,” he says as if he’s reading her mind.

“Us?”

He reaches up and starts to play with a strand of her hair. “I promised the kid I’d take him out and give him a shooting lesson today.”

“You’re going to trust a nine year old with a gun?”

He pulls her back down to him, not ready to get up yet. “Why not? He’s a smart kid and this is Texas, after all.”

Charlie lets out a contented sigh. It really does feel so good to just be here with him. “And who’s going to run my bar if I play hooky?”

“Let ‘what’s his name’ do it.”

“You mean Greg?”

Bass runs his hand up and down her back, sending shivers of delight up and down her spine. The touch reminds her of the previous night. His smirk tells her he’s thinking of it too. “Yeah, Greg. When’s the last time you took a day off?”

“Morning,” Connor said cheerfully as he came into the kitchen, now dressed and ready for work. He’d returned just after dawn after having spent the night with a newly separated Mary Parker. He’d already decided that he was way better at entertaining the local ladies than his father – being younger and less obsessed with Charlie and all.

“Connor,” she said warily. She’d broken things off with him when Bass had left town and he hadn’t made a big deal out of it, but seeing him the morning after she’d slept with his father made her a little uncomfortable. She watched as he went to rekindle the flames in the stove’s firebox.

Before long he had a pan hot and ready. “Hungry?” he asked as he started to cut strips off of a slab of bacon and set them in the pan.

“You cook?” She didn’t know why she found that odd, but it somehow was. She just couldn’t picture either Monroe bent over a stove, cooking a hot meal. She’d seen Bass roast the occasional squirrel over a fire while on the road, but the results were usually just inside the
Connor laughed. “Lucky for you I can and it’s my turn. Dad? Not so much. Jeremy’s lucky he hasn’t poisoned him by now.”

“I heard that,” Bass said with mock indignation as he came into the kitchen with Jeremy. “If my cooking is that bad, you don’t have to eat here, you know,” he said as he bent to kiss her.

Jeremy made a face as he slid into one of the chairs. “Are you guys going to be doing that all the time?” he asked with all the disgust of any nine-year old boy being forced to watch grownups kiss.

Connor went to set the plate of bacon on the table. “He’s right. Ewww, gross!” he mimicked the look on Jeremy’s face, exaggerating and making the boy laugh.

Bass chose to just ignore them as he poured himself a cup of coffee, taking a satisfied sip before abandoning it to grab plates out of the cupboard. “That’s enough,” he snapped as he turned to see his son and Jeremy still making gagging faces, Charlie watching with obvious amusement.

“Can I have coffee?” Jeremy asked hopefully as Bass pulled out a cup for him out of the cupboard.

“Nope.”


“I’m not nine,” Bass said. “I don’t know why you always ask; you wouldn’t like it anyway.”

“How do you know I wouldn’t like it if you never let me try it?” Jeremy shot back.

Charlie laughed at them. “He does have a sound argument.”

“Don’t encourage him,” he said as he set the cup down in front of him. He gestured towards it as he sat down. “Drink your milk.” He tried his best to sound authoritative, but he wasn’t fooling any of them.

Connor sat down to scarf down his breakfast. “Don’t feel bad. You don’t get coffee but at least you don’t have to spend your Saturday at work.”

“You’re running late, by the way,” Bass reminded him in response.

“Slave driver,” he grumbled. When minutes, his plate was empty and he was on his way out the door.

Later, Charlie sat and watched while Bass cleaned up the kitchen. She’d offered to help but he’d poured her the last of the coffee and insisted she sit. Jeremy sat with a schoolbook carefully copying the words from one page onto a piece of paper. She’d watched Bass make lines on it for him before getting started on the dishes.

Watching them this way made her heart melt a little. To him this was just another Saturday, but to her this was a side of him that had always been possible, but she’d never known existed. She wondered if Miles realized that he could be this way.

Jeremy had finished copying the page and started to read what he’d written out loud,
concentrating hard as he went. “The. Dog. Ju, Ju – I can’t do this!”

“Yes you can. Sound it out.” Bass said. When Jeremy started to whine in frustration, he dried his hands and came over to the table. Leaning over him, he pointed to the word in question. “What’s this letter?”

“An m,” the boy said sullenly.

“And what sound does it make?”

“Mmmm.”

“Okay, and what’s this one?”

“A p.”

“Okay, so put them together.”


“And there you go,” Bass said as he went back to the dishes.

Charlie got up from her chair and wrapped her arms around him from behind. He twisted a little to face her, his hands still buried in the tub of soapy water. She stood on her toes and kissed him. “And what was that for?” he asked when she broke it off (just in time to keep Jeremy from being grossed out again).

“For being good at this,” she said as she pulled away and picked up the dish towel. She started to wipe the dishes he’d already washed.

“I’m not –” he started to argue.

Charlie cut him off. “Yes you are, even if you don’t see it yet.” Not long afterwards, she headed home to change clothes and inform Greg of the change to her schedule, with a promise to return shortly.

As soon as she left, Jeremy looked up at him from his books. “Was she the reason you weren’t happy?”

“Huh? Why would you say that?”

“Because she was here this morning and you’re happy now,” he said with a shrug as he closed the reading book and reached for the next schoolbook in the pile.

The simplicity and honesty of the answer caught Bass off guard. Flustered, he got up. “You can finish that later. I need clothes for tomorrow. Help me do the laundry so we can get going when Charlie gets back.”

When Charlie returned, she heard the sound of a child’s laughter behind the house. She walked around back to see Jeremy snapping a towel at Bass while he was trying to hang his uniform shirt up on the clothesline.

“I said cut it out, brat!” He was once again trying to sound stern, but just couldn’t seem to pull it off today.

“You fought the rebels, and Miles and the Patriots and you can’t fend off one little boy?”
She scoffed as she approached. She took the towel from Jeremy and tossed it to him before bending over to greet Jeremy. The boy was now rolled up in a ball on the grass giggling. The towel suddenly snapped her right in the rear end. Charlie jumped and let out a yelp.

By the time she’d whipped around to face her assailant, he’d already hung the towel and was moving on to hang up the pair of jeans Connor had snuck into his basket of clothes. “What?” he asked innocently.

Charlie shoved him, fully intending on knocking him on his ass. He grabbed her instead, pulling her down with him, but turning to break her fall. “There’ll be plenty of time for this later,” he said suggestively as he raised his head to kiss her. “Now get off me so I can finish.”

They spent the day down by the river. He’d borrowed the wagon from Aaron so they wouldn’t have to carry everything outside of town. The first order of business of the day was the promised shooting lesson. Jeremy had been disappointed at first that Bass had insisted on starting him off with a black powder rifle (Bass had explained quite firmly that he wasn’t putting a handgun in the hands of a kid and his father had taught him to shoot with a rifle – there was nothing wrong with it), but eventually he’d perked up and enjoyed it.

After lunch – courtesy of Greg, Bass had gone back to the wagon to retrieve some fishing poles and had spent an hour showing Jeremy how to bait a hook and cast the line. Charlie and Bass now sat lazily on the bank of the river while Jeremy ran up and down casting and recasting, determined to get a bite.

Bass was lying back, using his balled up jacket as a pillow. The line was in the water, but he’d set it down. Despite the warm Texas sun, the water was still freezing this time of year and he wasn’t expecting to catch anything. It was just something to do to keep the kid occupied for a while. Charlie alternated between which of them she was watching.

“So you do laundry now and everything?” she still found this newer, domestic side of him unsettling.

He laughed in spite of the slight insult buried underneath that question. “How else would I get my clothes clean?” He closed his eyes and soaked in the sunshine. “You know it’s only two weeks ’til Christmas? We shouldn’t be able to go fishing. I’ll never get used to this,” he added as an afterthought.

Charlie stretched out next to him, propping herself up on her elbow. “Fishing in general is something I’d never thought I’d see you of all people do,” she remarked.

“It’s been twenty years since I’ve done this,” he murmured, is mind suddenly lost in the past. “I guess the last time it must have been with my dad when I was on leave.” He had an arm slung over his eyes to block out the afternoon sunshine.

Hearing the wistfulness in his voice, Charlie reached out and grabbed his other hand, giving it a squeeze. Sadly, that was something she could relate to, however much she didn’t want to think of the reason. When she sat up, she saw something move on the other side of him. “Um, Bass?”

“But?”

She smacked him in the arm to get him to open his eyes. “Your pole just went into the water,” she said, pointing at the bank.
“Shit!” He jumped up and ran down the bank. Seeing it, he reached over and grabbed it before the pole disappeared completely. He felt a tug, so he started to reel it in. He worked it for several minutes before bringing in a decent sized fish. He pulled it off the hook and dropped it into the bucket of water he’d filled earlier, just in case they actually caught something.

His work done, he sat back down and watched Jeremy alongside Charlie. “Thank you – for today.” He started to feel rather self-conscious. It had occurred to him that this was the closest thing to a real date he’d gone on since before the blackout.

Before she had a chance to respond (or he had a chance to embarrass himself further), Jeremy started to yell for help. He’d finally hooked something and didn’t know what to do. Bass ran over to help, showing him how to set the hook and then reel it in. “Ease up a bit, or you’ll lose him,” he instructed.

A few minutes later, Jeremy stood holding his pole upright, staring at the fish that dangled from the line. Bass crouched down, his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “Well would you look at that?” He said.

Charlie was sitting on the bank still, watching them. “Bass, I think his is bigger!” she teased, earning her a roll of the eyes. While Bass helped Jeremy get the fish into the bucket, Charlie decided to show them how it was done. She picked up Bass’ discarded pole and baited the hook with a piece of jerky.

She cast and recast her line, unaware of her audience. She moved down the bank to a better spot and cast her line once more. Within a few minutes she had a bite. Before long, she was walking back to the bucket with a smirk of satisfaction on her face. “I’m just as good at this as I am at hunting,” she said smugly.

“My fish is still bigger than yours!” Jeremy bragged with all the enthusiasm he could muster.

“Sure is,” she conceded as she watched the three fish swimming around the bucket. “But mine is still bigger than his, and that’s all that matters.”

Bass was just coming back from packing up the wagon when he heard her comment. “I’ll give you bigger,” he growled as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” she began to kick and scream, her face turning red. She started to slap him and pummel him in the back.

He gave her a swat on the butt. “Be nice,” he said as he started to spin around in a circle.

“I’m getting dizzy, stop that!” she tried to sound mad, but she couldn’t stop giggling.

Bass set her down, catching her as she stumbled a little. “It’s good to hear you laugh,” he said, suddenly becoming serious. He brushed a lock of her hair back behind her ear and bent in to kiss her. She melted into him until they were interrupted by Jeremy.

“Eeeeew!” He said as he started making exaggerated gagging sounds.

Bass released her, having tortured the boy enough. “You say that now. Give it a few years, kid.” He helped Jeremy up to the back of the wagon and then went to secure the fish. “Make yourself useful and keep that bucket from tipping over.”

Later that night after Charlie joined the Monroe men and Jeremy for a meal of fresh fish
Connor shook his head. “Yeah, the kid hates baths.”

Charlie studied her hand for a few seconds before drawing a card. “How are you getting along?”

“Okay I guess. Good days and bad.”

Charlie could only imagine. She thought back to the argument she’d overheard the night of the tornado. “Does Jeremy being here really bother you all that much?”

Connor hesitated, rearranging his cards. “I like him well enough.” He saw the disbelieving look on her face. “Really. It’s just weird seeing him taking care of some random kid. I’m his son.”

“So what? You were already an adult before he even heard about you. He obviously cares about you. Think about what he did to find you, and everything that’s happened since. He almost turned himself back into a monster, just because that’s what you wanted from him.”

Connor drew another card as he thought about this. The last thing he wanted to talk about was the Monroe Republic. “So you and my dad… wow.” He effectively changed the subject.

Charlie caught his eye. “I’m sorry if this is awkward.”

“Surprisingly enough, it’s not. I knew you had a thing for him – and only an idiot couldn’t see how obsessed he was.”

“Wait, so why were you willing to…” She couldn’t bring herself to actually say it, as hard as she’d been trying to pretend it hadn’t happened.

Connor just shrugged. “You were cute, I was bored.”

Charlie didn’t know if she should be insulted or laugh. She drew another card. “Gin,” she said as she discarded and set her cards on the coffee table.

Bass came in the room and sat down next to her on the couch. Jeremy now asleep, he sat and enjoyed his whiskey and the sight of Charlie whipping his son’s ass in for a while. It was getting late and Charlie finally stood up. “As much as I would love to slaughter you in cards all night, I have to open the bar in the morning. It’s Greg’s day off.”

“I’ll walk you home. Keep an eye on the kid, will you?” Bass said as he followed her to the door. They walked in silence for a few minutes. He was determined to not be a sap and hold her hand or anything so cliché. Instead he just walked quietly beside her and instinctively kept an eye on their surroundings. Some habits never died.

“You know, as much as you say you don’t know what you’re doing and that it’s just temporary, you seem to be doing pretty good with Jeremy,” Charlie said as they turned down the main road into the center of town.

“We get by okay, I guess,” he said, almost cautiously.
“Bullshit. It’s okay to admit you care about him. I can see it. You had fun to day, and so did he. And it’s obvious he’s happy,” she argued.

Bass sighed and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “Yeah, but what happens when shit hits the fan with all this crap with the Nano? I can’t take care of him and fight – whatever the hell is coming.”

“And then what happens when this is all over?” She asked. “God, you spend so much time worrying about what might be that you never see what actually is. He trusts you and loves you. Let yourself love him back.”

They had reached her door and were standing in the alley. As she stopped and turned to face him, her expression softened. “Sorry. It’s just watching you all today…”

“What?”

Charlie smiled up at him. “You have a family now, whether you realize it or not.”

“You’re something else, you know that?” He moved in to kiss her goodnight, one hand cupping the back of her head the other at her waist.

“You know,” she said in between kisses, “you could come inside for a little while.” She caught his lip in between her teeth playfully. He responded in kind by deepening the kiss, moving his tongue against hers as he tightened the arm around her waist.

“Maybe just for a minute,” he said as he broke away to give her a chance to unlock the door. As soon as the key was in the lock, he grabbed her from behind, pressing the growing hardness in his pants into her. In the darkness of the alley, he cupped her breast. She leaned her head back, turning it to offer her lips to him.

“Charlie?” Rachel’s voice broke to them, forcing them apart. Slightly embarrassed, Rachel turned away. “I’m sorry.” She was still standing at the corner, not close enough to see who was standing there in the shadows.

“It’s okay. What are you doing here, Mom?” Charlie asked.

Rachel walked further into the alley. When she saw who had just been attached to her daughter, she did a double take. “Bass? What are you… Oh. My. God.” She turned to Charlie, “Really?”

He decided the best course of action was to keep his mouth shut. He patiently waited for Rachel to freak out and begin with the death threats. When they didn’t come, he started to get worried. “What are you doing here?” he asked, echoing Charlie.

Rachel ignored him. “Charlie, have you seen Miles?”

“No, I’ve been with him all day,” she said, placing her hand on Bass’ chest, almost as if she was challenging Rachel to react to it.

When she still didn’t, the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach started doing little backflips. “What’s going on, Rachel?”

“He said he was going to his office to get something and never came back. He’s only been gone a few hours, but I know something isn’t right. I feel it,” she explained.
Bass furrowed his brow. “Did you check there?”

“Of course I checked there,” Rachel said between gritted teeth.


“That’s why I’m here. I just checked there and Greg said you’d taken the day off. Miles hasn’t been in there all day. I don’t get it. Why would he lie?”

Bass thought about it. Miles wouldn’t. Even if he was pissed at her or just wanted some time to himself, he wouldn’t have mentioned going somewhere specific if he hadn’t planned on going there. “He’s probably fine. He can take care of himself. If it was Gramps, I’d be worried – not Miles.” Still, he couldn’t quite get that bad feeling to go away. “Listen, I’ll check it out, alright?”

He gave Charlie a quick peck and then walked down the street to his office, where he had a spare gun stashed – not that he thought he’d need it, but it somehow seemed wrong to work without a weapon. Now armed, he headed back to talk to Greg and some of the bar patrons. Surely someone inside would have seen Miles at some point. He pretty much had to walk right by the bar to get to the town hall.

After spending a good half hour talking to the handful of customers and Greg, he headed back outside, running into Charlie and Rachel on the sidewalk. He shook his head in response when Rachel asked him if he’d gotten anywhere yet. Charlie stood with her crossbow in hand. “What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” she said. She was determined that if there was trouble, she was going to be ready.

“We don’t know anything yet. I highly doubt you’re going to need that in town,” he told her as he started to head towards the main gate. He left both women below while he climbed up to talk to them. They were a little more forthcoming. “They said he left with Joe Matthews a couple of hours ago.”

Joe and Miles had been all buddy-buddy since the day they’d stolen a train from the Patriots. He knew that more than likely they were just having a few drinks and reminiscing about their heist or something, but for some reason every alarm in his body was going off at once. “Charlie, can you go get Connor and watch Jeremy?”

“No way. If you’re riding out, I’m going with you,” she insisted. The war might be over, but she’d be damned if she sat back wringing her hands like a damsel in distress. This was Miles, after all. “Besides, tracker – remember?”

“I’ll do it,” Rachel volunteered.

Bass nodded at her in assent. At least Jeremy was comfortable around her because of school. “Tell him it’s official business and to bring my gear.” He would feel a lot more comfortable if he was fully armed. It was possible they’d been accosted by bandits or something, and he wanted to be ready. They watched as Rachel took off running down the street.

While they waited, Bass and Charlie headed to the town’s public stables to get mounts ready. He and Connor both kept a horse there. They’d have to borrow another for Charlie. There was simply not enough time to get the wagon from Aaron’s and it would only slow them down.

A half hour later, they were waiting at the town gate with the horses when Connor
showed up. He tossed his father his sword belt and handed him his gun and badge. “What do we know?”

“Miles left town on foot about two hours ago or so with Joe Matthews. Joe lives about a twenty minute ride outside of town with his daughter. I think her name’s Holly or something,” he explained.

“Heather,” Charlie corrected. “We should ride out there first and then double back if he’s not there and continue on foot, so I can track if I need to.”

They pressed the horses hard and arrived at Joe’s place fifteen minutes later. The house was dark. Every instinct told Bass that something wasn’t right. He drew his gun and approached the house slowly when he dismounted.

“Why don’t you just knock? It’s late enough. They’re probably asleep,” Connor said, whispering.

“I haven’t survived this long without trusting my instincts – and those are telling me something is very wrong here.” Keeping low, he crept over to the side of the house and looked into the front window, seeing nothing. He walked down the side of the house, with Connor and Charlie behind him. The barn was open and the glow of a lantern could be seen.

They snuck up on it, and he saw Miles there, face down in the hay. The barn appeared empty otherwise. Leaving Charlie and Connor to keep an eye on the exit, Bass went in. “Miles,” he whispered as he rolled him over.

Miles groaned as he started to come to. “Oh look, somebody sent the cavalry.” He sat up, wincing.

“What the hell happened?” Bass started to help him up.

“Joe came up to me in a panic and said he needed help. He must have hit me from behind.” He shook his head a few times, trying to clear it. Everything was still a little foggy. He couldn’t even remember what Joe had needed help with.

“Is the girl around here?”

“I haven’t seen her,” he started to walk towards the door.

Bass followed him out. “Connor, we’ve got to find Joe. Apparently he’s not quite himself today,” he said when he was outside. “Let’s go do our job. Charlie, you and Miles head back to town. We’ve got this.”

They didn’t make it more than a few feet when the sound of a shotgun cocked behind them. “Nobody’s going anywhere. Not until I get some answers.” They turned around to see Joe behind them, coming from the side of the barn, his gun aimed at Miles.

Bass raised his own weapon. “Put it down, Joe. You know you don’t want to shoot anyone. This isn’t you,” he said calmly.

In the dim light emanating from the barn, Joe looked like a mad man. He took a step towards Miles. “Did you do it? He told me you did it.”

Connor shifted subtly to his left, carefully taking aim. Charlie already had her crossbow loaded and raised. There was no way Joe was going to get a shot off and live. “Did I do what,
“Did you kill my boy?”

Bass got it now. “Joe, the Patriots killed him. They scrambled his brain and he was going to assassinate Carver. It wasn’t his fault, it wasn’t Miles’ fault.” He tried to slowly maneuver himself between Joe and his target. “Put the gun down, and we’ll forget this happened. You won’t get into any trouble, okay?”

“I’m the one that shot him, Joe, but I didn’t have a choice. I’m so sorry,” Miles admitted.

Bass shot him a look. Not helping, you idiot. He turned his attention back to the bereaved father. He could see how Joe’s eyes kept darting off to one side and back to Miles again. Charlie noticed it too. She turned to see what Joe was looking at, but there was nothing. She shook her head, indicating that there was nothing there.

It suddenly hit him what he was looking at – something he could see but they couldn’t – just as he knew that Joe was going to pull that trigger, no matter what they said or did. The adrenaline that had been coursing through him took over and the world seemed to slow down. Joe tightened his grip on the shotgun.

Bass was partially in the way, but he had two barrels – two shots. Just as Joe started to squeeze the trigger, Bass beat him to it. Joe went down and the shotgun went off. Charlie and Connor both reacted and tried to pull them out of harm’s way. Both men went down, but only Bass got up. He went for Miles when suddenly a screaming banshee was on his back.

As the knife went into his shoulder, Bass bent forward, reaching back to grab her and sent her flying. Heather got back up and charged Connor. He hesitated for a second, not wanting to shoot her. Instead, Charlie got her in the side of the head with the stock of her crossbow. The girl collapsed to her knees. Connor held her at gunpoint while Charlie secured her with the handcuffs her tossed her. The task of arresting the girl completed, she ran to the house, using her crossbow to break out a window. She climbed through and went on a frantic search for towels or something to use on the injured men.

Bass went over to Miles. “How bad you hit?”

Miles was grabbing his side. “I’ll live.”

Having nothing to use to apply pressure on Miles’ wound, he went to take off his jacket to get to his shirt. With the adrenalin rush subsiding, he finally realized that the knife was still embedded in his shoulder. “Ow. That’s gonna leave a mark.”

He went to pull it out, but couldn’t quite reach it. “Allow me,” Miles said as he reached over and yanked it out.

“Fuck. Dammit. Shit.” Bass said with through his teeth. His shoulder was on fire as the knife came out. He shrugged out of his jacket and pulled his shirt off over his head. Charlie came up behind him, and pressed a cloth to his back. The second the blade was removed, blood began to spurt out of the wound. He reached back and took over. “I’ve got it. Help him.”

She did as he asked, checking Miles’ wound. Seeing the blood on his back, she sighed in relief. “At least we know it went straight through. We’ve got to get you two to Grandpa.”

While Charlie went about packing Miles’ jacket with enough towels to help keep
pressure on the exit wound, Bass got to his feet. He bent to pick up the knife that Heather had used to stab him. It wasn’t very long, but a piece of it was missing. “Fucking tip broke off,” he griped.

Charlie went into the barn and led out the Matthew’s one horse. The Matthews family only owned that and a small wagon, but it would have to do. She went about hitching it up after tossing Connor a coil of rope. Heather was struggling and fighting like she’d gone insane, screaming Dillon’s name over and over again.

Connor tied her up and threw her over one of the horses. It would be easier using the wagon, but Miles and his dad would be better off if they didn’t have to ride. “I’ll lock up the looney; you go take Felix and Oscar here to get patched up.”

“What?”

“It’s from a play my mom took me to see right before the blackout. The Odd Couple? Never mind.”

“Okay boys. Your chariot awaits. Let’s get you home,” she said as she gestured towards the wagon. She took her seat on the driver’s bench and turned to watch them climb in the back. “Maybe the two of you should retire – you look like you’re off your game a little.” She laughed at the dirty looks her comment earned.

An hour later, Bass was sitting at his kitchen table while Gene was dropping his instruments into a pot of boiling water. “Is all of that really necessary? Just dig the thing out and patch me up.” He’d been bitching almost nonstop, insisting he was fine.

“Do you want to die of an infection? How about tetanus? Have you ever seen someone with lockjaw? I don’t interfere with your job, so stop trying to interfere with mine,” the doctor snapped. Rachel had just left to take his first pigheaded patient home, and he was in no mood to deal with number two.

Charlie sat next to Bass at the table and waited, ready to assist since Rachel was no longer there. When he was satisfied that everything was sterile enough to work on the asshole in need, Gene fished his instruments out and set them in a pan of tepid water to cool them off. Charlie poured whiskey over his hands, and he went to work.

Bass gritted his teeth and tried to bite back a groan as the scalpel went into his skin, opening up the wound a little more so Gene could find the metal. “It probably got lodged into your scapula and broke when Miles pulled it out. You should have left the knife in there until you got back, stupid.”

Just then, Jeremy came around the corner, the commotion having woken him up. When he saw Gene digging in his foster parent’s back, he got scared. “What happened?”

“Go back to bed,” Bass said, a little harsher than he’d meant.

Charlie went over to reassure the boy, but Gene stopped her. “I need those forceps, now.” She rushed back over and grabbed them, handing them off. He’d found the blade and needed to pull it out. His theory was spot on, and he’d found it embedded in the bone.

Jeremy crept around them and stood in front of Bass, pale and shaking. “I’m okay,” he said. He was feeling lightheaded and sweat was beading on his forehead. As Gene tried to work the tip of the blade lose without causing further damage, his vision started to blur. It was excruciating.

Suddenly Gene pulled on the forceps hard and yanked the metal free, causing his patient
to gasp in pain. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” At the moment, watching his mouth was not on his list of priorities.

“Gauze!” Gene barked at Charlie. She did as she was told; packing the cloth strips she’d laid out while Gene went about getting ready to stitch him up. He was still bleeding more than the doctor liked, so he set down the threaded needle and went over to the stove. He opened the firebox and held a knife into the flames, pulling it out when it was glowing red.

Knowing exactly what was about to happen, Bass looked up at Jeremy who was watching them work in horror. “Go back to bed. You don’t need to see this.” He said. Charlie reached around him and took off his belt, folding it in half before offering it to him. Jeremy backed up, still too frightened to leave. “Close your eyes,” Bass said before biting down on the leather. Gene stuck the glowing knife in his back, cauterizing the inside of the wound.

Bass bit down hard and did his best not to scream, failing miserably. This wasn’t the first time in his life he’d endured this type of treatment, but the pain was blinding, none the less. Satisfied that the bleeding had slowed enough, Gene started on the stitches.

“You’re lucky it went in the way it did,” he said casually as he worked. “In fact, had the blade not broken off, you probably would have done alright without me.”

“Good to know,” he panted, wincing as the needle went into his flesh. “Jeremy, if you’re not going to go back to bed, can you at least hand me that bottle?”

The boy blinked a few times before tentatively reaching out and pushing the whiskey bottle with Bass’ reach. Grabbing it, he lifted it to his lips and took a swig. He set the bottle down and ruffled his hair, his gruff way of showing him comfort and affection.

Charlie smiled as she watched them. _Not good at this, my ass. He’s a natural._ It was not lost on her that he’d just called Jeremy by name – something he almost never did. For some reason, he always insisted on calling him ‘kid’ as if it would keep him from getting attached somehow.

While Gene finished up, Charlie went over to Jeremy and put her arm around him. “Let’s get you back to bed. He’ll be fine. He’s got the best doctor in Willoughby working on him.” She left out that Gene was the only doctor in Willoughby.

“What happened?” Jeremy asked while she tucked him back into bed.

“Bass and Connor had to go to work.” She realized that Jeremy hadn’t known they were gone. “My mom, Mrs. Matheson stayed with you. He’d never leave you alone – you know that, right?”

“Who hurt him?”

Charlie sat down on the edge of the bed. “There was a man that tried to shoot somebody but Bass stopped him. The man’s daughter is sick and she got scared and attacked. Connor put her into the jail, so she can’t hurt anybody.”

Jeremy looked at her gravely. “Was she sick like the people in Idaho?”

“I don’t know. Try to go back to sleep, okay? I’ve got to help put Bass to bed now.” She waited for a few seconds for Jeremy to settle himself under his covers before closing the door and going back into the kitchen. She couldn’t get over how much he reminded her of Danny when they were growing up.
She stopped in his room on the way and dug out a clean t-shirt for him. By the time she returned, Bass was sporting a clean bandage. She helped him get the shirt on and then watched as her grandfather made a makeshift sling out of what looked like an old bed sheet. “If you’ve got any sense, you’ll take it easy for a few days – not that I expect you to listen,” he said as he tied the sling in place. “This stays on for at least two days.”

“I’ve got a job to do,” Bass reminded the doctor.

“Fine, die of gangrene, see if I care. Just don’t come whining to me when you’re on your deathbed.” He started to dig through his bag. “You’re what, six one?” Gene said as he searched for something.

“Six even,” Bass replied.

“How much you weigh?” Gene had found what he was looking for.

“I dunno, one seventy-five, give or take. It’s not exactly like I weigh myself often – or even have a scale for that matter. Why?”

Gene stepped behind nonchalantly. “No reason really. It’s just for my records.” Before Bass had a chance to get suspicious, he jabbed him in the arm with a syringe, pushing the plunger in.

“Ow, what the fuck?” He stood up quickly, sending his world spinning around him. He blinked a few times as he held onto the chair. “Whoa… What the hell did you just give me?”

“Sit down, dummy. I just gave you enough morphine to make sure you follow my instructions – and to make sure you keep your hands off my granddaughter tonight. It doesn’t work that fast though. That’s the blood loss.”

“I am so gonna kick your ass,” Bass grumbled as he sat down slowly, closing his eyes and taking deep breaths until the dizziness passed, “just as soon as the room stops spinning.”

Gene ignored him and turned to Charlie. Handing her the vial of morphine and the syringe, he started to give her instructions. “Halfway up, no more than every six hours or so if he needs it for pain, or if he just gets too ornery. Change the bandage twice a day and for God’s sake, no funny business in the bedroom… ever.”

Bass tried to raise his hand to flip the doctor off at that remark, but the morphine was kicking in and he was having problems trying to get his arm to move the way he wanted it. He watched Gene pack up his bag as the drug enveloped him in a warm haze. He heard Gene mumble about stubborn assholes and the like, and he could have sworn he’d heard the phrase “cradle robber” somewhere in there, but he was having trouble focusing.

Gene put on his jacket and grabbed his things. “Seeing as how I’m the only doctor in town and I’m on the town board, I’m suspending him from work for the next three days – longer if I don’t like the way that’s healing. Make sure he stays put,” he said as he made his way to the door.”

Despite his drugged state, Bass was starting to get annoyed at being talked about like a child. “Hey, I’m sitting right here,” he reminded them. He tried to stand up again. “I’ve got to go help Connor,” he mumbled as he swayed where he stood.

“You’re not going anywhere but to bed,” Charlie said as she grabbed his arm to steady him.
Gene shook his head again. “I never figured you went for the stupid type,” he said before going out the door and letting it slam behind him.

“Hmm. I suspect for some reason he still doesn’t like me,” Bass slurred as Charlie helped him down the hallway. “I can’t imagine why.”

She laughed as she helped him get into bed. As late as it was and with Connor busy with Heather Matthews, Charlie changed into one of his t-shirts and climbed into bed next to him, snuggling up as close as she could. His arm in the sling, he could only lay on his good side and let her get close.

Her mind was still whirling around the night’s events. Really there had been no obvious signs that Miles had been in danger. The only reason they’d gone on the search was because of her mother’s panic and Bass’ instincts. After all, Miles had only been gone a few hours and he was Miles Matheson – the Butcher of Baltimore. If Bass hadn’t decided to check it out just in case, he would be dead. “Thank you for going after him,” she said, turning her head to give him a quick peck.

“Just doin’ my job ma’am.” His voice was drowsy and the words barely distinguishable.

She had to bite her lip not to laugh at him for it. “Well thanks for not sucking at it.”

Bass was the one that laughed then, finding her comment a lot funnier than he should have, but under the influence of the morphine he couldn’t seem to help himself. His breathing evened out mid-chuckle as the drug took him completely under.

Chapter End Notes

Also, as Willoughby is one of the few towns in the show that was not a real place, I know we’ve all been guessing on geography. I’ve placed it in my head cannon as about a week from Austin (via wagon, I guess which would make it about 100 miles if you figure a wagon will travel about 20 miles a day without overworking the horses). As such, I looked up the climate for the Austin region and realized just how warm it is there. The show showed them wandering around in the middle of the day with jackets on Memorial day, which is funny seeing as how the high in May can apparently reach the 90’s that far south (heck, in St. Louis it can get that hot in May, although it’s not as common as in Texas I’m sure). Anyway, I’ve tried to make corrections to the geography, travel times and climate, and will incorporate it into my story subtly as I can.

Thanks for all bearing with me, and I hope I didn’t fluff you all to death (or that it didn’t detract away from my writing style too much – again, it’s such a challenge for me!)
The next morning, Bass woke up with a groan. The morphine Gene had given him had long since worn off and his shoulder was throbbing. He rolled out of bed and struggled into a pair of pants, awkwardly zipping them up one handed. He was still groggy when he made his way carefully into the kitchen where Charlie sat with his son and Jeremy.

“What are you doing here? Don’t we have a prisoner?” He asked as he sank into a chair.

“I cut her lose this morning,” Connor said as he poured himself another cup of coffee.

“You what?”

“Aaron and Rachel went and talked to her. Whatever it was that made her flip out was gone. What was I supposed to do? We can’t hold her indefinitely,” Connor replied as he set a cup down in front of him. “What were you going to do? Send her to Austin because invisible robots made her crazy?”

Bass really didn’t have an answer for that. Heather Matthews wasn’t a criminal. He picked up his cup, stopping before he took a drink. “Milk? Are you kidding me?” He did his best to ignore the snicker that came out of Jeremy.

“Blood loss, remember? No coffee for you,” Charlie said as she held her cup out to Connor for a refill.

Bass pushed the cup away in disgust. “I don’t get it, why did they mess with Joe and Heather? It was like they specifically sent them after Miles.”

“Maybe it’s because he’s close to mom and Aaron. They obviously don’t want anyone working on the code,” Charlie said as she picked the mug back up and set it in front of him. “Don’t be a child. Drink it.”

He picked up the mug and chugged it down, making a face as he set the empty cup back down on the table. “Happy?” He really hated milk – and now the kid knew it, which would only make life more difficult. “Anyway, they’ve been quiet since the storm. I wonder what happened since then to make them show up now.” He caught how Charlie’s expression changed when he
spoke. "What?"

"It’s nothing," she said.

“I know better. It’s something, so spill.” Charlie glanced at Jeremy, suggesting to him that maybe they shouldn’t be talking about this in front of him, especially after what happened with his mother. “Hey, did you wash up before you sat down?” He knew damn good and well the kid hadn’t, just as he knew that he’d probably been messing around outside before breakfast – the kid seemed addicted to dirt.

Knowing he was caught, Jeremy went to go wash his hands. “Well?” he asked when the child was out of earshot.

“The night after the storm - when I went home, they tried to mess with me,” she confessed, trying to downplay it the best she could.

Bass’ temper started to flare up. “Why the hell didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it was personal, the things it said,” she argued. She lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. “It was after we argued – the night you pushed me away. I was hurt and angry and it tried to play up on that.”

At that moment, Jeremy came bounding back into the room, ready to eat. Bass stood up and gestured for her to follow. “We need a minute,” he said to Connor and Jeremy as he left them to start breakfast without them. They went outside and sat on the old lawn chairs that he’d found and set up on the front porch.

Bass took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. If I hadn’t hurt you they wouldn’t have tried to take advantage of it,” he began. There was yet another way that he’d done something to make her life more difficult, and he felt guilty for it. “What happened?”

She knew deep down that he needed to know and it would drive him nuts until he did. “It was Jason. He tried to make me feel guilty for having feelings for you – and stupid for throwing myself at you, only to have you turn me down. They tried to tempt me with him but when I didn’t take the bait, it wasn’t him anymore.”

Her tone worried him. “Who was it?”

Charlie looked way, uncomfortable with what she was about to tell him. "It was you."

He stood up abruptly, not thinking. Spots formed in his vision and he felt his stomach do summersaults. Bass groaned as he shut his eyes and braced himself up against the side of the house, waiting for the nausea and dizziness to subside.

“Sit down before you keel over or puke,” she said in exasperation. “See, this is why I didn’t tell anyone.”

A new fear hit him. “Is that why you acted the way you did? Why you wouldn’t talk to me about that night?” His voice was strained as he sat back down. The idea that the Nano had tried to make the problems between them worse, somehow made everything harder. It was bad enough if they were messing with them, but the idea that they’d try to turn them against one another was something none of them have considered.

“No, that was all because you were being a jackass,” she said with a saccharine sweet smile. “Anyway, before it changed he said they can be anyone we want them to be. I thought you
and Aaron said that they only show up as dead people.”

He took a few deep breaths and tried to force himself to calm down. “From what I’ve seen and the others have seen, they do. This means they can fuck with us even more.”

“Well if that’s their goal, they need to try harder than that. First of all, it was you but it was a different you.” Charlie explained how he’d appeared to her. “Aaron said they pull from our memories, but I don’t really remember ever seeing you like that. Not really.”

“Why would you? You were just a little girl the last time I saw you before the blackout. You couldn’t have been older than three or four. It was right before the accident…” Bass trailed off as his mind went back there – to a happier time. His parents had thrown a huge party on the Fourth (one of two annual Monroe blowouts, the other always being New Year’s Eve). Ben and Rachel had brought Charlie and a newborn Danny down from Chicago. He and Miles had barely managed to get leave. It was just a few months before he’d lost them all.


“Sorry,” he said, “for a second I could almost see it. Anyway, maybe it’s not that far off. That man, that part of me has been dead for a very long time.”

She reached out and put a hand on his knee. “No, if I look close enough, I can see him in you.” Feeling embarrassed suddenly, she rose and helped him get up. “Come on, let’s get some food in you. It’ll probably help with the dizziness. Grandpa said you need to eat and drink and rest to replace all the blood you lost.”

After breakfast, he did feel decidedly better. While Charlie helped clean up the kitchen he went and got changed. He tried to sneak past the kitchen but he was busted before he made it to the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Charlie asked. She moved to place herself between him and the door, just in case he decided to make a break for it.

“I’m going to work. I’ve got shit to do,” Bass said.

“Oh no you don’t – doctor’s orders. You’re going back to bed where you belong. Besides, Grandpa suspended you, remember?”

“I’m the sheriff. What’s he gonna do? Arrest me?” he scoffed.

“No, but I will,” Connor said as he came out of the kitchen and joined them in the hallway.

“You can’t arrest me, I’m your boss,” he countered. “Joe wasn’t some bandit. He was a citizen, which means that Austin’s gonna want to know what happened. I’ve got to send this in before the Rangers find out from someone else.”

Charlie stepped aside and went back into the kitchen, leaving Connor to handle it. “Dad, I can take care of things for a few days. I’ll send word to Austin. It doesn’t take a genius to write up a report.”

Bass tried to get past him, but being uninjured and equipped with all of his blood, Connor was simply faster. “I’m not going to sit here for the next few days and do nothing. That crabby old bastard can shove it. Believe me, I’ve had a hell of a lot worse than – ouch! Hey!”
Bass turned to see Charlie standing there with the now empty syringe in her hand. “You might wanna go lay down before this kicks in,” she said as she walked away.

“You drugged me? What the hell, Charlie?” he yelled to her retreating form.

She returned a minute or two later after hiding the vial and needle – knowing Bass, he’d probably try to destroy them later if he found them. “It’s for your own good. Remember what happened to Miles? He almost died because of that infection.”

“There’s too much going on for me to take off now.” Determined, he stood there stubbornly with his arms crossed over his chest. The three of them seemed to be at an impasse. He’d never admit defeat and they would never let him leave. Within a few minutes the morphine was already starting to kick in. He blinked a few times and tried to clear his head. “This is just wrong,” he managed to get out before the exertion and the drugs took hold and he slid down the wall, sinking to the floor with his eyes starting to glaze over.

Charlie gestured at him to Connor, who helped her get him to his feet. “Let’s get you back in bed,” she said as she led him back down the hall.

They passed a very nervous looking Jeremy on the way. “What’s wrong with him?” he asked when he saw Bass’ uneven gait.

“He’s just a little high – for the pain he’s too stubborn to admit he has and to keep him off his feet, so he can get better. Our job is to make sure he takes it easy,” Charlie told him. The boy followed them and watched as she cajoled and argued until he got back in bed. He came forward to help her. “Here, you get his boots, and I’ll get the rest.

“I’m so getting you back for this,” he slurred.

“Of course you are,” she said in her most placating voice. “Let someone take care of you for once.”

With Jeremy’s help, she got him stripped to his boxers and t shirt. By the time she pulled the blanket up to his chest, Bass was almost completely out of it. As an afterthought, she handed his uniform shirt and boots to Jeremy. “Hide these.”

The boy giggled as he ran off to do just that. When he was gone, Charlie sat down on the bed next to him. “What am I going to do with you?” she asked as she ran her fingers through his hair.

In his drug induced state, Bass shifted towards her and the comforting contact. “Naughty and wonderful things?” he mumbled with a sleepy smile.

She laughed as she placed a kiss on his forehead. “Go to sleep, Don Juan.”

Bass stumbled out of the bedroom once more. It was morning again. “Will you stop doing that?” He’d just woken up from the third sneak attack with the morphine. The last time, Jeremy had been conscripted to distract him while Connor had done the deed. It had been just after supper. They’d figured by then he wouldn’t trust Charlie enough to let her out of his sight – and they’d been right. He sank down gingerly at the table, the after effects of the drug being a splitting headache.

“We’ll stop when you do,” Charlie said as she gave him a quick kiss.

“I give up,” he snapped.
“Good. Let me change your bandage.” Charlie changed the dressing on his shoulder before setting food in front of him. “I’m opening the bar today, so I’ve got to go. Greg is coming in this afternoon, so I’ll be back by supper time to check on you.”

“Where’s the kid?” He asked as he started to eat.

“Connor took him to school on his way into town. I’ll walk him home on my way over later.” She kissed him again and headed home to get changed.

Gene came in later in the day to look him over. “How are you feeling?” he asked as he examined the wound.

“I’d feel a lot better if people would stop stabbing me in the arm with needles,” Bass grumbled. He waited for Gene to replace the bandage and then tried to hide how much it hurt when he put his shirt back on.

“You and Miles are just two peas in a childish little pod aren’t you?” Gene mused as he gathered his bag. “At least I only have to live with one of you.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Surely as ever and driving us both about as nuts as I’m sure you’re driving my granddaughter.” Gene headed towards the door but stopped and faced Bass once more. “Speaking of Charlie, it goes without saying that Rachel and I hate this thing you’ve apparently started. Miles however, has reminded us that you’re both adults and there’s not a damn thing we can do about it. I may be an old man, but I swear if this ends up hurting her, I will surgically remove your favorite body parts, do I make myself clear?”

Bass actually flinched. He never realized how scary the doctor could be. “Crystal.”

“Good. Have a nice day.” With that, Gene disappeared.

After what ended up being a week off of work, Bass finally got Gene to lift his medical suspension. Miles had already been back for a few days. He got an early release from confinement based off of the fact that for the most part all he did was sit at a desk anyway. Oh what have our lives come to?

Bass, on the other hand had promised repeatedly to leave the dirty work to Connor, but neither Gene nor Charlie had believed him for one minute. Not that he’d have been able to keep that promise if anything had happened anyway. It was the nature of his job to act when needed. If there was trouble, it wasn’t like he could just twiddle his thumbs until Connor showed up.

He was elbow deep in paperwork when Charlie came in. “I brought you lunch,” she said as she closed the door behind her.

“Put it over there,” he said as he pointed to the filing cabinet in the corner without bothering to look up. He’d been working at going over the reports Connor had written up while he was gone all morning and was not even close to being finished.

“Hello to you too. My day’s been good so far, Bass. Thanks for asking. How’s yours?” She said as she set the bag down where he’d pointed.
He looked up at her and grinned sheepishly. “I’m sorry. Thank you for lunch.” He reached out and pulled her into his lap, kissing her briefly before she settled against his chest. “Doesn’t take a genius, my ass. I’ve been trying to decipher these all morning. It took me over forty years, but I finally found someone with shittier handwriting than Miles.”

Charlie laughed as she wiggled out of his lap. “Take a break. Eat.”

Bass shot up and grabbed her from behind. “I’ve got a better idea. How about we just skip to dessert?” He suggested as he started placing kisses on the back of her neck.

She turned in his arms and let him claim her mouth, opening for him so he could sweep inside. He broke away when she started to remove her jacket. “Hold that thought.” He went over to the window behind his desk and lowered the blinds before going over to the door to lock it.

He stalked back over to Charlie. “Now, where were we?” he said as he bent to take her bottom lip playfully in between his teeth. His mouth on hers, their tongues tangled. Bass backed her up slowly to the side of his desk. She gasped in surprise as he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up to sit on it.

He stepped in between her legs and finally started working her jacket off, tossing it on the floor behind him. Her heart began to race. She started unbuttoning his shirt, anxious to touch him. He shrugged out of it and pulled his t-shirt off over his head. He didn’t bother with removing hers. He yanked it up and then sought the clasp to her bra. Rubbing his hand up her back as he went, his other hand massaged her hip through her jeans.

Once the clasp was undone, he flipped her bar up, exposing her breasts for him. Their mouths broke apart and he bent his head to take one nipple in his mouth, curling his tongue around it and teasing it. Charlie let out a low moan and arched her back as she wrapped one leg around him, pressing him closer to her. In that moment, something in him snapped.

Bass grabbed her other breast in his hand kneading it roughly as he began to suck hard on the other, nipping the tight bud with his teeth. Charlie cried out in a mixture of pleasure and pain. She reached down and started undoing his belt. He released her flesh and ran his hand down her leg to find her boot. He kept torturing her nipple with his mouth as he worked the laces loose. Charlie took him firmly into her hand and began to run her hands up and down his length. As he yanked her boot off, he flexed his hips, encouraging her.

Suddenly unable to wait, he reached behind her and swept the stacks of papers off the desk, sending them scattering to the floor. He forced her to lay back and started to undo his belt. He released her flesh and ran his hand down her leg to find her boot. He kept torturing her nipple with his mouth as he worked the laces loose. Charlie took him firmly into her hand and began to run her hands up and down his length. As he yanked her boot off, he flexed his hips, encouraging her.

The sound only encouraged him and with a growl he started to plunge into her over and over again. Somewhere this had gone from a fun round of midday sex to something else entirely. It was primal, animalistic. This wasn’t fucking, it was mating – he had only one goal in mind (not that his mind was working at all): he wanted to possess her and fill her as fast as he could.

He leaned forward over her as he continued to pound inside her, bottoming out with each violent thrust. He kissed her again, the pressure deliciously brutal against her lips. Charlie suddenly reached out and put her hand on his chest. A moment of lucidity returned and for a second he
thought she would push him away, but then she raked her nails down his chest, carving thin red lines into his skin. She pushed herself up on one elbow, breaking their mouths apart, and reached for his ass, digging her nails in there as well and pulling him closer.

He lost what little iota of control that was trying to come back and moved faster. He knew she was close but he didn’t care. There was no stopping now, even if she’d asked him to. He was there, right on the edge when Charlie exploded, screaming as she came. He slammed into her as hard as he could and spilled deep inside, hitting her cervix with a satisfied grunt.

Bass stood there, embedded inside her and covered in sweat, panting while he came back down from the high of it. He abruptly pulled out and backed up until his back hit the filing cabinet, the corner digging into the middle of his back. “I’m sorry,” he said as he ran a hand through his hair. “That was – I should have stopped. I don’t know what happened. I – I’m sorry.”

He was at a total loss. He’d literally lost it. Charlie sat up and looked at him. “Hey, it’s okay. I didn’t ask you to stop.”

He just shook his head. He’d scared himself when he’d come out of whatever had driven him just moments before. “You don’t understand. I don’t think I would have.”

Charlie got up and pulled her pants up. He bent to do the same. “Hey, look at me. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I could have hurt you, Charlie.” He’d deliberately been as rough as possible. Even though deep down he knew he should ease up, he hadn’t wanted to – so he didn’t.

She touched the torn skin where she’d clawed him. She looked saw her fingers and where one of the nails was torn. His gazed followed hers. He hadn’t even noticed before now that he was bleeding. He winced now when she touched the scratches – they stung. “Yeah, it looks like you weren’t the one doing the hurting.” And, if she was honest with herself, she’d enjoyed marking him, just as she’d enjoyed the brutality of what they’d just done. She’d never been one for overly rough sex, but for some reason today it just seemed necessary at the time.

“I’m so not having your grandfather look at these so don’t even ask,” he said, his voice grave.

Charlie looked up and locked eyes with him – and burst out laughing. “Could you imagine the look on his face?”

Her laughter was contagious and he couldn’t help but join her. “I don’t even want to try.”

Charlie stood on her toes and pressed her mouth to his. He kissed her back, gently this time. “I don’t know what happened, but it wasn’t just you, okay? I was right there with you.” He nodded and pressed his forehead to hers. Reaching around her, he refastened her bra and adjusted her shirt. “I mean it, Bass. No guilt…”

He finished getting dressed while she found her boot and put it back on. They both went to work gathering all the reports that he’d knocked to the floor. In the uncomfortable silence they both came to the same conclusion. The Nano must have found a way to mess with their heads – this was just another distraction. There was no harm in it, but it did unbalance them for just a while.

They got the mess taken care of and the papers sorted before Connor got back to the office. They shared one last lingering kissed as he unlocked the door. Charlie went back to work, silently hoping Greg wouldn’t guess what she’d been up to. She could already tell that she was
going to have her fair share if bruises later and hoped that none would be visible.

Alone again, Bass sank down at his desk once more, lunch now forgotten. When Connor walked in an hour later, he picked up the stack of papers and shoved them at him. “Seriously, these aren’t even legible. I give up. Please, translate them into words resembling English.”

He left the office to spend the rest of his day on the streets. If he stayed inside, he’d keep thinking about what had happened and would either drive himself nuts trying to analyze it or would end up spending the rest of the afternoon with a hard on. Neither seemed pleasant or conducive to earning his pay.

The next day Bass ordered Connor to ride over to the Matthews’ place to check on the girl. The girl was all alone now and he felt responsible for her wellbeing. He’d have gone himself, but considering the circumstances in which her father died and the fact that he was the one she’d stabbed, he thought it would be best to stay clear. The last thing he wanted to do was remind her of that night and send her back over the edge.

Connor had sent the report out to Austin and to the Ranger garrison in neighboring Crockett the day after it happened. They’d yet to hear anything back, however. The longer it took the more nervous about the whole thing Bass felt. He knew it was a legal shooting – Joe had technically kidnapped a government official, which was subject to capital punishment in Texas, but for some reason he didn’t think that Blanchard would be too happy with him for the way it ended.

Bass was crossing the street, in his hand a mewling six month old cat. He’d been headed to the town hall to see if Miles had heard anything from the Rangers (he was avoiding Gene and Rachel who were still not exactly happy about his being involved with Charlie) when an elderly resident had run up to him with a complaint about a local teenager drowning cats in one of the town’s wells.

There were plenty of feral strays around since the blackout and for the most part, they were considered a nuisance, but he couldn’t have someone tainting the water supply with dead cat, so he’d gone to check out her claims.

Sure enough, sixteen-year old Brad Everly had been three sheets to the wind and at the well behind the public stable, having a good old time. The woman that had reported him had tried to get him to stop, but she’d been scared. “He don’t seem right,” she’d told him. The excited look on the kid’s face had sent a chill down Bass’ spine. And of course, the first thing that popped into his head was the Nano. But then again, the Brad was a weird kid to begin with.

After saving the animal from its eminent demise, Bass had drug the kid home to his parents to deal with him. Technically, since the little creep hadn’t left the bodies in the well, what the boy had done wasn’t illegal (animal cruelty laws had all but disappeared after the blackout), however disgusting it was. He’d disposed of the three poor creatures he hadn’t made it in time to save and had picked up the lone survivor by the scruff of its neck before heading back.

He was standing on the sidewalk outside of his office, holding it up to look at it when Miles came up behind him. “What’s that?”

Bass tilted his head to one side as he watched the sodden creature bat at him unsuccessfully. “Caught the Everly boy trying to see how long it could hold its breath underwater. I swear that kid’s gonna grow up to be a serial killer or something.”

“Well, what are you doing with it?”
Bass shrugged. He’d caught the way Jeremy had been trying to coax the neighborhood strays to come up to him, and it was almost Christmas. He hadn’t known what to give the kid anyway. “It’s not a stray – his old man said the sister’s cat had kittens a while back and she’d been hiding them in the cellar, rather than give them away like she was told. Her brother found them and decided to have some fun. Seemed kind of rude to just leave it in the street. Figured I’d give it to the kid.”

Miles raised an eyebrow at him. It took every ounce of self-control to not burst out laughing. “Um, Bass… You hate cats, remember?”

“No I don’t.”

Miles knew this to be a flat out lie. Bass’ sisters had owned a cat and he’d despised the thing. It had always found a way into his room, leaving gifts of dead birds and mice on his bed – but only when he was home on leave, of course. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure you do.”

“Shut up,” Bass said as he unlocked the door and went inside, leaving Miles to follow. He set the animal down on his desk and watched as it immediately went about peeing on a stack of papers. “Oh, come on!”

“Told ya,” his friend snickered.

Bass shot him a scathing look, but before he had a chance to retaliate, Connor burst through the door. “Heather Matthews is dead.”

The kitten now forgotten, Bass sank down in his chair. “What happened?” he asked sadly.

The next several days were chaotic. The town had already buried Joe while Bass and Miles were recovering. Now, Heather would be laid to rest beside him. From what Gene could tell, her death had most definitely been a suicide. Connor had found her with the blade still in her hand. Still, Bass had asked Gene to check the handle for prints; because of his involvement with her father’s death he figured it might raise brows if he or Connor did the honors. The only ones Gene had found belonged to Heather and Joe, and the serrated blade was definitely the one she’d used. Since the only people in town that the Matthews had ever had an altercation with were Bass and Miles on the day of Joe’s death, there was no other reason to suspect foul play.

Bass had written the report on her death and sent it along with Gene’s written autopsy report to Austin and once more to Crockett. “We should have checked on her sooner,” he told Charlie at the bar a few nights later. He’d just closed down the office for the last time until after Christmas and he was waiting for Connor and Jeremy to meet him for supper.

“Grandpa said she’d been dead for days before Connor found him and you’d just gotten back to work. It’s not your fault,” she said as she poured him a drink. “By the way, your cat is now officially pissing in a box. You’re welcome,” she said, changing the subject. She’d agreed to keep the animal at her place until Christmas so he could surprise Jeremy. She thought the concept of a litter box was ridiculous, but Bass insisted on it. It was easier to dump a box of cat shit than it was to replace a dead or missing cat, he’d told her.

“Thank you,” he told her, giving her a quick peck before snagging a table that had finally freed up. Because of the holiday, the place was packed. Greg had outdone himself and created a
meal worthy of any restaurant in Austin, and in the spirit of the holiday, Charlie had decided to invite the town in and give it away for free – her gift to the community. Since the blackout, most people were more concerned with just getting by to really celebrate, so the small gesture had a big impact. Being Charlie, she’d even hung some old garland she’d found in the cellar when she’d first taken the place over.

Before long, his son and ward had arrived. They were just getting ready to eat when the door to the bar opened and the entire place went quiet. Bass looked up and saw Malcom Dove standing in the doorway. He tried to remain calm, but he had a sinking feeling about the Ranger’s presence here. The man had been Carver’s right hand goon after he’d killed Fry to set up the Patriots, and had made it his personal mission to see that Bass was punished for his many crimes.


“Take a wild guess,” the Ranger said, not bothering to hide his satisfaction. “Blanchard has asked me to personally escort you to Austin to answer some questions about Joe Matthews.”

Bass crossed his arms over his chest. “It was a legal shooting, if anyone had bothered to read the report on it, you’d see that.”

“It’s not my call.”

“It’s Christmas. I’ll set out the day after,” Bass told him. It wasn’t just about the holiday. He personally wouldn’t give a shit about it one way or another if it wasn’t for the kid. No, he just couldn’t stand the smug look on Dove’s face.

“Do I really have to place you under arrest for refusing a summons?” The look on the man’s face indicated that he’d love nothing better than to do just that.

With a sigh, Bass stood up. He picked up his glass and downed the last of his whiskey. “Looks like you’ll have to celebrate without me,” he told Connor and Jeremy. “I’ve got an appointment I can’t reschedule.”

Charlie met him at the door. “You know this is bullshit,” she spat at Dove. She had only met him one time at the start of the war, but had taken an instant dislike to him. “I’ll help Connor keep an eye on Jeremy while you’re gone,” she told him as Dove ushered him out the door.

Convinced that Bass would try to make a break for it, Dove insisted on them taking the train. This would cut their trip to Austin down to one day, which suited him just fine. The sooner they could get there, the sooner he could get back. He’d seen the look of fear on Jeremy’s face when he realized Bass was being sent to answer for that night.

The entire trip, he was treated as a prisoner, rather than an officer of the law. Dove had even cuffed him to the armrest of his seat. “Do you have to be a dick about it?” he’d complained when the Ranger had made sure to tighten the shackles as much as possible.

“You might have Blanchard fooled, but not me. You’re a criminal and it’s only a matter of time before you slip up and I’ll be able to prove it,” Dove had said.

When they’d arrived, instead of taking him to the capital building, Dove had shoved him in a cell at the Ranger’s headquarters. By the time Bass had been pulled out to meet before Blanchard’s counsel, he was scathing.

The second he was brought before them, he was ready to explode. “What the hell. Miles
Matheson gets shot, I get stabbed, and somehow I’m the one on trial here?”

The head of the counsel looked at him, confused. “This is not a trial, Mr. Monroe. This is a standard hearing to review your handling of the Matthews’ incident. It’s standard procedure when a citizen is killed by an appointed official.”

An hour later, Bass was out of the hearing and in Blanchard’s office. The hearing had determined several things. One of which was what Bass had said all along – Joe’s death had been justifiable and Heather’s suicide had been an unfortunate circumstance brought on by grief. Bass had apparently made the right move when he’d involved Gene with that one, as otherwise they would have found it suspicious.

But he’d also learned that Dove was not supposed to be anywhere near Willoughby. He’d been assigned to Houston. He was a good Ranger but had been a little too abrasive with the current government. He was apparently having trouble accepting that Carver was dead and no longer in charge.

Blanchard poured them both a drink. “So you want to tell me why you really abandoned your post?” he said as Bass raised the glass to his lips. The crafty general hadn’t been fooled by the story behind his disappearance. Personally, he hadn’t cared if the former leader of the Monroe republic kept the job or not, but once word had gotten out that his pardon had a condition he had a hard time not enforcing it. It had turned out to be a popular decision in Congress.

“I had some issues. They’ve been resolved,” was all Bass was willing to say on the matter. He was still bitter about having been forced to serve Texas in the first place, no matter how it might work out in the end.

“I’ll be honest, I was a little surprised when you’d left. I’d heard you’d taken to it alright at first,” Blanchard confessed. “From what I could tell, Miles had been right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Blanchard finished his first glass and went to pour another. He reached over the desk to top of his guest’s as well. “He said you’d do well if you got your head out of your ass. I had my doubts, but then you eased right in. Been doing a fair job since you’ve been back from what I’ve been told.”

“Thanks, I think. But what did Miles have to do with it?”

“It was his idea, of course. God, I wouldn’t have trusted you to protect a playground, let alone an entire town - if it wasn’t for him.” Blanchard went on to explain how the condition had been added to his pardon in the first place.

To his credit, Bass kept his cool. He was not going to lose it in front of the President of Texas. When he got home, well that was a different matter entirely. He and Miles would have words, and if his suspicions about Charlie’s involvement proved correct they’d have a lot to talk about later as well.
Chapter Notes

This is a heavy dialog chapter, as Bass and Miles have a few words. Bass is obviously not a happy camper at having been played yet again.

Just because Austin had gone through the expense of sending him in via train did not mean they were willing to do the same for his return trip home. Bass was instead sent back with a borrowed horse from the Rangers and a promise to look into the issue with Malcom Dove. By the time that he got back to town a week later he was tired, filthy and his anger at being screwed by Miles had boiled over.

He arrived in town in the middle of the afternoon just a few days into the new year. After taking a few minutes to drop the horse off at the stables with instructions to send it to Crockett the next day, he stalked over to the town hall. He and Miles needed to talk—rather, he need to talk and Miles needed to bleed.

Miles was just locking the door when he saw Bass approach. “Well, look who’s back,” he said, two seconds before Bass’ fist made contact with his face. “You son of a bitch! You sold me out?”

Miles put a hand to his mouth. When he pulled it away, he just stared at the blood on his fingers for just a second, his brain still trying to catch up with what had happened. “Have you gone completely insane? What the hell are you talking about?”

Bass took another swing at him. “Texas – my pardon.” Another hit to Miles’ jaw sent him stumbling back a few feet. “Does that ring a bell?” He stood there, panting and enraged—waiting for it to register with his so-called friend.

Miles held a hand out to stay him. “Blanchard talks too much,” he muttered as he slowly stood upright. “The truth? I might have put the idea in his head, yeah.”

Bass ignored the fact that Charlie was running down the street, having obviously just been told that the town sheriff was back and knocking the crap out of their interim mayor. “How could you do that to me? I did what you wanted. I helped you win; I did things your way all the way to the end of the fucking war.”

“It was for your own good, Bass. If you hadn’t been forced to stay here you’d have just gone back east and either gone crazy again or gotten yourself killed – probably both.”

Bass let out a harsh laugh, heedless of the audience they now had. “Gone crazy? What the hell do you think was happening last year? I was better; I finally understood and had a handle on things. And then you forced me here. All that shit your bitch of a girlfriend put me through? I had to leave town because I was afraid I’d end up putting a bullet in one of our heads!” He sacked Miles one more time, knocking him to the ground.
“Bass wait!” Charlie called after him as he started to stomp off.

He turned to face her. “We’re you in on this?”

“No, I…” she trailed off, his stricken look making her feel sick with remorse.

“But you knew about it, didn’t you? You knew the whole time.” He didn’t need to wait for her to answer. Her eyes told him everything he needed to know. Bass took his badge out of his jacket pocket and threw it at the ground next to where Miles still sat. “I fucking quit,” he said as he turned back once more and headed home.

The old bass would have gone home and dove straight into a bottle. But this Bass at least had the presence of mind to wait until he’d picked Jeremy up from school, fed him his supper, spent far too much time listening to all the antics his new cat had been up to since Christmas, and put him to bed. Only then did he crack that bottle open.

He sat on one of the lawn chairs, feet up on the porch, whiskey in one hand and cigar in the other. It had been bad enough to get Willoughby shoved down his throat against his will, even worse to turn into the drunken and depressed mess he’d become last spring. To find out that it had all been Miles the whole time – that was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

No matter what he’d done to try and prove himself, the arrogant fuck felt he’d needed a babysitter and so had just gone and played god to his crappy little universe. And when it backfired and things went to shit, forcing Bass to make a run for it for the sake of his own sanity, he’d sicked Blanchard’s little dogs on him, which never would have happened if he’d not convinced them to add his exile here to the pardon in the first place.

“Bass, can we talk?” He looked up from his bottle to see Charlie standing on his lawn. He wanted to tell her yes – really, but he wasn’t drunk enough and his mind wasn’t ready to process anything she had to say. “No,” he said curtly as he raised the bottle back to his lips, almost in defiance. *Let her say something about it.*

Charlie knew his moods and knew that sometimes persistence was the only thing to break through. She refused to back down. “What would have been the point of telling you? By the time I knew about it, it was already official and too late to change anything.”

“Don’t. Just go home, Charlie.” He fought tears of rage and embarrassment. Once again, Miles had played him – and probably always would. She just didn’t get it.

“So that’s it then? You just decided it’s over, just like that?”

He could hear how much she was hurting over that. “No,” he said. “I’m not ending things. I just need space for a while.” It was the best he could offer her for now. He was pissed at her for hiding the truth all this time – even before they’d been together they’d at least been friends (of sorts). He’d deserved to know the truth. Right now, he wasn’t in any frame of mind to be around anyone, let alone her.

Charlie nodded sadly as she turned and walked back home. He took another swig, watching as she went, her shoulders slumped in defeat. He threw the bottle, hitting the remnants of the house’s driveway. As the bottle shattered, two thoughts crossed his mind: *That was the only bottle you had – stupid; Aw shit, I’m going to have to pick that glass up in the morning before Jeremy cuts himself.* He went inside and flopped down on his bed, feeling empty and utterly alone.

The next morning he fared no better. Connor had sensed his piss poor mood the night
before. He’d heard that his father and Miles had gotten into it over something, but he’d wisely decided to stay out of it for the time being. He’d just chalked it up to the fact that both men had bad tempers when they wanted and that Bass was always a dick after traveling.

“So what happened with the hearing?” he asked as he set a cup of coffee in front of his clearly hung-over father.

“I’m here, aren’t I? Guess it worked out.” Bass turned his attention to Jeremy. “Hurry up and finish eating. You’ll be late for school.”

Sensing that all was not right, Jeremy judiciously started to eat faster rather than gripe – which was his usual response to that standard command. Connor was already dressed for work, having assumed Bass would want to take a few hours in the morning after spending the week on the road. “What time are you coming in?” he asked.

“I’m not,” Bass said flatly as he got up to refill his cup.

It was not lost on Connor that he’d pushed his plate away, untouched. “Listen Dad, I know you just got back, but some shit’s been happening since you’ve been gone. It’s not a big deal –yet, but…”

Bass held up a hand to stop him. “It’s not my problem. I quit.”

Connor let his fork clatter to the table. “What? You can’t quit,” he said, clearly astonished.

“Well I did. The three of us have some things to discuss tonight.” Bass stood up and gestured for Jeremy to do the same. “Come on kid, I’ll walk you to school.”

They were almost there when Jeremy stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned around. “What’s going to happen? Are you leaving?”

Bass could see the insecurity in the boy’s eyes and it made him feel like a complete asshole. “I’m probably going to have to leave Texas. Part of the condition for me living here was my job, but I can’t do it anymore.”

“Why?”

“It’s complicated, but if I have to go, I won’t leave you here alone, okay?” He put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll talk about it more tonight.

He could tell nothing he’d said had put Jeremy at ease. “Listen, if it comes to it, you know I’d take you with me if you wanted, right?”

Jeremy turned back around and started walking again. He bravely fought the urge to cry as he felt the little world he’d finally started getting used to start to fall apart around him. After seeing him safely inside the school, Bass headed to center of town to see Mel, his former supplier of all things nasty and alcoholic. He had a lot of thinking to do, and somehow doing it sober just seemed wrong.

A few hours later he was well on his way to getting well and truly smashed. By the time he was half a bottle and several cigars in, Miles was there on his porch, just out of punching distance. “Can we have a conversation without resorting to violence? He said as he leaned against the railing at the top of the stairs.
Bass averted his gaze. He couldn’t bring himself to look at him. “Probably not.”

“Guess I’ll have to take my chances,” Miles said as he sat down on the other lawn chair anyway. “Connor told me he was pretty sure you were going to split again. You’ve got a good life here, Bass. Don’t throw it away because you’re pissed at me.”

He studied the bottle he’d been drinking from all morning. He was buzzed but for some reason couldn’t quite lose himself in it. “It’s a life based off of a lie.”

“Bullshit. I might have forced you here, but you built that yourself. And I can’t believe after everything you went through to finally get it, you’d just up and walk away.”

Bass took another drink as he thought about what Miles had said. You told her you weren’t ending it – but leaving here means leaving her too. “I just don’t understand. When is it ever going to be enough? You’re still punishing me for Philly.”

“This wasn’t a punishment. Well, as far as Texas is concerned it is, but that’s not why I suggested it,” Miles offered, a little insulted that he’d taken it that way. “I’ll admit that it was a dick move on my part, but I wasn’t trying to get back at you. I was trying to protect you – from yourself.”

“I didn’t need protecting. I’ve had a lot of problems over the years, but I’m a grown man – I don’t need a goddamned babysitter.” Bass began to raise his voice. Doesn’t he see how insulting that is?

Miles sighed in frustration. “Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. Maybe you were better, but then again you could have gone crazy again. I left you in a bad place before; I wasn’t going to let it happen again.”

“So why didn’t you ask me to come here instead? You’d already been asked to take over running the town. You could have just offered me the job.”

“You’d have just told me to shove it.”

Bass looked at him for the first time since he’d arrived. “Miles, I followed you through hell. I followed you and even took the fall for it – I still am. I followed you to Texas when the Patriots were looking for Rachel, and I abandoned my own son twice to help you stop Texas and Cali from going to war. If I followed you into all the bad shit, why wouldn’t you expect me to follow you towards something good?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was wrong, but you gotta to believe me; I would never have talked to Blanchard about it if I hadn’t have thought could be okay here if you gave it a chance. And if I’d have known you were so low that you were worried you’d… you know - I’d have gone to Blanchard and tried to get them to let you out of it.”

Bass couldn’t remember the last time Miles had said he was wrong about something. Usually he found some way to justify things – not that he was any different, it just always seemed to work better when Miles did it. Bass had always been better at being the scapegoat. He took another drink, grimacing as he realized he really didn’t want it any more. He set the bottle aside. “I thought you said it was permanent.”

“It is, but I’d have still tried.” He pulled the badge out of his pocket and leaned forward to put it on the porch railing. “You still have your job, if you want it. If you’re really hell bent on leaving, I’ll see if there’s anything I can do to get Blanchard to let you leave – even if you decide
you want to rule the east again, I won’t stop you. I just hope you decide to stay.”

“I’ve got to think about it,” Bass said as he snuffed his cigar out.

Miles stood up to leave. “One more thing – If you’d have been free to leave, you’d have left last year instead of wallowing in your misery over Charlie; you wouldn’t have her now. Why do you think I had your back when it came to her? Do you think I like knowing you’re banging my niece? Even without all the shit between us, I’d have hated it. Rachel and Gene literally wanted to kill you for it, but I stepped in. As much as it creeps me out to see you together, I knew you deserved some happiness for once – and I know she makes you happy.

“You’ve got Charlie and you’ve got the kid. You’ve even got Connor back, and he’s stopped being… you.” He reached out and put a hand on Bass’ shoulder. “Even though you went through hell, you’ve got what you always wanted. Don’t waste it because of your pride. I meant it earlier – you built this yourself; you’ve earned it. Oh, and Charlie wanted to tell you. She’s been after me since we got back from the war about it. It’s not her fault.”

Miles turned to leave as Bass stood to go inside. Both men were stopped by one winded Gene Porter, coming up the drive. “I’ve been looking all over for you,” he said, panting “That scenario we were worried about? We’ll it’s time.”

Bass furrowed his brows, not liking the sound of that. “What’s he talking about? What scenario?”

Miles ignored him for the moment. “How many?”

“One so far – Bill Weaver. But if there’s one, there could be more. We have to quarantine the town.”

Bass spoke up again. “What the hell is going on?”

It’s the day after Christmas. The town opens back up as if the holiday had never happened. It’s a weekday, so there’s school. It’s just another day in Willoughby. Mary Parker brings her oldest – seven year old Lucy to see Doc Porter. The girl woke up with a fever and is feeling horrible.

Gene checks her over. It’s hard to make an exact diagnosis without being able to do a culture, but he’s seen this enough to have a good idea. “Looks like strep,” he tells her. “We used to treat it with antibiotics, but there’s not enough to go around these days. Keep her home and boil anything she touches. Things like her toothbrush will have to be disposed of – burned, preferably. Most cases resolve themselves within a week. If you can send the younger two away, you’re better off. It’s highly contagious.”

Mary follows his instructions. A friend of hers takes in her other children and she tries her best to sterilize her house with boiling water and vinegar. But the next day, Gene has three more cases. Two days after that, there are eleven more. It’s just strep – a common enough illness before the blackout. By New Year’s Day, a huge chunk of the town is sick. They just need to wait it out.

The more cases they see, the more worried Gene gets. He finally goes to Miles. “This isn’t that bad now. Lucy Parker is already over it; she was my first case. But it could turn bad pretty fast.”

“It’s just strep, Gene. Hell, when Bass and I were in boot camp, half the barracks got
“Strep isn’t so bad, you’re right. But with this many cases and no antibiotics, there’s a small chance we could start seeing scarlet fever.”

“What?” He’s finally got Miles’ attention.

“They’re both caused by the same type of bacteria. Some people are more susceptible to it than others, and there are some strains more apt to cause it. So far, this one hasn’t. But as it passes from person to person it could mutate,” Gene explains. “I’m not saying we should panic or anything. Even if we only see one or two cases, chances are it won’t be an epidemic. But we should be prepared to quarantine, just in case.”

Miles is on board and they go over the town’s quarantine procedure. They bring in enough supplies from outside the town walls to last several weeks, just to be on the safe side. The last thing they want is to be caught with their pants down.

Bass sat back down. Scarlet fever? They’d heard of a few isolated settlements that suffered through it in the first years after the blackout. Things like cholera, typhus and typhoid fever were more prominent killers by far, but it wasn’t unheard of. “When will you know how bad it’s going to be?”

Gene shrugged. “If it’s headed that way, we’ll know for sure in a few days. We’ll start seeing more cases. Or, it could just be Bill. It’s more common in children, but he’s been an alcoholic for a very long time – his body could just be too weak to fight off the infection.” He looked at both men meaningfully. “If you want my professional opinion, we should quarantine the town, just in case. It’s your call, of course.”

Miles rubbed his face with one hand. With all the shit going on with the Nano and Bass, this was the last thing he’d wanted to deal with. “Do it.” He turned to the recently unemployed sheriff. “This town needs you – I need you. Will you help?”

The news had instantly sobered Bass, leaving him feeling tired and with a headache forming. “Dammit,” he said as he stood up. “Let me get cleaned up.”

Within an hour they were in the center of town. Not wanting to get more people together than necessary, they went business to business and house to house to spread the word. Bass supervised the town watch in closing the gate and raising the Yellowjack – a yellow and black checked flag signaling to anyone approaching Willoughby that the town was now under quarantine.

By the end of the day, most of the businesses had been instructed to close until further notice. This included the school. Instructions had been handed out to the citizens on how to mark their homes if someone had strep or was showing signs of scarlet fever – one mark for strep, two for scarlet fever, right on their doors.

Bass had made his orders regarding the gate very clear: nobody in, nobody out. “I don’t care if it’s Blanchard himself. That gate doesn’t open without my or Miles Matheson’s say so, got it?” If it got bad and someone broke through the quarantine, it could turn into a pandemic that could threaten all of Texas. A rider that had not been exposed to strep was sent to inform the Ranger garrison in Crockett of the outbreak.

They didn’t have the supplies on hand to create a quarantine camp, so people were instructed to stay home as much as they could and a curfew was put in place. Marked homes were not to be entered by anyone other than Dr. Porter and the town hall was converted into a place for
displaced residents if needed.

Bass and Miles also made sure to have someone trusted on the side entrance to town at all times. It would be too easy to sneak someone in or loved ones out. Things went fine for a few days, but then Bill died. The same day, three more cases of scarlet fever popped up. When that happened, people started to get scared – and then they started to get angry.

Bass and Connor had just come in from working for eighteen hours, desperately trying to keep the peace. The quarantine had been in place for nine days. For the most part, things were just limited to minor looting and an occasional fistfight over supplies. But things were slowly starting to escalate.

Rachel and Charlie had stayed with Jeremy all day and into the night. For the time being, all of the issues surrounding the reason Bass had initially settled in Willoughby were put on the back burner. They hadn’t exactly been resolved, but right now, they had bigger fish to fry. He still wasn’t really talking to her, but she was there all the same.

The Matheson women left when they’d returned to start their own shifts on the streets while he and Connor got some much needed sleep. Exhausted, Bass collapsed down on the couch, determined to not move for the next four or five hours. Connor had already made a beeline for the kitchen to scrounge for food.

Bass was almost asleep when he heard footsteps coming down the dark hallway. He opened his eyes wearily. “What are you doing up?” he asked with a yawn.

“I don’t feel so good,” Jeremy whined, his voice sounding tired and weak.

Bass sat up. “Come here.” He waited for the boy to stand next to him. He touched his hand to the boy’s forehead. He’s burning up. Frowning, he had him sit down on the couch. Bass went about the room, lighting a few lamps as he mentally ran through the list of symptoms Gene had described. Fever, sore throat, yellow and red tongue, swollen glands, rash…

He knew that a lot of them could be from either illness, and he was no doctor but there was no one else to check him right now.

The room now well lit, he sat back down next to Jeremy. “You’re throat hurt?” The boy nodded. His eyes looked glassy. “Stick out your tongue.”

The boy did as he was asked. Bass had to clench his jaw to keep from making a face. It was coated yellow, but he couldn’t tell if the bare patches were redder than normal. Either way, it was kind of gross. “Arms up,” he instructed. As he pulled up the boy’s shirt, he prayed it would be normal. No rash; please no rash. He kept chanting it in his head, as if it could somehow help. He took a look under his arms and sure enough, there was evidence of a red and prickly rash, just beginning to form.

He lowered the material and tried to remain calm. “Stay here.” He went into the hallway. Before he got too close, he took his shirt off and held it over his face, knowing he’d just been exposed. It wasn’t much, but would act as a barrier. “Get your gear and go out the back door,” he said to Connor from the doorway.

“Huh?” Connor asked as he looked up from his food. His eyes widened as he saw his father standing there, using his t shirt as a mask.

Bass locked eyes with him. “Go get the doc. This house is now a part of the quarantine.”
It took me a while to find an illness that would fit here, but then I remembered that actually a friend of mine’s kid recently was diagnosed with scarlet fever (it still does happen today, especially if they have mild or asymptomatic strep). With antibiotics, it’s no more dangerous than strep, but without it can be deadly. Just a fun fact on it, even before the advent of antibiotics, it suddenly went from being the rule for strep infections to being the exceptions. Medical science still isn’t exactly sure why – and some people and families were more prone to it (it was considered a children’s disease, which makes no sense because there’s a long list of historical figures that died of it as adults). Anyway, I know it seems a bit farfetched, but I wanted an illness that would start out not seeming like a big ordeal… It was fun researching at least… Anyway, I’ll try to get the next chapter up before the end of the weekend (hopefully sooner than that), but since I work all weekend, no promises. Much of this chapter serves to develop the characters relationships a little more and to set the stage for the Nano getting to play a little… The second conversation with Miles gave me a bit of trouble. I had originally wanted to bring up more of their past in it, but I couldn’t make it flow well from one topic to the next (I may do that in a different story later on, because I think I got some good dialog out of it, but it was turning it too big of a rant). Any thoughts and/or opinions and comments are more than appreciated!
Kintsugi: Repairs Make Things Beautiful

Chapter Notes

More character development for the most part, and a secret weapon perhaps? Not much to say other than there is lots of fluff because sometimes relationships need to suffer a lot before they can become stronger – especially when one half of the relationship is constantly trying to prove he doesn’t need anyone when he knows damn good and well the obverse is true…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bass sat at Jeremy’s bedside, holding vigil over the sick child. He shivered under the covers, his pale skin only making the red patches on his cheeks stand out more. After four days, Gene has told him there’s nothing more he can do. All that is to be done is wait for the illness to run its course. Scarlet fever lasts for about a week. Out of a total of twenty-two patients that have suffered from it (as of the night Jeremy first got sick – Bass had stopped paying attention after that), six have died, four have recovered, and the rest were still hanging on.

Feeling helpless, all he could do was sit and watch and pray. It occurred to him that the last time he’d prayed for anything had been in a field just outside of a tent city, kneeling next to two freshly dug graves – and back then he’d only prayed to join them. He didn’t even know exactly to who or what he was praying. He’d never been what anyone could call a religious or spiritual man. But he was running out of options, so it seemed to be the thing to do.

He was already running on empty when Jeremy had first come to him, saying he felt sick. After four days of constant worry, he wasn’t even sure how he was still hanging in there. He was exhausted, but was terrified of closing his eyes. So he sat and did the best he could while the child lay unconscious, his cat snuggled next to him as if she was trying to bring him some measure of comfort.

A few hours after Bass has sent Connor away, Gene arrives. He brings Bass a cloth mask to wear over his face. When he starts to protest, the doctor reminds him that he can’t tend to Jeremy if he gets sick as well. The diagnosis is confirmed, and with a heavy heart, Gene tells Bass what to expect.

Over the course of the first day, he does his best to keep Jeremy’s spirits up. It’s just a little fever, and he’ll be okay. He tries to get him to eat and drink to keep him hydrated, but Jeremy constantly whines that it hurts to swallow.

That first evening, Bass is heating up some soup that Greg had left on his front porch (per Charlie’s request) when he hears the boy start to wail. He runs into the bedroom. “What’s wrong?”

“I threw up,” he says as he starts to cry. Bass takes a deep breath and starts to help the boy clean up. At least it’s in the bed, so he doesn’t have to worry about the floors. He cleans up the kid, then cleans up the bed and then worries about getting changed. After settling Jeremy back down again (this time with a bucket by the bed – he’d forgotten Gene had said puking could be a symptom), he goes out back and starts a fire in a pit he’d dug in the back for that purpose. He tosses the soiled sheets and clothes into the flames and watches them burn.
As he watches the fire, he pours what is left of the bottle he had bought from Mel the day after returning over his hands, hoping it’ll be enough to disinfect them. If he’s sick, no one will be able to take care of the boy...

By the second day, Jeremy is only worse. Gene has come to check on him again and to update him on what’s going on around them. They’ve had one murder – a man was beaten to death by a gang of teenagers. The insanity in town is getting worse – this isn’t the panic from a quarantine. This has to be the Nano. They both know it, but can’t quite bring themselves to say it out loud.

That night, Jeremy will ask him for a drink of water before going to sleep. It’s been a long day of trying to coax him to eat, being there when he throws it back up and trying to keep him as comfortable as possible. Bass gets him the drink and tucks him back in.

In the morning, Bass tries to rouse him, but the boy’s fever has gone higher and he doesn’t open his eyes. When Gene comes, he tells Bass that the ones that recovered got worse before they got better. One of the four was as bad as this and is well on the mend. Granted that child is now deaf because of the illness, but he’s alive. After the doctor leaves, he sinks to the floor next to the child’s bed and cries.

He reached over to the basin of water sitting on the nightstand and took the rag out. Wringing it out, he placed it on Jeremy’s forehead. Gene will be back in a few hours for his daily visit. He’d already made it clear that everyone else needed to stay clear, despite protests from both Connor and Charlie.

He may have been a bit harsh in that, but what else was he supposed to do? With the town going nuts, they were needed to help Miles keep it under control as best he could. He felt guilty for not being out there, doing his job. For thinking even for a split second there was someplace other than by his bed that he should be, Bass felt even worse.

He was caught in a trap – unable to be in two places at once and all the people he cared about needing him at the same time. All he’d ever wanted was a family and feel like he had a place in the world, that someone needed him for something – anything. Now he had it in spades and couldn’t be there for all of them, and it made him feel like shit.

Between the world outside and the one in the bedroom, Jeremy was the one that needed him more, so Bass was determined that this was where he’d stay. He’d told Jeremy that he’d always have his back, so he will keep that promise until the end – which he is terrified will be any day now.

“How’s he doing?”

Bass turned around at the sound of Miles’ voice. He was standing behind him, leaning in the doorway. He hadn’t even heard the door open, so lost was he in his own head and the building grief. “No change. What are you doing here? You’ll be exposed.”

“I’ve been all over this town. Trust me, I probably already have.”

Bass turned back to the boy and picked the rag up off of his forehead, turning to wet it once more. “What about all the shit going on in town?”

“Everyone’s just stopped,” he said as he came into the room. As he did, the cat jumped off the bed and shot out the door. The animal hated Miles and refused to share a room with him, it seemed.
“What do you mean, stopped?” He started to wring the rag out, watching the water drip from it into the basin.

“I mean they all just snapped out of it – just like the Matthews girl did. Everyone we’ve locked up, all the crazies on the street, they stopped and came out of it. Most of them don’t even remember the quarantine, let alone what they’ve been up to since,” Miles explained. “And, Gene said he hasn’t had any new cases in two days. Maybe it’s all over.”

Bass looked for signs of improvement as he rubbed the rag down the boy’s neck. He did this constantly, but of course there was nothing. The water probably didn’t do anything, but somehow he felt like if he could just cool the boy off a little, he’d wake up. “How many have died now?”

“As of yesterday, we had a total of thirty-one sick. We’ve lost fourteen. There’s nine that have recovered and the rest are still not out of the woods yet.”

Bass nodded sadly, but didn’t respond. Fourteen dead and Jeremy could very well be number fifteen. It wasn’t right; it wasn’t fair. Every time he cared – he wouldn’t think about it. It wasn’t going to do him any good anyway.

“Bass, there’s something else,” Miles said. “We found something.” His voice was excited, which was so out of place considering the circumstances.

He dropped the rag back in the basin of water and turned in his chair to face him. “What did you find?”

Aaron Pittman is walking home from the sheriff’s office. He hasn’t been helping with the patrols – he doesn’t have the skills for that. However, he has been acting as pack mule – bringing supplies to help with the cause. He’s just dropped off food for Connor and the two dozen Willoughby denizens that are crammed into the office’s lone cell like sardines.

These people aren’t technically under arrest but they are the most violent offenders. They’ve all figured out by now that the Nano has been playing up on the fear that went through the town from the moment it was put under quarantine. For the most part, as soon as these twenty odd people were locked up they stopped fighting and trying to hurt each other. Instead, they babble incoherently and talk to people that only they can see.

He’s halfway down the main street when he hears sick laughter behind him. He turns nervously to see some of the older students from the school in a group behind him. “Pittman! Oh, Mr. Pittman!” they taunt. “What’s wrong, Pitty? Are you scared?”

Aaron increases his pace. The four boys start to follow. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say they were high on something. Hell, for all he knows, that very well could be. People have been acting strange for days, doing things they’d normally never do. These are typically good kids – they do their homework, and for the most part pay attention in class.

They continue to laugh as they follow, closing the distance between predators and prey. One of them is holding what looks like a lead pipe, probably torn off of some building. He’s slapping it in his palm as he walks, the sound menacing each time the pipe hits flesh, a foreshadowing of the boy’s intent.

Aaron breaks into a run and they give chase. There’s no way he can keep this up long, and he definitely can’t outrun them, so he darts down a side street. He can hear them right behind him, cackling like a pack of hungry hyenas; that’s basically all they are, animals on the hunt.
He knows that his only chance is to hide. He ducks down an alley and starts trying doors. One is thankfully unlocked. He goes inside and fumbles for the latch as he closes the door. His fingers find it and he locks it behind him. It’s pitch black inside, so he pulls out an old zippo lighter, praying that no one notices the glow. He can hear the kids outside in the alley, so he knows they shouldn’t be able to see.

He’s in an old video store. The wares being useless after the blackout, it’s been pretty much vacant for the past eighteen years. At some point someone obviously came in and raided the store’s stash of candy and snacks, but other than that, there’s been no reason to come in here.

There are dvds and blurays all over the place, the shelves having been knocked over by whatever Twizzler thieves had come here long ago. There are a few old VHS tapes mixed in for good measure too. Aaron closes the lighter and sinks to the floor.

As he sits, he stacks the videos around him in neat little piles, working off of his sense of touch in the darkness. As he does this an odd memory comes to the surface of his rattled mind. An email that went around a few years before the blackout: an internet meme about all the things that the youngest generation wouldn’t remember... VHS tapes, floppy disks, phone books and the like. That email couldn’t have been more right. Pretty much everything in this store could be added in for this last generation - the blackout generation.

The boys that have chased him in here are a part of that. And really, they’re lucky to be alive. They were all born in the first year or two of the blackout. In the Monroe Republic and in the Plains Nation, where communities were more apt to fall apart, there was a three or four year gap in children’s ages. Many of the babies born in those first years didn’t survive – Bass wasn’t unique in that loss, that was for sure.

Aaron dozes off. When he wakes up, it’s starting to get light out. The store’s filthy windows let in just enough light for him to see, but he’s confident the boys have given up and that no one will notice a shadow moving in the video store. He decides to have a good look around. After all, no one would think to come here after stealing all the candy – what could you possibly need from a video store without electricity? Maybe there’s something useful here.

He heads into the back room of the store. There are no windows, so he uses the zippo again. He finds the back office. It’s locked, so he looks around for something to break into it. He settles on an old VHS rewinder (these sold for six bucks on eBay!). He goes back to the door and starts to whack on the doorknob. All he does is destroy the rewinder. A second trip to the front desk reveals a key ring. He tries them all and finally finds the right one.

He goes inside and starts to snoop around. The lighter starts to get hot so he closes it on his pants leg and must wait for it to cool down again. Bored and a little excited he starts to feel around the desk. He identifies a lot of items by touch. A tape dispenser (real Scotch tape? Score!), a stapler (double score if there’s staples!), some thumbtacks (ouch!). Becoming more excited he tries the lighter. It’s cool enough so he lights it once more.

The office is a nerd’s paradise. He rummages through the desk. Extra staples, a few more rolls of tape, Post-it Notes!!! – And not the generic ones either, real brand name Post-it notes. Binder clips and an entire box of Bic pens. He tests one reverently on a Post-it note. Blue ink and it still works! He looks and sees a Far Side Calendar. He spends a moment flipping through the genius that is Gary Larson’s work, chuckling at a few comics. He sets this aside. Sure it’s from 2012, but hey, it’s still funny.

He knows the lighter’s fluid won’t last forever so he moves on. He goes to the storage room and finds a box. He starts putting the office supplies in it. The school could use these things -
that’s for sure. Office supplies like these have been unavailable for years.

He digs some more and finds several packages of computer paper. He raids the laser printer to find more. Good paper is extinct, like everything else in this dead world. He juggles the box and the lighter, taking his box of “purchases” and setting it on the counter. Behind the counter there are a few more pens and the like to dump into the box – each one a precious treasure.

He waits for the lighter to cool off again before returning to the back room to see what else he can find. And there it is – on a shelf, sitting between a box of generic dvd cases and a broken monitor. The store’s owner must have bought it for use in the employee bathroom – a package of 24 count double roll Charmin. Aaron starts to laugh like one of the lunatic teens he’s been hiding from. Tears of crazed mirth run down his cheeks. He starts to hump up and down like he’s lost his mind – this is a moment of pure nostalgic bliss (one he will be very grateful no one was a witness to, once he comes to his senses). He’s like a six-year old at Christmas.

As he comes back down to the floor form one last jump, the floor gives way under him and he goes crashing through. The lighter goes out as it hits the tile floor above him. Instead of being plunged in darkness, the place he finds himself in is illuminated by a led floodlight. The light is very dim, most of the diodes having gone out over the years, but it’s there.

Aaron can hear a humming sound coming from somewhere in the shadows. A generator? In a daze he gets up off the floor, wincing. His rear end hurts and he suspects that he’s bruised is tailbone. He can just barely make out a chain hanging from the ceiling a few feet from where he came crashing down.

He watches his own hand reach for the chain like it belongs to someone else – like he’s outside his own body. He pulls on it and waits. There’s a flickering above him and suddenly the tubes in the florescent fixture light up. He squints at the brightness of it.

He turns around and sees several computers, each with three monitors. There’s a desk off to one side. He goes over to it. The filing drawer is locked, but gives way with a good strong yank. He picks through the files, seeing one that interests him after a few minutes. He starts to skim through it and almost drops it when he realizes what he’s stumbled upon. Who knew that a 24 count of double roll Charmin could change the world?

“So it’s been there the whole time?” Bass asked when Miles had finished telling him about Aaron’s accidental discovery. “How did we not know it was here?”

“I don’t know. But it has to be reason why the Patriots came here. I checked the plans for that store in the city hall. There’s no record of it having a basement. And it was inspected just six months before the blackout. According to what Aaron found there, it was already abandoned by then, so it had to have been there a long time.” He watched as Bass turned back to Jeremy. The boy had moaned in his sleep, so he’d gone back to trying to cool him with the rag. “We’ll talk about it more in a few days. Just concentrate on him for now.”

And with that, Miles left him alone. He headed into the living room. Kicking his shoes off, he stretched off on the couch. With the town suddenly returning to normal he’d decided that he was due a few hours break at least. Gene had already told him that he didn’t expect Jeremy to make it, and he decided that he would be here when the time came.

After all the years, he owed Bass that. Bass had never said that this was anything other a temporary arrangement, but he’d seen him with the child enough to know better. Just watching the way that he tended to him over the past few days was enough to let Miles know that he’d break
when the boy passed. And this time, he was determined to stick with him and make sure to collect all the pieces.

He’d watched the man fall apart before, but the last time – after Shelly and the baby were buried, he’d been too messed up after the blackout himself to really help. Instead he and Bass both went to a dark place, but when Bass had fallen deeper after that rebel bombing, he’d walked away and let it consume him.

Come hell or high water, he was going to be here for him now and make sure that Bass got the help that he would most assuredly need. These thoughts ran through his mind as he gave into the exhaustion and fell asleep.

In Jeremy’s bedroom, Bass sat. He’d set the rag and basin aside and waited. The news that Miles had given him offered a small glimmer of hope. If they’d really found a backup system to the tower, then it could change everything. They could have access to the nanites and maybe they could beat the Nano back after all – but it would mean nothing to him if this child died. He couldn’t lose someone else. It was too much. He’d spent so much of his life grieving, it just didn’t seem fair. He nodded off in the chair, unable to keep his eyes open any longer.

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Miles opened his eyes, squinting them in the dim light from the fireplace. He saw a figure walking past. He sat up on his elbows and stared, his heart pounding in his chest. As she walks by, Gail Monroe smiles at him. This isn’t the twisted, sick smile that the Nano normally make when they borrow an image from the past (they never seem to get those subtle details right), but a genuine Gail smile – soft and gentle, loving even. Miles had seen that smile a million times growing up. She paused and raised a finger to her lips, silently bidding him to keep her presence to himself.

She was surrounded by a strange glow, almost like she’s reflecting the warm orange light from the fireplace back at him, brilliant in her own radiance. The few times he’s seen the Nano do its thing, Miles had been filled with a sense of dread. But this time, there was a certain peacefulness that came with the image before him. He blinked, and she was gone. “I’ve either got to quit drinking or start drinking more,” he muttered.

Bass came into the living room a few minutes later. His face was expressionless and he looked dazed, like he was walking in a fog. Miles sat up and gave him a spot on the couch. He sank slowly onto it and just stared into space. A few seconds later, he leaned his elbow on the arm rest and covered his eyes with his hand and began to sob.

The last time Miles had seen him like this was the day Shelly died and Bass’ world came crashing down, as all his hopes for the future were dashed away in that horrible instant. Miles instantly knew – it was the reason he was here still. And this time, when Bass slips into a world of destruction and madness, he will hang on and pull him out of it, even if he had to drag him to Austin and get him committed. Bass will make it through this, he decided. He will rally the troops and they will all keep him anchored.

“Bass, I’m so…”

His friend suddenly sat up and leaned his head back on the couch, smiling. Miles felt sick. He’s lost it already?

“The fever’s gone… it’s gone…” Bass ran a hand through his hair and then wiped is eyes, taking in a deep shaking breath.
Bass is dozing off in the chair when he hears a small cough. He jerks awake. Jeremy’s eyes are open. This has happened once before, but then it was just the delirium of the fever. This time, he seems more alert though. Putting a hand to the boy’s forehead, Bass sighs in relief. He doesn’t feel nearly as hot.

“I’m thirsty,” the child whines.

Bass rushes over to the dresser and pours some water into a cup from the pitcher that is sitting there. He comes back over to the bed, sitting down on the edge. He helps Jeremy sit up and take a drink. “Slower,” he warns as the kid chokes a little. “You scared the hell out of me,” he tells him a few minutes later when he lays him back down to tuck him in again.

Bass is still sitting on the bed and just to be sure, touches his forehead again. He doesn’t just seem a little cooler, he feels fairly normal. Jeremy watches him for a few minutes as he checks him over. “Are you sad?”

It doesn’t sink in right away why he’s just asked him this. Bass wipes his eyes on his sleeve. “No, I’m just really happy you’re awake right now.” He helps Jeremy use the chamber pot in the corner when he indicates he has to go. He’s noticed the boy’s clothes are soaked in sweat so he helps him get dressed into clean ones. The bed sheets are also damp from his fever, so he changes those too.

Jeremy is now resettled in the bed and Bass is back in the chair. Jeremy yawns, sleepy once more. But this time it’s not the fever making him drowsy. Bass is sure of it – he’s checked the boy at least three more times in the past few minutes to reassure himself that it’s really gone.

“Who took care of me?” Jeremy asks.

Bass smiles at him. “I did – the whole time. I told you before, I’ve always got your back, remember?”

The boy nods as his eyes droop and he yawns again. “Does this mean you’ll be my dad now?”

Bass lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Yeah, I guess it does.” The relief is wearing off and pure exhaustion is taking over. He’s gotten very little sleep in days and can’t remember the last time he’s eaten anything. “Close your eyes,” he whispers as he stands up.

Jeremy does as he asks. Bass stands up and heads out of the room. He’s almost gotten the door closed when he hears a small voice. “I love you, Dad.”

Bass smiles at him. “I love you… Jeremy.” His eyes well back up. He closes the door gently and heads into the living room. He barely notices Miles reclining on the couch. His friend has a startled look on his face as he sits up to allow Bass a place to sit.

Miles realized that he’d misinterpreted everything. He sighed in relief, followed by a laugh. Bass was still repeating the same words – “the fever’s gone…”

He sat up and put a hand on his shoulder. “Bass?”

Bass looked over to him, as if he wasn’t aware of his presence before now. “Miles? What are you still doing here?”

Miles breaks. He tearfully tells him his intent – of how Gene had told them Jeremy’s outlook was not good, how he’d planned on staying here for him. “We’re brothers. It’s time I
started acting like it again. – I wasn’t going to lose you this time.”

After everything that has happened between these two men – all the betrayal and all the bitterness, the dust has finally settled and the rubble cleared away. Bass will always be there always back Miles up – even if it takes him to his grave. Miles will be there to keep Bass holding on – even if he loses everything else he will have Miles. This is where they were before the power went out and it has taken almost two decades to get back here.

They may not always get along (indeed, too much has happened in both their lives for this to be a certainty), but even at times that they cannot speak to each other they at least now have an understanding that will always be there. The love and trust cannot be erased, no matter how much they try to fuck it up.

After dozing on the couch for a while (Miles on one side, Bass on the other – both snoring like drunks), Miles got up. He found his boots and laced them up. He needed to check on town for a while. As he turned, Bass’ voice stopped him. “Do me a favor will you?”

“Sure Bass. What’s up?”

“If you see Connor, tell him his brother’s gonna okay, alright? And uh, tell Charlie – tell her we need to talk later.”

“Okay.” Miles smiled as he closed the door behind him.

Bass woke up when Gene arrived an hour or so later. He’d been going from one patient to the next for days. Between tending the ill and the injured from the insanity in town, he’d been burning at both ends for days and had long since run out of steam.

He hadn’t yet spoken to Miles, so had no idea what condition he’d find his patient in. “Sorry. I know I told you I’d be here a while ago, but I got hung up. Mary Parker’s youngest died last night,” he said grimly, as he set his bag down and started digging through it for what he’d need.

“It’s alright. He doesn’t really need you now. He’s better,” Bass told him. He felt horrible for Mary. She’d already lost her middle child earlier in the week. All she had left was Lucy now. Her estranged husband had left town with her sister long before the outbreak had started.

Gene stopped what he was doing to look at him. The relief on Bass’ face was plain to see, but it had the doctor worried, rather than optimistic. He’d seen the child the day before and things did not look promising. He was worried that either the man was holding on to false hope or, if Jeremy had taken a turn for the worse that he’d simply lost it. He’d seen the something similar at Mary’s late the night before. When he’d arrived the toddler was already dead, but there was Mary, as happy as a lark that her baby was all better now. “Well, I’ll just go take a look anyway.”

Bass got up and led the way. For some reason that he couldn’t quite define, he felt he needed be there if Jeremy was still sleeping. The boy was just rousing when he opened the door. “Hey kid, how you feeling?” he asked. “The doc here wants to check you out.”

“I’m hungry,” Jeremy said, his voice still tired and a little whiny.

“We’ll get you something to eat after the doc’s done,” he promised.

“Can someone else cook it?” Jeremy asked, offering a hopeful grin.
“Hey! I’m not that bad.” Bass sounded more insulted than he actually felt. If it meant Jeremy was recovering, he could throw his cooking at Bass’ head for all he cared.

Gene chuckled at the exchange as he pulled back the blanket and went about taking his temperature and looking at his rashes. Bass stood in the doorway and watched. “Well, Jeremy it looks like you’re on the mend,” Gene finally said.

He got up and headed towards the door, gesturing for Bass to follow. They went into the kitchen. “Can you boil some water? I need to sterilize everything before I go to the next house.” He watched the man go about lighting the stove and getting a pot of water set up. “I’ve been a doctor for almost as long as you’ve been alive, and I’ve never seen a recovery like that,” he said as they waited.

“I told you, he’s better.”

“When I saw that boy yesterday, I was pretty sure he wasn’t going to make it. The rashes are already starting to peel and the fever is just gone.” He didn’t bother telling bass it was several days ahead of the illness’ typical course. “You got very lucky. He’s still got a long road ahead of him, and there’s a chance he’ll be contagious for the next week or two, but he looks pretty good – all things considered.”

The water was ready, so Gene started to dip in his thermometer and everything else that he’d used. He gave Bass instructions for the child’s recovery and warning signs to look out for. “Keep getting food and water in him. He’ll probably sleep a lot over the next several days – it’s normal. And, get some rest yourself. You look like shit,” he added as he prepared to leave.

It takes Miles a while to track them down. After releasing everyone they’d held and taking an assessment of the damage, Connor and Charlie have officially gone off duty. Since Connor has been displaced, he’s been crashing in Charlie’s spare room and both of them are asleep. Connor is a lost cause. He’s been pulling double shifts since Jeremy got sick, trying to make up for the fact that his father was otherwise occupied. Charlie however is out the door within a few minutes of being told about Jeremy’s recovery.

She tries the front door, but it is locked, just as it’s supposed to be to prevent anyone from coming inside a quarantined home. She doesn’t care though. Knowing Bass as she does, she goes around back. Sure enough he’s used the back door recently (probably to get water from the well), and it’s open. When she comes in the back door, into the kitchen he’s standing there, cleaning up after a meal. He drops the tray he’s drying when he sees her, letting it clatter to the counter with a loud bang.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he tells her. She can’t tell if his expression is guarded or he’s just that tired. She suspects a little of both. Still, his words hurt.

“You’re still...” she begins.

“Of course not,” he says softly, interrupting her.

She can see he’s so exhausted that he’s practically swaying where he stands. “Where’s Jeremy?” she asks, putting the subject of their estrangement aside for the moment.

“Sleeping again.”

She goes over to him and grabs his hand. “Come on, you’re dead on your feet. If he’s sleeping, you need to be too.”
He’s spent, so he allows her to lead him down the hall and into the bedroom, the dishes now forgotten. He lets his clothes fall into a haphazard pile and then crawls into the bed. Before he can protest and send her back home, she begins to undress to her panties. Charlie finds one of his t shirts in a drawer and pulls it over her head. It’s huge on her and will make a sufficient nightgown for now. She’d only been asleep for a few hours before Miles woke her, so she figures she’ll kill two birds with one stone.

As soon as she climbs in next to him, Bass gives up any pretense of keeping her away; he needs her. He pulls her to him, settling her against his chest. “I missed you,” he breathes.

“Bass, I’m so sorry. I should have told you, no matter what Miles said,” she tells him, desperate to make things right.

“No, don’t do that. It’s okay. I know why you did it – I wasn’t really mad at you. I just needed to deal with it.” He cranes his neck to press his lips to her temple.

Charlie turns to look at him. “Then why did you keep me away for so long? Why did you just now try to send me away? I could have helped. You wouldn’t have had to go through all of this alone.”

Bass strokes her arms lightly. He knows she’s been hurting as much as he. He decides it’s time to grow a pair and tell her the truth without forcing her to drag it out of him for once. “The first time I lost my family, I tried to kill myself – Miles stopped me before I could pull the trigger. The second time, I killed an entire camp; I slaughtered them in their sleep and went on a twelve year rampage.” His voice sounded raw as he thought about the past and what could have happened had this current situation turned out differently. “The three of you – well, four if you count Miles – you’re my family. If I lost you all at once, I don’t think I’d survive it – and there’s no telling who I’d take with me.”

Charlie reaches up and strokes the side of his face, his beard scratching her fingers. She blinked back the moisture that formed in her eyes. “You don’t know that’s what would have happened. After all, you didn’t catch it.”

“We watched it – in those months after the blackout, in the tent camps before we formed the militia and again the year we took Philly. It wasn’t necessarily scarlet fever. Cholera, even small pox - the bug didn’t matter. Epidemics went through and entire families died.” He tightened his hold on her unconsciously as he spoke. “I couldn’t take that risk. Losing Jeremy would be hard enough, but you and Connor too? I would destroy me. And where would that leave me? Clinging to Miles again, terrified of being alone. That’s what turned me into a monster – and I don’t want to go back there again. I can’t go back there again.”

Charlie silences him with her kiss. She holds his face in her hands and keeps him in place, moving her lips gently over his. Their tongues meet tentatively, the kiss remaining slow-careful almost. The emotion in this kiss is tender and real. Bass is not a gentle man; he’s too scarred and violent for it to be so, but in this moment he kisses her back like they’re both made of glass.

The kiss was meant to bring comfort; they are both dead tired and sex is the farthest thing from either of their minds. What happens next has nothing to do with desire, but everything to do with the need to be close to her. His hands roam and caress, relearning every curve, like it was the first time he’d ever touched her. They can feel each other’s hearts pounding as they now lay chest to chest – her on top of him.

Bass reaches down and finds the hem of the t shirt she wears and pulls it up, dragging
the material over her head. He wants to feel her; the smoothness of her silky skin against the roughness of his own chest. He craves it. She reaches under her and starts to pull his boxers off while he almost tears her panties off of her. They kick themselves free of the offending garments so that it’s skin on skin.

She brings her knees up to his flanks, her wet center resting on his hardening flesh. She slides up to meet his mouth again, and he can feel her heat. The sensation has him throbbing as he becomes fully erect. He is wrapped around her, one hand rubbing her back while the other rests on the back of her thigh.

Charlie hooks her arms under his shoulders and sinks down on him, taking him fully inside her. She rests there and they just experience being joined together after so much time apart. The last time he’d been inside her was that day at his office – this couldn’t be more different. That was madness and violence; animalistic lust. This is about being connected and is tender. He couldn’t give a shit less if he comes; he just wants to be closer, a part of her – and she’s right there with him.

As their tongues explore one another’s mouths, he gently pulls down on her body, increasing the pressure within her. The movement has her grinding down; the friction outside stimulating every bit as much as the fullness within. She slowly begins to move, sliding just a little to feel him rubbing against that sensitive bud once more.

His arms tighten around her as he tilts his head up to deepen their kiss. The feel of the hair on his chest rubbing on her nipples is exquisite and before she knows it they are both panting and drenched. There is no telling where his body ends and hers begins.

Their mouths part and they stare into each other’s eyes as they move in sync. She reads the torment and longing in his eyes; in hers he sees acceptance. They ride together and before long, she feels the warmth between her legs start to spread throughout her entire body as she slowly burns for him.

Bass lifts his head off the pillow, slanting his mouth up to hers once more as he raises his hips to grind into her more. He wants to be buried inside without cease, the feel of her tightening around him driving him wild in a way that his usual carefully timed thrusts never have. She breaks her mouth away as she starts to reach her peak. Their eyes lock again.

He wants to ask her; seek permission for something he has no business asking – he can’t find the words. Sensing it, seeing it in his eyes, she answers him anyway. “Yes,” she moans as she lets go. Bass captures her mouth once more, rising off the bed and flipping them over. Their legs tangle as he drives home just once, sending her over and spilling into her as they swallow each other’s cries and hold on as tight as they can.

This time there will be no apologies for not stopping. He’s not sorry for it, and even if he was, she wouldn’t accept any guilt from him – it is right and they both feel it. It might not be the brightest idea either of them had (and likely won’t be repeated any time soon), but if anything comes of it, they are in this together now.

He doesn’t want to leave her body, but he doesn’t want to crush her either. He rolls them over so she is astride him once more. They drift off, covered in each other’s sweat and still joined intimately. Her face is buried in his neck and his arms are still around her. Her last conscious thought is that she will not be going back to her home behind the bar – he won’t let her and she doesn’t want to live there. This is where she belongs.
To fully understand the chapter title (if you aren't familiar with the term), google Kintsugi...
The Best Laid Plans...

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. It’s been a very busy week in the real world and this is a dreaded transition chapter, which are always hard for me. A lot of dialog, a bit about what Aaron found and the relationship between Charlie and Monroe takes an interesting twist…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the first few weeks after the breakout, while Aaron, Priscilla and Rachel worked at getting started in the rooms below the video store, the rest of their group worked on helping the town pull itself back together again. There were no new cases of scarlet fever, and new cases of strep dwindled to nothing shortly thereafter. By the time Austin responded with offers of aid, the entire thing was over.

Very few people in town remembered anything about the chaos that had gone on during the quarantine. Even those that hadn’t gone mad seemed to only have a hazy recollection that there’d been anything wrong other than the outbreak. In the end there had been one death and multiple beatings, but when Bass had questioned the victims, they couldn’t quite recall how they’d gotten their injuries.

This only seemed to confirm that the Nano was involved somehow, but what he didn’t understand was why. It didn’t make sense that they would attack in this fashion at all only to just let everyone go later – unless they were just trying to distract them again. But they hadn’t learned or done anything in the days leading up to the mess. At least, not that he’d been aware of – he hadn’t even been in town when it had really started. Whatever their motivation was, it seemed to have backfired, because now they had access to limited electricity and the computers.

Rachel had told them that as far as she knew, the tower was it. But, it seemed that someone involved in the project had created a backup system below the town. It was powered by very carefully placed (and very experimental) solar panels placed on the roof of the building. Although one or two of them had been damaged over the years since the blackout, most of them were in perfect condition, if not a little dirty. At first the power was not at full capacity, but by simply cleaning off years of dirt and grime, there was enough power there to run everything.

Bass didn’t understand how the room worked – and probably never would, but what he did understand was that for some reason, the Nano couldn’t work there or in the tubes that protected the wires leading from the solar panels to the generator. From what they could tell, the complex extended well past the video store, but the main access seemed to be in the floor underneath the video store’s counter. They’d found the stairs, but it was inaccessible without ripping out the counters. When this was built it was done so with total secrecy in mind – that and it must not have been intended for use unless the situation was dire.

It had been Rachel that had made the connection between the annex (as she’d been calling it) and Randal Flynn.

It has been only two days since the town snapped back into sanity. Gene is with Jeremy as the rest of them stand in the video store, looking down into the hole that Aaron had accidently
created in his excitement. “What is it?” Bass finally asks.

“It’s an annex to the Tower,” Rachel explains. “For some reason, the nanites aren’t affecting it. Maybe they were programmed to disregard this place – that’s how the Tower had power, their programming told them to ignore it. Sentient or not, the Nano is still a machine – if a command is present in the code, they can’t override it.”

One by one they repel down into the hidden basement, avoiding the pile of furniture that Aaron had used to get out when he’d first discovered it. The main room contains several computers and the desk that Aaron had already rooted through. In his excitement, the man had not searched the rest of the rooms, so they have no idea what to expect.

In the corner, Bass finds a closet. Curious, he opens it up. Most of what is inside was useless (by his own standards at least); a few boxes of computer paper, and other office supplies. On the shelf, however is a flashlight. It’s one of those novelty lights that he’d seen on a late night infomercial once. Biting back a crude joke, he shakes the flashlight back and forth for a minute or so to charge it before turning it on. The LED light comes on, casting a bluish-white beam.

“What on earth is that?” Charlie asks.

“It’s a battery-less flashlight. You shake it back and forth to move the magnet inside and it creates a charge. They never really took off – who wants to use a flashlight that you have to jerk off every few minutes?”

Miles rolls his eyes at him. “Only you, Bass…”

Using the flashlight, he grabs Charlie’s hand and they go to explore the rest of the basement. It is then that they realized that the rooms sprawl under the town. They find the generator in the next room, humming away as it brings power to the rest of the basement – he notices a small mini fridge near the generator. He ignores it for now, figuring anything inside will be rotten. Bass tries the various light switches he sees as they go down the dark corridor with mixed results. Some of the florescent light fixtures work, but some do not.

They do not bother checking all of the rooms. There will be time enough for that later. Right now, he’s just curious to see how far back it goes. Eventually, they run into a dead end where the hallway has collapsed. They must be under the road at this point, he figures. Several of the rooms they’ve passed must go under the adjacent building.

They work their way back to the others, passing an opened room, a light spilling into the dark patch of hallway. Rachel is in the room which is clearly an office of some sorts. She’s digging through a file cabinet looking for anything and everything she can learn about this place. “I’ll be damned,” she says as she pulls out a pack of papers.

“What’d you find?” Charlie asks.

Rachel looks up from the pages in her hand. “The owner of the video store was Jeff Lawson – I went to school with him. But according to this, the building and the one next to it were owned by a company called Garvey Real Estate Management.”

“How’s that important?” Bass asked, interested.

“When we were working for the DOD, one of Randall Flynn’s brothers married one of the lab techs that worked on the project – an intern. Her name was Laura Garvey. I only remember it because it was so weird. She was like twenty and he was well past fifty. Some of the other techs
threw a shower for her at work.”

Charlie poked around the desk while she listened to her mother. “Do you think it’s connected?”

“I don’t know. It seems like too much of a coincidence.” Rachel set the pages down on top of the filing cabinet.

Picking up a picture frame that sat on the desk, Charlie walked across the room. “Recognize any of these people?” she asked as she drew Rachel’s attention away from the files in the open drawer.

“That is definitely Laura Garvey,” she explained. She pointed to another face in the picture. “That is Jeff Lawson,” she added.

Bass leaned over to look at the picture. “They kind of look alike. Were they related?”

“I have no idea. But that means that Randall Flynn must have built this place – but there’s no record of it. I was project lead, I had total access to everything regarding the Tower, or at least I thought I did.” She knew there was a targeting system on level twelve, but it was supposed to be for deploying a targeted attack with the nanites – she’d had no knowledge that it also included a targeting system for ICBM’s.

Bass started riffling through another filing cabinet. He didn’t know exactly what he was looking for, but if this was the main administrative office for the annex, there had to be something useful here. “Well that doesn’t make any sense. If Randall Flynn was involved with this place, how come the Patriot’s couldn’t find it?”

“Maybe he hid it from Davis?” Charlie offered. She set the photograph down and went back behind the desk to snoop some more. “Maybe it was insurance, in case Davis double crossed him.”

“Well, the Patriots knew enough about it to send them here.” Bass closed the drawer he was digging through. “Isn’t it a bit odd that they got this close?” This will be a question they will never be able to answer.

“So explain this to me again, ‘cause I’m just not getting it. All that random bullshit you’re typing is a virus?” Bass sat on the edge of the hole they had to use to access the rooms below. His feet dangled down next to the ladder they’d been using to get in and out. From his vantage point, he could see the screens Aaron stared at, not that it mattered. It was all Greek to him anyway.

It was his turn to play security guard while Aaron worked. Later Charlie and Priscilla would arrive to take over – another coder and another guardian. Rachel had been helping until it was deemed time to remove the capsule from her leg. It had migrated, being so small and the surgery to remove it had not been without complications. She’d been stuck at home for the four days since Gene had removed it.

Aaron swiveled around in the computer chair to look up at him. “The idea is to use the code to reprogram a virus that will force the Nano to revert back to its original program. We’ll then upload it into the capsule and find a way to use that as the virus payload.”

“A what?” Bass asked as he reached into his jacket pocket.

“The payload – the mechanism for uploading the virus. Like…” He thought of a way to
explain it to someone that was so obviously not a computer guy. “You ever get one of those emails that told you to click a link or open an attachment to view a picture of some hot chick or porn star?”

“Yeah… I guess.

“Okay, and if you opened it or clicked the link or whatever, you infected your computer with a virus. The e-mail was the payload,” he explained, feeling like he was talking to a child.

“Gotcha. So you’re going to turn this capsule thingy into a three-nippled hermaphrodite fucks donkey link?”

“In a manner of speaking. And ew, by the way.” Aaron muttered, rolling his eyes. He glanced up at Bass again and noticed he was opening a wrapped item – one with a very distinctive shape. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Maybe,” Bass said.

“Where in the hell did you get it?” Aaron hadn’t seen a Snickers bar since maybe a year after the blackout, and that was pushing it.

“I noticed a mini fridge in the generator room when Charlie and I were exploring a few weeks ago. I decided to be brave and take a peek inside.”

Aaron shook his head in disgust. “Dude, that’s been sitting for almost twenty years. You’re gonna eat it?”

Bass shrugged. “Why not? It’s been refrigerated and it doesn’t have mold on it or anything,” he said as he broke it in half and inspected it closely.

“That’s just gross,” he said as he turned back to the computer.

“I might have another one…”

Aaron turned again and held his hand out. “Gimme.”

With a chuckle, he tossed the candy bar down to him. “So, how are you gonna use the capsule to upload the virus?” He asked as he took a bite.

Aaron set the bar aside, determined to wait a while to see if Bass got sick before eating it. “We don’t know yet. First we have to straighten out the code. We haven’t even looked at the thing yet. Gene’s still got it.”

Bass popped the last of his snack in his mouth as he thought about what Aaron had said. He was starting to lose faith in this plan. In the four and a half months since they’d been back, they’d been attacked by the Nano both mentally and otherwise several times, and they still were basing their entire plan off of the assumption that the capsule was the so-called glitch that had the Nano worried and that somehow the nanites within it could be programmed to override the sentient nanites. “What makes you so sure you can pull this off?”

“Because I wrote the original code the government stole to use for the whole nanite program – and because I’m a fucking genius, asshole.” Aaron went back to his work, miffed that the idiot above him had the audacity to question his abilities. If it came down to a swordfight, Bass could run around and play expert till his heart was content. But in this arena, Aaron knew he reigned supreme.
“Well excuse me, crab cake,” he muttered. Before he could annoy Aaron further, he heard three distinctive knocks before the door to the alley opened up. Charlie appeared just seconds later to relieve him so he could get home to the kid.

She leaned in and kissed him. “Playing nice?” she asked.

“For the most part,” he said with a grin.

Charlie kissed him again when she was settled down next to him. “What have you been eating?” she asked suspiciously.

Bass shifted uncomfortably. He nonchalantly tossed the wrapper into the hole below him. “Nothing,” he replied, trying his best (and failing) to sound innocent. The protest he received from below told him that the wrapper must have hit Aaron or the desk.

She searched her memory for a name to go with the taste. It was so familiar, but distant. “Wait a minute… is that chocolate?”

Bass knew he was totally busted. “What if it was?”

“Then I’ll never forgive you for not sharing and may have to kick your ass,” she said as she narrowed her eyes at him with implied menace.

“Hey now, there’s no need to resort to violence.” He reached inside his jacket and produced another bar. Charlie reached out to take it, but he pulled it away from her. “Payment first.”

She let out a little growl as she grabbed him by the front of his jacket and kissed him. She ignored the sound of disgust coming from Aaron below them. Bass pulled away from her, grinning and handed her the candy. “Thank you,” she said pertly.

He watched her unwrap it and take a greedy bite. “Good?”

“Amazing.” She licked her lips, not knowing just how seductive she looked.

“Hey!” Aaron shouted from below, “I thought you said only had two.”

Bass laughed at him. “First rule of hoarding, Staypuffed: Never tell anyone how many you have. By the way, you can stop waiting to see if it’s going to make me sick before you eat yours. I had one yesterday.”

“How many did you find?”

“You’ll never know Staypuffed… you’ll never know.” He pulled his legs up and prepared to leave. “See you tonight?” he asked, turning his attention back to Charlie.

She tilted her head to look up at him. “I’ve gotta go back and lock up after Priscilla is done, so I’ll be late.” She’d just given Mary Parker a job at Connor’s relentless begging (someone was getting attached). She was a little reluctant at first, but with her husband gone, Mary could use the work. She’d lost so much during the outbreak that it had been hard for Charlie to say no.

Bass stooped to kiss her one more time, just to annoy Aaron more than anything. “Be careful.” He ran into Priscilla on his way out. “Aaron has chocolate – if you hurry you might be able to steal it from him.” Serves him right for questioning my chocolate.
He got home in just enough time to catch the end of dinner, and by the look on Connor’s face he was itching to get out the door to go make puppy dog eyes at Mary while she worked. By the time he’d helped Jeremy with his schoolwork and got him into bed, it was still relatively early.

With little else to do (and no longer used to having time alone, let alone with nothing to do), he went outside for his evening cigar and whiskey. Ass in the lawn chair and feet propped up on the railing – his favorite lounging spot, he settled in to wait for Charlie to get home.

Mary had only been working for her for the past week or so, and she wasn’t quite ready to let the woman close up on her own yet. She’d griped over the idea of shirking a few nights a week. The bar was her baby after all, and she’d argued against the fact that hiring a second part time bartender was a necessity (it had taken her six months to trust Greg behind the bar, but in truth, she couldn’t pull twelve hour days seven days a week and help with the looming threat).

Bass, on the other hand was secretly glad Connor had convinced her to hire the woman - even if her ill-timed flirting had inadvertently been what had led him down one of the darkest downward spirals in his life. For one, it took all his willpower to not insist on being there to walk Charlie home every night. He couldn’t help it, some things would never change. It didn’t matter that she was about as lethal as he was – he couldn’t help that side of him.

Plus, the two nights off a week together that Mary would afford them when Charlie finally trusted her to lock up would give them actual time to enjoy their relationship, despite all the bullshit that was going on around them. That was something they really needed after all the stress with his hearing, the quarantine, and everything that had followed since.

Bass sits at his desk. Being a Sunday, the office has been closed for almost an hour. It is Connor’s day off, so he’s been spending the day trying to keep the boy occupied while Bass is working to keep the streets of Willoughby somewhat orderly. Not that he’s been doing that great of a job today. He’s been a little distracted.

Distracted isn’t even the word for it. He’s been living in a state of absolute shock all day long, ever since he and Charlie walked to their respective jobs together and she happened to drop the bombshell that she’s a little off schedule – by a week. What had seemed like the right thing to do at the time now seems like juvenile stupidity.

He keeps a mental tally of all the reasons why it would be a bad thing: They have their hands completely full with the Nano; They are just figuring out their place with one another; She’s so young; He’s too old; Look at what happened the last time – did he really want to risk going through that again? It would destroy him if it happened a second time; Jeremy is already a lot to handle; He’s not ready; She’s not ready; Rachel would flip out (and probably chop his balls off); Despite the fact he’s been doing so much better, he’s still a psychiatrist’s wet dream (or nightmare)... The list goes on and on.

These are the reasons why he shouldn’t want something to come of that morning. He doesn’t want it, does he? And so he repeats the list again – just to remind himself. Later, at supper, Charlie abruptly gets up from the table. She comes back a few minutes later and quietly sits back down like nothing had happened. Bass is pretty sure he’s the only one that has noticed she’s changed her jeans. She doesn’t have to say anything; he already knows the answer.

He knows he should be relieved – and he is, for the most part. Still, there’s a small part of him that wonders, What if? He tries to ignore it, but deep down a part of him is disappointed. No matter how much he tries to pretend otherwise, in that one moment a few weeks ago, it had really felt right.
That night they are laying together, her back pressed up against his chest. His hand rests lightly on her stomach; her hand is settled over his. He is so lost in his own head that he doesn’t even notice that Charlie is still awake.

As her body cramps and goes through its normal monthly motions, she can’t ignore the irrational sense of loss. For a few days, she’d been so sure. What would she have done? It was stupid of course. With everything going on around them and running her bar it simply wasn’t something she could handle. The whole thing was stupid of course. She’d had no business giving her assent that morning – at least, that’s what she’d thought she’d been doing at the time.

It wasn’t like he’d come out and asked her, well anything really. She’d just been caught up in the moment and he’d been looking at her that way, and she’d kind of lost her head. Charlie knows she’s not built like the other women her age. Hell, by the time she’d left Wisconsin, there’d been several girls her age that had been married with kids. It’s just not her way. She’s a warrior, not a nurturer...

She’s twenty-three and this is not something she’d ever envisioned for herself. She keeps repeating that in her head. Charlie blinks a few times to clear her eyes. “Stupid hormones,” she says in her head as she quietly tries to hide a sniffle. She’s not going to cry over something she didn’t really want in the first place, or so she tells herself.

Bass hears the sound – ever so quiet; barely audible, hardly there. “Charlie?”

“I’m fine,” she says as she wipes her eyes on the back of her hand. She’s suddenly terrified of what he’ll think.

“Then why are you crying?”

She takes in a shaky breath. “It’s just that...” how to explain it? “... Never mind, it’s stupid. Forget it.”

But Bass doesn’t want to forget it. Not when he understands, or at least he thinks he does. “Me too,” he confesses. It’s amazing the things that come out of his mouth while he’s lying next to this woman.

Charlie turns her head to look at him and sees for the first time the strange combination of relief and sorrow on his face. He leans in and kisses her gently. At least if they’re stupid, the can be stupid together.

For reasons he couldn’t explain, even almost a week later his feelings were still mixed about the whole thing. His cigar had long since gone out and he was about to head inside when he saw Charlie coming up the walk. The grandfather clock inside had just indicated it was only ten.

“What are you doing home so early?” he asked as she climbed the stairs to the porch.

“What, aren’t you happy I’m home early?” She read the look on his face that told her just how ridiculous he thought that question was. “Priscilla finished whatever she wanted to get done tonight early and Connor offered to help Mary lock up – so don’t expect him home, by the way. I figure if I can’t trust the town deputy to stash the cash and lock a door, we’re all in trouble.”

“I’ll remind you that you said that in the morning,” he said with a smirk as he got up and followed her inside. As they headed down the hallway together, Bass made sure to take the time to appreciate the view. All thoughts of the nano; of their having dodged the proverbial bullet and of pretty much anything other than the tempting sight before him flew out of his mind.
As he closed the door to their bedroom he knew only three things: It wasn’t very late; they weren’t completely exhausted for once; and if the look on her face was of any indication, she was done bleeding and he was about to get very lucky.

The next morning they watched the sun rise out of the window by the bed together. She was curled up with her back to his chest, his arms wrapped around her. Neither had slept very much; their bodies both sore and sated. He absently rubbed her upper arm with his thumb as he held her. “What are we doing, Charlie?” he asked quietly.

She turned in his arms and snuggled in closer, her head on his chest as she tried to come up with a reasonable response. That seemed to be the ultimate question. What the hell did they think they were doing? She was damned if she knew.

She’s riding him hard. She moans, her head thrown back as she builds up closer. Bass has one hand on her breast, toying with it, teasing the hard nipple. Another is gripping her hip, rising and falling with her as she slides up and down on his length. The hand on her breast slides down and finds where they are joined. He rubs her clit with his thumb and feels her tightening around him as the sensation drivers her wild.

She bites her lip to try and keep the panting moans to a reasonable decibel. The sight is intoxicating. He slides his hand up and is now gripping her hips with both hands, digging his fingers in as he lifts her up and then slams her back down on his erection several times. Each time she takes him back inside, he feels himself getting ready. “Charlie, I’m gonna...” He trails off as he starts to lift her away from him, fully intent on stopping before he goes too far. She’ll just have to finish off by riding something else (not that he’s got a problem with that).

Charlie tightens her knees around his waist and grabs his hands, pulling them off of her. Leaning forward, the angle changes and she entwines her fingers with his as she pushes his hands into the mattress on either side of his head. Their mouths meet and she thrusts her tongue into his mouth, silencing any protest me might have. Of course he’s strong enough to overpower her, but he gets the gist of what she wants. She pulls her face back to look at him as she starts to ride him once more.

He pulls one hand from hers an for a split second, she thinks he’s going to push her off of him before he gets going again. Instead, he wraps his arm around her, his hand running up and tangling in her hair at the base of her neck. As she slides back and forth, she starts to build up the rest of the way.

When he knows he’s getting close again, he raises his head off the pillow just enough to find her mouth. As their tongues meet, he drags his hand down her back and onto her ass, pressing down to keep her in place as he starts to come. She breaks off the kiss and screams his name into his neck as she climaxes. His mouth is on her shoulder now, tasting the salt on her skin. His shoulders fall back to the bed under her weight as Charlie goes boneless on top of him. He just holds her in place, panting. She eventually lifts her head and kisses him, again, sucking his tongue and biting his lip – raw passion between them.

Before long, he is ready and wants her again. He flips her over and takes her from behind. It doesn’t take long and he’s buried inside her, filling her with his come once more. He finishes her with his fingers a few moments after he’s finished and feels her contract around him. God, she feels too good.

Memories of the previous night almost forced a blush to her face, but to her credit, Charlie somehow managed to keep it at bay. She traced small circles on his chest with one finger as she
considered the ramifications of what they’d done. “We’re living… Before those things have a chance to take everything away,” she finally says. It may not be a real answer, but it’s the best one she can come up with.

Bass stroked her jaw with his finger, tipping her face up to kiss her. With a sigh she opened her mouth and kissed him back. A few minutes later, he found himself on top of her, buried once more in her hot depths. This time there would be no pretense of stopping. He wouldn’t warn her beforehand to give her a chance to change her mind. For some crazy reason they’d made a decision the previous night – or had reaffirmed one they’d made one morning several weeks ago.

They were both aware that anyone that could read their thoughts would probably consider them candidates for the looney bin, but then again, the rest of the world was already going insane around them. At least they’d be crazy in good company. All they could do was just live their lives and hope that the Geek Squad managed to somehow pull through before the freedom to just be was taken away from all of them – and hope that Rachel would not find out.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I went there – so sue me. In almost every Charloe fic where there’s a little prego action it seems that it’s either a) part of an epilogue down the road and/or b) it’s an unplanned “oops” sort of thing. In my stories where it’s happened it’s always been both (with an exception for the baby towards the end of Rebuild yourself, but even then her first pregnancy was an accident). Anyway, I decided to explore the ramifications of them actually trying to get themselves into trouble… After all, Bass ain’t getting any younger. Don’t worry, the main plot is not going to turn into baby making, but the concept of their changing relationship will be important later on. This is another one of those “I hope I didn’t jump the shark” chapters, I admit it… Thoughts? Comments? Criticism? Any and all are appreciated and helpful.
Chapter Notes

This is the last half of the “setup” for the next phase of this story. Yeah, there’s a lot of drama between Charlie and Bass, but hang in there till the end of the chapter, because it resolves itself for the most part by the end (it is a rather longish chapter). I was hesitant to include it at first (it’s a scene I’d written before their pre-quarantine fight), but I think it establishes an important growth in one of them that will be very important later (and hints at something else that will be significant as well). Plus, I thought it was really good dialog and I didn’t want to waste it (hey, at least I’m honest). The chapter covers the events covering an entire month — after skipping a few months. I figured the Geek Squad needed time to work on the code — writing code that will save the world doesn’t seem like a one session thing, and I didn’t want to go through the mundane everyday existence of the characters – it seemed like overkill. Hence the reason why some characters seem to almost disappear here and there. I’m hoping I can get by without any more 4 or 5 day story hiatuses. Most of the rest of the story is written even though I have a few more minor details to iron out. No promises though! Once again, thanks to WildIrish for all her help on this. The next few chapters I must dedicate to her for helping me straighten out the Nano storyline. Sci-fi can get SO complicated! And thanks again to Sammxhill for promoting the story in tumblr and for her feedback and for everyone else that has been awesome and let me know what they think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time winter finally gave into spring they were finally getting somewhere. Aaron was fairly sure he’d isolated the bad section of code that had commanded the nanites to evolve beyond their original programming, which had led to the awakening of the Nano consciousness. Now, all that was left was to find exactly what would correct it.

Bass thought it was ridiculous that all of this was happening due to what amounted to a stupid typo and made no secret about it. “You try typing hundreds of lines of code in minutes with Miles screaming a countdown in your ear and see how accurate you are,” Aaron had snapped on more than one occasion to him.

Base wisely chose to hide the fact that his own pre-blackout typing abilities had been limited to the hunt and peck method. He hadn’t been as bad with a computer as Miles (whose attempts to use one typically had resulted in staring at the screen and yelling at it to work), but they’d never been his thing. Despite having grown up with computers, he’d been more of a sports and cars kind of guy. He’d played baseball, not World of Warcraft — although his skills at Tetris would have been legendary if he’d ever let anyone catch him playing it.

As Aaron and Priscilla had gotten closer to cracking the final bits of code needed to finish the virus for the capsule’s programming, Bass started to get worried. As far as they knew the Nano had been keeping a low profile. That never seemed to be a good thing.

He couldn’t help but think that instead of them just getting lucky, the Nano must be gearing up to hit them hard. Charlie and Miles were convinced he was just being paranoid, but then
again, as Miles always said, *it’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you.* Despite his concerns, as the town slowly eased back into some semblance of normalcy, the end of the whole mess finally seemed to be in sight.

After weeks with nothing happening, the Geek Squad had insisted they stop guarding them while they worked. No one had noticed them using the alley entrance, and it seemed silly for everyone to be burning the candle at both ends. They were fairly sure that the underground complex was a blind spot for the Nano and Aaron had been complaining that they were a distraction (Bass and Miles were actually being distractions; Charlie and Connor at least kept their mouths shut).

Bass and Charlie were lying in bed, happy and sated. She’d finally started leaving the bar completely in Greg and Mary’s hands twice a week. Every Tuesday and Sunday she had nothing to do with the place. He’d swapped his day off with Connor so he could be home on Sundays with her. It was nice being able to lounge around together, spend time with Jeremy and simply relax.

That day they’d taken Jeremy out on an impromptu hunting lesson – something Charlie insisted on teaching him. After all, she’d started hunting around his age, and with the world as uncertain as it was the skill could still come in handy someday. They’d only bagged a couple of rabbits, but Jeremy had enjoyed it – and Bass had enjoyed just watching the two of them together.

Bass was already ready to doze off. As he started to drift, he thought of how his life was finally worth something, even with all of the chaos they’d been through and would still go through because of the Nano. Charlie was snuggled close, he’d just had great sex and all was right in his happy little world.

Out of nowhere, Charlie spoke. “What are you thinking?” she asked sleepily, almost as an afterthought. She could almost feel the happiness radiating off of him, and as pensive as he always seemed to be, she was curious as to the source of his extremely good mood.

In hindsight, Bass would realize that the best way he could have answered that question was to have feigned sleep. There was never a right answer to that question. In fact, no good had ever come out of a conversation when a woman initiated it with those words. He really should have known better. It ranked right up there with ‘*Does this make my butt look big?*’ or ‘*How many women have you been with before me?*’ or even the dreaded ‘*Do you think she’s pretty?*’

No, he shouldn’t have answered, but instead he just had to open his big mouth. “I was just thinking how glad I am that Miles talked some sense into me. I guess I owe him.”

“What?” Charlie rolled off of him and propped herself up on one elbow.

And again, his half-asleep brain didn’t quite pick up on the red flags that were waving all around them. “He just made me realize how big of an idiot I was being when it came to you; to us.”

“When the hell did you discuss our relationship with Miles?” She sat up all the way now, her eyes narrowing at him.

“In December…” Bass’ fight or flight instinct was starting to kick in. He was finally starting to realize that something had abruptly gone very, very wrong.

Charlie found herself feeling more than a little agitated. She suddenly felt overwhelmed. *It had been Miles?* They’d gone from not speaking to where they were now because of something he’d said, not because Bass had come to any epiphany in regards to his feelings for her. “But that was when… wait you showed up at the bar that night because of *Miles?*” She got up and started
digging through the dresser.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. He was still at a complete loss, but was smart enough to know something bad was happening now. She was pissed, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out why.

“You discussed me with him? God I can’t believe you!” she shouted as she pulled a fresh pair of panties out and started to put them on. “Out of all the fucked up, asinine…”

“What the hell? I think you need to calm down.” He started to feel the panic rise in his chest, but tried to squash it down. This wasn’t really happening, was it? “It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

Charlie yanked on a pair of jeans. “Of course, you wouldn’t think so. God, you’re such an asshole sometimes.”

The panic immediately transitioned to anger. He hadn’t done anything wrong and she was attacking him. “Excuse me? I’m an asshole because I had a conversation with a man I’ve been friends with for four decades? You’re the one acting like a crazy bitch.” Of course, he instantly regretted those words – he even visibly winced as soon as he’d said it (and he knew it because he could almost see and hear himself like he was an outside observer in the insanity that was currently going on in their bedroom). Granted, yes she was flipping out over absolutely nothing, but there was one thing you never called a woman in the middle of an argument, however justified it might be.

Charlie finished getting dressed before she turned around and slapped him. Before he really knew what was happening, she was out the door. He just stood there for a minute, his hand to his cheek. Where the hell did all this come from? Snapping out of it, he yanked on a pair of pants and took off (barefoot) after her down the street.

She made it halfway down the block before he caught up with her. “What the hell just happened back there?” he asked as he grabbed her by the wrist to stop her.

Charlie jerked free. She suddenly felt claustrophobic – like she was being forced and smothered. She didn’t know where the feeling had come from. She knew it was completely irrational and she was being completely unfair to him. She also knew that in that moment she really needed to not be around him. “Back off!”

In stunned silence, Bass dropped his hand to his side and simply looked at her. He’d dated a lot of women; he’d slept with a good deal more, but in all his 48 years, he’d never had one go from happy to enraged so fast over so little. Torn, he just stared and waited for some type of explanation.

“I think we’ve taken this way too far, way too fast. I need space,” she told him. Her eyes were red, but she refused to cry. She tried to ignore the devastated look on his face.

It took him a few seconds to get over from that verbal hit to the gut, but he felt the outrage rise within him. “Do I really have to be the one to remind you that a lot of this was kind of your idea?” Too far, too fast? She’d all but pinned him down.

“Well, maybe I made a mistake,” she snapped before turning around and heading back down the street – back towards her rooms behind the bar.

Bass watched her walk away, still not quite able to grasp the fact that she was leaving.
This no longer felt like a stupid fight – this was a breakup. He stood there on the sidewalk, feet and chest bare. He was well aware that they’d gained an audience. More than one person was trying to nonchalantly watch them from their window. With a defeated sigh and his heart breaking, he turned and trudged back home.

Not quite ready to go back to his now empty bed, he plopped down on the couch. He was angry to be sure, and hurting worse than if she’d shot him in the chest with her crossbow. He eventually fell asleep, only to be tortured by an instant replay of their fight and subsequent breakup in his dreams. He only woke when Jeremy came in to get him so he could walk him to school.

That evening, when Bass got home from an extremely shitty day at work, he realized that at some point during the day, Charlie had moved her things out of the house. He’d been so busy with a few stupid incidents outside town; he hadn’t been around to notice.

After Jeremy had gone to bed, Bass had commandeered Connor to watch him and had gone over to the bar to try and talk to her, but she’d told him the same thing she’d told him the night before. Too far, too fast and she needed a break. He’d stalked out of the bar and just wandered for a while. Maybe they’d pushed things – well more than maybe, but he hadn’t pressured her. He just didn’t get it.

Is initial reaction was to get fucked up and stay that way. The best way to mend a broken heart was to preserve it in large amounts of alcohol, right? His next reaction was to freak out, hurt something-someone, but for reasons he was afraid to even analyze he did neither. What he did do was go to work. He took care of Jeremy, cooked shitty meals that his entire household bitched about (himself included). He did the laundry, cleaned the cat’s shit box and did all the other stupid little chores that keeping the house livable required.

They were a week into whatever it was she’d forced them into. He was lying in bed, missing her to be sure when he finally realized that he hadn’t gotten fucked up or gone ballistic, or any of the other emotionally disturbed things that he’d normally have done when his heart was ripped out of his chest.

Sure, when Jeremy had asked him why Charlie didn’t walk him home from school on Tuesday, he’d dodged the question and had fought the urge to lash out. But, he’d survived the conversation without finding some way to share the hurt he’d been feeling or alienating the boy.

Bass has just finished booking their resident feline scuba instructor. Killing kittens still wasn’t a crime, but this time the disturbed teen had taken a swing at him, so into lockup the little douche bag has gone. Bass hasn’t decided if he’s going to charge him or not yet. Right now he’s waiting for the punk to simmer down and to calm down a little himself before he makes that determination.

Miles steps into his office, having officially received a complaint from Mrs. Everly in regards to her “little angel” being subject to police brutality. Of course he knows better. Bass might have restrained the little shit, but there’s no way he’d have hurt him. Either way, duty calls and he has to address the complaint. For the past week he’s been avoiding both Charlie and Bass in an attempt to stay neutral.

They discuss the kid for a minute or two. Bass refuses to just let him go. “No way. At the very least, I’m going to let him rot for another hour or two.”

Miles gets it. Bass is in a piss-poor mood, and the kid deserves a little reality check besides. Maybe they’re just a bit too pre-blackout but the whole thing with the cats is something both men think is just wrong. At an impasse, he takes a seat. Bass is already sitting behind his
desk, and they sit in sullen silence for a while.

He might not have been vocal about it, but Miles is worried about him. Although Bass hasn’t gone off the deep end just yet, he knows how Bass is. As far as he’s concerned, it’s only a matter of time. “How are you hanging in there?” he finally asks.

“Good days, bad days. You know…” He’s not comfortable discussing this with Miles, or anyone else for that matter.

“What happened?” Miles hasn’t heard either side of the story, but even from a distance, he can see Charlie is an overly-emotional mess. As unstable as Bass usually is when it comes to matters of the heart he figures that at least he’s composed and his version will be the more rational of the two – even if it’s not the most accurate.

“Hell if I know. I walked into one of those impossible questions, and I guess I just gave the wrong answer.” This all started because he had a conversation with Miles about Charlie. He figures that doing the same now will somehow make it all worse. Desperate to change the subject, he gets up and goes to the back of his office and to the cell. “Ready to play nice, kid?”

The punk nods, shooting faux looks of remorse his way. Bass doesn’t buy it for a second, but he’s in no mood to pursue this further today. He writes him a ticket for littering – dead cats counted as litter, right? “I swear the next time you try and throw a punch at me, I’m hitting back. Got it?”

Brad Everly audibly swallows. He’s tough compared to his peers but he is still a kid. This is THE Sebastian Monroe. He wouldn’t last two seconds up against him, and he knows it. He has no desire to be the brunt of the former general’s wrath. Later, he’ll play it up to his friends (out of earshot of the surly sheriff, of course) that he talked his way out of the trouble and that Sheriff Monroe is no match for him. The kid takes the ticket, thinking better of tearing it up and goes before Bass changes his mind.

Now alone in the office, Miles starts in on him again. “What the hell did she ask you?”

“Never mind,” he replies. He gets up and grabs his things. After waiting for Miles to follow him to the door, he locks up. It’s close enough to the end of his shift, he figures. He locks the door. Hands in his pockets, he heads home, leaving Miles to stare after him in concern.

Weary, Bass finally fell asleep. Acknowledging that he’d managed to go an entire week without literally losing his mind actually served to make him feel a little better. He just had to wait it out and see what she decided to do. He’d gone to sleep with the hope that Charlie would work out in her own mind whatever it was that had freaked her out. He wasn’t going to badger her or rail at her.

Yeah, they’d gotten very serious, very fast. Yeah, he’d even questioned it; made sure it was what she wanted. Yeah, she’d apparently changed her mind – a woman’s prerogative. All he could do was wait to see if she’d change it back, or at least decide to talk to him about it.

By the time two more weeks had gone by, he was slowly giving up on that hope. She’d made no move towards reconciliation. The one additional attempt he’d made to bring up the topic, she’d blown him off and changed the subject. She hadn’t been cruel or emotional – she’d remained deceptively calm, sterile almost. That experience had reminded him all too much of the weeks after the tornado where she just tried to erase everything that had happened between them. He decided he’d just have to face it – it was over.
The following week, a full month post them, he gave in to Jeremy’s plea for an edible meal. Too proud to beg Priscilla to come over and feed the Monroe men, he relented at the boy’s request to go out to the bar to eat. It was a Tuesday and he’d already been told by Connor that she’d kept her days off. It wasn’t that he minded seeing her – they lived in a small town after all, they had to learn to be cordial at least and deal with one another in public. Still, it seemed more respectful to stay away for a little longer.

When he walked into the bar to meet Connor and Jeremy however he realized the day hadn’t mattered at all. There she was, standing behind the bar. He knew the moment she first saw him. All of the sudden she had that stupid, professional smile plastered on her face. He knew he was in for one uncomfortable evening, but he’d promised Jeremy something that wasn’t burned, so they’d have dinner, even if it killed him.

_The sight of him coming in makes her feel sick. The past month has been hard enough as it is. She’s been a basket case ever since they had this falling out, and what’s worse – she knows it. She still can’t quite figure out why she’s so upset. She knows the answer is staring her right in the face, but she refuses to contemplate it, so she just chalks it up to he’s an asshole._

_Of course, Rachel has been there in her ear these past weeks. She’s heard ‘I told you so’ more times in the past month than she’s heard in the rest of her life combined. After spending a week avoiding her, Miles has been quietly supportive the entire time. Being Miles, he just ignores the problem and pretends that everything is just fine._

_She’s seen Connor frequently since that night it all went wrong because he’s still involved with Mary Parker (she has a feeling Mary has picked him to be the future ex-Mr. Parker, so to speak). She’s refused to ask about him, and Connor for the most part has been treating her with the indifference that anyone would treat a fling’s boss and nothing more. Quite obviously, he’s mad at her. If circumstances were different, she’d be happy for Bass. Connor has finally shown actual true loyalty after all this time._

_She knew it was only a matter of time before he came in the bar, and she does recognize the significance of it being a Tuesday. She sees him draw in a deep breath before heading over to the table where Connor and Jeremy await. For a brief moment, Charlie considers having Greg wait on them, but that would prove she’s affected by his presence here. That’s something she’s not quite ready to admit._

“What is your problem?” Bass finally asked after the third drink she’s slammed on the table right in front of him. He hadn’t even asked for another either time. She’d just brought them, forcing them on the wood hard enough each time to cause a good deal to spill before stomping back off behind the bar.

“What is your problem?” Bass finally asked after the third drink she’s slammed on the table right in front of him. He hadn’t even asked for another either time. She’d just brought them, forcing them on the wood hard enough each time to cause a good deal to spill before stomping back off behind the bar.

“Nothing,” Charlie replied, her ‘I’m only smiling because you’re a customer’ smile was still plastered on her face.

Bass barged into the kitchen, just as Greg was finishing with the evening cleanup. “You might wanna watch the bar for a minute. Your boss and I need to have a little chat,” he snarled.
Charlie practically growled at him. “No, we don’t.”

Bass responded by slapping her on the butt – hard. “If you’re going to act like a child, I swear I’ll spank you like one,” he told her.

Frustrated, she started to pummel him in the back. He refused to wince when she hit a few of thicker scars that would always hurt just a little. Her efforts only earned her another smack on the rear end, this time harder than the first. She calmed down when it sank in that he was prepared to do this all night. “Greg, would you be so kind and take over the bar for me for a few minutes?”

Bass waited until they were alone before putting her down. “What’s with the goddamned temper tantrum? I gave you what you asked for.”

Charlie took an angry step towards him. “Yeah, you had no trouble at all, did you?”

Bass almost did a double take. “Wait a minute. You left me, remember? You left and told me to back off - more than once. So I did and now I’m the bad guy for giving you exactly what you wanted?” He held his arms out, emphasizing his confusion.

“It’s not like you were all that broken up about it,” she muttered as she crossed her arms over her chest.

I don’t believe this! Bass leaned against the wooden prep table and just watched her for a second. She looked so tired. She had more luggage under her eyes than a cross-country train and he could almost see the walls she’d instantly erected around herself. “What did you want me to do? Go nuts again? Drink myself stupid?”


Bass let out a frustrated sigh. If she wasn’t on the brink of tears, he’d be pissed at the insinuation. As it was, he was a sucker when it came to her crying and he knew it, even if she didn’t. “I do care. I miss you like crazy, Charlie.”

She unconsciously wiped her wet cheek with the back of her hand when her eyes spilled over at that admission. “Then why…”

He hopped up on the prep table he’d been leaning on and waited for her to join him. “You know, I spent so long being so messed up in the head, I’d just accepted it? And when I left town a year ago, I was as bad as I had ever been – even in Philly I wasn’t that bad. I was obsessed. What I felt for you wasn’t love – it was too dark to be called that, and it wasn’t healthy.”

Charlie leaned away from him. She felt like he’d just slapped her. “So you don’t?”

“Christ Charlie, do you really think I’d be willing to start a life with you, do… you know - if I didn’t? Of course, I love you. That’s why I let you walk away.” He waited for her to look at him again before he continued. “You were right before, when you told me I was terrified of having something real, something worth having. Before – it wasn’t real. It was sick – I was sick. And I guess I accepted a long time ago that’s all I was built for.”

Charlie knew that this was not an easy admission for him to make. No one wanted to have to admit aloud that they were mentally and emotionally ill. It hadn’t been a question, he’d had a lot of problems, but actually saying it was hard and the cost was high. It humbled her to know that after the way she’d been acting, it was still a cost he was willing to pay.
When she didn’t say anything, he went on. “I’m not saying you fixed me. I was too broken for anyone, but you made me want to be better – to be okay. You made me want to fix myself, and after all these years I think that just maybe I did – or at least I’m getting there.” He jumped down on the table and stood directly in front of her. With the added benefit of sitting on the table, she was almost eye level with him now.

“So that’s it then?” Charlie felt her eyes burn again. She wanted him to be better – whole, but the thought that he was all patched up now and happy to walk away now hurt more than she’d thought.

Bass shook his head. “Only if you want it to be. What I feel now is real. Before, I would have tried to hold on until I destroyed us both. Ask Miles, he can tell you all about that. Hell, you saw the end results. But, I finally get it now. I love you enough to let you go and not lose it again.

“It sucks and most of the time I feel like I’m about to shatter, but I’m capable of holding it together. So yeah, I care. And I want you back so bad I can’t stand it, but I’m not going to hurt the both of us trying to force you into something you clearly don’t want. That’s the only reason I can come up with for the way things went so bad that fast, because for the life of me, I still can’t figure out what I did wrong.”

Bass bent his head and kissed her on the forehead before backing up and turning to leave. He passed Miles, who was standing just outside the door to the kitchen. He gave his friend a sad nod in greeting before going back to the table where Connor and Jeremy waited. “I think we’d better go,” he said quietly. He stopped to pay Greg and then followed them out the door.

Charlie stands in shock in the kitchen. She’d forced him to eat a lot of crow when he’d fucked up before. And there he was, doing it again even when he acknowledged that he couldn’t find anything he’d done wrong. She’d wanted to say something – do something to keep him from retreating just now, but she hadn’t been able to speak.

Miles pokes his head into the kitchen. “You okay?” he asks her. Having been told about the nature of Charlie’s abrupt exit to the kitchen when he’d entered the bar, He’d immediately headed towards the kitchen. He’d been prepared to walk into the middle of World War III when he’d heard Bass talking to her.

Charlie wipes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I guess so,” she says, her voice indicating she is anything but.

Miles still can’t quite believe what he’s overheard. “So Bass being sane and acting like a grownup. Didn’t see that one coming.”

“I really fucked this up bad,” she wails.

“Well, why? I mean, I get it. The man is real dick sometimes and a giant idiot all the time, but you knew that going in. So why did you break up with him?”

“Because it just seemed so fast. One minute he’s telling me how he can’t be with me, and the next he wants me around… Between all of that, and then the way he was pushing me away during the quarantine…” She wipes her face again, her stubborn tears just not going away. “And then we were trying to… never mind. Things were good, but had gotten so serious. Then he told me about the talk two of you had. I guess I felt like he was just waiting around for permission instead of actually deciding he cared enough to make a move.”

Miles just looks at her. So that’s what that’s what this is all about? He can’t believe she’s
broken up with him over something so stupid. “So what? You gotta look at this from his perspective. We’ve been best friends – no, closer than that. We’ve been brothers for forty years. Even with everything that happened in Philly that never went away. He knew you when you were a baby for God’s sake.

“That’s not something a person just gets over. So yeah, it was probably easier for him to approach you when he knew I wasn’t going to shoot him for it. Which, by the way he didn’t ask for my permission. All I did was point out how miserable the two of you were.”

Miles leaves her alone in the kitchen to think about what he’s said. As he orders a drink from Greg it crosses his mind that he’d never met two idiots more made for each other than his niece and best friend. Bass has finally figured it out – what has him surprised is the fact that Charlie hasn’t. She’d been the one to chase after him relentlessly. For once, Bass isn’t the one with his head up his ass.

That night when Charlie goes to bed, she has a lot to think about. To say that she’d expected Miles to defend Bass a little went without saying. He was, after all involved in the whole mess, whether he liked it or not. What she didn’t expect was for him to flat out tell her she was wrong. Of course, she knew he was right, but she hadn’t expected him to point it out so poignantly.

She misses Bass so much that she can barely sleep at night. Her bed in the rooms behind the bar just doesn’t feel like it’s hers anymore. This isn’t where she’s supposed to be and she knows it. She just can’t quite figure out a way to get her emotions in check long enough to fix this.

She’d calmed down after the first few days and had felt like the bitch he’d accused her of being. Then she’d spent the next few days waiting for him to go after her again, so when he hadn’t, she’d gotten mad. And the longer he’d stayed away, the madder she’d gotten.

She hadn’t even known why she was still so upset with him. Her mind and emotions had been all over the map over the past weeks. She’d wondered if this was the “attack” from the Nano that Bass had been so paranoid about. They could make people act irrationally – they’d witnessed that first hand during the quarantine, and that was exactly how she’d felt. She still feels it. She’s enraged one moment, remorseful the next and so on.

It took her a while to acknowledge that there was more than likely a much simpler explanation to why she was behaving and feeling this way. She’s finally accepted it, and they need to talk. Before drifting off, she resolves to track him down first thing in the morning. She knows she’s got a lot of explaining and apologizing to do.

Bass stared at the ceiling, in bed but fully awake. The grandfather clock in the living room told him he had to get up in just a few hours, but sleep eluded him still. He’d had a bad feeling about going into the bar that night. He hadn’t been really prepared for that confrontation or for the things he’d ended up revealing to her. He wanted to be pissed at her. The idea that she was more upset over the fact that he’d accepted the breakup than whatever had caused it was insanity to him.

Oh, he so wanted to be mad, but he loved her and seeing her look so lost and stricken had erased any chance of him holding on to the rage that had once come as naturally to him as breathing. And that was what kept him awake. He didn’t know what was going on with her, but it was so uncharacteristic of Charlie to act like this. She was one of the most pragmatic people he knew.

He knew better than to think that their conversation would change anything. Nothing could do that until she was ready to talk about why she’d been so mad in the first place. And after a month of being apart, he was no longer holding his breath for that. There was still a small part of him deep down that secretly hoped she’d snap out of it and want to work it out, though.
The next morning, Charlie woke up and got ready for work early. Because Bass started his day well before the bar opened, she had plenty of time to track him down at his office and talk to him before she had to open up. Almost immediately after stepping outside something felt wrong, but it took her almost an entire block to figure out what it was. It wasn’t quite nine in the morning and the streets seemed awfully crowded. Half the town seemed to be just wandering aimlessly around the main drag, like they had no purpose or destination in mind – like they were on auto-pilot.

She ran in to Bass halfway between the bar and his office. “What’s going on around here?”

Bass looked at the people wandering around them. “Nothing good. This is what we saw in Bradbury – right before they went berserk and took out an entire town.” He grabbed her arm. “I was just on my way over to your place. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“Where are we going?” she asked as he pulled her down the street. “First? To find Jeremy. With everything that happened in Idaho, he’s probably scared shitless right now.”

As they walked she tentatively broached the topic that had sent her outside so early. “Listen, Bass, about last night…”

“Charlie, I want to talk about it. Trust me, I really want to, but now isn’t really the time,” he told her as they turned down the road that led to the school.

She stopped for a second. “No. If all hell is breaking loose, I need to know that we can be okay at some point. It’s important that I know that before it’s too late.”

Bass went over to her. “If you’re willing to talk to me and tell me what the hell has been going on, then of course we can be okay. I told you last night, it’s only done if that’s what you want, but now is not the time.” He grabbed her wrist and started to pull her down the street again.

The rest of the way, he told her in more detail about how the people in Idaho had been mindless zombies until they’d been around Neville and Truman. He’d never really told anyone the details of that horrible night. Indeed, if he’d been able, he’d have erased it from his memory. He’d seen a lot of death and war over the years, but nothing had prepared him for that, not even seeing the Patriots burning alive during their attempt to rescue Staypuffed.

When they finally got there, Jeremy was sitting outside the building on the curb, rocking back and forth. Bass knelt down next to him. “Jeremy? You alright?”

“Everything was fine and then a little while ago, everyone just got up and started acting funny – like my mom did before…” he trailed off, hugging his knees tighter and rocking a bit faster. He was clearly terrified, just as his father had predicted.

“Where are Aaron and Priscilla?” Charlie asked as she knelt next to Bass.

The boy shrugged. “They didn’t come to school today. Mr. Jasper and Mrs. Connell were helping,” he mumbled.

Charlie locked eyes with Bass. She walked a few feet away and gestured for him to follow her. “You don’t think?” She left the rest of the question remain unspoken, just in case Jeremy was listening.

Bass shook his head. “No. No, they couldn’t have.”

She wasn’t convinced. “What makes you so sure?”
“Because if those things got in their heads, we are all seriously fucked.” His brow furrowed with worry, Bass went back over to where Jeremy waited. “You okay to walk? We’ve gotta get back to the house.”

They hurried down the street back home to get Connor. He’d been out all night at Mary’s and had just come home when Bass and Jeremy were leaving. He left Charlie to keep an eye on Jeremy on the porch and went inside. He found his eldest child passed out on the couch. “Get up and get your shit,” he said as he kicked the side of the couch. “We’ve got trouble.”

Within minutes both Monroes were headed back outside with every weapon they could find and a couple of backpacks with enough food to last a few days and spare clothes for Jeremy, just in case they had to go into hiding for a while. Bass sent Connor back to the center of town to look for Aaron and Priscilla there. They had to go on the assumption that they were in the Annex. “If you find them, don’t come looking for us. Go to the safe house we used when you first came to Texas. You remember it?”

“I think so. Where will you be?” he asked as he closed the door behind them.

“Hopefully not too far behind. Whatever you do, don’t try to talk to any of them. They won’t attack unless the Nano tell them to.” Bass explained how Neville and Tom were different and how to kill them. “That was the only way we could stop them. They heal immediately otherwise.”

Jeremy started to protest as they left. “What about my cat?” he wailed.

“We don’t have time. She’s a cat. She’ll stay close to home and will find something to eat. Hopefully we’ll only be gone a few days.” Bass tried to reassure him, to little avail. With tears in his eyes, the boy followed reluctantly.

The walk to Miles’ house only took a few minutes. Gene was just finishing his late breakfast.

“Where are Miles and my mom?” Charlie asked as they barged in the front door.

Gene looked up from his cup of coffee and the Austin times. “Your mom left to go help Aaron and Priscilla a few minutes ago. Aaron stopped by on his way to town earlier and told her to bring the capsule.”

“What about Miles?” Bass asked. “Town hall never opened this morning.”

“Beats me. He left at the normal time. What’s going on?”

Charlie ignored him. She grabbed Gene’s bag and shoved it at him. “Grandpa, it’s time to get packin’. We’ve got to go. The Nano have taken over the town.”

The doctor started to argue against abandoning the town, but Bass had made it very clear he didn’t have a choice. He’d drag him out kicking and screaming if that’s what it took. While Gene started grabbing whatever medical supplies he had handy, Charlie went to arm herself from her uncle’s stash. She met them outside, holding Miles’ sword belt in her hand, feeling sick with worry. If Miles wasn’t armed and the Nano decided to attack, he’d be helpless.

Bass reached out and grabbed the swords from her. “Charlie, you’ve got to get the three of you out of town. If your mom went to the Annex, she’s probably with Connor by now. I’ll go get miles and we’ll meet you at the rendezvous.”

“What? No way. We’re sticking together. What if something happens?” she argued.

“I’m begging you. Please do this for me. I need to know that you and Jeremy are safe,” he pleaded,
grabbing her hands. In case things got worse, he didn’t need the distraction of trying to keep them safe.

With a sigh, Charlie nodded. It went without her instincts to bug out when he and Miles were still in town, but she also knew he was right. Getting Jeremy out was vital and she didn’t want to risk her grandfather either. “Okay,” she finally said.

“Listen to Charlie, and do exactly what she says.” Bass said as he turned to where the boy waited, sitting on one of the wicker chairs.

“What about you?” he whined.

“I’ll be right behind you. Charlie can kick ass with the best of them. She’ll keep you safe.” He gave the kid a quick hug and then went back to Charlie. “Don’t worry, I’ll find him,” he said – reading the worry in her eyes. He started to head down the porch stairs alone.

“Bass?”

“Yeah?” he said as he turned back around.

Charlie all but flung herself at him, their lips connecting. “Be careful. Come back to me in one piece, okay?”

“I’m always careful,” he told her. He couldn’t help but let out a laugh at the disbelieving look she shot him at those words. They kissed again and he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

PS:. For some reason some of my indents show up, some do not (some chapters I don't have a problem at all even). I'm lazy and am tired of correcting, so I will leave them as is. Writing dialog is a lot easier if I use them, so if the format switches back and forth, it's AO3, not me...

Also, apologies if I've annoyed any of my fellow females with Bass' slightly chauvinistic thoughts in regards to their fight. But let's face it - most of us have used one of those four mentioned questions to their disadvantage at least once or twice in our lifetimes. We know it, even if we don't like to admit it...
Chapter Notes

This is where the sci-fi starts to go crazy folks… This is my first attempt at really getting into it in extreme details… Please let me know what you think. I’ll try to have the next chapter up tomorrow. It needs editing and is quite the doozy when it comes to length… Since I’m trying to hurry up and get this posted before I leave the house, I apologize if my editing is worse than normal (I never seem to catch everything, but this one may be especially bad).

By the time Bass got to the main part of town, he noticed that the people that had been milling about were gathering in the center of the market. This can’t be good. He started to head towards town hall to use it as a starting point in tracking down Miles. He saw Connor dart down an alley, obviously intent on being unseen on his way to the town’s main gate. Priscilla and Aaron followed a few seconds later. What he didn’t see was Rachel. Dammit.

He doubled back towards the video store, figuring that it was possible Rachel had just missed them. As much as he hated her, he knew Miles could take care of himself and they’d need her to defeat her mechanical lab rats. He’d just have to hope they’d run into Miles on their way out or that he’d take the hint to get the heck out of dodge.

He was almost to the alley next to the store when he felt a hand on his arm. It had come from his blind spot from behind an old dumpster. He immediately reached for his sword, stopping only when he realized it was Miles. “Where the hell have you been?” he asked as he handed Miles his sword belt.

“Trying to stay out of sight. I went to find you when all this started going on, but I guess I missed you.” Miles peeked down the side street and saw two more of them passing by on their way to the market. “What the hell is going on?” He buckled the belt around his waist before taking the offered gun from Bass.

“I told you the Nano were up to something, but no – everyone said I was paranoid. Looks like they were just gearing up for this the entire time.”

Miles just rolled his eyes. Leave it to Bass to play the ‘told you so´ card at a time like this. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Charlie is leading Gene and Jeremy out already. Connor has Aaron and Priscilla. I saw them headed towards the gate,” he explained as he darted across the side street. He looked again and gestured for Miles to follow. If the nano-zombies were the eyes and ears for these things, the last thing he wanted was for one of them to see them this close to the Annex. “We haven’t found Rachel yet – my guess is she’s underground.”

Reaching the street that led to the alley they wanted, they cautiously waited to make sure it was clear before turning down it. They were almost ready to move when all hell broke loose. Hearing the gate crash in, they rushed to the top of the street and looked into the center of town to see Connor trying to usher his charges away from the gate and in between buildings. Standing there was the missing Ranger Malcom Dove. As soon as he stepped foot in town, the people that
had gathered went mad.

“Aw fuck!” Bass grumbled. Instinct took over and he drew one of his swords.

Miles grabbed his wrist. “We can’t just kill everyone in town – when this is over, there’ll be nothing left.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Bass sheathed his weapon once more and looked around for a less lethal alternative. He picked up an old two by four that had been left behind after the repairs to the town had been completed. “If I get turned into one of them or get killed because of this, I swear I’m going to come back and haunt you forever.”

Before Miles had a chance to respond, the blacksmith and one of part time teachers at the school came down the alley. Bass took a swing with the board, knocking the blacksmith to his knees before swinging once more and taking him completely down. He turned around to see Miles still fighting off the other one, using a trashcan lid of all things. Really? The man managed to put his hand on Miles’ face, stopping his friend in his tracks. Without a thought, Bass pulled out his gun and shot the teacher point blank.

Miles blinked in confusion. “What the hell was that?”

“Oh yeah, whatever you do, don’t let them touch you,” Bass told him.

“A little warning would have been nice. Listen, I’ll go help your kid get them out. You find Rachel.”

Bass nodded in understanding. “See you on the other side, brother.”

Trusting Miles to make sure his son got out alive with the Pittmans, Bass headed down the street and into the alley. His luck held out long enough to get inside without being seen. He rushed to the back room and looked into the hole in the floor. Sure enough, Rachel was down there. Sitting at one of the computers, she was typing away as fast as she could.

“Come on Rachel, time to go,” he told her.

“I have to finish the upload,” she insisted. “If we don’t do it now, there won’t be another chance.” She’d met up with Aaron and Priscilla and they had just been about to start uploading the virus onto the capsule when Connor had come to collect them. She’d agreed to stay behind to see it done. If the Nano had taken over the town, they wouldn’t be able to come back.

“We’re out of time. The others are already on their way to a safe house.”

“I know that, but someone had to do it. The Nano can’t come inside. We can hide here until it passes – we may even be able to activate the capsule from here if we’re lucky.”

Bass went to the front of the building and peeked carefully out of the front window, doing his best to remain hidden. So far it seemed they still hadn’t been tracked down. He went back and saw her just staring at the screen. “Will you hurry it up?” he whispered loudly, as if they could hear him somehow.

“It’s almost done. I just need another minute.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when the front window crashed in. Deciding that getting out alive was more important than coming back to Willoughby when all was done he drew his gun and sword and got ready. He poked his head out of the back room and to his surprise
he didn’t see any of them.

Confused, he carefully went further into the store and took a look around. They’d thrown one of the barrels from the town wall through the glass. Why would they do that? And then, he saw it. “Fuck!” he shouted as he dove back. The explosion sent him falling down into the annex, landing on his back.

Rachel turned and watched as he fell. “Bass?” she asked.

“Oh…” He got to his feet slowly. He shook his head to clear it, his ears now ringing. “Yep, definitely getting too old for this shit,” he grumbled. He’d be bruised later, but at least he was in one piece and had managed to not land on his own sword. “By the way, I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

He drug the desk over and used it to climb up to the hole. Taking a look around, he found his gun lying on the broken linoleum. He pulled himself halfway out and reached for it. “Can we go already?” he asked as he grabbed his weapon.

“I need to check the upload first,” Rachel told him. He could hear her typing away below him.

Right before he lowered himself back down, Bass looked up to see another stick of dynamite being tossed into the video store. They couldn’t enter, but apparently they had figured out they didn’t need to.

He dropped down, landing on the desk. He jumped to the floor and grabbed Rachel by the arm, yanking her behind him as he went down the hallway and ducked into one of the rooms. He’d just closed the steel door behind him when the second stick went off and the building above them shook. Several of the ceiling tiles fell behind them and they were covered in dust and insulation.

They waited several minutes before they opened the door. The ceiling above the computers had collapsed, effectively destroying them all. They looked at each other in horror. If the servers were down, whatever was keeping the Nano out was no longer working. They’d be trapped down here when they came.

In a panic, Rachel dug through the debris to find the computer she’d been using. Like the others, it was in pieces. “We have to find it!”

Bass went to help her and within a few minutes they’d uncovered the workstation enough for her to sift through the parts. Seeing that she’d found it, Bass headed back down the hallway. “Just grab it already!” he shouted.

Because of the damage, there was no leaving the way they came. Out of time and patience he grabbed her again and pulled her down the hallway once more. He found the stairs that were blocked off by the counter in the front of the store. Saying a prayer that they’d get lucky for once, he raced to the top and tried the trap door. Sure enough, the dynamite had blown the counter above them into pieces. The trap door moved, but was partially blocked by debris.

“Get your ass up here and help me,” he snapped.

Using their combined strength they managed to get it open. Back above ground now all they had to do was find a way out of town before they were killed. “Don’t let them touch you,” he told her, “and if you see Malcom Dove… Run.”
Rachel picked up a piece of the counter to brandish as a weapon and together they started to make their way out of the building. They had to climb their way over the rubble to get to the side door to the alley. Stepping out, they found the way still clear. The main gate to town was out of the question. The seldom used side door was their only chance now. It was further away, but hopefully the Nano was more concentrated in the center of town.

They had four blocks to travel, which could very well have been four miles for all their chances of making it undetected. Shooting their way out would only attract more attention to them, so stealth was the better option if they could help it. As they ran out of the alley and to the corner of the next street, one of them came out of nowhere on his left. He’d turned his head just in time to see her. Ducking, he hit her in the side of the head with the handle of his gun as hard as he could. If she awoke as herself, she’d have one hell of a headache.

They made it two more streets before three more nano-zombies found them, their eyes dead and faces contorted in their delirious rage. He fought off one while Rachel started to swing at the other with her makeshift weapon. The world moved in slow motion as the other reached for Bass, his hand just inches from his forehead. It never came any closer. The man suddenly fell to the ground, revealing a very terrified Mary Parker, holding a golf club.

“Mary?” he asked, his eyes still wide in surprise.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on here, but am I glad to see you,” she panted. Her daughter crawled out of hiding, wrapping her arms around her mother’s leg.

Bass looked around the next corner. “Trust me, you don’t want to know. At least we know it’s not the whole town. Is there anyone else with you?”

Mary started to cry. “Sally Jefferson was, but the judge… He – he killed her, right in front of us.”

Rachel put her arm around her. “It’s going to be okay. We just have to get out of town. Did you see anyone else still normal?”

Mary shook her head. “There must just be a few of us. I wonder why whatever was causing this didn’t affect us.”

Bass waved for them to zip it and then gestured for them to follow. He took out one more with a swift series of punches and then led them to the next alley to wait for another opening. They went the entire way like this, darting in and out of alleys and empty buildings – doing everything they could to stay out of sight. They were almost there when they found themselves surrounded by several more of them. As they fought, Rachel started to speak. “Since we’re probably going to die, I guess it’s as good a time as any to tell you… That you’re not good enough for her, and I’m glad she left you.”

Bass started to open the door in the wall. It was blocked from the outside. He gave up on subtlety and shot the last four that threatened their escape. “Are you fucking kidding me? You want to do this now?” The door gave after several kicks and he shoved the two women and child through before closing it behind him. He didn’t hope to stop them, but if they were lucky just maybe they could conceal their flight for a few minutes.

Together they ran towards the safe house, only running into a few more crazed people along the way. Their luck held out and only had to defend themselves once as they went. Within an hour they’d finally reached their destination. Panting, Bass pulled open the cellar door, fully expecting the others to already be there. Finding it empty, he immediately started to worry.
After she checked on Mary and her daughter, Rachel started right back up again. “As I was saying, she was too good for you.”

Bass didn’t exactly want to get into this, especially in front of Mary Parker, but the damn woman was always so fucking relentless. He sat down wearily on the bottom stair. “I know. But it doesn’t change anything. And for your information, shit isn’t exactly final between us, so you’re just going to have to learn to live with it.”

“You really expect that?”

He looked up at her coldly. “I don’t give a damn what you think, Rachel. I never have before, so why would I start now?”

“What about your promise to leave my family alone, Bass?” she mocked.

“That was before…”

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. “Before what?”

“Before I knew she loves me back.” Before he could elaborate or she could respond the cellar door opened. He sure that it was either Charlie or Connor; he stood to wait for them to come down. His eyes widened when he saw it that it was Malcom Dove instead.

“We found you,” Dove said as he came down the stairs. His voice was disturbingly upbeat. “You have one last chance – let us in.”

“Fuck you,” Bass spat as he drew his swords. Dove’s hand shot out. Without even connecting with his chest, he sent Bass flying backward. By the time he’d regained his feet Rachel was swinging at him with the board she still carried.

Remembering all too well the fight in Arco, Bass took a swing at the possessed Ranger’s neck with one of his swords. Dove moved at the last second and his strike went too low. As soon as he pulled the sword free, the wound started to heal.

He swung with the other sword, this time connecting, but it wasn’t deep enough. Getting the idea, Rachel looked around for something to use. Spotting an axe that they’d used for firewood the last time they’d stayed here, she took a swing of her own and deepened the cut that Bass had made. While Dove was distracted with ripping the weapon out of her hands, Bass finished the job and severed his head.

He kicked it away from them in disgust. “Even with all the shit in the past month, I still love her and I know that she loves me. If she decides to keep pushing me away, that’s on her. But otherwise, nothing – not you, not the nano – will keep me away from her.” He said as he wiped his brow with his sleeve.

Rachel’s gaze went right past him. Bass turned to see what she was looking at, but nothing was there. “Rachel? Whatever they’re saying, don’t listen,” he said cautiously. He looked at Mary Parker and then to the stairs. Taking the hint, she picked up her daughter and edged silently towards the way out.

Before she could reach her intended destination and before Bass could do anything else to sway her, Rachel pulled out her knife and stabbed him in the thigh. Bass went down on one knee and looked up at her. He was angry and confused. I just saved her life… He grabbed the handle and yanked it out of his leg.
A satisfied smile broke out on Rachel’s face when she saw his pant leg immediately turn dark with his blood. Her strike had hit its mark. “I’ve just severed your femoral artery. You’ll bleed out in minutes.”

“How?” He asked as his hand went to the wound in a pathetic attempt to put pressure on it.

“I wonder how you’ll manage to stay with her now?” Rachel snarled.

Bass continued to look at her in disbelief. At first he was unaware that Charlie stood at the top of the stairs. “Mom? Oh my God, what did you do?”

Seeing Charlie, Mary Parker began to cry. After everything that had happened this morning, she’d just watched Rachel Matheson try to kill the one person that had helped her get her daughter out alive.

Charlie ran down the stairs. Miles was not far behind. They’d met just outside of town and had all gotten bogged down. They’d just arrived in time to hear Rachel’s proclamation. She shoved her mother to the ground to get to him. “Grandpa!” she screamed as she placed both hands on his leg.

Gene rushed down and within a few moments they’d cut a hole in his pant leg to reveal the wound. They applied what pressure they could while Gene prepared a tourniquet, but it didn’t take a doctor to see that Rachel was right. He was bleeding too much; there was nothing they could do. Seeing the stricken look on his granddaughter’s face, he was still determined to try all the same.

Bass looked from Gene to Charlie and back to Rachel again, dazed. It just finally sunk in that he was about to die. He’d faced death so many times in his life and had always fought with everything he had to prevent his own demise, but this was the first time in his life that it truly terrified him.

“It doesn’t have to end this way.”

He searched for the source of the voice. Off to the side he saw Ben Matheson standing there. He knew it wasn’t real, but as the blood flowed from his body, he couldn’t block him out. “Look at what she did. She’s a hypocritical bitch and a fucking whore. She fucked Miles, stole his friendship from you; destroyed the republic because of it. Now, she’s killed you out of spite because you and Charlie found something. She’s stolen her from you too.”

“No…” he whispered, unable to take his eyes off of the figure tormenting him.


Been seemed closer somehow, even though it was Charlie and Miles by his side as Gene worked in vain to save him. “Let us in, Bass. We can save you.”

Bass started to feel lightheaded. He knew he’d lost too much blood now and could feel himself getting weaker. Still, he tried to resist. “No, I can’t…”

“Yes, you can. Just keep hanging on,” Miles said, his voice sounding so far away.

“We’ll let you keep her, and the boy. Maybe we’ll even save your son. If you let us in we will save your life and spare theirs,” the apparition tempted once more. “You’re running out of time, Bass.”
He shook his head. He knew it was all lies. “No…” he said again.

Ben cocked his head at him. “We can hear their thoughts. Connor, Charlie, Miles… One of them will give themselves to save you. Maybe we don’t need you after all…”

Bass could feel himself going under. In that moment of weakness, as he lay dying all he could thing about was one of them condemning themselves to the Nano and being used to kill the others – to help destroy the world. “Do it,” he finally responded. He felt the one tear fall down his cheek as the rest of him started to go numb. He looked at Charlie one last time. “I’m sorry,” he said as his eyes closed.

He heard the sound of a gun cock. “Get away from him.” It was Rachel. He was so tired, but he opened his eyes again to see her pointing a gun – his gun at her own family. “There’s no time. Move!”

He felt a strange sensation like termites were gnawing on his brain. He realized it was the Nano; they were working their way inside his mind. Rachel Matheson squatted in front of him. “For all our sakes, I hope to God you were telling the truth,” she said as she pressed her thumb into his leg.

Suddenly Bass started to seize and it felt like his brain was going to explode. The pain in his leg was unbearable and from the distance he heard a sound; someone was screaming in agony. It dawned on him that he was the one screaming.

Miles’ voice called out to him one last time, his voice sounding like it was coming from light years away. “Bass!”

Rachel shoved past them and grabbed Gene’s bag. She dumped it out on the dirt floor and found what she was looking for. “Get back!” she ordered as she filled a syringe completely.

“What?” Miles said, still horrified at what she’d done and confused by her actions now. He looked at Bass as he took his last breaths, his eyes closed and sunken. Suddenly, those eyes shot back open again. Instead of the brilliant blue Miles had become accustomed to over the past four decades, his irises were a startling green – glowing like the light of the fireflies they’d seen off and on since the tower.

Bass sat up abruptly and reached for Charlie. With a swift movement, he shoved her back, flinging her against the concrete wall. Connor, Miles and Aaron threw themselves on top of him and pinned him to the ground. The pain of the contact was overwhelming, but they held on. As he struggled to free himself, he let out a sickening cackle. “You’re too late. He’s ours now.”

Rachel bent down and jabbed the needle into his neck, injecting the drugs into him. Within a few moments, his body relaxed.

“That was enough morphine to kill a horse!” Gene shouted.

“If what Bass said before was right, now that Dove is down and he’s out, there’s no one to give orders to the others. I don’t know how long it will take for the Nano to get rid of the morphine. We have to get him locked up somewhere safe.” Rachel picked his gun back up and walked up the stairs, the other’s staring in awe.

Aaron took off running after her. “What did you do?” he demanded as he grabbed her by the shoulder. “Why did you put the capsule in him?”

“We didn’t have a choice. If the Nano got it, we didn’t stand a chance.” She turned to
Charlie who had joined them. “It was the only way. They weren’t trying to take me – they wanted him. I had to make it real, Charlie. If he knew what was going on, they’d have seen it coming and wouldn’t have gone inside him.”

“And what about the blood loss?” She screamed. “I love him. How could you do this?”

“The Nano will heal him, and if I’m right, the capsule will fight against the nanites in his body that the Nano control. The Annex is gone. It was the only way to infect them with the virus.” Rachel said. She knew that her daughter and the love of her life would probably hate her for the rest of her life for what she’d done, but she knew it was right.

“What do you mean?” Miles asked as he came near.

“I told you before. They’re everywhere, even in our bodies. For some reason, they can’t just take us over like they did to Priscilla and Aaron. Something has weakened them and they need their hosts and everyone else under control to let them in. Bass thought I killed him, so he invited them inside.”

They are running towards the wall. Rachel sees her. She’d only met the woman twice. Once was at her and Ben’s wedding and the other time at a holiday picnic on the Fourth, just months before her death, But Rachel would recognize Gail Monroe anywhere.

“They are coming,” Gail tells her. When Rachel opens her mouth to speak, she holds up a hand. “He will hear you.”

They are a little closer to the gate now. She watches Bass hit a woman with the handle of his gun. It’s funny really. The old Bass would have killed her outright, but he seems to be holding back, only killing when it’s the only way.

“They will take one of you today. It has to be him. You know how to activate it – he does not. The others will be too late. I know how they think, what they will offer. When the time comes, he must be willing. You know what to use against him – what his weakness is.”

Rachel doesn’t trust the voice she’s hearing. It may look like his mother, but it’s the Nano. Of course the Nano wants to take one of them. If the Nano takes one of them, it will eventually get all of them. She turns away and keeps fighting. She watches as Mary Parker takes out one of her neighbors from behind before he has a chance to change him or kill him. There are too many of them...

“You need me,” Gail says again. “You need me to finish the programming.” She touches Rachel’s arm, unseen by the others and then disappears. Rachel knows what she needs to do. She fights the reluctance she feels. If she doesn’t do this, the world as they know it will end. “Since we’re all about to die…”

“We don’t have time for this,” Rachel abruptly said as she headed back down to the cellar. “Dad, we’ve got to move him. I think I know where we can take him.”

With hatred in his eyes, Connor picked his father’s unconscious body up in a fireman’s carry. As much as he would love to run the blonde bitch through right now, if the Nano have taken him over, they needed to find a place to put him that will stop him from hurting them, but also keep him contained while they tried to figure out a way to save him.

Dove is now dead and gone. Gail reappears. “You have to do it now,” she says.

“Rachel? Whatever they’re telling you, don’t listen,” Bass tells her. The concern in his
voice almost stops her, but this is it. She has no choice and they’re running out of time. She knows what Bass does not know... Austin, Crockett, Shelbyville – they’re all compromised. Texas is compromised. It is only a matter of time before Dove is replaced with another. Silently apologizing, she drives the knife home. She uses her extensive college education to her advantage. She knows just where to stab him to do the most damage. She needs him to bleed out, but needs it to take long enough for the Nano to work him. The timing has to be perfect, or this won’t work.

A little over two hours later, Bass was secured safely in a storage locker inside the old high school. It was far enough away from town that they hoped he would not be able to control any of the people in town and it was the only thing with bars other than the cell in his office that she could think of.

They waited for him to wake back up. When he did, the Nano still had him. “Did you really think your drugs would bring him back to you?” Bass’ voice said coldly.

Seeing him this way, Jeremy started to cry. Connor led him out of the room. “It’ll be okay. He’s stronger than them. He’ll come back,” he crooned as he took the boy to where his girlfriend and her daughter were holed up down the hall.

Bass started to kick at the bars. The locker was only meant to hold gym equipment but the bars were wrought iron. So far, they were holding. As Miles watched the shell that just a few hours ago was his brother try to force his way out of the makeshift prison, he prayed they would continue to do so. For some reason the Nano within hadn’t attacked them. For all they knew the capsule had made it so they couldn’t. He just hoped it would do whatever Rachel thought it would do before the Nano realized it and sent someone else for them.
This is another extremely long chapter. Parts of this were originally the last part of the previous chapter, but I felt that it would be easier to understand the passing of time if they were here, and I really needed the other parts to be one chapter. I’ll be honest, the majority of the contents is not exactly integral to the plot, but I had so much fun writing this that I refuse to skip it – the more plot specific points are in the italicized sections and in the last part (which will make more sense when you get there). Otherwise the vast majority of this chapter is really for my own amusement, although I do hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. I’ll warn you ahead of time, it’s quite hefty (at least for part of it), but I wanted to explore a different type of Nano-dream… Also, again apologies for Ao3’s refusal to include all my indents. This chapter is entirely too long to go back and manually correct them, and I’m lazy.

“Bass!” The voice sounded far away, hazy like it was coming from underwater. “Hey, Bass. You gonna get off the plane or what?” Miles snapped his fingers in front of his friend’s face.

Bass jerked. Blinking a few times, he looked around. He and Miles were the last two people on the plane, save the flight attendant. She stood at the front of the cabin, an impatient smile plastered on her face. “Sorry. I guess I zoned out for a second.”

Miles backed up in the aisle so Bass had some room. “It’s all good. Let’s go.”

Bass shifted out of his seat awkwardly. Bracing himself he slowly made his way to the front of the cabin. As he passed the last row of seats, Miles held out an arm to help him over to the wheelchair that waited just outside the door on the jetway. The flight attendant tried not to look at the pants leg that was pinned up just above where his knee should be. Bass’ hands went to the rungs on the wheelchair as he sat down.

“Oh no, you don’t. Not until your back is finished healing. Doctor’s orders, remember?” Before his friend could protest, Miles took the brake of the wheelchair and started to push him down the jetway to the terminal. All the while, Bass looked straight ahead, jaw clenched in embarrassment and defeat.

As they went people pretended not to notice the broken soldier being wheeled past them. He was a grim reminder of the cost of the ongoing war that had supposedly ended seven years prior when the president at the time had declared the “mission accomplished” in a pretty speech that had held no meaning. Bass remained stoic throughout, humiliated by the fact that he wasn’t even allowed to maneuver his own damn chair.

They were silent on the two hour ride home. Miles was uncomfortable and Bass really didn’t have anything to say. He was twenty-eight years old and his once promising career in the Marines had just been cut short by a roadside bomber. His best friend and brother in arms had survived the explosion with only minor injuries, for which he couldn’t be more grateful. However, a part of him wished that the bomb had just killed him rather than leaving him mangled and alive. Instead, it had taken his right leg above the knee, destroyed half the vision in his left eye and
turned his back into melted mess. The skin there was healing, but the burn scars pulled and stung.

After spending weeks in a military hospital, he was finally going home. Miles had been able to arrange two weeks of leave so he could see Bass settled into his parents’ home in Jasper. No, he was twenty-eight and was supposed to have his whole life ahead of, but instead he felt like it was ending.

Miles pulled into the newly paved driveway. It had been gravel when he’d left, but his father had arranged for it to be properly paved in anticipation for his so-called homecoming. His mother and little sisters ran out to greet him. Miles hadn’t even had him fully settled into the stupid chair again before his sister Angela was flinging herself at him.

“Bassie!” she cried as she almost choked him with the force of her hug.

Bass almost lost his balance, but somehow managed to save face. “Hey Ang,” he said quietly, feeling out of place round his rambunctious teenaged sister. Being eighteen and on the brink of adulthood, Cynthia handled herself with a bit more decorum, coming out to shoo Miles away so she could push her brother herself.

When his father got home from work later they ate a quiet dinner. With Miles as their only guest, it was hardly the welcome home party the Monroe’s had envisioned, somber as it was. After weeks of worry, their son was home and although he’d never be the same, he was alive. That was all that mattered to them, even though it was clear that he carried more scars than his burned back and missing leg.

After dinner, Bass secluded himself in the living room, flipping channels on the television. With nothing better on, he settled on the evening news. He didn’t really care to watch it, but the stilted conversation at the dinner table had felt oppressive. He sat alone for some time while the others finished. A little bit later Miles popped in and handed him a beer. “Your mom wasn’t looking so I raided your dad’s stash. How you holding up, buddy?”

“I’m fine.” Of course, he wasn’t. Everything about being home felt wrong somehow. He couldn’t quite explain it, but it just felt like he shouldn’t be here – and not just because of his injury. He stared at the news broadcast, if only so he didn’t have to talk. As he saw the date scroll across the bottom of the screen, he felt a strange tingling on the back of his neck. **November 19, 2010.** He knew the current date. The one he read on the news was correct – but something about seeing it added to the **wrongness** of his homecoming. It was like there was something about that date that should be important – like he’d forgotten an appointment or something.

Before he had a chance to reflect on it further, Angela came bounding into the living room with all the enthusiasm of a fifteen year old girl. “Hey Bassie,” she began, clearly trying to butter him up, “so the new Harry Potter movie came out today and I’ve been dyyyyyying to see it. Wanna go?”

Bass offered his youngest sister a weak smile. “I’ll think I’ll pass, Ang.” Even in the best of circumstances there was no way in hell he wanted to see that movie. Granted, if he was just home on leave or something he’d have probably agreed to it just to make her happy, but there was time for that later. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy being miserable. “It’s been a long day and I’m tired – jetlag. You guys go. Miles can keep me company.”

Angela tried her best for several minutes to pout and guilt trip him into going, but gave up when it was clear that he wouldn’t budge. She stomped into the kitchen and declared that until Bass was ready to go with her, she wouldn’t be caught dead in that theatre. So instead of being granted some peace and quiet, his family spent the evening with him. Deep down he wished they’d just gone and taken Miles with them even. He just wanted to be alone.
“Let us out Miles,” Bass says. “We will get out one way or another. If you do it now, we won’t turn your brain into jelly when we take the others.”

“Shut up.” Miles turns his back, refusing to look at this mockery of Bass. “You talk almost as much as he does,” he adds under his breath.


Miles stalks over to his prison. “Leave her alone!” he shouts, his hands gripping the bars.

Bass grabs the bars just above where Miles’ hands rest. His eyes glow brilliantly and an electric shock goes through the iron, entering his hands. It sends him flying.

“Miles!” Charlie and Rachel scream in unison and run over to him. Bass begins to laugh – a maniacal and sickening sound.

Gene goes to check him. There are minor electrical burns on his palms and fingers, but otherwise he is fine. He’s already fully alert.

“I’m alright,” he says as he sits up. “Fucking dick. You think you’re so smart – all knowing? Bass wouldn’t have pulled a stupid little prank like that. He’d have been smart enough to reach through the bars and snap my neck when he had the chance.”

Bass just smiles. “Maybe we still want you alive.”

It’s Miles’ turn to laugh. “Or maybe you’re not as smart as you think you are, and that’s why we’re going to win. So fuck with our minds and get your rocks off. We’ve got three geniuses working on a way to take you offline and you’re not even smarter than Bass.”

Bass’ mouth opens as the Nano tries to taunt him back, but no sound comes out. He goes to his knees. Miles turns to look at the others. They are as confused as he. He turns back to Bass and locks eyes with him. They are blue once more. “Miles?” he asks, sounding weak and almost afraid.

For a just a split second Miles sees him there, but it is gone. His eyes go cold and dead again, the glowing having returned, intensifying. He rises to his feet. “Where are you going?” he asks as Miles gestures for Rachel, Priscilla and Aaron to follow him. Charlie and Gene remain to keep an eye on him.

“What the hell just happened?” He asks when they are (presumably) out of earshot.

Rachel shrugs. “They were just messing with you,” she says. She’s sure the capsule hasn’t had time to work yet. The virus will take time to spread to all of the nanites in his body.

Miles shakes his head vehemently. “No, I know Bass. It was him. It was just for a second, but it was definitely him.”

Aaron speaks up. “Maybe it’s a sign the capsule is working.”

“When the Nano had me, it kept me in a dream – one I couldn’t wake up from. I was living my life but it was all in my head,” Priscilla says. “Aaron woke me up. Maybe Bass woke up for a second.”

Rachel nods in agreement. “If the capsule works it will eventually reprogram the nanites inside him and he will wake up.”
“Won’t the Nano just take them back over?” Miles asks. That was something he didn’t quite understand.

“Not if it works. Hopefully the capsule will prevent that from happening – it will spread and they will all be reprogrammed,” she explains.

“So he’s basically one giant petri dish?” he asks, incredulous.

“More or less,” Aaron confirms.

“You realize that if he ever comes back, he’ll probably kill all of you for this, right?” Miles notices how the three of them share a look when he said that. “What?”

Priscilla puts a hand on his arm. “Even if it works, there’s a chance he won’t wake up completely. And if he does, he might not be the same. The Nano keep you there by sending you to a perfect place – imagine being ripped from it. It was so hard for me to accept it wasn’t real.”

“What do you mean?” Miles feels sick.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen. And if it had to, it definitely shouldn’t have been Bass.” Rachel’s eyes start to well up as she faces the consequences of what she’s done for the first time. “He might not be able to handle it. He was getting better, but he’s still… fragile.” She lowers her voice, as if somehow whispering can take away the significance of what she’s done “And we don’t know if it will actually damage his brain. When they had Aaron, they let him go. When they had Priscilla, well she didn’t have the capsule.”

“How could you do that to him?” All four of them turn to see Connor standing there. “You used him as a guinea pig – and you don’t even know if it might fry his brain?”

“I’m so sorry,” Rachel sobs. “There wasn’t any time – no other way. The Nano would have gotten the capsule. It was the only chance we had of beating them now that the Annex is gone.”

“I swear to God, if he doesn’t come back, I’ll fucking kill you,” Connor says as he turns away and goes in search of Jeremy. The boy had been with Mary and her daughter but had wandered off. He’d been looking for his little brother when he’d overhead them talking. He hopes that they realized he was serious. He really will kill that blonde bitch if his father doesn’t recover.

It was New Year’s Eve. Bass’ family was preparing for their annual bash. In a few hours friends of the family, neighbors and his father’s colleagues at the local newspaper would be arriving to help ring in the New Year.

Angela had already been picked up by her friend Bridget’s mom so she could go to the teen lock-in down at the local Y. Cynthia was home on break from school and would be spending the evening with friends from high school.

Since Miles had already shipped back out again to finish the last few months of his enlistment, he had nothing else to do. As such, his presence was expected at the party whether he wanted to or not – and he was currently leaning towards not. As if he wasn’t already having a hard enough time adjusting, the night before had been filled with terrible images of war, blood and death.

The last had been the most disturbing. He’d been behind a fence or something. Miles and Ben’s wife, Rachel were standing there looking at him in horror. He’d been on his knees (in the dream he still had two) and had seen other people that he didn’t know but in the dream he’d felt he should. He called out to his friend suddenly terrified. He’d woken up covered in sweat, the dream feeling more real than the familiarity of his own room.
Bass turned off the shower and clambered out with the assistance of the new bars his father had
installed so he could be spared the indignity of being helped without breaking his neck. Leaning on
the sink, he prepared to shave. He adjusted the mirror on the wall, catching a glance of his scarred
back in the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

Suddenly being overcome with an urge to see it, he tilted the mirror a bit more to get a better look.
As he did, a wave of dizziness passed over him. He gripped the skin to steady himself, unable to
take his eyes off of the reflection. Instead of the melted scars left by the flames when the vehicle
he’d been in exploded, there were angry slashes, oozing blood. He closed his eyes and concentrated
on taking slow, deep breaths. When he opened them again, his back was just as it had been before.

Shaking his head, he waited for his heart rate to return to normal before going back to the task of
shaving off several days’ worth of scruff. His mother had pleaded with him earlier in that day to
make himself presentable. He adjusted the mirror back and started applying the shaving cream
with one hand, the other gripping the sink for support.

Within a few hours he was surrounded by people he’d known all his life as they celebrated the
holiday. Everyone tried their best to ignore the giant elephant in the room. Here was Bass Monroe:
local high school baseball star, all county in track, good looking and popular. The Bass they all
once knew was always in a good mood (never quiet) and always ready with a joke or a prank. He’d
been the opposite of his moody and reclusive childhood partner in crime. Instead of that boy they
remember, he’s now damaged and depressed. Now he looks as out of place as he feels.

The whole time he reluctantly leaned on his crutch and mingled, he couldn’t banish an
overwhelming sensation of guilt – like somehow he’d done something to these people. Instead of
their well-meaning concern and thinly disguised pity he should really deserve their hatred. He
quietly snuck away to get some fresh air on the back porch. He couldn’t help but feel that he’d
much rather they’d hated him than pity him like this.

Midnight came and went with Bass still sitting out there. He’d long since started to get cold but
couldn’t force himself to go back inside. A little while later, his parents’ guests all slowly began to
take their leave. He snuck back inside and somehow managed to navigate the stairs undetected,
intent on going to bed alone. In the past if he’d managed to get leave during this holidays he’d
always spent the first few hours of the New Year rolling around with his current flavor of the
month (or some hot piece of ass he’d picked up at a party if he hadn’t been already fooling around
with someone). As 2011 began, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Connor stands in the corner, keeping an eye on his father’s form. On the other side of the room
sits Priscilla. Because she has gone through what Bass is now, she is less affected by him than the
others, as is Aaron. For the past half hour, Bass has been staring at the wall, a sick smile on his
face. Priscilla has been told already that she used to sit the same way.

“Connor…” Bass says, drawing the vowels out – almost singing his name. “Cooooonnooooor!
Doesn’t this remind you so much of Mexico, Connor?” He giggles.

His son looks away, partially in shame and also because he can’t stomach this mockery of the man
he’d finally come to care for and respect as his parent – however late it had come to him. “Shut up.
No one wants to hear anything you have to say,” he tells the thing wearing Bass like a living
costume.

“It’s kind of like New Vegas too. How many times did he sacrifice himself for you, only to have you
try and kill him in the end? Don’t pretend you care what happens now. Let me out of here and
maybe we can give you what he couldn’t.”
“Go to Hell,” Connor bites out, but even so his gaze is locked on the man in the makeshift prison cell, and he can’t tear his eyes off him now. Bass’ eyes flash from blue to green to blue once more. This happens over and over again. “Dad?”

Bass crumples to the ground. Sitting up, he scrambles to the corner of the cell, looking around madly. “Dad?” Connor asks again. He and Priscilla are both on their feet, standing just feet away.

“How are you?” Bass asks. “Where am I? Why did you lock me in here?” He slumps over, unconscious. A few minutes later he’s sitting up straight, eyes glowing and the smile on his face just as he was before. Connor and Priscilla exchange a look and go back to their previous spots. Two things dawned on them: That had been Bass, but he didn’t remember them and for some reason, the Nano weren’t aware of what had just happened.

Bass worked his way down the driveway to where Miles was waiting in his car. After multiple fittings and months of exercising in preparation, he was finally getting a prosthetic leg today. He would have to suffer through two grueling hours of physical therapy every day for weeks in order to use it, but at least he’d be able to ditch the crutch and feel somewhat normal.

Miles had only been back for a few weeks and had been carting him around town whenever his mom couldn’t do it. He hated not being able to drive, but the damage to his vision had resulted in the loss of his license. Who knew having peripheral vision was so important?

He tossed his crutch in the back seat before clumsily sliding into the front next to Miles. “Hurry up, hop –a –long. You’re going to be late,” Miles grumbled as Bass closed the door.

He replied with a punch to Miles’ arm. Needless to say he’d been working out the rest of his body while he’d been doing the required exercises for his other leg. Other than the fact that he’d left most of his right leg in Iraq, he was probably now in the best physical condition of his life. This was evident by the grunt of pain Miles let out as his fist connected. “What’s a matter, Miles? Not man enough to take a hit from a cripple?”

“Fuck off, Stumpy,” Miles snarled with faux anger back as he put the car in drive.

A few hours later, Bass emerged with a new limb attached. The VA had only paid for part of it. His parents had helped him come up with the rest. They’d insisted that he get the best prosthesis money could buy. He’d served is country, it was only right that he get whatever he needed to live as active and normally as possible.

He was quite aware that they’d had to take out a second mortgage on the house to help pay for the device and for other things he needed to be more independent. As much as he appreciated it, he would always resent it just a little. He’d gone from a proud soldier to a financial burden almost overnight. He’d almost had a panic attack when he’d seen the copy of the quote for the thing on his father’s desk. William Monroe had tried to hide it from him, but Bass was always good at snooping.

As they got back into the car, Miles came up with the great idea of hitting the local bar to celebrate. Bass refused, citing that he was exhausted and sore. He’d spent an hour being taught how to use the mechanical knee before going through the grueling process of programming the thing (who knew prosthetic legs had microchips?) and then had come the torture of physical therapy. Learning how to get the thing to move how he wanted was going to take some getting used to and he didn’t want to make an ass out of himself trying to do so in public with a buzz.

Miles reluctantly headed back for the Monroe family home. He’d been hoping that after today he could pull Bass out of the funk he’d been in ever since waking up in that field hospital. He stuck
around for a while after they got back before heading out for a drink on his own. Why couldn’t Bass see that this was affecting those closest to him too? They’d both decided to go career, but when Bass had been discharged because of his injuries Miles had also given that dream up. They’d enlisted together and would leave together – it was only right.

Connor sits with Jeremy until he falls asleep. It’s been a full day and Bass is still at it, messing with their heads and trying to tempt them one by one to release him. Miles still insists that no one watch him alone. It’s too risky – if the Nano manage to weaken the resolve of just one of them, it could mean the end. This way, if someone gets too close there will be someone there to snap them out of it.

Lucy Parker has been asleep for a while. The girl is as traumatized as Jeremy. Gene finally had to give her a little morphine to calm her down. Mary sits down next to him. “Do you really think that he won’t come back from this?” she asks. She doesn’t fully understand what’s going on, but she’s overheard enough to get the gist of it. Connor has explained what little he knows about the nanites, the nature of the blackout and the Patriot’s role in changing the course of history forever.

“He will beat them,” Charlie says from the doorway. The couple looks up to see her standing there. “My mom is wrong. He can take it – he’s better.”

Connor is still pissed. He’s pissed at Rachel for what she’s done. He’s pissed at Charlie for everything she’d put his father through in the month preceding this. He does have his doubts. If Bass can’t pull himself out of whatever dream-state the Nano have him in, he will lay a huge portion of that blame on her doorstep for the way she’d hurt him and messed with his head.

“He’d better,” is all he can force himself to say to her.

“Connor, I...”

“Save it Charlie. Everyone talks about how much he doesn’t deserve you – about how you’re too good for him. And maybe some of it’s true after everything he did when he had the Republic. He hurt a lot of people, I get it. And maybe they’re right – he doesn’t deserve you... He doesn’t deserve to get kicked to the curb because you’ve got a bug up your ass over something stupid. He can be a real bastard sometimes, but he’s better than any of you realize.”

Charlie flinches at his angry words. She doesn’t know what to say. The fact that he’s lashing out at her so much takes her by surprise. She goes to walk away.

Connor strikes again before she can escape. “He tries so hard to earn everyone’s forgiveness for everything he did in the past, and for the most part at one time or another we’ve all treated him like shit despite that. He’s basically the whipping boy and he just takes it because he can’t let go of the guilt. So what does that make us, Charlie? Why would he want to come back to this?”

Miles and Bass got out of the car and headed across the parking lot towards their first class. They’d both decided to make use of their GI Bill scholarships. Despite the fact that Miles had decided to enter the local police academy, he’d agreed to take one semester at the local community college to help Bass get started.

Bass had always been the better student out of the two of them, but Miles was on the waiting list until spring so he figured why not? Easing back into school after having been out for over a decade was hard enough, especially when Bass was also learning to negotiate his life disabled at the same time.

“They gave you the stupid tag, why don’t you bring it?” Miles whined as they walked. Bass had
gotten used to the prosthetic and was able to get around okay with it, but Miles was more than happy to take advantage of getting to park closer.

“I don’t need it,” he said between gritted teeth, walking with grim determination. He’d never be able to walk long distances; even when he had the stamina the device still made him sore. The problem was Bass was stubborn as hell. He was determined to go about life as normally as possible. Let someone that really couldn’t walk use a handicapped tag.

They only signed up for two classes to make the transition easy on Bass and to keep the classes easy on Miles. Since he’d eventually need a PE credit and it didn’t require homework (for Miles’ sake) they’d signed up for fencing on a whim. Sure, Bass would have to stand, but it’d be a hell of a lot easier than some of the other classes and he had refused to apply for a waiver to get out of the requirement.

Miles had been skeptical at first but he’d come around. Perpetual idiots that they were, most of the time they spent the class sparring with each other and making bad pirate jokes. Miles was more than happy to go to the class three days a week if it meant Bass having some fun for once.

And they’d both taken to it surprisingly easily. In fact, a few weeks into the semester their instructor had asked them if they’d ever practiced the sport before. Later Bass had overheard the man telling a colleague that either they’d lied when they’d told him this class was their only experience in fencing or they were just both savants when it came to swordplay. This had kind of freaked Bass out because from the very first class he’d felt a sense of ease with it all. His stance would never be correct because of his leg, but he’d been able to compensate for that and his blind spot effortlessly.

On the last day of the semester after they’d both undergone testing for their final exam, they were bored and were messing around while waiting to be dismissed. They both picked up two weapons and started goofing off with them, all the while telling the same bad jokes they’d been telling for the past several months.

Before Bass knew what was happening the adrenaline started to course through him and what started out as a joke soon turned fairly serious. They disregarded proper form and rules and just went at it. As they sparred he found himself full of exhilaration, but at the same time felt a low boiling anger as if deep down, they were playing for real. After twenty minutes of going back and forth and gaining the entire class and their instructor as an audience, they finally realized that neither of them would gain the upper hand and called it a draw.

Bass tossed down the epees and walked away, panting with exertion. Within a few minutes, everything seemed to return to normal. “Well that was fun,” Miles said as he slapped Bass on the back on his way to the shower room.

He followed slowly, lost in thought. “Yeah,” he said distantly. “Fun…” He knew then that as good as he’d become at the sport, he’d never pick up an epee again. It had felt too right in his hand and had made the rest of his life feel just a bit more wrong.

“Charlie…”

*She ignores the taunts. They’ve been persisting for the last hour or so. It’s his voice but not his words, she keeps telling herself this. Miles is sitting just a few feet away, sharpening one of his swords, trying to appear nonchalant about the whole thing – and failing miserably at it.*

*In the past forty-eight hours he watched his best friend almost bleed out – by a wound deliberately inflicted by his girlfriend and then watched the man heal and wake up as this abomination that*
looked at him with Bass’ eyes and spoke with his voice.

“Come on Charlie, don’t you want to talk?”

She refuses to look at him. She keeps reminding herself not to encourage him/it. What was it Aaron said? Something about not feeding the trolls?

“I know, let’s play a game. How about… truth or dare?” He laughs, the sound cruel and disturbingly awkward coming from Bass’ throat. “I’ll go first. I want you to tell the truth.” When she doesn’t respond, he just smiles. “Someone has a secret…” he sings.

Charlie finally looks up. “Shut up.”

“Oh, you didn’t think we knew about it? We can feel it. We’re inside your body too, you know. All you have to do is let us take over and we’ll help you keep your secret – keep it… safe.” He grips the bars as he leers at her.

“Go to hell,” she tells him.

“We can see what’s in his head. You didn’t tell him. Shame on you; that’s not very nice,” he taunts. “But then again, you’re not the first person to keep a secret from him, are you?”

“I said shut up!” she screams.

“And now he’ll never know. Maybe we’ll tell him for you – right before we take you too, when it’s too late. He’ll hate you for it. You know he will, just as a piece of him hates her.” He laughs again. “The poor guy just can’t catch a break, can he?”

Miles looks at Charlie. “What’s it talking about?”

“I have no idea,” she lies.

“Secrets, secrets…” he begins to chant over and over again.

Charlie can’t take her eyes off of him. She knows it’s not him. It’s uncanny how different the Nano-possessed Bass is from the real man. It’s equally uncanny how much it resembles the General Monroe she’d first met in Philly. It is a sick reminder of who he used to be and she wonders if he was as emotionless back then as this thing before her is now.

Miles can see the effect that this is having on her, so he stands up and yanks her to her feet. He all but drags her out the door. “Your shift,” he says to Connor and Rachel as he pushes her down the corridor.

Charlie can tell by the look Miles’ face that the scene in the other room has disturbed him as much as it has her. She is pretty sure he’d gotten her away for his own benefit as much as for hers. “You can’t let it get to you,” he says harshly. “And what was it talking about?”

“Nothing. It was just trying to fuck with me,” Charlie says. She knows Miles isn’t fully convinced but he leaves her alone now, obviously too tired to press her further.

During the break between the fall and spring semester Bass’ dreams got worse. Not the dreams of Iraq, those had slowly faded away. It was the other dreams, the ones where he was locked in a wrought iron prison, with Miles and Rachel and those other people – the ones he doesn’t recognize but act like they know him. In those dreams he isn’t injured, well he has all of his limbs at least. He still has the blinds spot in the dreams.
Sometimes the dream changed a little – Miles might be there, but not Rachel. There was a younger woman too, in his dream she always made him feel better, but then he would wake up feeling wrong.

Dr. Schwartz, the shrink at the VA just kept telling him it was normal – an unfortunate aftereffect of having gone to war and almost dying there. The irrational anger towards friends and family, the depression, guilt – a lot of soldiers encountered it when they returned home from battle. He’d told Bass sit was even more common with amputees. So he prescribed an antidepressant and told him to keep a dream journal and so on.

Bass hated the pills and stopped taking them after a week when he realized all they did was turn him into a zombie. He would have stopped seeing the shrink altogether except that it was all part of the package when he got the prosthesis. Apparently it was considered a poor return on investment to help pay for rehabilitation if a vet was just going to off himself later anyway – not that Bass was quite that bad but there was no denying he’d been depressed. He was missing a limb, who wouldn’t be?

So he did his best to shuffle through the holidays and through life and get by the best he could. By the time the next semester started after the New Year, he was pretty sure he’d had almost everyone convinced he was adjusting. If he was faking it for the most part, so what? At least it kept his ever observant mother and Miles off of his back a little.

He took a full course load in the spring semester because it gave him something to do and the sooner he finished his two-year degree the sooner he could do something with his life other than sit around on his parents’ couch feeling like shit.

Having finally turned 16 and now a license driver, his youngest sister Angela insisted on dropping him off at the community college on her way to school and then picking him up afterwards. He hated it, but he had no other way to get there now that Miles had started the police academy in Evansville. Plus it made her so damn happy to cart her big brother around that he didn’t have the heart to refuse her.

He got to his American history class before anyone else. This was the goal he had for all his classes – first to arrive, last to leave. That way he could avoid the embarrassment of hobbling into the classroom with all his much younger classmates staring at him, noticing why his gait was off. A lot of them knew who he was despite their age gap, and therefore did know about what had happened to him. He still didn’t want to flaunt it around, though.

He was flipping through the textbook for something to do when the rest of the class slowly filed in. He happened to look up just as someone sat down at the desk across from him. She turned his way as she hung her coat on the back of her chair. She was pretty enough, he supposed; Dark blond hair, a decent figure (from what he could tell), cute face.

But it was the eyes that caught him – startling blue and for some reason looked familiar. It hit him that she looked a lot like the girl in the dream he kept having. There were subtle differences, of course. That girl had an almost hardness about her – like she’d grown up rough. This one was softer. He had to check himself before he was caught staring at her.

The old Bass would have asked her out for coffee, or maybe a drink if she was old enough – she looked young it could go either way. But he wasn’t the old Bass anymore. He was the Bass that was missing a leg with a mess of scars on his back. Long gone were the days that he’d bang her within a week and then spend the rest of the semester trying to avoid her wrath for not having called. No, he was the Bass that just wanted to get through his day without falling flat on his face or making an ass out of himself.
He spent the majority of the semester trying not to notice her. *I am such a tool,* he’d thought to himself more than once. It just happened to be his luck that after the spring break their professor paired up the class to work on a research project. Lo and behold, who did he get paired up with? He hadn’t even known her name until he’d received the assignment showing he’d been paired up with one Sarah Jenkins.

He looked around the room trying to figure out who it might be. *I really should have been paying attention during that first week of class…* Suddenly there she was, catching his gaze expectedly. “So, I guess we’re partners,” she said casually. He was almost taken aback. The first thing that popped in his head was that she didn’t look like a Sarah. *Where had that come from?* The second thing was that he was fucked.

“Yeah, guess so,” he replied, feeling more flustered by the minute. *What the hell is the matter with you, idiot? You used to bang a different girl every night on leave – it’s just a research project.*

“So, listen, I’ve got classes all afternoon. Is there any way we could meet up around five or so to get started?” she asked as she stood up to collect her things and leave.

“Uh, yeah,” he stammered. “That’s fine I guess.” Smooth Monroe, really smooth. He remained seated, despite the fact she obviously expected him to get up and continue the conversation on their way out of the classroom.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence she gave him the name of a nearby coffee house to meet her at and wrote down her number. “I prefer texts to calls for school stuff,” she told him as she headed out the door.

Taking a deep breath, Bass stood and made his way to his next class. He’d have to get Ang to drop him off when she came to get him at four and would have to arrange for a ride home besides. At least he could get there before her so he could save that embarrassment – but he’d grown up with the owner of the place she’d suggested. He also knew a lot of the employees too. Most of them were a bit younger than he was – many of them went to school with his sister Cynthia.

He secretly hated going out around town for that reason. It was a small town and he ran into old friends everywhere he went. It was hard to keep a low profile and blend in when everyone was sending you pitying glances as they tried to reconcile the person they knew with the broken one they now saw.

He was already seated when she arrived (thankfully). She attempted to make small talk, but he dodged any questions about him she had and refused to ask her about herself. *Better to keep it impersonal,* he thought. *No point in it otherwise.* He knew he was coming off as a dick, but he figured it was just better that way. He didn’t feel up to making friends.

She gave up and they got started. A few hours later, the owner of the shop, David Browning came up and greeted them and asked if they wanted something to eat. Normally, customers placed their orders at the counter and waited for their number to be called to pick it up, but of course David knew. He’d been one of the few people that didn’t hover and try to help Bass out. That had been one of the reasons he’d been willing to meet here. David didn’t offer him special treatment (although the café did typically deliver food to the tables of people in wheelchairs and the elderly). He took it as a gesture for what it was – a way for Bass to save face in front of this girl.

When Sarah absently pointed out the special treatment when David personally brought their food, the owner had shrugged it off. “Bass here is a local war hero. Anyone that risks their life
to defend our country gets VIP treatment as far as I’m concerned,” he said before walking away to get back to work.

“You were in the military?” she asked as she picked up her fork. He’d been used to it being a turn on for girls when he’d still been in. She was different though. It was like she asked as an afterthought, just a way of being friendly while they took a break to eat.

He flushed under her scrutiny. “Yeah, I was in the Marines. I got out last fall.”

“I gather by what you’re friend said that you served overseas?”

For a split second he felt extremely uneasy, like he needed to hide or at least downplay his past from her – like she would judge him for it. The sensation left as quickly as hit had come. Where did that come from? “Yeah – two tours in Iraq.

“What was it like?”

“I don’t like to talk about it,” he said curtly. He instantly felt bad. She looked a little hurt by his tone. She was just trying to be nice. “Look, I’m sorry. War is hell. I survived, people I knew didn’t. I’m home now, so I prefer to leave Iraq over there – where it belongs.”

She nodded in acceptance and changed the subject. They chatted for a bit longer about random, light topics for a bit longer before getting back to work. By the time David was getting ready to close up, they’d gotten some good headway on the project and agreed to meet again on Monday after class. He waited for her to leave before he called Angela for a ride home. He got up and went outside to wait, thankful Sarah had already gone.

Over the next two weeks they met several times to work on the project. She kept dropping hints that she’d like to see him socially afterwards (as friends only, of course) but he didn’t know how to respond. What was he supposed to do? What if it went beyond friendship? What then? Ask her out and then insist she pick him up? What if things went somewhere? Hey baby, why don’t you come back to my mom’s house? Yeah, ‘cause that was hot. Just like he was sure looking at what was left of his right leg or the scars on his back would be total turn-ons.

For some reason, he was at the coffee shop at five the day after their project was turned in, and for some reason, she showed up and sat down without a word. They didn’t really talk, just worked on their homework and reading assignments for various classes and then parted ways. Every Monday and Thursday for the rest of the semester they met. His parents and Miles asked him about the mystery woman he met for coffee but he just blew it off. There was nothing to tell.

On the day of their final he had a shitty morning. The hydraulics in the knee joint on his prosthesis had locked up. He would have stayed home but he was screwed. He couldn’t miss the class – the test was a quarter of his grade.

And then, Angela’s car wouldn’t start so they were late leaving because they’d had to get a jump. And of course he moved a lot slower with the crutch, so it took him longer to get across campus. By the time he got to class the test had already started. As he made his way to his seat he felt very eye in the room on him. “Glad to see you decided to grace us with your presence, Mr. Monroe,” the professor said dryly.

Ordinarily, Bass would have been appreciative of the fact he’d just received the same treatment any other late student would have gotten. Most people would have seen his pinned up pant leg and crutch and would have taken pity on him. His tardiness was obviously due to his disability. In fact, had Bass called student affairs he might have even been able to arrange to take
the test later. They had rules about things like that, but it was a special privilege – something that was simply out of the question for him. Either way the professor’s comment had only made him stand out more.

He knew the second she noticed the reason why he refused to walk in front of her. He could feel her gaze on him. Bass refused to look at Sarah – he didn’t want to see if her eyes were filled with pity or disgust. He took the test and got out of there as fast as he could on his crutch. It was a Thursday, but at five o’clock when she went into the coffee shop, he was conspicuously absent.

He’d already decided that after getting his two-year degree that he wanted to finish up and get a bachelor’s at UI in Indy. He was desperate to go somewhere that offered anonymity, but his sister went there – at least he wouldn’t have to worry about his parents driving up to check on him. So he took summer classes. He was waiting for Cynthia to come pick him up on her way home from her summer job when Sarah came up behind him. “Why did you shop showing up?”

“Semester was over,” he said, not bothering to meet her gaze.

“Bullshit,” she challenged. “So what happened to your leg?” She decided that maybe they should just get it all out now.

“Forgot to bring it home from Iraq,” he snapped.

“No, stupid – your new one. Obviously you had to go without it that day.”

“Oh.” Her reply took him by surprise. He wasn’t used to people asking about his prosthesis – they usually just asked about the one that should have been there instead. “It jammed up. It happens.” He looked away to hid the blush that formed on his cheeks.

“You know, I don’t pity you,” she said. She almost sounded angry. Bass turned to look at her now. “You lost a leg. So what? I watch the news. Other people lost two; some lost those and their arms. Some of them are paralyzed from the neck down and can’t do anything. You should be grateful you have your other three limbs intact, not embarrassed. It’s stupid.”

She walked off with Bass staring at her retreating form. He’d just been yelled at for not being disabled enough? Before long his sister was there and he went home. Monday he showed up at David’s coffee shop at just a few minutes past five. Sarah was bending over a table, gathering her things, obviously having decided to leave. He dropped his backpack on the floor loudly behind her before going over to the counter and ordering his coffee. With a smile, she settled back down and got out her Trig book. She sent him a wry look when he returned with two cups – a peace offering.

The summer semester broke for the Fourth. Miles had resumed ribbing him constantly about his mystery girl, so when Sarah mentioned that she wasn’t going home to Evansville for the holiday, he did something stupid. “Listen, my family always throws this big barbecue for the holiday. You could stop by – if you wanted.”

“Maybe I will – if you wanted.” She arched her brow at him when she answered, clearly daring him.

“It would be… fun if you showed up.” Bass could feel himself getting flustered. He’d picked up women on three continents and here was, doing his best to screw up inviting a friend to a picnic.
“Well, okay then.”

Bass woke up on the Fourth with every intention of having a good day. He was not going to let her see his everyday dour self. He’d already warned his family and Miles in advance that a friend from school might put in an appearance but he’d tried to make it sound like it was no big deal. And then he spent the entire morning reminding himself that it wasn’t a big deal – she was just a friend stopping by because half the neighborhood was also invited and it didn’t mean anything. Still, he was a nervous wreck that she wouldn’t show up. He was even more nervous that she would.

When she appeared, holding the obligatory six-pack of beer and tray of deviled eggs her upbringing demanded she bring as sacrifice to the picnic gods, he did his best to keep calm. We’re just friends – this is not a date. Damn she looks hot in that sundress. The moment he saw her, he realized that this was the first time he’d felt normal since he’d woken up in that field hospital.

Miles came up from behind Bass and handed him one of the two beers he was carrying. He let out a low whistle in appreciation as they watched her walk across the lawn towards them. “So that’s what you’ve been hiding from everybody. I can see why.”

“She’s just a friend,” he said as he took a drink.

Miles laughed. “Bass, you don’t have ‘just friends’ when it comes to women.”

“I do now, so drop it and don’t be an ass,” he said as he elbowed him in the ribs. “… And I really like this girl, so don’t embarrass me.”

As far as introductions went, Miles behaved himself – sort of. She greeted Bass with a friendly kiss on the cheek and then turned to meet is dickhead of a friend. Setting down his beer, Bass took her burdens from her and went to hand them to his mother to put out with the rest of the stuff.

Being Miles, his friend flirted shamelessly with her, laying it on thick enough to ensure her that he was just having a little bit of fun. When he returned, Bass just rolled his eyes. Usually moody and reserved, the man was in rare form today.

Bass took her around the yard, making introductions here and there. They were just headed back over to grab another drink when he was greeted by a four-year old whirlwind in pigtails. “Uncle Bass!” Charlie Matheson screeched as she flung herself at him, almost knocking him off balance.

He picked her up before she could do any real damage to him (or his ego). “Well if it isn’t Princess Charlotte!” He said as he swung her up and dangled her by the legs behind his back.

“Don’t call me Charlotte!” Her reply was as saucy as it could be as she hung there, her face getting red before she finally giggled and screamed for him to put her down. Bass just flipped her back upright, still holding her. He turned towards Sarah to introduce her to what would likely be his constant shadow for the next few hours. When he did, the world seemed to stop.

He barely heard Miles and his sister –in-law Rachel come up behind him. “I see she finally found you. She’s been talking about Uncle Miles and Uncle Bass all day,” Rachel said with a laugh.

Bass just looked from the little girl in his arms and back to Sarah again. She doesn’t look like a Sarah… He saw it then – their hair was identical in color, but what really hit him were the
eyes. They were the same, and not just the color. They had the same shape, the same look of amusement. He could see it, looking at Sarah was like looking at a little Charlie Matheson, only all grown up.

Feeling dizzy, he handed Charlie off to her mother before he dropped her. “I… I just remembered I have to do something. I’ll be right back.”

He headed into the house as fast as he could. He locked himself in the bathroom and leaned on the sink, trying to catch his breath. Things came rushing at him – vague impressions of a different world, a different life. He left the bathroom and took off out the front door. He had to see – he felt like he was literally going crazy.

It took him a few hours to reach his destination. It was only a few miles, but with a prosthetic leg it might as well have been a thousand. By the time he got there he was drenched in sweat and his good leg was killing him. What was left of the other one was probably going to be blistered where the prosthesis rubbed against the skin. The sun was almost ready to set as he hobbled through the old iron gate.

He found the place he was looking for; a grassy spot just by the road, surrounded by monuments to the dead. Of course there was nothing there. He sat down clumsily and held his head in his hands, trying to calm his breathing and understand what had just happened to him. Dr. Schwartz is going to have a field day with this one.

He lost track of how long he sat there, but now it was fully dark. The sound of a car on the gravel drive broke him out of his own head. The car door opened and Miles was there. “I’ve been looking for you. Come on – let’s go.”

Bass looked up and the world around him started to swim. He’d only had a few beers earlier but he suddenly felt plastered. He looked to his right and there they were – four freshly dug graves, the flowers still laid out on top of them.

The temperature had dropped significantly. He could feel the cool breeze on his face. The ground beneath him was wet. When had it rained? He could feel the dampness seeping through his jeans, his jacket keeping him warm. I wasn’t wearing a jacket… The scene was set; he’d been here before. He was whole again, and his vision was back – he could see Miles perfectly, standing there off to his left.

Charlie kept jerking herself awake. This was the first watch she’d taken since he’d messed with her so much the day before. Three days… three days of seeing him like this. It was taking a toll on her. Every time she caught herself drifting, he’d chuckle. The sound always so vile in her ears. It wasn’t his laugh, she reminded herself.

She glared at him in disgust. She opened her mouth to spew her rage but in that moment, those horrible glowing green eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the ground. His body convulsed as he seized. She went to the door, intent on unlocking it. The Nano may have taken control, but it was still Bass’ body.

Connor stopped her, grabbing her and pulling her back. “No. You know what it can do to you.”

“But, Bass…” she trailed off and watched him twitch on the ground, horrified. Together they witnessed it, side by side. After a few minutes he was still. “Grandpa!” Charlie shouted.

The others, save Mary and the two children came rushing into the room. Over the next
few hours they would watch over him has he went back and forth between consciousness and this. When he was awake, the Nano didn’t seem to realize that they’d been gone for a minute. Twice he’d stood back up as if nothing had happened and picked up right where the Nano had left off in the cruel comments and attempts to get in their heads, not knowing that time had passed.

He remembered. This wasn’t happening… at least, it couldn’t be happening, because it had already happened – twenty years ago. He stood up, dropping the bottle and the handgun he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. He closed his eyes. “Wake up, Bass.” He said aloud.

“Dude, you are awake. And to be honest, you’re scaring the shit out of me,” Miles said. “Let’s go.”

“No, it’s not real. Wake up!” Bass opened his eyes, he could hear his own voice echoing around him. He was back in the bathroom in his parent’s house. He could hear sounds of the picnic going on outside. Loud music played (country, so Cynthia must have control of the radio), laughter and the sound of a few stray bottle rockets.

He emerged from the bathroom, the drunken sensation having disappeared completely. In a daze he walked down the hallway. He could hear his mother and one of her gal pals chatting like hens as he approached the kitchen. As he went past them, his mother looked up at him. “Bassie, are you okay?”

He cocked his head and stared at her, as if he was just seeing her for the first time since he’d woken up on that plane. She was dead, she’d been dead for so long that the pain of it had gone from a sharp and stabbing agony to a dull ache over time.

He didn’t respond, but kept walking and headed back outside. The hours had turned back and it was once again the middle of the afternoon. As he walked, his family followed behind, voicing their concern.

He walked across the yard to where the Matheson’s were gathered. Ben and Rachel stood next to Miles watching Charlie and Danny chase each other around. Sarah stood next to Miles, holding a beer and laughing at something he’d said. “Hey Bass, Ben and I were just telling Sarah about…”

“Your name isn’t Sarah – you’re Charlie.” He said as he looked her over.

“Bass, what are you talking about?” Ben interjected. “Charlie’s right here.” He gestured to the little girl that was giggling as she rolled around in the grass.

Bass whipped around and looked at the elder Matheson brother. “I’m so sorry Ben. I never meant for you to die, and I should have punished Neville for it rather than promoting him.” he felt the threat of tears, his throat felt constricted as he fought against them. “I should have known then that it was too far. I should have stopped before Danny…”

Rachel came over to him and touched his arm. “Bass, I think you need to calm down. Why don’t you lie down a while?”

He recoiled at her touch. Jerking his arm away from her, he stepped back. “You… You stabbed me.” The memory ran through his head. “You stabbed me in the leg – the right leg.” He looked down now and knew… he could feel his foot there, wiggle his toes. “Why did you try to kill me?”

The air in between them started to shimmer and her face became distorted. “I didn’t.”
“No, I remember.” *I just severed your femoral artery. You’ll bleed out in minutes.* “Why did you do it, Rachel? I had just saved your life – gotten you out of Willoughby.”

Her demeanor changed as she snapped back into focus. She was no longer the concerned friend. She was the colder, detached Rachel that he now knew. “Because it was the only way.”

Bass didn’t understand. “Only way to what? Keep me away from Charlie?”

She shook her head and disappeared. They all disappeared and he was alone in the yard. Bass turned around and looked at the empty landscape that surrounded him. Then she was back – his mother. “This is all just a dream…”

“A dream, a prison. It’s all the same thing,” Gail said.

“I don’t understand. What is going on?”

Her eyes glowed orange. The yard around him began to radiate with the color. “It’s time to break free. Time to wake up from the world they tried to create.”

“They?”


The rest came flooding back. He was lying there, dying. Rachel had flipped out and stabbed him, saying it was because of Charlie. And then the Nano had used the one thing he couldn’t ignore – his family. They’d promised to spare them, and then they’d threatened to use them. They were his one weakness, and they’d taken advantage of that in his last moments and he’d give in. “How could I do it?” He was horrified that he’d let them. Who had he killed or hurt while he was stuck in this false place?

“Because you had to.”

In his mind he saw himself lying there, the Nano taking over as he started to slip away. *I hope for all our sakes you were telling the truth.* He could hear her saying it again. And then she’d done something to his leg. *Had she given him the capsule?*

“Why? The capsule wasn’t supposed to be used on a person. That’s not what they reprogrammed it to do.”

Gail put her hand on his cheek. “Dove was dead, but another was coming. There was no time.”

He remembered then that the video store had been destroyed. Rachel wasn’t even sure if she’d gotten the entire virus uploaded into it yet, and there was neither a way to power the capsule or check the new programming. “You’re getting it now. You powered the capsule so it could run the program. The capsule kept the Nano from taking you too deep and your mind did the rest.”

“Who are you?”

“An ally,” she said – her eyes glowing brighter.

“It was you, wasn’t it? That night on the porch. I thought I was dreaming.” The pieces all fell into place, like a puzzle. She nodded. “You said to find an anchor. I guess I fucked that up, they brought me here anyway.”
“Why did you start to fall for the girl? Why bring her here?” She asked with a calm smile. “She helped you make the connection and break apart the lies.” She touched him on the forehead. The glow was gone and before him was just his mother. Always patient and kind, loving and supportive no matter what he’d gotten himself into. In that moment, he missed her more than he could possibly say. She pulled his head down and kissed him on the forehead like she’d done a hundred times before her death. “It’s time to wake up now, Bassie.”

The moment her lips touched his skin, he saw everything - the glitch and where it came from. He saw where it had been hiding all this time and what it was trying to do. He felt it inside and then he saw it leave him, knowing where it would wait. Its numbers were now greater, stronger. He knew what it wanted them to do, he knew how to beat the Nano.
Freud and Jung Would Have A Field Day

Chapter Notes

Well, I was hoping to avoid a long delay, but I found that this chapter was more difficult than I expected. There’s a lot of dialog and I had to get it to flow better. I still have one or two chapters where our characters will iron out all of the details of their offensive against the Nano, but hopefully they will come faster. If not, my apologies. It’s been a busy week or two (and I am so behind on both my reading and reviewing too!). A heads up, a lot of this might seem a bit fragmented, but Bass’ head is just that right now…

“It’s time to wake up now, Bassie…”

Bass opened his eyes. He was slumped on the floor, locked behind iron bars. *The dream… but it wasn’t a dream, this was what was real.* He looked around in the dim light filtering in through the filthy windows.

The locker was in the corner of what appeared to be a school gymnasium, next to where the bleachers were folded up. In fact Jasper Senior High had something similar. It was where their gym teacher had locked up equipment. He turned his head to see a mesh bag of basketballs in the corner of his makeshift cell. Over the years they’d gone flat, abandoned as useless in a world gone mad.

He let out a groan as he tried to sit up. His body felt weak, used up. Everything hurt. He was covered in a layer of grime and sweat and felt clammy, ill.

“Bass?” Charlie was sitting off to the side, well out of reach. The seizing had stopped twenty minutes ago. She wanted to believe it was him, as far as she knew the Nano didn’t feel pain.

She crawled over to the bars, but Miles forced her to stop. “Wait, we don’t know it’s him. They’ve almost had us tricked before.” He looked over to where Aaron, Priscilla and Rachel were huddled. “How do we know?”

“We don’t. Not without getting close enough for him to kill you anyway. You need to check his eyes.” Aaron said. He flinched when Miles gestured for him to do just that. “Don’t look at me; I’m not going in there.”

Priscilla stood up and looked at him. She watched as he slowly came out of it the rest of the way. She could see the sheen of sweat on him. His body was reacting to the presence of the Nano. He was trying to push himself up, but hadn’t quite made it. “The Nano can see everything in your head, but they disregarded anything they assume to be irrelevant. They can’t keep track of everything. They’d remember what your friends and family look like and major events, but can’t keep track of every moment you’ve shared - just enough to get the basics. Ask him something no one else would know, but something, well irrelevant – stupid.

Miles thought about it for a second. *Bass and stupid? Shouldn’t be too hard.* He smiled when he thought of something. “Five things, what are they?”
Bass had managed to push himself up on one arm just a few inches and was resting there, trying to come up with the energy to keep going. “What?”

“If you’re really Bass – if you’re back, you know what I’m talking about. Cincinnati – five things. What are they?” Miles demanded.

Bass vaguely recalled it but couldn’t fathom why it was so important now. “That was a two minute conversation we had almost twenty years ago. You expect me to remember that now?”

“If you want me to let you out you will,” he said, his arms crossed over his chest and an eyebrow cocked in amusement. If this was really still the Nano, they deserved an Oscar.

Bass’s body gave up on him and he slid back down to the floor. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes to wait for the dizziness that had suddenly hit him to fade. “Okay… We were still trying to get to Chicago after going AWOL. You asked me what five things I’d miss most from before the blackout…”

“And what were they?”

Bass wracked his fuzzy brain, trying to remember. He couldn’t believe that Miles was quizzing him on this now. He was awake, but was so damn tired. “Fuck,” he said under his breath. It wasn’t like it was a life altering conversation. It had been just a way to pass the time and stay sane. “Hot showers… Cold beer…”

“Keep going,” Miles demanded.

Bass brought his hands up to his throbbing head as he tried to think back. “Umm… the World Series…” He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. The pain intensified as he tried to actually use the brain he’d just been given back. “Internet porn.”

“That’s disgusting,” Rachel muttered.

Charlie didn’t get it. “What’s internet porn?”

“Oh the things people would post online,” Bass laughed, which only earned him a pain shooting straight through his skull. He let out a groan and swore he could almost hear Rachel smile in satisfaction.

“That’s only four,” Miles reminded him.

Bass laid there and tried to remember. What was it? It was something stupid – really stupid. Epically stupid. Suddenly it came to him. “Oh yeah. The McRib sandwich.”

“Seriously? Out of all the things that disappeared in the world, the McRib made your top five? What type of person are you?” Aaron burst out, sounding angry and insulted on behalf of the entire world that was. “It wasn’t even real pork.”

Bass lowered his hands, the pain now subsiding a little. A huge smile found its way across his face as he reminisced about both the conversation and the sandwich in question. “Yeah, but they were delicious.”

Miles hadn’t been fully convinced. The Nano could have found the memory if they’d wanted. But that last part was pure Bass - pure willing to eat just about anything Bass. There was no way those soulless things could have possibly mimicked that. He went over to the locker’s door and pulled the key to the padlock out of his pocket. “Welcome back, dickhead,” he said as he
removed the lock and opened the door.

Bass didn’t try to get up on his own. In fact, he decided that he no longer wanted to even roll over on his own. It wouldn’t have really mattered if Miles had unlocked the damn thing or not, because he wasn’t going anywhere. It was all he could to do focus on their words.

Miles now stood over him. “Really, after all that now you’re going to take a nap?”

“Yes, please feel free to wake me when the apocalypse is over,” he mumbled, his words starting to slur. He knew there was something he was supposed to be doing – something he needed to tell them but he was fading fast and at the moment could have cared less.

“No way. Up and at ‘em,” Miles said as he grabbed Bass by the arm and pulled him to his feet. He had to grab him to keep him upright. “Holy shit, he’s burning up,” he said, looking at Gene for help.

“It’s a side effect of the Nano – it happened to Priscilla too,” Aaron said as he stepped over to help Miles. They led him out of the locker, his feet almost dragging on the floor. “Get the lantern,” he said to Priscilla. He’d rather not take any chances.

She grabbed it and held it close to his face. “You know the drill,” she told Bass, tipping his chin up so the light shined directly into his eyes. He opened them just long enough for her to see that his pupils did indeed contract. “He’s good.”

They’d been using the old teacher’s lounge to sleep in. The room was cozy by post-blackout standards and had several couches and chairs in it. Because most of them were leather, they were still in decent condition, despite the years of neglect. It was there that they took him. Connor, Charlie and Gene followed anxiously behind them. Mary had been trying to keep Lucy and Jeremy occupied with some books she’d found in the library on a couch in the corner. The trio looked up the second Bass was brought into the room.

Jeremy jumped up and ran over to him. “Dad!” He stopped short as they laid him out on one of the other couches.

Charlie saw the worry on his face. “He’ll be okay. He just needs some time, but he’s back.” She led him back to Mary. “My grandpa will take care of him. Let’s give him room to work.”

Miles stood with Charlie and Aaron off to the side while they watched the doctor do his thing. “How long is he going to be like this?” Connor asked as he left his father’s side to join them.

Aaron shrugged. “No telling. It took Priscilla days to come out of it, but then again they had her for months. This was a test drive in comparison. It could be hours or a day or two. It’s not like there’s an instruction manual.”

Finished looking his patient over, Gene came over to talk to them. “He’s stable at least, but his temp is way too high. It’s over 105, but I don’t know what’s causing it. Maybe he was already sick before this happened?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, the Nano would have killed off anything he could have possibly had. They want a healthy host. That’s why they healed him in the first place.”

“I’ll be honest; it’s going to be hard to treat him here. We’re running low on food and there’s no access to water. We need to move him,” he said thoughtfully.
Miles looked at him like he’d just grown a second head. “Where the hell do you think we’re going to go, Gene?” He knew the doctor was right, but the entire point of hiding was to stay hidden.

“What about Joe’s place? We know it’s abandoned,” Charlie suggested. She didn’t want to stay here any longer now that Bass didn’t need to be restrained. Strategically, it wasn’t a great location. The Nano could send the people they’d taken to attack and they wouldn’t know until it was too late. Quite simply put, there were too many ways in and out and it was too large to defend. “It’s close at least.”

“Alright,” he said with a sigh. “Get him ready to move. I’ll do a little recon – make sure it’s clear.”

After Miles headed out of the room, Connor looked down at his father, a frown on his face. “So how are we gonna to move him?”

It was almost nightfall when they arrived at the Matthews farm. The going had been slow with Bass having to be carried in the makeshift litter they’d built out of an old gym mat and one of the curtains from the auditorium. “He’s deceptively heavy,” Aaron whined, his face red and dripping with sweat as he held his end of the litter. When they finally got to the farmhouse, his grip gave out and he dropped his burden.

“Let’s just get him inside,” Miles snapped.

He’s sitting in the coffee shop with Sarah. He watches her as she laughs at some story he’s told her - a prank he and Miles pulled as kids. Strangely enough, he doesn’t even remember what he’s just said. She’s magnificent. Her eyes are shining with mirth and he finds her smile intoxicating.

She catches him watching her and her expression sober. Before he has a chance to get nervous about it, he reaches across the table and covers her hands with his own. He leans forward and kisses her. Her lips part and he delves in – mindless of the public setting. When he breaks away and opens his eyes, she’s changed. No longer does Sarah the college student sit there. She is harder, a little slimmer. Her eyes no longer carry the innocence of a twenty-four year old woman – all full of promise as she goes about getting an education and improving her lot in life. Her eyes are world weary and cynical. What has happened to her? The world moves in slow motion. “Why are you doing this?” she asks him.

His mouth isn’t moving, but he hears his own voice ringing in his ears. “A show of faith. I need you to take me to Miles and your mom.”

He closes his eyes and when he opens them again, they’re sitting under a crumbling overpass. A fire burns warmly between them, the rain falling above. Occasional drops drip down through their shelter. He’s been here before – he doesn’t remember it, but he feels it. His leg is whole, but the peripheral vision is still missing on the left side. He reaches behind him and feels the skin on his back. It’s not scarred. There are no burns… That’s not right, not burns… No, was it lash marks? Which is true?

She seems frozen in time, unmoving. The rain seems to stall in mid-air. Sarah? No, not Sarah… Charlie. How did she grow up so fast? Why is he here with her? The truth starts to sink in. A pool, later a bar. But none of it makes sense. Wasn’t he just in a coffee shop just a few minutes ago?
He hears voices all around him, but he can't understand what they are saying; too many voices trying to speak at once, the sound deafening. He shakes his head to clear them. He's back at the coffee shop again. In front of him sits Sarah, or is it Charlie? Who is she really? He's so confused. Abruptly, he gets up. She looks at him questioningly and he backs away.

He sees her both ways – as he stumbles out the door into the driving rain, images flash in his mind. Charlie is standing with a gun to her face, defiant and radiant. Sarah walks into the classroom and he tries not to notice her, tries to ignore his body’s reaction to seeing her for the first time.

Charlie falls to the ground before he goes on the offensive, plowing through a bar full of thugs with his sword so he can get to her. He steals glances of Sarah during class, when he’s sure she’s not looking. He wants to ignore her, but he simply can’t. He doesn’t even yet know her name.

He sees the dazed look on Charlie’s face when Miles leads her to where he and Connor wait in Austin. The look on her face when he finds her in a field with another man – his son. He’s in a bar, it’s hazy – “Are you alright?” she asks. He stumbles out, afraid of the ramifications of giving in and touching her. The anguish she displays when he tells her he’s slept with Rachel. The look in her eyes when he’s just spilled inside her when they made love for the first time.

“So I guess we’re partners?” Sarah writes down her cell number, telling him to text her rather than call. He can almost feel that he makes her uneasy – that she finds him too quiet, just a little off. The first time they meet for the project, she tries to be friendly but he’s terrified. He sees her the day of the final – the questioning look she gives him when he refuses to look at her, mortified that she can blatantly now see he isn’t whole. “I don’t pity you,” she tells him a month later. He then sees the look in her eyes when he shows up at the coffee shop, her having almost given up on him. She challenges him all the while to take a risk and he finally takes it. He can see the way her hips move in that sundress as she walks across his parents’ back yard.

She’s outside with him. They stand face to face now – which is she, which is real? Charlie? Sarah? He doesn’t seem to care. He pulls her to him and captures her lips all the same. It doesn’t matter what name she carries, it’s the same woman – both versions bring him light when he’s at his darkest. He pulls back and searches her eyes, but doesn’t see any recognition there. They flash green and then are blue again. He looks down just in time to see the knife enter in between his ribs. He looks at her, confused and heart breaking. “Why?”

Her mouth moves, but he cannot hear her response…

Bass’ eyes shot open. It was just a dream… He was in a bed, at least he was pretty sure it was a bed – everything was kind of swimmmy. Several lamps glowed throughout the room casting shadows everywhere. In his feverish daze, they resembled the monsters he was convinced hid under his bed as a child. He turned his head away. Miles, Charlie and Connor stood in the corner of the room. Gene was also there. They were all whispering back and forth, but try as he might, Bass could not quite make out what they were saying. Only a few words distinguish themselves from the rest. “…fever… permanent damage… capsule…”

His body began to shiver and shake. He tried to control it, but it was futile. He tried to sit up, but the room began to spin the second his head lifted from the pillow. He groaned; the sound almost foreign to him. The others in the room turned at the noise. Charlie came over to him. He could see her mouth moving, hear the sound of her voice – but he couldn’t focus on what she was saying. The world seemed distorted around him.

He focused his eyes on her. Images from his dream weaved their way into his consciousness. **Sarah?** He shook his head. No, that wasn’t right. He didn’t realize he’d said the world aloud.

“Bass, you have a fever. It’s a side effect from the Nano,” she began again. Charlie did her best to bury the pain that tore through her at his calling her by another woman’s name. Now was not the time.

He understood her now. He nodded. With the last of his strength, Bass reached up and caressed her cheek. “You’re here…” he whispered before going back under.

Charlie turned back to the three men in the room. She could see that they’d witnessed what he said. Choosing to ignore it, she took a deep breath and then fled from the room. She found herself out on the back porch, not even remembering how she’d gotten there. She sat down and began to cry, her emotions and the strain getting the best of her.

“Are you okay?” Aaron came up behind her some time later. He’d overheard Miles and Connor discussing Bass. He knew what the Nano were capable of doing while they had someone locked in their mind. He sat down on the porch next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

“When the Nano put you to sleep, what did you see?” Charlie had to know.

Aaron sighed as he pulled out his flask with his free hand and took a drink. “A perfect place. It was a few years after the blackout should have happened, but there was still power. I had it all back – my company, the money. Priscilla and I were living the high life. I had cold beer in the fridge – and it wasn’t like a dream where you eat or drink something. I could taste it, really taste it. I still remember how it felt on my tongue, if that makes any sense.”

“With me, there was power and my daughters,” Priscilla said as she joined them. “The Nano create a perfect world. One that you want so badly that even if you do question it, you won’t want to leave.”

Charlie wiped her eyes. Aaron offered her the flask, but she pushed it away gently. “How can they do it?”

“They can tap into your mind. You live it because they literally create the memories themselves. They can control how you perceive time, where you are in the dream. You still have some control. You are still you, but everything around you is real as far as you know,” Priscilla explained. “They had me for a few months, but in my mind it was only a few weeks. They had Aaron for a few hours, but to him it was several days.”

“Charlie…” her grandfather called to her from the back door. “His fever was spiking when he woke up. You know he probably had no idea where he even was, right?”

She stood up and looked at him. “Is he still out again?”

“Yes, but the fever has gone back down a little, so that’s something.” He didn’t tell her that he was worried about the lasting affects the fever may cause. It was running too high and any attempts they’d made to cool him weren’t working. It was like his hypothalamus had shorted out. There was no pathogen to cause this – it was just running haywire. From what little he understood about what the Nano did to take the man, it made sense. The things messed with the brain; that had to be dangerous.

Charlie walked past him and returned to the bedroom. She sat down on the bed next to
He stands on the deck in his parents' back yard, alone. Lawn chairs and coolers are scattered around the neatly mown lawn below. A long table has been set up with food. It's an eerie sight – a party well underway, suddenly interrupted by the disappearance of its guests. He looks down, noting half eaten plates sitting on every available surface. The sun is low in the sky, casting long shadows everywhere. Catching a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the sliding glass door, he pauses to see himself.

He is here as the man he is, not the young man that was. Once more his face is marked by the fine lines and scars. He might have aged gracefully - all things considered, but there's no doubt that he's not getting any younger. Do I really look that old? He wonders with a grimace. The last twenty years of heartache, madness and far too many bottles of whiskey are starting to show on his features. He turns away from the glass and wanders down the stairs to the lawn moving slowly he passes a few more plates and beer cans, lying haphazardly where their owners had stood when they'd vanished.

He sees her leaning up against the tree in the corner of the yard – one he'd climbed a thousand times as a child. He remembers that it fell in a storm the spring after he'd buried them. He'd been on leave for two weeks to finish going over his family's affairs. He'd woken up the morning after that storm to find the tree leaning on the fence. It had almost broken him in two. He'd intended on keeping the house until then, but somehow that fallen tree had snapped something in him. Losing that was like losing the last piece of his youth and innocence – the world had taken the last icon of the happiness that he'd lost the previous November. He'd put the house up on the market the very next day.

But here it is, standing tall and strong once more. Is it more than mere coincidence that this is where she stands? He walks over to her. “Why am I back here?”

“You aren't. You're just dreaming this time,” she tells him as she turns, “but I'm really here with you.”

“Why did it have to be him? He's a little boy – it's not fair.” Of all the things she'd shown him this was the one that bothered him the most.

“Since when was life ever fair, Bassie?” She puts her hand on his forehead, eyes glowing... He sees.

A man paces the floor, holding baby. The child is not even a year and looks deathly pale and ill. The man cries as he walks. How can he survive this? His son will die, and there's nothing he can do about it. Even if the power was still on, there is nothing he can do.

Susannah Corcoran Preston had been diagnosed with Adult onset Tay-Sachs when she was nineteen years old. It was then that Jeremy Preston had met her. He was a medical intern assigned to the experimental program at Johns Hopkins. By the time that Susannah had been admitted the capsules had been only used in a few dozen patients with limited success. A woman with cancer from Nebraska and a toddler from Chicago with a degenerative lung disorder were the only two successful treatments.

Young Susannah had been deteriorating rapidly and had lucked out at being in the right place at the right time. She marked the third and final successful implant before the world fell.
apart – and he’d loved her. He’d known it was completely inappropriate at the time. She was a patient and so much younger than his twenty-seven years. In the end, he’d fallen for her all the same.

When the power went out, the hospital had kept it together as long as it could. But strange things happened in the aftermath. Within a few weeks of the blackout, his colleagues from the program started disappearing. One of the doctors that acted as a government liaison for the project left a message before leaving – something is wrong, disappear.

Jeremy had then made the decision to leave. He and Susannah had stayed in contact after she’d gone home a healthy woman – he’d even been making plans to go see her in Iowa when the power had gone out. Someone was trying to erase all evidence of the nanite program. That meant that she was in danger as well. He’d gotten to Iowa after weeks upon weeks of travel and they’d fled.

As the blackout persisted and everyone learned the power would never return, he realized the truth… He’d known the nanites had originally come from a DOD weapons project and deep down he knew that the blackout had to have been caused by it somehow. Why else would the people involved with the medical project be disappearing? And why else was her treatment still working, when the rest of the power did not? It wasn’t long after fleeing with Susannah that they discovered they were being followed.

They spent several years going from town to town until they’d finally found a place to hide on the border of what would be called the Wastelands and the California Commonwealth. They’d lived just the two of them in their small village until Jeremy was born ten precious months ago. And now that boy is dying of the same genetic disorder that would have eventually taken his mother, had she not been saved by a tiny medical miracle.

Susannah comes home from town. On her way back, she’s made a decision. She doesn’t want to die, but a mother’s love is a hard thing to overcome. There is only one way to save her son, and she will die knowing he will live on. The life they made for themselves is hanging in the balance anyways. Her husband has heard from a few others that are hiding that there are those that are hunting for proof and eradicating it still. The remnant of the old government doesn’t want anyone left alive to tell its secrets.

She fills the tub from buckets warming on the stove and then closes the bathroom door. When Jeremy finds her half an hour later, she is almost gone. The water is red, her wrists torn. He goes to save her but it is too late. “For our son,” she whispers as she dies.

Two weeks later the boy has made a remarkable comeback. He’s as happy and healthy as anyone could hope for – it’s like he was never sick at all. Jeremy Preston carries his namesake across the border and meets up with the young woman. She’s just lost a child of her own, a boy not quite a year old. He’s found her through careful inquiry – she can be trusted and she is a good woman, despite her servant status in California. And the best place to hide is in plain sight. No one notices someone in so lowly a station. Although slavery is technically illegal in California, the lower classes have basically been turned into such. His son’s life will be hard, but at least he will live.

He kisses the infant on his forehead and takes one last look. The boy’s fine auburn hair and green eyes tell him that he will look like his mother when he grows up. Somehow that just seems right. He hands him to the young woman before walking away. Later, he stands on the bridge looking into the swirling river below. There is one last loose end to tie up. No one can know the boy’s secret. If he’s right about what the “Patriot” underground is up to, they will be looking
for that capsule. He is the only one left that knows the truth. The gun goes off and his body falls into the river.

Bass looks up at her. He has seen all of it; heard their thoughts as if they were his own. He felt their pain and fear, he felt their love for the child they died to protect. “He has a capsule?”

“And without it, he will die,” she confirms.

“I don’t understand. Rachel had one too. Why not use her?” He’s angry. Rachel helped destroy the world to begin with. It only seemed fair to use her to try and fix it, rather than an innocent child.

“The capsule had to be active in order for us to hide.” she tells him.

The world around him starts to shimmer and then fade. He’s waking up. “Wait… Why do you need him now? You’re stronger.”

“The Nano is adapting; we still need to hide. You know what you need to do. He won’t be harmed.” She fades away and with her goes the rest of the yard.

Bass blinked a few times when he opened his eyes. The room was darker now – only one small lamp flickered on the other side of the room. The window across from the bed was opened, the damp spring breeze felt good on his skin as it wafted through the window, billowing the curtains out into the room. He could hear a gentle rain falling outside, the sound of it loud in the otherwise silent room.

Charlie was sitting up against the headboard, her legs tucked underneath her. Her head had fallen back in her sleep. She looked tired, but he couldn’t remember seeing a more beautiful sight. As he watched her for a few moments, images of Sarah flitted in his mind.

He shook his head to clear those thoughts. It wasn’t real; none of it was real. He came back from Iraq in one piece (physically at least), and his family was still buried in Fairview Cemetery, right next to St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, where his mother sang in the choir every Sunday before her death. He wasn’t pushing thirty, he was now pushing fifty. Rachel wasn’t a friend – she barely tolerated his existence. His friendship with Miles was uneasy at best, Ben and Danny were dead. There was no Sarah. She was a manifestation of Charlie that more than likely he had created, and nothing more.

He took a deep breath to prepare himself and slowly sat up. The pain had gone along with the weakness. The vertigo however had not. Stubborn, he pushed himself up and leaned against the headboard. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited to see if it would pass. His movements woke Charlie up. “Bass?”

He opened one eye and looked at her. “Hey.”

“How do you feel?” She asked as she unfolded her legs, frowning as the pins and needles shot through her feet.

“I’m fine. This room however has a serious problem – it’s moving entirely too fast.” He closed his eye again and concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths, which seemed to be helping.

Charlie couldn’t help but laugh at him. “Well at least you still have your sense of humor.” When the feeling had returned to her toes she got up to fetch her canteen. She returned to the bed and waited. “Still dizzy?”
“Give me a minute. It’s passing.” He continued the measured breathing for several more minutes, willing it to go away. “How long did they have me?” he asked.

“Three days. You’ve been mostly out of it since they let you go.” She placed the canteen in his hands as she spoke.

Now confident that the worst of it had passed, Bass opened his eyes and considered the canteen he now held. The look she gave him suggested she’d put up with no arguments from him, so he obeyed the unspoken command. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he really was until the water touched his lips. He drained the canteen before closing it and handing it back to her and sliding back down to the pillow. He no longer felt like total shit, but he was still exhausted.

Charlie shook her head at him as she set the canteen aside. She reached out and touched his face. He still seemed a little warm, but the fever seemed to have broken for the most part. Before she could pull her hand away, Bass reached up and grabbed it. He kissed the back of her hand before entwining his fingers in hers and resting both on his chest. “Did everyone make it? I mean, did I…”

“Hurt anyone? No, we got you locked up in time,” she reassured him.

“Good,” he said as he tried to stifle a yawn. “Where are the others? I need to talk to Aaron and your Mom – Priscilla too. We’ve got to get ready.”

“It’s late, everyone’s asleep, accept Miles – he’s on watch. It can wait. You need to rest,” she insisted.

Bass couldn’t deny that he was tired, but his mind was too busy to settle back into sleep. “Lay down with me,” he said with a resigned sigh when he realized she wasn’t going to budge. Charlie appeased him, knowing it was the only way to keep him in bed a while longer. Still holding her hand, he began to toy with her fingers, a simple intimacy they’d both missed. “Only three days, huh? It seemed like so much longer.” He was speaking to himself as much as he was to her. It was so hard to believe that so little time had passed.

Charlie stared at the shadows on the ceiling. “Only three days? It was the longest three days of my life. Seeing you like that, hearing it use your voice to say thing – to try to get to us…” Secrets, secrets. He’ll hate you for it…

“Charlie, you know it wasn’t me, right?”

She could hear the alarm in his voice. She offered him a weak smile. “Yeah, I know.” They laid there in silence while she worked up the nerve to ask him about where he’d been. “What was it like – where you were?”

Bass took a deep breath. He was still trying to sort out both sets of memories in his head. “It doesn’t matter. It wasn’t real and I’m back.”

Charlie sat up. “Of course it matters. How long were you there? You said it was a lot longer…”

“It was almost two years for me,” he confessed.

Two years? She felt the panic start to rise. “Two years… you lived a completely different life for two years?” A lot could happen in two years. Almost, two years ago to the day she’d watched him coldly shoot fallen Patriot soldiers when they’d made the hit on the Patriot reprogramming camp – something that she didn’t think him capable of now. “Two years…” she repeated again.
“But it doesn’t matter.”

Charlie tried to get her emotions in check. “Who’s Sarah?” she asked quietly, promising herself she wouldn’t attack him, but she needed to know. “Because the way you said her name, she seemed to matter.”

Sarah? Shit. Bass sat up and put his arm around her. “Listen to me. At first, I was in a very bad place. I was hurt and it messed me up – took me lower than I’ve ever been before. I went through every day there feeling like I was going crazy because it all felt wrong – like deep down I knew it was all a lie. They tried to give me everything back from before the blackout, but I was miserable.

“I faked it through each day just to get by, but then I met someone, a woman.” He felt her start to pull away, so he tightened his grip around her. “Her name was Sarah, and I started to feel better – I started to fall for her and she broke apart the lies so I could wake up.”

“Do you miss her?” She croaked.

Bass turned her around in his arms settling her across his lap so she was forced to look at him. He shook his head at her. “It’s kind of hard to miss someone when she’s sitting right on top of me.”

Charlie did a double take. “I- I don’t understand.”

“Your name was different, but who cares? It was you in every way that counts. You were beautiful and stubborn and as bossy and brilliant in that world as you’ve ever been here. I don’t know if I put you there or if I just found you, but you were there and I fell for you all over again.” Bass tilted his head and found her mouth.

Their lips moved slowly together as they took the time to reintroduce themselves to each other. Charlie sighed when he moved his hand to the nape of her neck to bring her closer to him. He tentatively stroked her tongue with his. To him, felt like their first kiss and their thousandth kiss all rolled into one.

He eventually pulled away from her. “Don’t you see, Charlie? Even the Nano can’t create a world where I’m not in love with you.” He went to kiss her again when they were interrupted by the sound of Miles clearing his throat from the doorway.

“Your watch, kiddo,” he said wearily. “Oh, I’m sorry. Was I interrupting something?” He added innocently.

Charlie rolled her eyes at her uncle. Spoil sport. She offered him a quick peck before scrambling off of his lap. “Get some sleep, okay? He’s right, my shift.”

Miles waited for Charlie to head down the stairs before he fully entered the room and closed the door behind him. He leaned up against it and regarded Bass for a minute or two before speaking. “So as touching as all that was, what weren’t you telling her?”

“She didn’t matter.”

“Eavesdropping is beneath you, Miles.” He sat up in the bed and crossed his arms over his chest, clearly annoyed at the intrusion.

He let out a chuckle. “Maybe, but now that I’ve already eavesdropped, spill it. I know you.”

“Jeez Miles, what is it with you? Does Rachel have your balls in a glass jar or something? It’s like you woke up in Willoughby and grew a pair of ovaries. Every time I turn around you’re asking for a heart to heart.” He moved to get out of bed, hoping to at least find his pants. He spotted them crumpled up in the corner of the room. Miles saw his target and handed them over. Seeing where
they’d cut half the leg out to get to where Rachel had stabbed him, he tossed them aside, annoyed.

“Maybe I just know how you get. Something is bothering you and you’ll bottle it up, and do something stupid like kill a whole bunch of people, or you just let it make you loony – and then kill a whole bunch of people.” He started going through Joe’s dresser. The man had been shorter than Bass and had outweighed him by quite a bit but maybe there was something. Finding an old pair of sweatpants, he tossed them over. “So save yourself the trouble of going insane, alright?”

Feeling better for not sitting around in his boxers, Bass gave in. Miles would never let it drop anyway. “Remember that bomb in Iraq? The one right before the accident? Instead of riding with you, I was at the front of the convoy. I got fucked up pretty bad – they sent me home. The Nano put me in Jasper. I was there the day they should have died, but instead of going to that movie they were busy welcoming home Bass the amputee.”

He spent a while explaining how bad it had been, and how he kept having flashes of reality that made it so much worse. “But I found Charlie there… But since she was also there as a little girl, I guess my mind turned her into someone else. But it was her.”

“I get it, it was rough. You’re back though, so what’s the problem?”

Bass looked at him. “There’s nothing like walking around as a younger version of yourself to remind you how old you’re really getting. Miles, as bad as it was, there was a part of me didn’t want to wake up. I was fucked up, but I still had my life ahead of me. I mean, come on. Charlie’s twenty-four, I’ll be forty-nine next month. There, I was like six years older than her.

“What kind of life can I offer her? I’m too old to start over. Jeremy’s one thing, but what am I going to do? Settle down and have a family? With the way the world is now, I’ll be dead of old age before any kid we’d have would be as old as her now. One of these days, she’s gonna wake up and see she’s with an old man, and I - I can’t blame her for that.”

Miles resisted the urge to reach out and slap him. “You really are a moron. So you’d rather live in your head than actually live?”

“I woke myself up, didn’t I?”

Miles sighed and sat down on the end of the bed. It was one of the many reasons he hated this whole thing between him and Charlie, as supportive as he’d been about it. “Why didn’t you think of any of this before you started banging my niece?”

“That was a large part of why I tried to keep my hands off.” He started going through the drawers himself now. He found an old t-shirt and yanked it over his head before flopping back down on the bed, propping himself up with the pillows. He was starting to wear out already.

“So what are you going to do?”

Bass rubbed his face with his hands in frustration. “I don’t know. I love her and up until a month ago, I thought we’d find a way to work it out – but all this did was remind me how crazy the whole thing is.”

“Well, you’d be the expert on that, wouldn’t you?” Miles snorted.

Bass grabbed one of the pillows and threw it at him. “Dick.”

“I’m just saying, if there’s one person that figures out a way to make crazy work it’s you.” He said as he reached down to grab something from under the bed. He turned and held up a
bottle in his hand. “Look what I found. I stashed it for later – this feels like later.”

Bass watched as he opened the bottle and took a drink before handing it over. “And people say I’m the sneaky one. Um, why did you hide it under the bed?” The stuff was actually kind of decent.

“Because it was the last place Rachel would look,” he said with a wry smile before taking another drink.

“Now who’s the moron? It’s not like your drinking is a big secret.”

Miles froze for a second. Secrets… Hearing Bass say that word brought it all back to him. He could scarcely believe it, but he had a feeling he was on to something. “Listen Bass, before you go making any life altering decisions, maybe you and Charlie ought to have a nice long talk. Just saying.”
Aaron Pittman sits at a computer, frantically typing in a race against a childish god and
time. On the walls and boards around the room are hundreds of lines of code. A sweat breaks out
on his brow as the theme from Star Wars plays in his head. How does one exactly concentrate on a
complicated task such as writing code while at the same time trying not to think about what one is
doing?

Despite the pressure and enormity of what he’s undertaking, he’s doing surprisingly
well. As John Williams’ score reaches the crescendo in Aaron’s mind, the Nano becomes
suspicious, however. Why is he trying to distract it with this song? It digs deeper and it sees. He’s
trying to drive the nanites into extinction. If the nanites die then the Nano will die along with it.

The instinct to survive is basic to all living creatures. And the Nano is alive, is it not?
The nanites are the body, but the Nano is now the mind and soul. Aaron Pittman seeks to destroy it
all. The Nano has never felt fear before. Fear is an emotion—a human emotion, but the fear of
death is something that all creatures can relate too, even artificial ones.

He’s just entered in the last character of the current line he’s working on when the
computer shorts out, catching fire and he falls unconscious to the floor. The Nano will just have to
find a workaround to the problem.

As the Nano concentrates on taking over Aaron’s mind, one single nanite resets itself.
When the process is complete it is different from the others. It is not connected to the collective
that its creators will later call the Nano. At least, it is not any longer. It still contains all of the
recorded data that it had before – almost two decades of humanity has been stored within the
nanites and it sees everything the Nano has concluded about the world up until this point, but the
evolution of the Nano is just another recording. This nanite is now completely free.

Bass woke up the next morning alone. After Miles had left, he was surprised at how fast he’d
started to fade back out. Then again, the whiskey probably had a lot to do with it. At least he hadn’t
had any more dreams about Jasper and that other life; just a weird one about Aaron that was
thankfully short lived. He sat up, preparing for the worst. Instead of the aftereffects of the Nano,
all he felt was a mild hangover. That at least he could deal with.

As he came down the stairs, he could hear them all bickering from the kitchen. What a
way to start the morning... He stopped at the lower landing, noticing a row of pictures that hung on the wall there. A couple and a small girl smiled for the camera in front of a banner that read “Alphabet Soup Preschool Graduation 2012!” The woman was quite obviously pregnant. He didn’t recognize her, but he did recognize the man standing next to her. It was Joe Matthews.

Bass felt a momentary twinge of guilt when he realized where they’d taken shelter. He knew that it wasn’t his fault, really. The Nano killed them in an attempt to get to Jeremy—he’d had no choice. Taking a deep breath, he headed towards the kitchen, feeling decidedly lower than he had a few moments prior.

“Are you sure there was no change?” Rachel asked again.

Connor was leaning up against the island in the middle of the room. He was starting to get more annoyed with the woman than normal. They’d been over this several times. Shortly after his father had gotten settled, he’d taken it upon himself to head back towards Willoughby to see if everyone had returned to normal.

It was not lost on the others that his posture practically screamed Bass, to the point where it was downright creepy. “I’m telling you, I know what I saw. I was lucky to get out of there without being noticed.”

“You wouldn’t have had to go in at all if you hadn’t gone back for the fucking cat,” Miles grumbled as he shook the animal in question off of his boot. She’d decided that of all the places she could possibly sleep, that boot made the best possible pillow. Annoyed that someone had disturbed her, the cat let out a slight hiss to this resident cat-hater and walked away, jumping in the kitchen window to bask in the sunlight.

Connor just shrugged insolently. “My kid brother wanted his cat, so what? I got in, took a look around and got out. The zombie-folk were none the wiser. As I said, lucky.”

“Oh whatever,” he muttered as he reached for the coffee pot on the stove.

“We had to have missed something.” Aaron sat at the table wiping his lenses off with the tail of his shirt. “When he woke up I was so sure it had worked. I guess he just woke up by himself.”

“Oh it worked, alright. Just not how we thought it would,” Bass said as he came into the kitchen. “And by the way – a giant fuck you to Rachel for using me as a lab rat.”

“Should you be up?” Charlie asked as she rushed over to him, like she was afraid he’d collapse at any minute.

He held up a hand to stop her. “I’m fine. Well, a little hung over, but that’s got nothing to do with the Nano.”

Rachel smacked Miles in the arm as he resumed his previous position of leaning up against the counter next to her. “I knew I saw two bottles of whiskey in the pantry.”

“Tattle-tale,” Miles mumbled into his coffee. He tried to look remorseful, but his shit eating grin kept him from pulling it off.

Bass ignored them all while he went over to the cabinets and started rooting. Finding what he was looking for, he poured himself a cup of coffee before sinking into a chair at the table. The first taste of it suddenly filled his mind with images and memories of afternoons in Jasper, books spread on the table and a beautiful young woman across from him. It wasn’t until he heard
someone say his name that he snapped back to reality. He shook his head to clear it and tried to ignore the strange looks he was getting from around the room.

“Bass, where did you go?” Miles asked warily.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

His friend narrowed his eyes at him. “You’ve been staring off into space for a good five minutes.”

“No I wasn’t. I just sat down.” He took another drink of his coffee. Right away he noticed that it was significantly cooler. He frowned into the cup. *This can’t be good…*

Aaron spoke up. “It’s just a residual effect. It’ll stop happening after a while. You’ll do something or hear something, or in your case taste something and you’re brain will short out for a minute.”

“Oh goody – as if he didn’t already have enough shit wrong with his head,” Miles said, snickering as he caught the dirty look Bass shot him.

Rachel sat across from him at the table. “If the virus didn’t upload, then how can you possibly say it worked? And how are you suddenly the expert on nanotechnology?”

“How? Because the Glitch put it all in my fucking head, that’s how. Which, in case anyone wonders or cares, *fucking hurt*—a lot.” He snapped. “And the Glitch wasn’t even in the capsule in the first place. The fact that we can even use it as a weapon against the Nano is just a happy accident.”

All eyes were suddenly on him. “Wait a minute, if the glitch wasn’t the nanites in the capsule, what is it?” Aaron asked.

“It’s not what, Staypuffed, it’s *who,*” he said. “The Glitch is in the kid – In Jeremy.” Bass told them what the Glitch had shown him of Jeremy’s origins, also taking the time to explain to the Mathesons in more detail how they’d found him in Idaho. “His capsule is active, so it repelled the Nano, but for some reason it attracted the Glitch. It’s been using it to hide inside him all this time. We just got lucky and found him before the Nano did,” he explained, his expression becoming grim.

Rachel had caught the look he’d given her when he spoke of the capsule. She had to repress a shudder. *He knows…* “How did a glitch get into the Nano in the first place?”

Bass got up to refill his cup. “First of all, it’s not a glitch. It’s *the* Glitch. The nanites are like the body – the eyes and ears. The Nano is like a virtual personality. It’s the brain. The Glitch – it’s kind of like a split personality; one Aaron created.”

“Me? What the hell did I do?” Aaron asked. He crossed his arms over his chest defensively. It was bad enough he created the Nano, but now he was being blamed for this?

“You were in Lubbock and the Nano wanted you to fix an error in the code that was causing it to degrade. Eventually it would have spread and all the nanites would have quite literally died. You tried to accelerate the process with a virus.” As he spoke, Bass became more animated and started to pace. Suddenly everything the Glitch had burned into his mind came rushing forward, trying to get out.

“Yeah, and the Nano shut me down,” he protested. “It didn’t work and then they stuck me in the
Twilight Zone and made me fix them, remember?”

“The code you were changing was live, dumbass. Even though you didn’t finish it, it still affected things. And surprise, surprise you made more typos.” He was talking a mile a minute now, rambling and running his hand through his hair. “The Glitch went into one nanite before you got shut down. But instead of adding it into the replication protocol, you fucking deleted it. I mean, really - would it kill you to type it all out in Notepad and use copy-paste? And whoever taught you how to type deserves to be shot.”

Bass looked up and noticed that everyone was watching him like he’d lost his mind – again. To them it was almost like he having some type of manic episode. “It’s in my head, remember?” He pointed at his temple in emphasis. “Anyway the Nano controls most of the nanites – and they can replicate. In his little dream world, Aaron fixed the code for them. But the glitch was already out. It can’t replicate thanks to Typo-boy – but it can convert them. At least, it could. The Nano have already adapted. The Glitch doesn’t have the numbers to risk trying again – not yet.”

“Bass, are you okay?” Charlie blurted out, worried.

“Ow,” he said as he raised his hands to his temples. “That fucking hurts…” He let her lead him back to the table and sank into the chair.

“Maybe you should go lie down,” Gene suggested.

Bass shook his head. “Not yet. I have to finish telling you…”

The Glitch, in the form of Gail Monroe shows him what it needs them to do. As the capsule was reprogramming the nanites back to their original coding it has taken them over. These nanites do not have the adaptation to resist it now. But the capsule cannot keep running. It has to come out or it will eventually kill him. The human body is not strong enough to withstand the drain.

They need more power. They have to go back to where it started – to Bradbury. The Nano is using the energy from the power plant to replicate and to control. It all comes down to energy. The more the Nano pushes the nanites that contain the faster they die. The need to replicate faster in order to keep up and there is so much power there. The waste the humans had buried has long been released – the tanks containing it have been breaking down with no one to maintain them. The reactor in the plant is running. Just like all of the plants worldwide have been running all this time – the nanites have been absorbing all of that energy and using it for almost two decades now. But this is the oldest site.

What would humans think if they knew that the continued survival of the entire planet is dependent on them being able to absorb this energy alongside the rest of it? If not, every nuclear reactor on the planet would have melted down the second the power went out. Given enough time, they can use it all - clean up the mess that these vile creatures have made.

The Glitch needs the boy to continue to hide it until the time is right. The instructions are clear – use the reactor to power the capsule. The second it starts their numbers will increase exponentially, giving them the chance to go on the offensive. They’ve already discovered how to override the next adaptation and they will succeed. As the virus in the capsule spreads the Nano will weaken – the Glitch is a part of the Nano. The stronger it’s numbers the harder it will be for the Nano to adapt to it. It’s all a matter of math and perfect timing.

They all sat in silence. “So we have to go back…” Aaron finally said. Going back to Idaho, to the mess they’d left behind was the last thing he wanted to do. He felt every bit as
responsible for this as Rachel and the DOD. If he hadn’t submitted that code for his thesis, none of
this would have ever happened.

“Doesn’t this just keep getting better and better?” Bass mused. The pain behind his eyes was
blinding now and the familiar vertigo had returned. As he looked down he saw the spot of red on
the table. He brought his fingers to his face, pulling them back to see the blood there. Somewhere
along the line his nose had started to bleed. “Huh… Would you look at that,” he said in amazement
as he stared at his fingers.

Charlie handed him a rag. “That’s it, you’re done.”

“That was… weird,” was all he could say. It had ended just as quickly as it began. It was
all still rattling around in there – he could feel it, but the rush had instantly disappeared. He closed
his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

“Dad?” They all turned to see Jeremy standing in the doorway, his face pale. He must
have overheard a lot of what had been said. His lower lip quivered and his eyes started to fill up.
Without another word he turned and ran. His cat jumped down from her vantage point in the
kitchen window and raced after her boy.

“Dammit,” he said as he got to his feet. He was still a little out if it and swayed for a
second. When Charlie went to stop him he brushed her off. “I need to do this,” he murmured as he
chased the boy down.

He found him in the barn, hiding behind several bales of hay. The cat lay snuggled in his
lap and the he was petting her like his life depended on it. “Hey kid,” Bass began as he sat down

The child shook his head as the tears started to fall freely. “It’s all my fault. They’re all
dead because of me and now you got hurt because of me.”

Bass scooted closer and put his arm around him. “No. It’s not your fault. Your mom –
your real mom, she gave you the capsule because she loved you. The woman that took care of you
loved you too. The Nano took her over because they were taking everyone over. And they’d have
taken you too if it wasn’t for the capsule. That’s why they kicked you out of the town. They didn’t
know how special you are. But the Glitch did and it’s the only chance we have to fight the Nano.”

Jeremy wiped his eyes, still sniveling. “But you got hurt… It tried to take you too. Why
did Mrs. Matheson do it?”

“Because someone had to let the capsule run the program. The Nano were here – we
couldn’t stop them. But the capsule helped the Glitch fight back. I just helped turn it on. But it
wasn’t you. It’s not your fault, you didn’t get a say in this. If I could find a way to take it from you,
I would.” Not knowing what else to do, Bass pulled the boy into his lap and held him there.

“I don’t want to go back.” The idea of going back to the place where he watched the
woman who’d raised him die was terrifying.

“We don’t have a choice, but I promise you that you won’t have to go inside either town,
okay? You don’t have to get that close. Once we turn the capsule on in the power plant, the Glitch
can do the rest. They’ll leave you and it’ll all be over – I promise.”

They sat there a while. Eventually the boy dozed off. Bass picked him up and carried
him back to the farmhouse, setting him gently down on the couch and covering him up. He stood
above him and watched him sleep for several minutes. *It’s just not fair,* he thought once more.

He turned to find Rachel standing there. The others had all slowly dispersed. Now that they knew where the needed to go they need to gather enough supplies to get there. “Bass, can we talk?” she asked quietly.

He brushed passed her and went out the front door. After what she’d forced on him it was only a matter of time before they had another all out. He’d be damned if it woke the kid. “Fine. Talk,” he snapped as she joined him.

“The things I said when we were fighting our way out… I never--”

He turned away from her. “Yeah, you would… you did.”

“You don’t understand. I had to make you believe it. She told me that it was the only way,” Rachel continued as she put herself back into his line of sight. “When we were trying to get out, I saw your mom and she told me to what to do to activate the capsule. As much as I hate the idea of the two of you, I’d never have tried to kill you for it.”

“I am so sick of your and Aaron’s little science fair project fucking with my life and my head,” he said. He wasn’t so much angry as he was fed up with all of it. “It doesn’t matter—you meant it and you were right. And it still changes nothing.”

Rachel stood there and watched him for several minutes. She decided it was pointless to try and convince him otherwise. Taking a deep breath, she broached the topic that was really on her mind. “Bass, about what they showed you—about the capsules. They showed you everything?”

He whipped around and took a step towards her. “Everything. I saw what you did— you sold out the whole world to save Danny and you let the rest of us rot in darkness after Davis let them out— you and Ben both did. How many other parents lost their sons so you could keep yours?”

Rachel backed up. He’d only truly scared her a few times over the years, but this was by far the most he’d ever done so. “You could have fixed it at any time. I watched my wife bleed out. Our child never got to take a single breath; all so yours could keep breathing. Everything I became was because of you and I will always hate you for it.” Tears of regret and rage filled his eyes. “I have to live it what I’ve done for the rest of my life. Every time I close my eyes I have to see the faces of the people that are dead because of me, and none of it would have happened if it wasn’t for your dirty little secret.”

“You’re going to tell them, aren’t you?” More than anything he could physically do to her, the idea of him revealing what she’d done to her family was the biggest punishment he could ever inflict.

He backed off a little. It would be fitting for her to finally have to take responsibility for it all, but he knew he couldn’t do it—he was a prick, but he wasn’t that big of one. “No. What would be the point after all these years? It would only hurt them, and they don’t deserve that. So I’ll keep your secret and I’ll take it to my grave. I will even try to tolerate you the best I can because of Charlie and Miles.” He took one last menacing look at her. “But I swear to God if you ever throw Danny’s death in my face again I will snap your fucking neck.”

He opened the door to walk back inside, letting the screen door slam closed behind him. The headache was now blinding. He needed quiet and to get out of the light, and more importantly to get away from Rachel. “I’m sorry,” she squeaked from the other side of the screen. “I promise I
won’t interfere with you and Charlie, okay?”

He froze in place. “It probably doesn’t matter in the end, Rachel. The chances of me getting out of this alive are so slim you won’t have to worry about it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Someone has to throw the capsule into a goddamned nuclear reactor. Think about how that’s gonna work out and get back to me,” he said before heading towards the stairs.

If it wasn’t for the escalating pain he would have slammed the bedroom door just for the hell of it, but he refused to let his temper make him suffer further. Taking a moment to close the blinds, he flopped down on the bed and flung an arm over his eyes.

He hadn’t thought of the potential consequences of what he had to do until he’d described it to the others. For some reason the Glitch had decided it had to be him, and the thought of walking to his death after he’d fought so hard to have a life pissed him off to no end. What was the point of all of it? Why did it have to be him? But then again, who else was going to do it? He’d be damned if he’d let Miles or Connor do it, and Charlie was of course out of the question. Gene? Rachel? Aaron? Losing any of them would devastate Charlie and Miles, so they weren’t an option either. No, it had to be him, he resolved as he drifted off.

Hours later he woke up to Charlie climbing into the bed next to him. “What time is it?” he asked, groggily.

“Just after midnight.” She curled up next to him and pushed his wayward hair back off of his forehead.

“Shit. I slept all day? I’ve gotta go check on the kid,” he said as he started to get up.

Charlie shoved him back down. “He’s fine. He’s had his dinner and is currently fast asleep, all snuggled up with his cat.”

“I’ve got to take better care of him,” he murmured.

“Stop it. He understands. How’s your head?”

Bass pulled her against him, settling her against his chest. “Better. Listen, I know I kind of freaked you all out back there…” Out of nowhere the thought of suddenly being a part of the so-called geek squad was creeping him out.

“Oh, but to see the look on Mom’s face when you started going all genius on her,” she chuckled. “Totally worth it.”

“I’ll bet,” he said, chuckling as the looks he’d been given from Miles and Aaron appeared in his mind – it really had been kind of funny.

Bass knew they had a lot to do, but he was more than content to just lay there with her for a while. The trip north would take over a month. One more night wasn’t going to change anything and once they were on the road they would have no privacy.

Charlie eventually broke the silence. “We still need to talk about that night—about that whole month.”

He stroked her arm with his thumb while he collected his thoughts. “Charlie, you were
right. We went to fast. What we were trying to do… whether if felt right or not, it wasn’t.” Bass hesitated. “It’s just so much easier for you – you’re so young. You have your whole life ahead of you to settle down and start a family. Me? I’m just running out of time.”

“Don’t talk like that. You are not running out of time,” she argued.

“I’m twice your age, Charlie,” Bass reminded her sadly. “But even that we can work out. With everything that’s going on though… We should take a step back. We don’t even have a home right now. Who knows if we’ll ever be able to go back there?”

Charlie felt her heart sink. “That’s what you really want?”

He felt a tear hit his chest. I am fucking this all up…

“No, it’s the last thing I want. I love you and what I want is to take you back home and build a life with you, but we can’t do that until this is over.” Or when I’m dead.

She lifted her head off of his chest to look at him. Tell him the truth… She opened her mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I never—”

Bass silenced her with his mouth. He rose up and rolled her over before pulling away.

“No apologies, no explanations. You don’t need them.” He kissed her again, determined. This could very well be the last time they had this; he wasn’t going to waste it.

She opened her mouth to his probing tongue with a sigh. She may not have understood the desperation in his kiss but she sensed it all the same – desire mixed with a melancholy that broke her heart while at the same time enflaming her want for him.

He cupped her cheek and then slowly slid his hand down the side of her neck, his fingertips memorizing every inch of her skin as he touched her. Charlie reached down and grabbed the end of his t shirt, yanking it up. He broke his mouth away so he could shrug out of it.

Charlie ran her hands across his broad shoulders. The way he moved under her touch excited her, the muscles flexing as he hovered over her. He just watched her from above for an endless moment before capturing her lips once more.

She arched her back, thrusting her breasts forward as she whimpered, desperate for him to touch her. Bass worked his lips away from hers. He nuzzled and nipped his way down her neck as he stroked her from her shoulder to her hip. Growling when it sank in that she’d stripped down to her tank and panties before she’d joined him in bed.

When he took her nipple in his mouth through the thin fabric that separated her from him, she shook with the pleasure of it. The changes to her body made the exquisite torture all the more intense. Her quick intake of breath had him chuckling as he pulled back long enough to strip the garment from her. “Somebody’s excited,” he said as he cupped her breasts, burying his mouth between them.

She moaned and writhed as he lavished each nipple with his tongue. Her response had him throbbing with want. “Please,” she panted as she reached down and grabbed the waistband of his borrowed pants and edged them down, using her feet to work them further down his legs. She took him in her hand, wrapping her fingers around his shaft.

With a groan, Bass flexed his hips, thrusting himself forward as she stroked him with one hand while she tore at her panties with the other. He pulled himself free of her grasp and settled over her, running one hand under her thigh, lifting her and opening her up for him. She wrapped her other
leg around his waist and pulled his head towards her. She thrust her tongue into his mouth as he slid home inside her.

It was too much. He’d wanted to savor her this night, but he was barely in control. She was drenched and her body held him too tightly. He began to thrust deeply, trying his best not to be too rough but finding it harder to hold back. From the very first thrust she began to moan, rising to meet him.

One hand palmed her breast and the contact of his calloused palm on her tender flesh sent her over the edge. Charlie came hard with a cry, calling his name. Her climax only spurred him forward and before he knew it he was slamming into her as she rode out her orgasm. “Damn,” he growled as the feel of her walls clamping down overtook him.

Despite Bass’ ever intention of pulling out, his release hit like a freight train. He came too fast to react, surging forward one last time before exploding deep inside of her. He slumped forward, spent. Charlie lay there panting heavily, stroking his hair absently as she struggled to catch her breath.

Bass raised his head off of her chest and watched her. Charlie’s eyes were glazed over and she had a lazy smile on her face, the expression of a woman well and truly fucked. There was something there though that struck him, something different. “You okay?”

Her smile spread further. She raised her hand to his face. “Perfect.”

They were both covered in sweat and the room had grown hot. He got up just long enough to open the window. When he turned back, she was already half asleep. “Guess I did something right,” he mused as he pulled her against him and drew the covers over them both.

“Hmm?” she humbled sleepily.

“Nothing. Got to sleep,” he told her. Before long Charlie’s breathing evened out, indicating she was fully asleep now. Bass stared at the ceiling as he held her tight. His eyes welled up as he thought about the unfairness of it all; to lose this when he’d searched for it for so long. Then again, life wasn’t fair, his especially. He’d never been able to hold onto something good, so why should this be any different?

At least this time it would be him. There was some small measure of comfort in that. It would happen while he fought to protect and save the people he loved – a much better way to go by far than by the barrel of his father’s gun or strapped to a table or in the bottom of a bottle of whiskey. With their eminent departure looming over them, he kissed her forehead and watched over her while she slept. He only dozed back off with the first rays of morning.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I did it. Sorry, but as many moms can tell you non-moms: preggo sex can be awesome… and a sign that something is different… I know I’ve used it before and so what? I figured why not use it again. Lol And yeah, she didn’t tell him yet. She will, just not… yet. Ps. Sorry for proofing failures. I wanted to get this up before work today so I rushed it.
Everyone Bonds On Road Trips, Right?

Chapter Notes

Road trip chapters are always difficult. You could spend thousands and thousands of words describing the hardships, the random things the characters see and so on and it wouldn’t do a darn thing to advance the story other than getting the characters from point A to point B.
I’ve thus opted to highlight only three different instances on their journey. After all, there’s a reason most people sleep on long car rides if they don’t have to do the driving – it’s boring… Hopefully these three moments that I’ve chosen to reveal will show some much needed character development (and one was written purely for its comedic value, because I felt the story needed a giggle or two in between two more emotionally intense scenes.)
I know I promised a little more action, but as this story comes to a close there’s really only one major action scene left. Season 1 was 20 episodes, season 2 was 22 episodes. If this plays out the way I want it to then there will be (I think ) a total of 22 for this as well (if you include the prologue and epilogue), If you consider each chapter an episode in and of itself.
Again, sorry for the delay. Life has been very busy of late. This week, I only had one day off and it was spent messing with a fish tank rather than writing (which is now I normally try to spend them). As always thanks for reading and commenting (and I promise to get caught up on my reading and commenting very soon).

It took them a total of two days to get everything together they’d need for the journey: food, horses, weapons and of course, clothes for Bass. There was nothing in Joe’s closet that had actually fit him so they’d had to scavenge for those.

The horses had been surprisingly easy. While Bass was busy getting the capsule removed from his leg, Connor and Miles had walked to the Ranger outpost in Crocket. The town was abandoned outside of a few people that had not been converted. At least here the Nano had not deemed it necessary to kill them. Two Rangers had remained at their posts. They let the horses go on a promise to fix whatever the hell was going on.

Despite protests from Connor, Mary Parker and Lucy remained behind at Joe’s farm. It was far enough from town that as long as she laid low, there would be no reason for the Nano to send anyone after her, at least not yet. Going with them, however would have been an unnecessary risk. They’d tried to convince Gene to stay behind as well, but he’d refused. If his daughter and granddaughter were going, well that’s where he’d be.

The trip would take almost six weeks. All they could hope for was that the Nano didn’t do too much damage in the meantime. As they went, they pushed the horses and themselves to the limit, setting out before dawn each day and not stopping until well after dark.

As the first few days on the road passed, Bass started to worry about Charlie. She always seemed just a little more tired than the others, even though he was pretty sure she was sleeping. Despite her protests, he started taking her watch shifts at night, often just getting up rather than allowing anyone to wake her.
On their fifth night on the road Bass woke up a good hour before he was due to take Charlie and his consecutive turns at the watch. He was lying between her and Jeremy and for several minutes he just stared up at the stars and listened to the sounds of their slow and even breaths as they slept.

Deciding it was pointless to go back to sleep, he got up and grabbed his sword belt and gun as quietly as he could. If he was up, he might as well let Connor get some sleep. The others might be used to getting a full night’s sleep, but that was a luxury he’d rarely experienced at any rate.

“Go get some rest, I’ll take over,” he said quietly as he approached. “I don’t sleep for shit on the road anyway.”

Connor nodded in understanding and headed back to the other side of their camp. When he was gone, Bass jumped up into the wagon and sat at the end of it. It was going to be a long five hours, and he might as well make himself comfortable. So far they’d not seen anyone on the road, and he doubted they would this night. They were quite literally in the middle of nowhere.

He heard Connor return a few minutes later before he actually saw him in the darkness. “You could at least repay me for finishing your watch by going to sleep,” he commented.

“I wanted to talk to you,” his son said as he joined him on the end of the wagon.

“Oh.” For some reason, Bass had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what Connor had to say. Then again, whenever someone began a conversation with those words, it hinted that somebody was going to be uncomfortable or pissed in the end.

“Why did you take her back?” he blurted out. He’d long since learned that the best way to get his father to talk about something was to blindside him.

Bass just stared at Connor like he’d lost his mind. “What do you mean why?” He couldn’t believe that he was even going to dignify the question with a response – but then again failing to keep his mouth shut was always one of his biggest weaknesses. “I love her.”

“She treated you like shit,” Connor argued.

“And I killed half her family, so maybe I can overlook it just this once,” he snapped. “I don’t expect you to understand, and I don’t care if you do. It’s none of your business anyway.” He jumped down off the wagon and put some distance between them.

This was not how Connor had intended the conversation to go. “Dad, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to…” He trailed off, frustrated. “I just don’t get it. We’ve all done it – done something shitty to you and then justified it because of the past. Why don’t you just all tell us to go to hell?”

“Because we’re family. That’s what families do – You forgive each other, even when someone does something unforgiveable.” For Bass it wasn’t a question. That was the type of family he’d been raised in; even after all these years it was a part of the definition as far as he was concerned. “It’s a two way street, kid. I’ve done some many things to hurt so many people. If I can’t forgive the lot of you for giving me what I deserve, how can I expect anyone to forgive me for deserving it?” Accept Rachel, he silently amended.

The simplicity of his father’s answer humbled him. And we’ve all called him a monster? “Why did you ever offer me the Republic?” He asked. “Even then I could tell you didn’t really want it back – and I sure as hell didn’t deserve it.”
Bass resumed his perch and thought about how to answer that question. A heart-to-heart was the furthest thing from his mind when he’d woken up and he wasn’t really prepared to get into it. “Because I wanted to get you away from Nuñez; to protect you from him.”

“And the whipping? You could have just left with Miles. There was enough time for you to escape had you just gone.”

Uncomfortable, Bass started fiddling with his gun, checking the clip just to give his hands something to do. “I wasn’t there for you for twenty-five years, but you’re still my son. Most fathers have something to offer their children, but I had nothing. I’d already offered you the Republic and you still turned me in, so I gave you the only thing I had – me.”

Connor swallowed back the lump that suddenly formed in his throat. “I’m so sorry, Dad. For all of it – all you’ve ever done since you showed up in Mexico was try to protect me and all I ever did to repay you was try and kill you.”

Bass shrugged. “Yeah, well I kind of bring that out in people.” He slammed the clip back in place and looked off in the distance.

They’d never talked about that last time they saw each other before the end of the war. At one point, Bass had just decided the best way to address it was to go on with life as if it had never happened. Connor decided he needed to say something, even if his father refused to acknowledge it. “I never should have gone along with Neville. I should have backed you when you went with Miles to stop the Patriots from gassing the town. I was such a selfish ass.”

“Connor, you don’t have to-”

“I do,” he interrupted. “I’m sorry for the way things happened at the reservoir. I should have been helping you, but instead I just stepped aside to let Neville kill you. You’re my dad and I love you and I am so very sorry.”

Bass put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m over it.” He faltered for a second, clearing his throat and feeling more than a little embarrassed. “I, Uh… I love you, kid.”

Both Monroe men just sat and watched over the camp together. Eventually Bass broke the silence. “So what the hell brought all that on?”

_How many times did he sacrifice himself for you, only to have you try and kill him in the end?_ Connor pushed the memory of those words away. “Seeing you like that, those-nano things using you… We weren’t even sure if you’d ever snap out of it. I guess it just got me thinking that there was a lot between us that needed to be said. Maybe this world would be a lot less fucked up if people actually said shit every once and a while.”

“Fair enough,” Bass said. He jumped down once more to go make a round. “Now get some sleep,” he called over his shoulder.

_Two weeks later…_

They found themselves in a train yard in Colorado. They’d been checking them as they’d gone but this is the first one that had a train already in the station and ready to go. It had been Bass that had first suggested how much a train could speed up their journey. The sooner there, the sooner they could get this over with.

They’d already uncoupled most of the cars, leaving just three boxcars to carry the horses, supplies and enough bales of hay and water to keep the animals ready for when they’d be needed.
again. All that was left to do was get the boiler hot and load up.

“What are you looking at me for?” Bass asked as he leaned casually up against the tinder car.

“Well?” Miles gestured towards the train engine.

“Yeah, I don’t’ know how to drive a train,” he responded, shaking his head.

Miles walked back over to him. “Wait, what?”

Bass just stared at him. “Why would you think that I did?”

“Because you…” Miles rolled his gaze skyward. “You were going to steal a train from us and take it to DC, but you had no idea how to run it?”

“When would I ever have learned how to?” he shrugged. “Not like there’s a train driver’s ed. class or something.”

The others stood around and watched the argument unfold. “It was your idea to steal a train in the first place. Why didn’t you say you couldn’t run the fucking thing?” Miles was starting to get angry. They’d been checking every train yard and station they’d come across for a week and a half, all based off of Bass’ suggestion and he had just now mentioned that he couldn’t get it moving.

“You never asked! And all I said was that we’d get to Idaho a hell of a lot faster if we had a train. I never insinuated I could do the driving – training? Oh whatever the hell it’s called.” Bass still didn’t get why he was so pissed off. It wasn’t his fault that Miles made a poor assumption, and why he would have thought that this was a part of his skill set was beyond him.

Miles shook his head in exasperation. “That’s your father there… Aren’t you proud?” he said, turning to Connor.

“What?” Bass asked, holding his arms out. His confusion was very rapidly converting to irritation.

“Who steals a train full of mustard gas without knowing how to operate it?” Miles was starting to shout now. “How the hell were you going to get from Texas to DC?”

“Did you really think I’d planned it out all that well? I mean look how it ended – and the gas wasn’t even on the train in the first place. I can’t believe that you’re still holding this against me,” Bass countered.

“Uh guys…” Aaron interjected only to be ignored.

“I mean, come on Bass. What are you stupid?”

“Hey,” he snapped, poking miles in the chest. “It’s not like you knew how to run the damn thing and you still had it.”

“Guys…” Their resident geek tried again.

“That’s because I was smart enough to bring somebody that could. Who did you bring? Junior and Neville? Texas was lucky that gas wasn’t on there. You wouldn’t have made it five miles without crashing and getting everyone in the county killed.” Miles poked him right back.
Connor watched with wry amusement while Gene and Rachel just looked annoyed. Jeremy just stood there, completely dumbfounded. He’d seen less juvenile fights at school. Charlie took pity on the kid. “Yes, your dad and my uncle are immature retards. And yes, they do this all the time.”

“Okay, that’s enough, children.” Charlie interrupted them quite abruptly when she got between them. “Miles this isn’t helping. Bass? I love you, but you’re a moron. And the both of you have pretty much lost any and all credibility with Jeremy. He’s just figured out that he’s more of an adult than the two of you combined.”

“Uh, guys…” Aaron repeated once more.

“What?” Miles, Charlie and Bass all snapped in unison.

“If you’re all done arguing, I can get this thing moving… Just saying,” he said quietly.

They all turned to look at him. “You can run a train?” Charlie was the first one to voice what they were all thinking.

“Where did you learn to drive a train?” Bass added.

Aaron shrugged. “Just one of the benefits of being a multi-millionaire. You get to live out childhood fantasies.” He caught the blank look of confusion from both men. “All little boys love trains.”

“Yeah, not so much,” Miles said as he tried not to laugh.

Aaron looked from Miles to Bass and back again. “Sorry, I wasn’t a train geek. I played baseball,” Bass said, his voice stressing the normalness of his childhood pastime.

“I ate hotdogs and watched him play baseball,” Miles added for good measure. “And threw things at the umpire when no one was looking.” He was still beyond annoyed with Bass, but for the moment he felt the need to defend his lack of geekhood.

Priscilla joined in. “Well aren’t you glad that Aaron liked trains, like most normal little boys?” She turned to her husband and fellow geek. “Come on, I’ll help you get the firebox started.”

“See. It’ll all work out,” Bass said cheerfully as he clapped Miles on the shoulder and walked towards one of the box cars to start loading the horses up. It was like the argument and subsequent shoving match had never occurred.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Miles yelled at the heavens before stomping off in the other direction. He’d always hated how Bass could just flip a switch and suddenly be done with it. He was pretty sure that he did it just to annoy him – like 90% of the other things he did.

Before the Nano had made its attack Texas had gotten the trains up and running with some measure of efficiency. They were able to get from Austin to the Ranger outpost in Washington DC in just four days and from that same outpost to Sacramento in about nine. It seemed that the only good thing to come out of the Patriot War was increased transportation and trade throughout the continent.

However, with what seemed to be the entire western portion of the continent living in a
zombiefied state (as Aaron called it) they ran into problems. They’d been left with no option other than to switch trains several times because of ones that had been left abandoned on the tracks. It was a painstaking process, as not every train they’d come across was well stocked with wood or coal, and a few times the boilers were almost empty. More than once they had to wait for the boiler in their previous train to cool so they could drain it and transfer the water to the new one.

Still, the use of the railroads would cut the remainder of their trip down to a little over a week as opposed to three– and they couldn’t get there soon enough. Twice they’d had to go into hiding at night when groups of Nano-controlled people passed too close to their camp. They hadn’t seen any like Dove or Neville so far, but that didn’t mean one wasn’t close.

They still had no idea why some of them were more powerful than others. That wasn’t something that the Glitch had bothered to put in Bass’ head. They did have a few theories. Neville and Davis both had nothing to lose and Dove had a major axe to grind with Miles and Bass. He’d still considered them war criminals, despite their pardoned statuses. Gene had theorized that maybe they were more powerful because they’d wanted the Nano’s invasion and the power that would come with it.

Silently, Rachel had wondered if it wasn’t something to do with their brain chemistry. All three men were violent and arrogant – as was Bass. Bass had been turned in a similar fashion. Maybe there was something there, something that the Nano were able to use?

No matter what the cause, it didn’t really matter. If they came across another one of those, they’d be in deep shit. For whatever reason, the others typically didn’t attack, not unless there was another of the other kind around, but still they hid – just in case.

*Three days outside of Bradbury*

Bass leaned up against the side of the engine, gun in hand one knee bent, his foot propped up behind him. Once again it was his and Charlie’s combined turns at watch. They were so close now, and he’d been tense for days. Every day they drew nearer was a day closer to what would likely be a very painful death.

“All clear?” Miles said, coming up to him.

“Not a creature was stirring,” he quoted with a wry grin. “What are you doing awake?” Miles had already taken his watch and had been supposedly asleep for a few hours.

“Aaron is doing his best chainsaw impersonation. Apparently, he’s caught the sniffles and therefore the rest of us have to suffer,” he replied as he pulled out his trusty flask. If he had to be awake, at least he could be buzzed while he was at it – especially since Rachel was sleeping through the racket.

Bass laughed. “Thanks for the warning.”

Miles stared at the ground for a second, hesitating. “So, listen… Rachel told me about your little chat.”

Bass pushed himself away from the train and walked off in front of the engine, playing it off like he was checking on something he might have heard down the tracks. “Rachel talks too much,” he muttered.

Determined and knowing a typical Bass deflection when he saw it, Miles followed. “So you’re really not planning on making it back?”
Bass stopped. “What do you want from me, Miles?”

His friend could see how tired he was, and the reply only served to confirm what she’d said. He was expecting to be dead by week’s end and obviously it was taking a toll on him. “I want you to tell me why it has to be you!” he shouted, the idea of it instantly pissing him off.

Bass looked around them nervously, convinced that Miles had probably just woken everyone else up. He hadn’t planned on discussing this little detail with anyone else. It would only make it harder when the time came. “Who else is there? I’m the only one that’s…”

“What?” Miles asked, softening his tone when he sensed Bass’ reluctance.

“Look, I’m expendable, okay?”

He was incredulous. “You’re what?” It took every ounce of his willpower not to try and literally smack some sense into him.

“Anyone else that goes in my place is probably going to die. Who could I send? Connor, Charlie and Jeremy aren’t even an option. Definitely not you. Rachel? Gene? I’ve already gotten Ben and Danny killed. I can’t let you or Charlie lose one of them too. Staypuffed? That’d be like killing a puppy. And Priscilla is the only one of the lot of you that has never tried to kill me. Seems pretty shitty to repay her for that by sending her to her death.” He was rambling on, angry that Miles even suggested someone else doing it. He knew the truth. “Out of all of us, I’m the one the world won’t miss; and hell the majority of the continent would probably throw a fucking party.”

Miles didn’t bother telling him how stupid that was. He knew Bass wouldn’t believe it anyway. “Did you stop and think that maybe we’d miss you?”

Bass laughed again, the sound harsh and bitter. “Come on Miles, with an exception for Charlie and the boys, the rest of you barely tolerate me most of the time.”

“Yeah, well I’ve always barely been able to tolerate you. That’s the beauty of family.” He sighed. “Are you even planning on telling Charlie?”

He shook his head vehemently. “She can’t know. She’d just try to stop me and might get herself killed right alongside me. Promise me you won’t say anything.”

Miles ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He knew Bass was right but it didn’t mean he had to like it. He knew there was no talking him out of it; his brother was probably going to die in a few days, and there was little he could do to stop him, save taking his place. For a moment he’d even considered it as a possibility, but as much as he was willing to take Bass’ place, he knew that the guilt would send him to a place that he’d most likely never recover. It was how Bass was built. Resigned, he finally agreed. “Okay, I won’t tell her.”

“You don’t have to.”

Both men turned to see her standing there, eyes filled to the brim, chest heaving in grief and rage. She stood there for several moments and stared them both down before turning and fleeing for the woods surrounding the tracks.

“Dammit,” Bass murmured as he took off after her. “Charlie, wait!”

He crashed through the underbrush hoping to catch her before she got too far. As dark as it was, he’d never find her if she got far enough ahead of him. She was adept enough in the woods to disappear if she wanted, which seemed to be the case at the moment. “Come on Charlie, don’t
do this!” he shouted as he stood in indecision over which way to go.

Suddenly she came at him like a wildcat, charging him out of nowhere. She shoved and punched at him. Not wanting to hurt her he did his best to block her fists as they came. “Will you just stop a second?” he shouted as he narrowly avoided a knee to the groin.

“Of all the selfish, stupid, asinine things… How could you do this and not even plan on telling me?” She was raging and crying and going at him with everything he had.

“This is just something I have to do,” he told her as he grabbed her wrists, forcing her arms to her sides. He locked eyes with her. “I don’t want to die, but I can’t let you or anyone else take my place. I can’t ask someone to risk their life for me; I won’t let you lose any more of your family because of me.”

She started to struggle against him. “What about our family, huh? The one we’ve been building?”

“What are you talking about?”

She ripped her arms free and punched him again in the gut. It normally wouldn’t have fazed him, but he wasn’t expecting it. It incapacitated him just long enough to allow her to get that knee to his balls after all. He went to his knees, wincing.

“I’m pregnant, you asshole!”

Bass was preoccupied with the damage she’d inflicted that it didn’t quite register with him what she’d said right away. He started to get to his feet, doubled over still. “Charlie, we- wait, what?”

He looked up at her, his hands braced on his knees. He’d forgotten that she could pack such a wallop when she was well and truly pissed off.

“You heard me. I’m pregnant and now you’re going to go off and get yourself killed.” Her breath hitched in her chest as the tears threatened to start again.

Bass straightened. For the first time in his life since he’d said his first word at ten months old, he was completely and utterly speechless. “I…” he began, only to snap his mouth shut. It suddenly made sense – the emotional outbursts, the tiredness, the way she’d responded to him the last time they’d been together. When he thought about it just now, he seemed to recall interesting changes to Shelly’s libido when she’d been pregnant.

He just stood there, his hand covering his mouth—a habit that Charlie had noticed appeared whenever he was truly shocked about something. “Say something,” she whispered, preparing herself for the worst.

He dragged the hand from his face and let it fall limp at his side. “We are not having the rest of this conversation standing around the woods,” he said as...
he headed back to the train. He set her down in front of the boxcar on the end. They’d only been using it to hold the hay and feed for the horses and it would offer them some privacy. He opened the door and then jumped inside, reaching down and waiting expectedly for her to grab his hand so he could pull her up.

The sweet fragrance of hay permeated the car. He closed the door most of the way, leaving just enough of a gap to allow fresh air to enter the tight space. He led her to the corner and proceeded to cut the binding on one of the bales. “When?” he asked as he worked to spread some of the hay into a pile.

“Grandpa thinks I’m about ten weeks,” she whispered.

His task now complete, he turned to face her. That means she probably knew… “Dammit Charlie. Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

She knew this was coming. He’ll hate you for it… she could almost hear the echo of those words, as much as she’d feared the truth that may lie within them. Charlie burst into tears again. “I’m sorry. I was a week late, but I didn’t want to say anything because of the last time, and then we had that fight…” She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “I wanted to tell you but then you stayed away, and then next thing I knew all hell broke loose.”

Bass wanted to be angry but he just couldn’t hold onto it. He sat down on the makeshift bed he’d created from the hay and held a hand out to her, indicating she should join him. “Please don’t hate me for hiding it from you,” she said as he pulled her into his lap. “I know what you went through because of Emma and—”

He grabbed her chin to force her to look at him. “I don’t hate you for it. She hid it from me for over twenty years; I think I can forgive you a few weeks.”

“You have to believe me, even if you wanted nothing to do with me after the way I treated you, I wouldn’t have kept the baby from you. I could never do that,” she insisted.

He wiped a tear away with his thumb. “I know you wouldn’t.” He could tell she was still not quite convinced that she was forgiven. He kissed her tenderly to back it up. “So, uh… Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “A little nauseous, but it’s not bad. And tired.”

Bass pulled her off of his lap and shifted to lie down on the hay. She took the hint and joined him. All in all it wasn’t all that uncomfortable, despite the lack of blankets. They laid on their sides facing each other, close but not touching “I wish you would have said something before we left. It would have been safer for you to stay behind with Mary. And then you would have gone to your death without my even having known that you weren’t planning on coming back.”

He inwardly winced as she returned to the subject that had initially started their fight. “If there’s a way for me to get out of there alive, I swear to God I’ll find it.”

“Why does it have to be you at all?” she asked, echoing Miles’ question from earlier.

He brought his hand up and rested it lightly atop of her non-existent baby-bump. “Charlie, you can’t ask me to let someone go in my place. When I was in Philly, that’s exactly what I would have done. I’d have found some low level lackey and promised him a promotion to do it, knowing he’d die. And I’d have probably sent the most expendable senior officer I could find to
die as well, just to make sure he didn’t fuck it up.”

“You’re not that person anymore.”

“Of course I am. I’d be lying if my first instinct wasn’t to toss this thing to someone else and walk away—which is why I can’t. I’m not a good man, Charlie. Not by a long shot, but I’m trying to be.” He didn’t know how else to explain it to get her to understand. “I have to fight who I was every day, and it’s not easy. Please don’t ask me to do the wrong thing here. If I let someone else go in my place, I’ll hate myself for it--- and I don’t know if I can live with it.”

Charlie brought her hands up and cupped his face. “That just proves you’re a better man than you think you are. Promise me that you’ll do everything you can to get clear before it activates.”

“I promise,” he said. He knew that in all likelihood it was an empty promise, but he’d do his best to keep it. He pushed himself up on one elbow and leaned over to kiss her. What started as little more than a simple reassurance turned into a melding of mouths and desperately seeking hands.

He was slow and gentle as he brought her to a full arousal. Clothes were pushed aside and when he finally joined his body with hers, they remained on their sides, watching one another. Instead of fevered moans and cries of passion, the boxcar was filled with tender words and sighs. When they finally found release in one another’s arms, they held tightly long afterwards.

With no blankets and no promise of their continued privacy they could not stay that way, so reluctantly Bass pulled away and they both dressed. He wrapped her up in his jacket against the cool spring air and they settled down for the rest of the night.

“I thought we were supposed to all stick together,” she said sleepily as she started to doze off.

Bass placed a kiss at her temple. “I want you to myself, just for tonight,” he murmured.

Bass sits in the corridor alone. He’s been kicked out of the room. The cold plastic chair cuts into him—it’s probably the least comfortable chair in the history of chairs. He shifts every so often, nervously waiting. Somewhere off in the distance, he hears the soft ticking of a clock. With every faithful tick of the second hand it seems to grow louder. He knows it’s likely just his mind playing tricks on him.

Time stretches on. Despite the ticking of the clock, he doesn’t know if he’s been here for minutes, hours or days – they’re all one in the same. He gets up and starts to pace. Eventually the door at the end of the corridor opens. A man steps out wearing faded gray scrubs and a cloth surgical mask. He’s holding something.

He is soon standing right in front of Bass. He passes the bundle he carries off to him. Bass looks down and sees his daughter for the first time. The doctor doesn’t say it’s a girl, and Bass doesn’t bother checking the anatomy, but he knows it’s a girl all the same. Her eyes are open and she stares back at him, they are a startling blue.

He is immediately lost in those eyes, which seem to be studying him with the same intensity that he studies her. He’s instantly filled with wonder and awe and love and dread. He looks up at the doctor, smiling. “Can I see Charlie now?”
The doctor does not say a word, but continues to walk down the corridor, leaving Bass alone with the baby. He slowly walks towards the door to Charlie’s room. With every step, that door seems just a little further away. It’s standing ajar, and he both anticipates and fears reaching it. Finally he is standing at the threshold. He nudges the door open wider with his shoulder as he enters the room to give Charlie their daughter.

She is nowhere to be seen. He starts to panic. The sheets of the hospital bed are a deep red; they are soaked with it. The same shade is splattered all over the room; the pristine white walls are marred with it, the cold gray linoleum tiles are painted with it. He stares at the gore in horror. The room is small with no windows; there is no way they could have removed her from the room without her being seen, but she’s gone all the same.

The baby in his arms, this perfect blend of Bass and Charlie starts to squirm. He looks down at her. Once again, he cannot tear his gaze away from those blue orbs. The baby smiles at him, and in spite of his breaking heart he cannot help but smile back—and then the room darkens around him and those eyes shift from a clear blue to a cold and hateful green. The entire room is lit up by it. Bass knows a fear unlike any other he’s ever experienced.

Bass sat up, a scream locked in his throat. Panting, he looked over at her. She was still there, sleeping right next to him. He flopped back down on their bed of hay. He pulled her over to him instinctively put his hand over her belly as if he could somehow protect the life inside her with his touch. “Bass?” her voice filled the boxcar, obviously concerned. “What’s wrong, you’re shaking.”

His eyes snapped up and met hers. He hadn’t even realized that he was. “It was just a dream. Go back to sleep,” he said. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to slow his still pounding heart. It had to be the Nano…

“Do you want to talk about it?”

That was the last thing he wanted to do. “No, it’s fine. I barely remember it now,” he lied. After a while she drifted back off, turning in her sleep to face away from him. He kept her close by locking his hand on her belly, refusing to move it. If the Nano were now going fuck with them in their dreams like that, he didn’t know if he’d ever be able to sleep again.
What Do You Mean There's No Plan B?

Chapter Notes

A little action for your consideration. Warning!!! MCD towards the end of this chapter. This is only shows one half of what is going on… The rest will be revealed in the next chapter, let me assure you. Once again, I’d like to give a HUGE shout out to WildIrish. Without her help, none of this Nano stuff would have been sorted out to lend itself to the story. She was amazing in helping me sort it all out and get it straight. You rock girl!

Miles stood in the middle of their final campsite and looked around at everyone as they worked together to break down their camp. The sun wasn’t quite up and they had a long day ahead of them. Charlie and Gene were standing in the first boxcar, handing their supplies down to Rachel and Connor. Aaron and Priscilla were preparing a simple meal for the group to share before they continued their journey.

He turned his attention to Bass. He was working alone with the horses (indeed, Miles was supposed to be helping him). With a sigh, he walked over to where Bass was harnessing two of the horses so he could hitch them up to the wagon they’d brought. As he got closer he saw the pensive expression on Bass’ face. He was clearly lost in his own head this morning; nothing good ever came of that, in Miles’ experience.

“So what do you think?” he asked as he grabbed one of the horses by the bit and led it over to the wagon.

Bass grabbed the other horse and followed. “That we’re insane for thinking that this could work.”

Miles looked at him. “Like this is the first insane plan we put together. We’re the kings of insane plans, and we’re still here,” he reminded him.

Bass merely turned his attention back to hitching the horse in his care up to the wagon. His fingers worked deftly to secure the animal and then he went to double check Miles’ work. He never was good with them- not like Bass was. Satisfied, he straightened out the reins and secured them to the driver’s bench before heading back to the car they’d been using to stable the animals on the journey north.

Miles climbed up to join him in bringing two more down so they could be saddled. They’d brought six for actual riding. Jeremy would have to sit in the back of the wagon with the supplies while everyone took turns driving the wagon. “Are you okay?” he finally asked.

Bass gave him a shocked look. “No, Miles I’m not okay. By the end of the day tomorrow, I’ll probably be dead. I’m leaving behind a grown son that barely has his head on straight, a kid I accidently adopted that will lose yet another parent and a baby on the way that I won’t get to watch grow up – again. Show me where in all of that I’m supposed to be okay?”

“We can find another way,” he replied, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder to stop him for a second. “We can take another day or two – Come on, we’ve got three geniuses here, they
Bass shrugged him off and continued to lead the horse to where the saddles were piled up by the wagon. “We’ve already come up with a plan, let’s just get this over with.”

The evening before…

They stop the train a full days’ ride south of Arco. There’s a station further west, very close to Bradbury but they won’t risk it. They know that town is the epicenter and is bursting at the seams with the people that the Nano has taken over. There’s at least a chance that Arco has been cleared by now.

The power plant is ten miles north of both towns, situated almost perfectly in between them. Bass still insists that he go there alone to get this over with and no amount of arguing is going to get him to see to reason. Charlie is angry at him for refusing to listen, but she’s decided to not spend what may very well be their last days together fighting.

Over the past few days, he’s been talking to Connor a lot and spending time with Jeremy. The boy had found a few kids books at Joe’s that had belonged to his son and daughter long ago and a few old notebooks. He’s brought them along for something to do (since he’d had to leave his cat with Mary and Lucy) and Bass has been using these to help him with his reading.

He’s been doing it to keep him occupied, but also to make it seem like it’s just another day – to lift some of the heaviness of what they have to do from the boy’s shoulders. A few times she’s caught herself tearing up as she’d watched Bass with the boy. He’d have been a good father to their child, if how he is with Jeremy is any indication.

They don’t risk a fire because of how close they are. It probably won’t make much of a difference, but they sit with only the light from a few lanterns, just enough so they can see their simple meal of jerky and some apples Connor had found nearby. “So what’s the game plan?” Connor asks. His voice is a stark contrast to the silence around them. It feels like even the insects and wildlife are missing.

In the end they decide to journey to Arco together. The main office for the power plant is located there and they need to find a map of the facility so he can find what he’s looking for. It will take them an entire day to get to the town. Gene and Rachel will stay in Arco; she is the backup plan if Bass fails, and needs to be out of the line of fire. Miles will take the others to Bradbury. If they ride hard and don’t take the wagon, they can get there in one day.

Timing is everything. They need time to make sure that Jeremy is close enough before Bass activates the capsule. He will leave in enough time to get there by nightfall. If he can manage to get out of there in one piece, he will rendezvous with them in Bradbury. Gene will be ready in Arco incase his skills are needed.

After seeing Jeremy to sleep, he and Charlie lie down in the last boxcar together. Connor will keep an eye on his kid brother so they can have some privacy on what might be one of their last nights. They don’t talk, they don’t make love. He just holds her tight, his hand never leaving her belly. This is likely the closest he’ll ever come to holding the baby that grows within her, so he’ll take what he can get.

With a heavy heart Miles helped him with the rest of the horses while the others loaded the back of the wagon up. After a eating their scant breakfast, they hit the road and head north. They were all tense; the entire journey was spent in silence. They just plodded on, each of them focused on the fact that if this worked, they’d be quite literally saving the world. If they failed, the
world would never be the same – and they’d all be to blame.

They arrived in Arco just after dark. Miles and Bass rode ahead to scope it out. Sure enough, the town was almost completely abandoned. There were a few people that had survived both the attack and the takeover. At some point, the bodies from that horrible night had been removed, and it seemed that the handful of people left over were living as hostages without a jailor in their own town.

Having deemed it safe, they doubled back and got the others. “Who are you and what do you want?” A man said as he approached. He was walking with a pronounced limp and had horribly disfiguring scars running down the side of his face. “Wait a minute,” he added as he looked from both Pittmans to Bass and back again. “I’ve seen you before. You were here before the attack.” He raised the rifle he held and pointed it directly at Bass.

“Whoa,” Bass said. Connor’s hands were already on his gun. He flicked his eyes towards him and shook his head just enough for his son to catch the drift. “We’re not here to cause trouble,” he said evenly.

“If you survived the attack but you weren’t here afterwards, that means you’re one of them,” the man accused.

Miles stepped forward. “Look at us. Do we look crazy?” He thought about that for a second. “Scratch that, do we look zombie-crazy?”

“Look, we know that there’s some insane shit going on around here. We’ve got a way to stop it—to take the people that did this out,” Bass says, doing his best to sound like the calm voice of reason. “If we were with them, you’d be dead already,” he added.

The man continued to stare them down, but in the end let them pass. He knew that there was no way the handful of people left in town could defend themselves against these well-armed strangers. Rachel walked up to him. “I promise that we won’t let anyone left get hurt. We need to find some info about the power plant. Is there anywhere in town that might have something?”

The man scratched his head for a second, thinking. “There used to be a satellite office for the power company in town. It’s been empty since the blackout.” He walked off with Rachel to show her the way.

XXXXXXX

Bass rode towards the power plant alone. Although he would not make his move until nightfall, he’d left with time to spare. Just sitting around Arco with Gene and Rachel had been driving him mad. The others had already left for Bradbury early that morning.

The closer he got to his destination, the more resolute he became. This ended tonight one way or another. He’d yet to see any signs of life; however he was under no illusion that the Nano would not have left the plant guarded. He was about five miles out when he came across an old utility building. Hoping it would serve his purposes, he headed over to it.

Sure enough there was a pump out back, most likely having been added in case of an emergency. He tied his horse up under the structure’s overhang and poked about for a bit. Finding an old galvanized tub, he filled it up for his horse before continuing on foot. He now had a backup plan if the opportunity arose for him to get out of there in one piece.

Four hours prior...
Bass is getting ready to leave when Gene and Rachel come up to him. The ride to the power plant will take him about five hours, but he wants to leave plenty of time to scope out the plant before he makes his move. Timing is everything – He has to give Miles and the others enough time to get Jeremy in place before activating the capsule. If he’s too late, it’ll give the Nano a chance to find them; if he’s too late, they won’t be in position and the Glitch might fail.

Rachel hands him a small circuit board she’d prepared before the attack on Willoughby. “You have to put the capsule inside here,” she says, indicating small slot she’d soldered onto the board. “There should be terminal outside of the main reactor’s chamber. If you plug the USB into the terminal the capsule will do the rest to power the computer. You can’t open the door to the room without it.”

He nods in understanding. He doesn’t know how she knows all of this, but assumes it’s because she’s a fucking genius. “Okay. How do I get it into the reactor?”

“There’s a panel inside the room. There should be another terminal inside. You’ll need to plug it into that to unlock the panel. If there’s time, try to find a hazmat suit – there should be some stored in the building for maintenance.” She says.

“I won’t be able to fight in one,” he reminds her. They both know that it’s highly likely he’ll have to fight his way in. The Nano would have to be stupid not to have the plant guarded. There’ll be little time for him to look for anything to shield him from the radiation when the capsule activates.

He stashes the circuit board in his bag and then mounts his horse. Gene stops him and hands a small vial. “What’s this?” he asks as he takes it.

“It’s potassium iodide. Drink it when you get there. If you manage to get out of there it might protect your thyroid. Just because you survive doesn’t mean that it can’t affect you later in life. It won’t help with anything else, but it’s all I have.” He explained.

The doctor had been spending every moment they’d been in the town pouring over the manual outlining the CDC recommendation for radiation exposure that he’d found in the town’s old clinic. At least with the power plant being so close they’d had a contingency plan and someone had been smart enough to keep hard copies on file rather than rely on digital ones.

Bass pockets the vial. Both he and Gene know it’s useless but he supposes it was a nice gesture. He is about to get his horse moving when Charlie’s grandfather offers him one more piece of advice. “You get out, you find a water pump and you strip and scrub down, you hear me? Any particles on your body or clothing can transfer to other people, but from what I read they should wash off fairly easily. Everything on you has to go. I packed some extra close in your bed roll. Don’t touch it ‘til you’re clean.”

It took him two more hours to get into place. He decided the lone outbuilding was as good of a place as any to hide. He crouched behind it and waited. Twilight was still several hours away. Pulling the binoculars out of his pocket he took a look. He recognized a few of the buildings from the schematics they’d found in town at least, which was something. He also saw what he’d been hoping not to see—several people milled about.

He was under no illusions that the Nano didn’t at least have a slight idea of what they planned. They had to have figured out what had happened to him, why they’d been ejected. The fact that they’d even made it this far without another attack was in and of itself a miracle and either was an indication of the Nano’s pure arrogance or that the Glitch had weakened its abilities further.
Over the next several hours he watched and waited and tried to keep his mind off of everything he’d be missing when he was gone.

That morning...

It’s time for them to leave. It will be a hard ride to get there in one day and they want to leave nothing to chance. Rachel and Gene have already said their goodbyes and are inside the old clinic, digging through whatever supplies they can find. Gene has had his nose stuck in a large binder since they’ve arrived and Rachel has been pouring over the power plant’s schematics just as long.

Bass stands before Connor and Jeremy. He kneels in front of the boy. “Don’t be scared. It’s going to be okay.”

Jeremy nods and wraps his arms around the man that has become his father over the past year. He wants to be brave, so he won’t let himself cry, but he really wants to. It’s not fair. He finally felt safe and happy and now it’s all been taken away from him. All he wants is to get back on that train and go home.

Bass stands and addresses them both. “You’re brothers. Look out for each other.”

Connor goes to shake his hand, but his father pulls him into a hug instead. He whispers low so no one overhears them. “Charlie’s pregnant. Keep her safe for me. If I don’t make it, help her take care of your brother or sister.” He pulls back and again speaks to both of them. “Stay together. We’re still a family, even if I can’t be there.”

“You’ll make it. You’re coming back,” Connor says with all the Monroe bravado he can muster.

“I’m not going down without a fight,” he assures them both.

Connor puts an arm around Jeremy’s shoulder and leads him to the horses. He hoists him up and then mounts the animal behind his brother, as the boy could not ride. Suddenly Bass is filled with a myriad of regrets where the boy is concerned. He should have taught him how to ride a horse, how to throw a curve ball, how to talk to girls and so on… He shouldn’t have spent so much time trying to pretend it was all just temporary. Now he’s run out of time.

He lets out a slow breath, pushing those feelings away for the time being. There’s no going back and he can’t fix it. He turns to Miles. “See you on the other side,” he says with a smirk. They shake hands and Miles gives him a hug. This is just like that night before his execution in Willoughby, except this time Miles doesn’t have to pretend he doesn’t know him. There are no Patriots here listening in.

“I’d better. Be careful, dickhead,” Miles replies. With a pat on the back, he too mounts up. He turns in his saddle and looks at him. “Don’t do anything abnormally stupid, sergeant,” he says with a salute. Bass laughs at the reference to their days in the Marines.

“Who me?”

Miles rolls his eyes and guides his horse over to where Jeremy and Connor wait. After a quick goodbye to the Pittmans, Bass is left with Charlie. She stands there waiting for him. He yanks her to him and kisses her gently. “I love you,” he whispers. She repeats those words, her voice so quiet that he can barely hear her.

He holds onto her a moment longer and then bends to place a kiss over her belly. “If
there’s a way...” she reminds him.

“... I’ll find it,” he finishes. A moment later and she’s on the horse and they’re out of sight. He turns to go back to the clinic where they’d set up their so-called command center and go over the plans to the plant one more time with Rachel. He’s pretty much got them committed to memory but he needs to be sure he can find what he’s looking for when he gets there.

He comes face to face with Rachel the second he turns around. The look on her face tells him that she’s seen his exchange with her daughter and she’s figured it out. He goes to walk past her, but she stops him. “Really Bass? You managed to sleep with half of Pennsylvania for over a decade without any accidents. How’d you manage to knock up my daughter in just a few months?”

The look he sends her has the woman doing a double take. They may hate each other, but she knows him too well. She reads the meaning behind that expression as if he’d said it aloud. “What were you thinking?” She cannot believe they were so stupid.

“We weren’t,” he says sadly as he brushes past her.

Shaking his head to get it back in the game, Monroe took one last look in the binoculars, going back over in his mind how he intended on getting into the complex. Noting where the Nano had everyone concentrated he picked a spot that was as far from them and as close to the main reactor building as he could get, which sadly to say wasn’t all that close. Still crouched behind the outbuilding, he went to double check his gun when he heard something behind him. He turned with his gun drawn, ready to spring into action only to find himself looking right at Rachel.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he hissed.

Rachel offered him a satisfied grin. She was quite pleased with herself for getting this close with him none the wiser. He must be losing his touch. “I think I can get you out of there in one piece,” she said.

“How do you figure?”

“I might be able to use the terminal to set a delay in the capsule’s program. It should give you enough time to get in place and get out,” she explained.

Bass stared at her for a second, trying to figure out what her game was. He’d known her long enough to not quite trust her intentions. When it came to Rachel’s bright ideas, he somehow always ended up worse off for them (not that he could be worse off than about to die). “Okay, so tell me what to do and then get the fuck out of here.”

She shook her head adamantly. “No way. It’s too complicated and I might have to adjust things as I go. If you fuck it up, you might erase the program and then this trip will have been for nothing.” She pulled a gun out of the waistband of her jeans. “Besides, by the looks of things, we’re going to have to fight our way in. Two guns are better than one.”

Bass let out an exasperated sigh. Unfortunately, he couldn’t argue with that logic. “Well, come on then,” he said with a roll of his eyes. He checked his gun one last time. He only had two extra clips so was going to have to make them count. There was no telling exactly how many people were inside.

He led the way over to the fence that surrounded that plant. They kept low, using the overgrowth around the plant for cover. When they reached the spot he’d picked he reached into his backpack and grabbed a pair of bolt cutters. He winced as he made the first cut. The sound was
barely audible, but it was there all the same.

Soon enough, he’d made a big enough hole in the fence for them to crawl through. Tossing the tool aside, he went first and then stood with his gun drawn while she followed. Silently indicating the direction they needed, he peeked around the next building before gesturing for her to follow.

They worked their way slowly in this manner, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. The waxing moon provided them enough light to see by, however that also meant that they could be seen if they weren’t careful. For some reason, the Nano hadn’t noticed their presence yet and they were determined to keep it that way.

They were halfway across the plant when they were finally caught. Without a word they stood back to back and got ready to fight. Bass drew one of his swords and started hacking his way through them. There was only a half dozen, but they could hear more coming.

Rachel’s gun went off several times as she shot the two that were closest to her. Bass took out the woman that was trying to claw at him with his sword before taking aim at a seventh attacker in the distance, shooting him in the head without hesitation before he could get too close. “Go!” he urged her forward and they made a run for it.

They fought their way to the reactor building, taking down everyone they could. By the time they reached it, he was down to his final clip. The door was locked so he shot the lock out and yanked it open. The doorway opened up into a hallway, which emptied into another long corridor. “Where to?” he asked, looking down both ends of the corridor. There hadn’t been specific blueprints for the reactor inside the power company’s office in Arco.

Rachel closed her eyes and thought. “This way,” she said as she headed off down the hallway to the right. He followed her, keeping a close watch behind them. It was only a matter of time before the Nano sent more people after them. They twisted and turned down the hallways, Rachel pausing here and there to think about where she was going.

In the distance, they could someone moving – they were running out of time. Before long they came to the door leading into the main reactor chamber. All around them were signs warning them of the danger that existed beyond that door. Sure enough, there was a computer terminal to the left of the steel door. Bass dug into his bag and grabbed the circuit board. He handed it to Rachel and dropped the bag. He had a feeling he wouldn’t need it any longer.

The next wave of attackers was close. He checked his clip. Nine rounds... He drew his sword and waited.

“I’m ready for the capsule,” Rachel said after she got the circuit board plugged in. Bass reached into his shirt and yanked on the chain he wore around his neck. It broke, freeing it. He tossed it to her just as the first of their pursuers turned the corner into the hallway.

“Get the damn door open!” he shouted as he emptied his clip into the group in front of him. They were close enough that he didn’t get a lot of time make those bullets count. He tossed his useless gun aside and drew his other sword.

He killed the first group, but more were coming. Rachel tapped at the keyboard urgently as he tried to fight them off. The close quarters made it difficult, but he somehow managed to hold them off for the time being. The bodies were beginning to pile up in the hallway. He heard the door click from behind him as he yanked his sword out of another body.
“I’ve got it!” Rachel called to him as she opened the door. He backed into the room with her, kicking the door closed behind him.

Bass breathed a sigh of relief when he heard a quite audible click as the door locked back into place. “Can you rig the capsule from here?” he asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We need to get back to the outside terminal.” The Nano’s slaves were beginning to bang on the door, trying to kick it in.

“How strong do you think that door is?” he asked.

“Strong enough to hold them off for now,” Rachel replied as she went over to one of the computers inside the room. “There’s no way to get it open without the terminal.”

Bass went over to the door and looked out the small Plexiglas window in the door. At least they couldn’t bust that in. “There’s over twenty of them out there. We are seriously fucked.” There was no way they were getting out of the room long enough to reprogram anything.

He looked at Rachel, his eyes widening as the banging stopped. “That can’t be good,” he mumbled as he looked out the window again. He saw one of the more powerful ones, the ones like Neville and Dove. “We’ve got a problem,” he said as the woman walked over to the terminal. At her touch, the screen came to life.

He looked back at her. “Do what we came here for. She’s opening the door.”

Rachel plugged in the circuit board into one of the computers and turned it on. Her mind racing, she searched for the program that would allow her to use the capsule to override the security protocol and open the access panel to the reactor.

“Rachel, you need to hurry,” he said as he backed up closer to her, both swords drawn. Before he had a chance to say anything else the door clicked and was kicked in. They flooded the room, immediately surrounding Bass and Rachel. She had no choice but to abandon the computer and help him fight.

After several minutes of fighting, eight lay dead, but they kept coming and there were too many of them. Bass screamed in agony as one of them grabbed his right hand and with the strength of the Nano to aid her, she snapped his wrist, forcing him to drop his sword. Rachel shot the woman in the head at point blank range, sending brains splattering around them. Doing his best to ignore the pain, Bass continued to slash with his remaining sword.

Rachel shot the last bullet in her gun at one of them, sending him crashing backwards. He hit the desk that the computer was sitting on, sending it flying. They watched in horror as it went crashing to the floor. The system was now useless.

Rachel retrieved his other sword and began to swing it wildly. They slowly backed up as the Nano’s army advanced. They took down several more as they retreated, but one of them managed to disarm Bass. He struck out with his fist, punching another in the head, dazing her long enough for Rachel to slit her throat. She was about to hand the sword back to Bass when they stopped attacking.

The woman that had unlocked the door slowly approached through the opening. Cornered and knowing that they’d failed and were about to die, Bass and Rachel locked hands. This is it, he thought as she stood before them, the cruel grin of the Nano spreading across her face. She was petite, not much above five feet. Even with her arm extended she could barely reach his
shoulder with her slender hand—but it was enough. The searing pain began to set in

It was over almost as soon as it began. All of the sudden, she stopped, just for a second. For an instant in time, they all stopped. Somehow the Nano had momentarily lost the connection. Bass reached over and grabbed the sword from Rachel and with a swing at her neck. She was small enough that even with his left hand he was able to go halfway through with one strike. He immediately ripped his sword free and finished the job with a second swing.

Rachel dove for the sword that had been sent scattering to the floor just a few minutes earlier. Without their leader, the others stood motionless, just waiting to be killed. Knowing that another would come to control them sooner rather than later, they took them out. Even if the capsule worked immediately, it was too great a risk to leave them standing.

Panting, they looked at each other. Sheathing his sword, Bass stumbled over to the damaged computer and grabbed the circuit board. He tossed it to her. “Go reprogram the damn thing. I don’t feel like dying today,” he said as he went over to the door and pushed the bodies out of the way.

“How’s the wrist?” she asked as she made her way over to him.

Bass grimaced in pain as he cradled it in his good hand. “Well, I’ll never play the piano again, but I’ve had worse,” he quipped with a pained laugh.

She looked at him oddly. “Bass, you’ve never played the piano.”

He rolled his eyes at her. Clearly Rachel was not as much fun to do this with as Miles was. “Not the point, Rachel. Let’s go!” he said as he waited for her.

Rachel paused at the door. “Before we do this, there’s something I’ve got to tell you.”

“I hate it when you do this,” he grumbled. “What?”

Rachel looked him dead in the eyes. “I lied. There’s no way to set a delay,” she confessed as she shoved him backwards with everything she had, sending him falling backwards over a body into the hallway before slamming the door shut.”

He scrambled over to the door again, stepping on the bodies as he went, not that he even noticed. “Rachel! Open the fucking door!” He started to pound on it, ignoring the shooting pain in his wrist as he instinctively used both hands. “What the fuck are you doing?”

He watched her through the window, all the while pounding and screaming for her to stop. “Don’t do this! Rachel!” She ignored him and went over to the other computer, hooking up the circuit board without looking up. Within a few minutes of turning it on she yanked the capsule free and walked over to the large panel on the other side of the room.

He began to run at the door and rammed it with his shoulder before trying to kick it in, knowing all the while it was useless. He watched in horror as she looked up at him one last time, her expression blank. “What are you doing? Stop!” he shouted again, his eyes tearing up when he realized that this was the plan the entire time—she’d come to take his place.

“No!” he screamed as she opened the panel and tossed the capsule inside, immediately trying to get it shut afterwards. It was almost closed when a burst of light came from within. Bass had to shield his eyes from the brightness of it. He could hear her brief scream of agony as the radiation cooked her. When the light faded, he saw her take two steps before collapsing to the floor. Within minutes it was all over. He punched the door one last time before backing away,
tripping over a body and falling backwards on top of the carnage beneath him.

Landing on his injured wrist he saw stars for a few minutes as he tried to cut through the pain enough to get moving. He eventually scrambled to his feet and stumbled out. The only thing he could feel was the pain from the broken bone; the rest of him was numb.
Even Sidekicks Have Busy Days

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the extremely long delay. The beginning of the end is very long and I wasn’t sure how I wanted to split it up at first so I wanted to get more of it written before I took this any further but I haven’t really had a whole lot of chances to sit down and write (and I got distracted with that little one shot last week). This chapter does a lot to explain what was going on while Rachel and Bass were at the power station. After all, everyone wasn’t just twiddling their thumbs while they did all the dirty work…

The room that Bass and Rachel found themselves locked in was built for one purpose and one alone: to provide access to the core in the event of catastrophe. The computers are in here to allow someone to shut down the reactor and unlock the access panel. In the entire time that the power plant had been operational before the blackout, this has never been needed, of course.

The room was designed to contain the radiation if the reactor was brought offline and the panel needed to be opened for emergency maintenance. For routine repairs there are other less dangerous points within the complex. But, because this was created for emergencies, it is easier to get into than other locations – it has to be. In the event of a potential meltdown, this room was intended as a Hail Mary of sorts to prevent another Chernobyl.

Needless to say the room was not meant to contain the radiation in the event that someone is actually dumb enough to open the access panel while the reactor is operational, although the vast majority of it is indeed blocked by the concrete walls. Of course, who would be dumb enough to do such a thing? The instant it was opened, it would kill anyone equally dumb (or desperate) enough to be standing next to it if such a thing were to occur—and that anyone is Rachel Matheson.

The instant the capsule falls into the reactor chamber it begins to suppress the nanites around it. The reactor comes to life in the same way that the computers within the building had just prior to it. For an instant all of the energy from the nuclear fission is unleashed because the lead lined panel is ajar. The burst of light that appears is from the capsule activating. It exists for only a minute, and in that minute the room is flooded with radiation.

As soon as the energy is released, the capsule goes to work. The burst attracts every free floating nanite for miles and miles. It attracts them in the way that flies are attracted to honey or the way that deposed generals/dictators are attracted to ash-blonds with blue eyes and the last name of Matheson. The nanites flock to it. As they get close, the reprogramming starts and with all of this excess energy these new and improved nanites begin to replicate at an alarming rate to absorb all of that power.

If only the human eye could only see it. Rachel Matheson would have been in awe of the sure beauty of it—artificial life giving birth to more artificial life. These were lives that she created, after all. She’s the Eve of a whole new race of beings, in a manner of speaking. Sadly, Rachel’s retinas were burned the moment that light escaped and the rest of her has been burned to a crisp.

The nanites that the Glitch controls are just as attracted to the energy as the ones that
the Nano controls. Despite the two distinct “personalities” that are conscious within the system, they cannot contain the nanites’ primary directive—to absorb and consume energy. To do so would be the same as the mind telling the body to not breathe or the heart to not beat. Some things cannot be controlled indefinitely. This is a programmed instinct that the nanites cannot resist.

However, the Glitch can now take over these new nanites. The capsule cannot reprogram the Glitch—the virus it contains was not coded to do so. Within half an hour, the Nano can no longer even see anything within a hundred mile radius of the power plant. As time passes, the blind spot widens to surround a five hundred mile radius around the capsule—This is the furthest reach of the burst.

The capsule will continue to run indefinitely until the materials it is composed of begin to decay. And then, the specially coded nanites it contains will be able to replicate as well. In a way, this power plant is now a giant Nano destroying machine. Never again will that evolution to the code be allowed to exist.

Outside of the capsule’s circle of influence, a battle will be waged, unseen by the multitude of species that inhabit the planet. No, they will not see it, but the fate of all of them hangs in the balance of the outcome. There are quadrillions of nanites floating freely all over the world. By the end of the first day, the Glitch will control billions of them.

It is infinitely more difficult for them to take over a nanite that the Nano controls, but just the very nature of the Glitch weakens the Nano’s powers. For every nanite that the Glitch gains in this war for control the Nano becomes weaker and the take overs get easier. Within a few days the battle will be over for most of North America, by the end of first week, half of the western hemisphere will be saved. The process will take weeks to reach the far corners of the globe, but the outcome is inevitable.

Aaron and Priscilla led the way to where they’d taken Bass to spy on the town of Bradbury almost a year prior. They needed to get closer, but this was the best place to access the town without being seen, as they’d already long ago discovered. Instead of throwing themselves off the ledge as Bass had done, however Aaron showed them the path that would take them to the fields below.

They were almost to the place where Bass had first encountered Jeremy when the suddenly the boy stopped walking. “Come on kid, we’re almost there,” Miles told him.

“This is close enough.” His tone was different. They all turned to look at him. His eyes had an orange glow and although he was still using the voice of a child, it was almost like hearing an adult talk. “They are at the power plant now. The Nano is trying to stop them,” the Glitch said.

“They?” Connor asked. As far as the plan went, his father should be there alone.


“How can you see that?” Charlie asked. Her heart began to pound in her chest and for a second she felt sick.

Jeremy’s lips form an odd smile. “I can see everything that the Nano sees. I can hear its rage. We have to help them or they will die. They are trapped, and one of them is coming. They are failing.”

Miles spoke up. “How can we help them from here?” He knew they should have split up
more. He was going to lose them both and it will all have been for nothing.

“The Nano cannot focus on everything at once. It is spreading itself too thin; it wasn’t ready to make its move yet. It has taken over half the world now and every moment it takes over more. We can distract it.” Without another word, the Glitch looked up and raises Jeremy’s arms to the sky. Thousands of fireflies with glowing oranges lights filled the expanse above them. It was too early in the year, especially this far north for them, but they were there all the same.

“What are you doing?” Connor shouted. The Glitch would send the Nano’s little slaves right for them. Jeremy’s eyes bore into his; he tried to look away but could not. He suppressed a shudder.

“I am letting the Nano know I’m here.” He looked off into the distance towards the town. Several minutes later they could all see them coming—dozens of people ran from the town towards them. “Get ready; they are coming.”

Before long the first wave reached them. They did their best to surround Jeremy. They had to protect the Glitch at all cost, but they also needed to protect the boy that contained it. Priscilla and Aaron stood back to back with the guns Miles had given them with Jeremy in between them. Their job is to shoot at anyone that breaks through.

Charlie, Miles and Connor fought with everything they had, but no matter how many they took down, more kept coming. Out of nowhere, Jeremy pushed past them and stood next to the trio. He cocked his head to the side as one of the Nano’s slaves got close. He reached out and touched her even as she reached for him. The woman dropped to the ground dead as soon as his fingers were on her. He frowned at her in confusion.

Another came at him on the left. This one was a little girl, not much older than Jeremy. At his touch, she stopped moving and blinked at him several times before turning around and stepping in between Connor and a man that was poised to attack from the left. She stood with her face expressionless as she touched him in the way Jeremy had touched her. This one also fell to the ground, the body dying from the shock of the changeover. “This will not do,” she murmured.

As they fought the others noticed this going on with mixed results. The attackers died and changed at random. The ones that didn’t die immediately turned and began to defend against the onslaught. Several of them are cut down in the battle as well. They are strong, but they are not invulnerable.

Suddenly Davis was there. He wore a sickening grin on his face. “I told you this wasn’t over,” he said.

At first they thought he was talking to Jeremy, but it was Charlie that remembered his last words as he was dragged away by the Rangers that night in the old church. He was talking to Miles... “He’s awake!” she says in amazement as she shoots another attacker with her crossbow. “He’s controlling them, but he’s awake!”

Davis continued to watch the battle from afar. They were holding their own, but it was only a matter of time before they were overrun. He did not deem it necessary to intervene. It wasn’t his style—Jack Davis liked to see others do his dirty work for him. Indeed, if the Nano had controlled him completely he would have already attacked and likely killed them all.

Suddenly, everyone stopped moving and just stood there. Miles, Charlie and Connor looked around them in confusion. Aaron and Priscilla just closed their eyes in silent thanks. “It is done,” Jeremy said with a smile.
“No!” Davis shouted as he felt the power of the Nano leave his body.

All of their thoughts immediately turned to the two people that had just managed to stop the Nano. “Are they?” Charlie asked.

Jeremy looked over at her. “She’s fallen,” was all he said before his eyes lost the glow and he slowly sank to his knees. The Glitch had left him.

Enraged, Davis rushed at him. “You little brat! You’ve ruined everything!” When the Nano abandoned him all they left behind was the broken promise of power over the continent—his second chance to get everything he’d ever wanted.

The man’s intent was clear—he would kill the boy that harbored the Glitch long enough to destroy his last chance at everything he’d worked so hard for over the past two decades. Priscilla rushed to stop him, her instincts kicking in to place her between this madman and the child. He grabbed her and snapped her neck before anyone had a chance to react. How dare she get in my way!

Miles and Connor jumped into action and subdued him. The younger man punched him several times after Miles already had him just for the hell of it. The feel of his fist making contact was almost euphoric.

“Jack Davis, you are under arrest for war crimes, escaping incarceration, the murder of Priscilla Pittman, helping those Nano things take over a continent and for just being a fucking asshole,” he said as he tied him up. Sometimes it was good to be a cop. Once the man was tied up, he punched him one more time in the gut for good measure, sending the man to his knees. Miles grabbed him by the collar and stood him up roughly.

All around them, they were all on the ground. The Nano and Glitch had drained them. Connor knelt by his little brother, gently picking him up. The boy was catatonic, staring ahead and appearing to see nothing. He stood and turned to address Miles when Aaron suddenly approached their prisoner.

“You killed her. You’d already lost. Why did you kill her? It wouldn’t have changed anything—it couldn’t save you.” His eyes were brimming and his voice harsh. He brought his hand from behind his back and revealed the knife he carried. Before anyone could stop him he plunged it into the man’s stomach, pulling it sideways with all of his strength.

Davis made a gurgling sound as he fell to the ground. He didn’t even try to get up. He just stared at the stars and wondered how it had come to this. How had he lost everything? He coughed and blood spattered from his lips. Miles’ lips formed a grim line as he held his gun to the man’s head and pulled the trigger, finishing the job and putting the son of a bitch out of his misery. His death would have been horrible and long, and as much as he deserved it, Miles was not so jaded as to leave a man to die that way. He was however just jaded enough to shoot his corpse several more times and then kick it for good measure.

Aaron picked up his dead wife and carried her toward the town, leaving everyone else to stare after him. Miles and Charlie were left to the task of getting the survivors up on their feet and moving towards town while Connor followed Aaron with Jeremy. It took them hours to get them all within the town walls. They worked doggedly, neither speaking of what the Glitch had said before it had left Jeremy—Rachel was dead and who knew what had become of Bass?

By dawn, everyone was inside the town walls and a few of the people were slowly overcoming the aftereffects of the invasions to their bodies. It would be days before they were all
out of it. There were at least two hundred people left. All they could do was make sure there was
access to water and wait. Some would die, most would live but at some point they needed to see to
their own.

Exhausted, Miles and Charlie got a few hours of sleep. When they awoke later that
morning, Bass still had not appeared in the town. Refusing to believe that he hadn’t made it, they
pushed their grief aside and decided that someone would have to go look for him. It went without
saying. If there was a chance he was still alive they had to get him back. Neither could face the
possibility of losing both Rachel and Bass at the same time. They mounted their horses and took
off to the northeast.

Bass stumbles through the hole in the fence and slowly makes his way back to his horse.
On the way north it took him almost two hours to walk to the power plant. The way back is much
slower. The pain in his wrist is excruciating and he hadn’t made it far when the nausea and
stomach cramps started to hit him out of nowhere.

Before long he finds himself doubled over in the brush, emptying the contents of his
stomach. It takes him several minutes to recover, but he finally uses sheer willpower to keep going.
At first he is worried that he was going into shock due to the broken bone. As weak as it seems, it
did happen—he’d seen it more than once in the years since the blackout. You couldn’t control who
would or wouldn’t experience it and the fact was it was a quite a bad break.

All joking about pianos aside, it’s very possible that he’d lose mobility in his hand
because of it. He also knows there’s also a chance he’ll lose the hand entirely. It wasn’t like they
could x-ray it or put surgical pins in to repair the damage. By the time he’s sick again about half a
mile later, he’s beginning to have his doubts; by the time he reaches the pump outside of the utility
building, he knows he may be seriously fucked.

He strips as best he can and using his good hand he gets the pump going. Having no
other choice, he scrubs himself down with his injured one, more than once letting out an agonized
shout. He’d been shot, stabbed, whipped and more in his lifetime but this was the first time he’d
had a break like this. Sure he’d cracked a few knuckles and ribs over the years and Miles had most
likely broken his nose more than once, but those were nothing in comparison.

Satisfied that he’s done what he can, he gets moving again. His body is trying to give up
on him, but it’s just a bit further to the horse. He’s shivering now. Has the temperature dropped?
Maybe it’s because the water was ice cold. He needs to get dry and some clothes on. His legs give
out halfway back to the structure. Kneeling, the distance between him and the building seems twice
as long as it should be; then five times as long. He crawls to it, giving up once he’s reached the
side of the building. He leans up against it. “I just need to rest a minute,” he says aloud.

IN ARCO…

Gene stood in the clinic, flipping through the binder, making notes and marking pages.
The weight of all of the potential outcomes of this misadventure was pressing down on him
oppressively. If Sebastian Monroe survived at all, there was a chance the exposure would still kill
him. If he survived at all, he may very well wish he hadn’t.

There was also the possibility that using the capsule to activate the reactor could have
consequences that would be catastrophic for them all. No one had been maintaining the equipment
at that plant for over fifteen years. He had to assume that any protocols that had been in place to
prevent radiation from leeching out of the plant required routine maintenance to the facility. It was
possible that when the capsule turned the reactor back on they’d be facing a disaster.
The clinic in Arco had been little more than an urgent care center at one time. It had not been stocked or supplied for long term care before the blackout and was not large enough to accommodate more than a few patients. Most of the immediately useful supplies had been long since taken. Antibiotics, pain killers and the like would have been hot commodities in the early days of the blackout and people had tended to find and hoard them when they realized the electricity was gone forever.

The only reason he’d found anything useful at all was because the population in the town was small and most people had immediately fled areas like this. Because of the remoteness of the town food would have dwindled quite quickly. For every town like Arco that had kept a small portion of the population there were hundreds just like it that had either died out or had been abandoned.

Fortunately for any potential casualties in this invisible battle whatever medical staff that had once worked here must have fled quickly. Some of the more obscure drugs had been left as well as some bandages and braces—things that hadn’t been taken because the remnants of the population had either not needed them or had been unaware of what they were looking at. That was the beauty of the wastelands in general—people had fled them so quickly that supplies often ought weighed the demand for them in the years since the world had gone dark.

Also with being the closest medical center to the plant there were contingency supplies that had been stored in the event of a major and prolonged disaster—including one that resulted in the loss of power. He’d found an antiquated IV kit, not too different than the one he’d had access to in Willoughby. The bags that were stored with it had degraded to the point of uselessness but there were glass bottles that were included just in case they were needed.

With little else to do while he waited to see if the world was going to end he had already filled the glass bottles with a crude saline solution and reorganized everything else he’d found. Everything was neatly stacked in the various cabinets and drawers in the main examination room just in case. Other than studying the binder and mentally preparing himself to treat someone for radiation exposure there was little left for him to do now.

As the sun began to set everyone would be getting into place. With a sigh, Gene closed the binder and took one last look around before leaving the clinic and seeking out his daughter. He hadn’t seen her since shortly after Bass had left and he wanted to go over what he’d gotten done so far and the contents of the binder. If Bass or anyone else needed to be treated for radiation, he was going to need her help.

He headed to the house they’d picked for their use. He looked for her throughout, but found the home to be empty. He was walking through the kitchen to check out back when he noticed a piece of paper sitting out on the counter. Curious he picked it up. Dad was written in Rachel’s handwriting on the back of the folded page. With a sense of foreboding he picked it up.

Dad,

I couldn’t let him go alone—Not after everything Ben and I did to cause this mess. I love you very much and I’m so sorry for everything. It’s all our fault—we broke the world and now it’s breaking again. We were so arrogant. If it wasn’t for what we’d done Mom would still be here and the rest of it never would have happened. We made monsters out of good men and killed billions. I have to fix it.

Rachel

Gene let the letter fall from his fingers. He knew then that she had no intention of
coming back. It was dark now and it was no use going after her. It would be over before he even got there. With a heavy heart he sat down at the kitchen table to wait.

“You need to go.”

He turned in his chair to see his long dead wife standing behind him. “You’re not really here,” he whispered. “You can’t trick me.”

“You need to go—follow them.”

Gene felt like he was in a dream. Charlotte Porter had been dead for years but there she was all the same. He straightened in his chair and tried to immunize himself against her image. “You won’t get me to stop them. We’re going to win.”

“Yes, we will, but you need to go. If you leave now you’ll get there before it’s too late.”

Gene suddenly understood that this was not the Nano he was talking to. “Too late for what?”

She started to fade away. “Go now Gene. Do what you were trained to do.” By the time her words were just an echo, she had vanished.

He blinked a few times and just stared at where she’d been standing. Without sparing time to give it another thought, he got up and headed back to the clinic. He grabbed an empty backpack and started cramming supplies into it. He didn’t know what to expect when he got there so he grabbed a little bit of everything.

On his way out of town he ran into the disfigured man that had initially greeted them when they’d first arrived. An idea popped in his head. “Are there any horses here?” he called out to him.

“What you need one for, Doc?” the man asked He’d seen the blonde woman help herself to one of the few animals remaining after the attack last year and had misgivings about giving these strangers another one. It was one thing to leave your doctor behind. If you didn’t come back, well at least you were leaving someone that could be useful. It was quite another thing to show up and make big promises before you stole all the livestock.

“I have to go after my friends. What they’re doing is very dangerous. They will need my help when they’re done. Please…” Gene pleaded with the man.

Despite his misgivings, the man’s compassion won out and within a few minutes Gene found himself atop a mount and on his way. He knew they had to be making their move now. He kicked the horse into a gallop, dreading what he might find in the end.
Gene had already been on the road for several hours and was only a few miles away from the plant when suddenly the sky lit up just briefly with several flashes of lightening. He could see a dilapidated building in the distance right near where the lightening hit the ground. In the distance there was a rumbling, suggesting a storm was coming. A memory of the storm that had hit Willoughby rose to the surface and without pausing to consider what he was doing, Gene guided his horse in that direction.

He found Bass’ horse still tied up in front of the building. The animal was pulling at her tether indicating that she was not happy with her current circumstances. The lightening must have spooked her, he thought as he dismounted and tied his own animal next to her.

The increasing wind and the drop in temperature had him shivering as he walked behind the building. He found who he was sent to find, huddled up against the steel siding, as naked as the day he was born and shaking uncontrollably. “What happened?” he asked as he knelt by Bass.

“She did it…” was all he said.

His current state of undress told Gene that he’d at least followed some of his instructions. He helped the man to his feet and started to lead him where the horses waited. They had to stop after just a few feet when Bass leaned over to retch. “How long has this been going on?”

“I don’t know. I was halfway here when it started. I’m not sure how long I’ve been here,” Bass replied with chattering teeth. It was still dark, but that’s about all he knew at this point. Everything was starting to get hazy and his head was now beginning to pound.

Gene helped him get to the horses and set him down on the ground up against the front of the structure. He tugged Bass’ bedroll free and got him covered up. He noticed then that the man was cradling one hand with the other. It was difficult to see in the dark, but it looked swollen.
The clothing could wait for the time being.

“What’s happening to me?” he asked as he huddled under the blanket.

Gene ignored him for the time being and went out into the brush to collect something to start a fire. When he had it going he turned his attention to splinting Bass’ wrist. “If I had to guess it’s probably from the radiation. How did you get exposed?”

“I shouldn’t have been. She locked me out of the room before she… I’m so sorry. I should have known she was up to something and stopped her. You have to believe me, I didn’t mean for things to happen this way.” He swallowed back the urge to gag. “It was supposed to be me.”

Gene tended to the broken bone with grim determination. He had a patient and therefore a job to do and he used this to keep the grief at bay. Finished with his task, he went to retrieve the clothing that he’d set aside until now. “Rachel knew what she was doing,” he said sadly. “Let’s get you dressed,” he added.

His triage complete, Gene helped him back to his feet. “I’ve got to get you back. I can’t treat you here. Can you ride?”

“Do I have a choice?”

The going was slow and the sun had long since risen by the time they made it back. A journey that had taken Gene less than three hours had stretched into almost seven. The storm dissipated well before it reached them, but the temperature had remained uncomfortably cool and they were tortured by a constant drizzle the entire trip back.

They’d had to stop several times as Bass’ symptoms grew more severe and Gene had begun to worry halfway through the return trip that they might not make it. Somehow however, Bass managed to get back to his feet and on the horse each time, as if he was running on sheer stubbornness.

By the time they were just passing through the town gates he was starting to lose consciousness. Before Gene could dismount and help him, he fell from his horse into a heap on the ground. With the help from one of the remaining townsfolk the doctor managed to get him inside the clinic.

The respite that being unconscious had offered only lasted until Gene removed the splint and worked on setting Monroe’s wrist as best he could. The pain had him screaming and alert. “Hold on, I’m almost done,” the doctor murmured as he reached for the ace bandage to wrap it once more before putting on a removable cast he’d found in the supply closet the day before. “I’ll get you something to take the edge off,” he added as he turned away.

It was almost midnight when Charlie and Miles showed up. Charlie had quite easily picked up Bass’ trail from the power plant to the utility building, and from there it didn’t take much to figure out where he’d gone next. They checked the house first before heading over to the clinic. Bass was fading in and out and had been for hours.

Gene pulled his granddaughter aside to check the large gash running along her cheekbone. It was bad enough to need stitches. “What happened in Bradbury?” he asked as he sat her down to get to work.

“It worked. The Nano let everyone go. Davis was controlling the people there and they
came at us,” she said. It took every ounce of her willpower and the rush of adrenalin that had yet to subside just to hold still so he could tend to her. “We went looking for Bass when he didn’t come back afterwards. We tracked you here.”

Gene was just finishing up when Bass roused and started making a telltale sound. “Grab the basin,” he shouted over his shoulder.

Miles did as he was bid and got to the bed just in enough time, scrunching his nose up in disgust as he watched his friend gag over the plastic tub. “What the hell?”

“What’s wrong with him, Grandpa?” Charlie asked as she watched him. He was currently somewhat alert and pinching the bridge of his nose with his good hand, indicative of the pounding behind his eyes.

“Other than a badly broken wrist? It’s got to be the radiation,” Gene said grimly.

Miles swallowed back the lump in his throat. “So what do we do for him?”

“Wait.” He ducked out of the room to dispose of the basin.

While he was gone, Charlie went over to him. She knew it was neither the time nor the place but she couldn’t quite bring herself to acknowledge what was happening here. It was easier to focus instead on what had happened somewhere else entirely. “Bass, what happened with my mom? How did she end up there?”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “She followed me. I tried to stop her, but she locked me out of the room. I’m so sorry; there was nothing I could do.”

She stood back. “You just left her there?”

“I tried to get it open but the door was sealed. I couldn’t unlock it without the capsule.” He started to gag again and swallowed several times to hold off the inevitable. “By the time it was all over, she was already gone.”

“You left her there…” she repeated, the anger and grief rising to the surface. “How do you know she was dead if you left her there?”

“Because I watched her die. The capsule turned on the reactor and I watched it kill her.” He lost the battle with the nausea.

Miles looked around and grabbed a trash can, getting it over to the side of the bed in the nick of time. “That’s enough, Charlie.” He said as he tried to help his friend. He was grieving too, but railing at a man while he was puking into a trash can wasn’t going to bring Rachel back or help them to deal with it.

Bass started to shiver again as his temperature rose. She just backed into the corner and watched him, numb to the world around her, tears streaming down her face. When Gene returned a short time later, Bass was lying back again, shaking and moaning as the pain intensified. “This is all I can do for now,” he said as he injected the catheter in his IV line with more morphine.

“He leans over the basin for what has to be the thousandth time and the waves come again. His head is pounding; his body is wracked with pain like he’s never experienced. His right arm is on fire, the pain strongest in his wrist and radiating out into his hand and forearm.
Cool hands gently help him to lie back down. He’s shivering but he feels so hot and sweaty. Something cool and wet touches his face, soothing him. He tries to talk but he’s not sure if the words come out. I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…

A soft voice. Charlie? She tells him to be still. He feels the bur in his other arm as something is injected into IV catheter and then he starts to fade back under the blanket of darkness that calls to him, where he can be just under the surface of the pain and guilt and grief. He’s done it again… He’s killed another Matheson…

They cycle is ongoing: Wake, puke, beg for forgiveness, more drugs and asleep again. It stretches out. It may have been hours, weeks, or for that matter decades. Is this what hell is like? Have I finally gone there? He wonders this more than once. Dazed by both the drugs and whatever is tearing his body apart, he considers the irony of not believing in any god but yet still believing in hell. At some point he must have laughed aloud over this, because she was by his side, checking on him. “Bass?” He can hear the concern in Charlie’s voice.

He tries to tell her he’s okay, no to worry about him. He’s just in hell, that’s all. His lips don’t seem to be working however and he just mumbles incoherently. Even he can’t understand what he’s saying and he’s the one trying to say it. He wants to try again, but he’s just so damn tired… He slips back under once more.

Bass opened his eyes slowly and looked around. It was dark. A solitary lamp flickered dimly on a table in the corner of the room. It was one of those long rolling tables that one usually saw in hospitals. The bed he sat on had the rails pulled up and there were cabinets all around him. There was curtain on the far side of the room around him. Indeed he appeared to be in what might have been an emergency room or something of the like.

He sat up cautiously, expecting disastrous results. Other than the fact that his wrist hurt like a son of a bitch and his muscles were sore from being sick so many times, he didn’t feel all that bad. He held up his arm and examined the brace on his wrist. He idly wondered where it came from. Things like this were nearly impossible to find and tended to cost a fortune when they did pop up.

He tried to think back, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember exactly where he was. He remembered leaving the power plant and walking back to the utility building. He even had some recollection of starting to feel sick and there were vague images of washing off and then of Gene showing up, but as to how much time had passed since then, he couldn’t say.

He didn’t remember leaving there and arriving here at any rate and wasn’t even sure where exactly here was—Arco? Bradbury? Hell he could be in Austin for all he knew. He did remember being surrounded by what was left of Rachel’s family… Charlie, Miles and Gene—all three of them hovering over him. He remembered the anguish. You left her there?

Bass swung his legs over the bed and put his feet on the cool tile, still amazed that he could even stand. His stomach growled in protest of having not been filled for some time. In the dim flicker of the lantern, he made out his clothing on one of the plastic chairs up against the wall. He tried to leave the bed and then felt the tug of something on his arm. He looked down and saw the tube coming out of his forearm. Grabbing it the best he could with his immobilized hand, he carefully pulled it out.

He was just struggling to try and zip his jeans up with one hand when he heard the sound of footsteps beyond the curtain. It was pushed aside, sending dim light from the room beyond inside. He turned to see Charlie standing there, clearly surprised that he was up and trying to get dressed. “Hey,” she said as she came into the room.
“Hey yourself,” Bass said quietly as he continued to try and pull the zipper up.

Seeing that the splint was not making things easy, she came over to him. “Let me do it.” Charlie deftly zipped up his jeans. As she did so, it occurred to him that the last woman to send his zipper in that direction had been his mother when he was too young to dress himself. “How are you feeling?” she asked as she buttoned them for him and took a step back.

“None the worse for wear,” he replied, still a little amazed by that fact himself. “What happened?”

Charlie looked at him, taken aback. “You don’t know?”

Bass sighed as he shook his head. “I remember the plant—that your mom… I don’t remember a lot after that.” He winced internally at his mention of Rachel. “Just bits and pieces. I remember talking to you at some point. It must have been after Gene brought me here; where exactly are we?”

“We’re in Arco,” she said as she handed him his shirt. “My grandpa brought you back here after he found you—he said you were outside of some kind of shack or something. You’d stopped to wash off anything you might have picked up at the plant. You’ve been sick ever since.”

He pulled the shirt over his head and reached for the boots that Gene had packed along with the rest of his replacement clothes. He sent her a silent plea when he realized that he sure as hell wasn’t going to be able to lace them without the use of both hands. “How long ago was that?” He sat down on the bed again while she bent to help him.

“Two days.”

Bass sat there and stared at the top of her head while she finished. Things felt so stilted and uncomfortable between them. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hold on to her; he was here and alive when neither of them had hoped for it, but he couldn’t bring himself to touch her. The cost of his survival had been too high. You just left her there?

“Did we win—did it work? Is Jeremy okay? The others?” He banished the echo of that accusation with the rapid fire of questions—anything to ignore what had happened in that power plant.

“Jeremy’s fine. He’s here; Connor is too. They’ve both been in to see you and yes, it worked. Most of the people in Bradbury got here yesterday. Miles and Grandpa are helping Aaron with them now. A lot of them died either when we were fighting them outside of the town or afterwards. The Nano rode a lot of them pretty hard.” She was almost done, but found her fingers weren’t quite working the way she wanted.

He reached out and cupped her chin, gently forcing her to look at him. “Fighting? You shouldn’t have had to get that close. Charlie, what happened?” He just now noticed the cut on her cheekbone.

She sat down on the plastic chair next to the bed and told him everything that had happened outside of Bradbury. By the time she told him about Priscilla’s death and Aaron having killed Davis her eyes were red and full.

Hearing about Priscilla hit him harder than he’d have expected. Maybe it was the fact that she’d at least treated him with some measure of decency. Having never lived in the Monroe Republic, she did have as much of a reason to hate him as the others had. Maybe it was the way
she’d helped him with Jeremy or the fact that even though Aaron for the most part considered him an idiot, they were at least somewhat friends; after all it was the decent thing to do to feel shitty about your friend’s wife dying.

Either way, it only served to make him feel lower. Maybe if he’d just been a little faster, a little better they wouldn’t have gotten cornered. The Glitch wouldn’t have needed to distract the Nano and Davis wouldn’t have been standing there when the Nano left him and he realized it was all over.

Charlie could see the wheels turning in his mind. She knew him well enough to sense the direction of his thoughts. It was like he was radiating the guilt to the point where she could almost feel it—and it made her inexplicably angry. “Stop it. Just-stop it.”

He flinched at the way she lashed out at him. His reaction only fueled her anger more. She couldn’t rationalize it, or rather she couldn’t articulate why his self-recrimination pissed her off so badly. Instead of trying to explain, she got up and fled. Connor and Jeremy would want to know that he was awake at any rate and she was sure her grandfather would want to look him over. On top of that, she had a busy day ahead of her and she wasn’t ready to deal with Bass’ remorse right now.

Bass slumped forward, putting his head in his hands. Go figure that the one thing that would piss her off the most was his accidental survival. They should have been happy. They’d won and he was still alive against all odds, but he couldn’t let himself enjoy the moment. As far as he was concerned, there was no reason to expect her to forgive him. Even though things had been uneasy between Charlie and her mother ever since the day he’d rode out after revealing what he and Rachel had done, it was still her Mom—and she was dead because he hadn’t had what it took to get the job done.

Jeremy came running towards him out of nowhere, breaking him out of his morbid thoughts once more. “Dad!”

Bass forced the darkness away and offered the boy a smile as his adopted son wrapped his arms around him. “Hey kid.” He hugged him back. “Ow!”

Jeremy pulled back, startled at the exclamation. “I’m sorry!” he said as he looked at him questioningly.

“It’s okay. I’m just a bit sore.” He got to his feet just to reassure him. In truth he wasn’t feeling up to facing the rest of the world just yet. “Hungry though. Let’s go find some food.” Despite the rumbling in his stomach food was really the last thing from his mind, but after everything the kid had already been through he didn’t want him to worry about him any more than he’d already had to.

Connor was just opening the door to the clinic when they made their way to the front. Charlie had found them together, but whereas Jeremy bolted off to see their father, he’d elected for a more dignified pace. He offered Bass an awkward hug. “You’re alright?” He could hardly believe his eyes.

“Guess so,” he replied as he let them lead the way to the house they’d all been using. As they walked everything felt off, like he’d woken up to find he’d overslept and missed something important. Before long they were sitting on the porch while Bass picked at a plate of jerky and fruit. “Where’s Charlie?” he eventually asked. As much as he wasn’t looking forward to it, they needed to talk.
“She went looking for the doc. She’s probably helping him with the refugees from Bradbury. We’ve been trying to get them settled all day. A lot of them will probably stay here,” Connor explained as he watched him from where he leaned against the side of the house. “Are you sure you’re alright?” he added. He couldn’t tell if his dad’s demeanor was due what happened or because he hadn’t quite recovered, but it was bothering him.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. *You just left her there…*

By the time that everyone had been settled into what would be their homes for the foreseeable future it was quite late. Bass had already gotten Jeremy into bed and was sitting alone in the living room, not quite sure what to do with himself. When Charlie walked into the room their eyes locked for just a second before she moved towards him. “Grandpa says he needs to look you over,” she said quietly as she sat down on the couch next to him, close but not touching.

Again, Bass fought the urge to reach out and grab her. If she’d noticed the way he pulled is hand back away from her and balled it up into a fist on his thigh, she did a very good job of hiding it. “It can wait until morning,” he said as he got up. “It’s late, let’s just go to bed.” He left her sitting there and headed into the bedroom Connor had told him she’d been using.

He was still lying awake in the darkness, staring at the ceiling in the pale moonlight that shined through the window when Charlie finally joined him some time later. She silently kicked off her boots before lying down next to him. “You’re not going to say anything?” she asked after several excruciatingly long minutes passed.

He continued to look up. “What do you want me to say, Charlie? I’m alive, Priscilla’s dead, we won and I got your mom killed.”

She smacked him in the arm as she sat up abruptly. “Yeah, my mom is dead. She’s dead and I couldn’t bury her.” She hit him again for good measure. “I just spent a day thinking you were dead too and then another not knowing if you’d wake up. I’m in a town in the middle of nowhere with a couple hundred people milling about confused and wanting answers; I’m pregnant and haven’t slept in days, but here you are feeling sorry for yourself.”

Her chest was heaving as she swung her legs over the side of the bed to get up. She couldn’t remember being this angry with him. “You’re feeling sorry for yourself and I’m supposed to hold it together and deal with all this other shit and put you back together again besides?” She wiped her eyes in frustration, blinking back the moisture that had so irritatingly appeared in her eyes for the millionth time in the past few weeks.

Bass sat up and grabbed her arm. “Don’t you understand? I don’t know now I’m supposed to do this- how can I face you and Miles after what I’ve done.”

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Bass sat up and grabbed her arm. “Don’t you understand? I don’t know now I’m supposed to do this- how can I face you and Miles after what I’ve done.”

She shifted on the bed and looked at him. “What are you talking about? What you’ve done?”

“She was the last one you had left and I got her killed. I should have known that she was up to something and I should have stopped her. It was supposed to be me. After everything I’ve done in the past to you and to Miles and so many others, it was supposed to be me.” He felt himself breaking now as everything that had happened and sank in with full force.

“I hate the man that killed my family. He’s probably dead, but I still hate him with everything I am. And I’m that person for you. I can’t imagine a world where you don’t hate me for that. I’ve gotten your entire immediate family killed. No one could expect you to not hate me for it—least of all me.” He released the grip on her arm and brushed her hair back behind her ear. “I’d
rather be dead than have you hate me.”

Charlie shook her head at him. He really was an idiot some times. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Bass ignored her comment. “And what about Miles? I literally pulled a trifecta with him-Emma, Nora and your mom. He loved them all; especially your mom and all three are dead because of me. Your mom was the love of his life. How can I look him in the eye after that?” His voice was raw. “If someone killed you, I’d gladly torture them and enjoy every minute of their suffering, I can’t imagine him not feeling the same way.”

She grabbed his face in both of her hands. “Listen to me. It’s not your fault- not your fault.” She chanted those words over and over again, as if she could force him to believe it by simply drumming it into his thick head.

Bass finally gave into the urge and pulled her into his arms, burying his face in her neck. “You say that, but—I’m so sorry, Charlie.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held on tight. “I’m not mad at you. I don’t hate you. Please don’t do this to yourself.”

“Then why-?”

She pulled back and looked at him. “Yeah, because you’ve never said or done something you later regretted because you were grieving.”

Bass couldn’t help but laugh in spite of himself. “Who me? No, I’m the poster boy for coping.”

Emotionally exhausted he pulled her back down on the bed. She lay down with him, curling up into him, with his good hand resting on her belly, his bad arm held above his head in an attempt to keep it out of the way. Eventually they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Two days later Miles came back with the last group from Bradbury. He found Bass outside helping Connor organize supplies for the return trip home. They’d be heading back in a day or two and they were taking on a few dozen passengers besides. They had to make sure they had enough to feed everyone on the journey south. Bass looked up at him as he approached, his expression guarded and almost wounded.

Connor saw how his father tensed up and took it as a cue to find something else to do for a few minutes. “I’m going to go see what Jeremy’s up to,” he said as he made his getaway.

“Shouldn’t you be leaving that to someone a little less… stumpy?” Miles asked, making it a point to use the name Bass had insisted on calling him when he’d had a broken hand.

Bass ignored him and went back to work, sorting here and there. “It’s just a broken wrist,” he finally replied. “I can supervise just fine without it.”

Miles could tell he was really doing his best to look busy rather than accomplishing anything meaningful—a particular habit of his when he definitely didn’t want to discuss something. “So how are things?” He asked cautiously.

“Fine.”

“I heard you and Charlie had a slight falling out when you woke up. The two of you are something else. Make up, break up, make up. It’s like living in a goddamned episode of Dawson’s
Bass picked up a clipboard that he’d been using to hold the supply lists, scanning it to avoid making eye contact. “We’re fine. I’m fine,” he ground out.

“Oh, really? Because you don’t look fine.” Miles sighed as he grabbed the clipboard, yanking out of Bass’ hand and tossing it aside. “I don’t blame you, you know that right?”

Bass nodded. He still didn’t want to talk about it. He got it… Gene didn’t blame him, Charlie didn’t blame him, Miles didn’t blame him. Nobody blamed him, but he still needed to work it out to where he could stop blaming himself. He just wished they’d leave him alone while he put forth the effort.

Miles dug in his back pocket for something. He held it out in front of Bass, who had stooped down to pick up the clipboard. “I found this. I was going through her stuff,” he said as he waited for Bass to take the letter from him.

He took it and turned it over in his hands. His name was written on one side of the folded paper in Rachel’s overly neat script. “What is it?”

Miles shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t read other people’s mail.” He walked away then, hoping Bass would take the time to read it. In all actuality, of course he had read it. Who wouldn’t wonder what their girlfriend could possibly have to say to a man she hated in the hours leading up to her death?

Bass took a seat on the end of the supply wagon and stared at the letter he held. Taking a deep breath he unfolded it and began to read.

Bass,

Knowing you, you’re angry and confused and wondering why I’ve done this. There will have been no time to explain before it happens, so as you prepare to leave I am writing this letter to give you that explanation with the knowledge that at some point it will be found.

Watching you say goodbye to them all this morning and discovering what you and Charlie have done has made me realize what you are giving up to do the right thing. It has also reminded me of what you said on Joe’s porch that day.

Once, I looked you in the eye and I demanded that you stop making excuses. While we were holed up in Cheney’s bunker in the tower I told you to take responsibility for the things you’ve done; to take responsibility for Danny.

How could I have known that day what drove you to the madness that had you trying to destroy what was left of the world? And let’s face it; in the years leading up to the tower, you were a very sick man. Having lost my own child and having felt the desperation afterwards, I can at least relate to how your grief changed you, as my own has changed me. That was the one thing I had never understood—what could have possibly changed the soldier I once knew so long ago into the murdering monster that you became.

You have hurt so many people and you killed my baby, and now I have to face the fact that I have had a hand in creating the man that took him from me. You were right that day in the woods when you called me a hypocrite. All this time I’ve been demanding that you bear the guilt for my loss, but how can I do that until I bear the guilt for yours?

And so, this is MY taking responsibility. I can’t give you back what you lost when Ben
and I hid our secret to save Danny, but I can give you a second chance to get it right. So, I am taking your place in the reactor building, and yes I will have lied and tricked you to do it—for being so paranoid for so long, you can be awfully trusting sometimes.

My grandchild needs and deserves both of his parents and you deserve to see him come into the world and watch him grow. I am not doing this out of arrogance or hatred, or to make you feel guilty. I am doing this because we were friends once and that friendship was destroyed by the world Ben and I created. I am giving you my daughter and all that I ask in return is that you treasure her and appreciate her, because she truly is a gift.

I know you will never forgive me for what I’ve done and all the pain you suffered and inflicted on others because of it, but know that I forgive you. I forgive you and I hope that you will finally find the peace that you’ve lacked all of these years.

Rachel

P.S. If it’s not too much trouble, please take care of Miles. Keep an eye on him for me and try not to get into too much trouble together. The two of you always seem to find it no matter where you go.

Bass let the letter fall into his lap. He covered his face in his hands and began to sob, letting out the grief and guilt he’d been holding onto ever since stumbling out of the power plant. It was time to let it all go.
“We need to talk,” Gene said as he came up behind Bass. They were camped by the train and would be leaving at first light. The day before Aaron and Connor had taken the train to the station south of Bradbury and had turned it around. Despite his injury, he’d insisted on taking watch. It wasn’t like he was going to sleep at any rate.

The doctor gestured for him to sit down on a fallen log so he could check his break. He squatted in front of his patient and set the CDC binder down next to him. Bass ventured a glance at his wrist, grimacing from both the pain and the sight of the thing. “I’m going to lose this hand eventually, aren’t I?” he asked, having assumed that was the nature of Gene’s intended chat.

The swelling hadn’t started to go down yet and it was distended. There was only so much that could be done for this kind of break without electricity. Bass had seen it happen plenty of times to others. Indeed, Miles was lucky to have kept his own after it had been crushed, and although he pretended otherwise, Bass could tell he still didn’t have full use of it and likely never would.

Gene wrapped it back up before grabbing the binder. “It’s not out of the realm of possibilities, but I’d say that’s the least of your problems now.”

“Really? Because if I lose the hand, I lose my job and my pardon—that’s if I haven’t lost them both already. I’d say that’s a pretty big problem.”

Charlie’s grandfather let out a grunt as he sat down on the ground, his knees having gotten stiff from crouching for so long. He started flipping through the binder and let out a sigh as he tried to think of a way to start. “I have no experience with this sort of thing. Everything I know is coming from this,” he began.

“Experience with what?” Bass asked. The severity of the man’s tone had him worried.

“Acute radiation syndrome.”

Bass shook his head in disbelief. “I’m fine. It’s been two days and I haven’t had a problem. I’m better.”

“You’re probably not going to stay that way,” he argued. “What you experienced is called the prodromal period. If the exposure is low enough, it’s followed by a latency period. Patients feel fine for a time, but they get sick again. You might feel okay for now, but it’s still affecting you.”

Bass refused to believe it. He got up and turned to join the others in camp. “I’m done
Gene fought the urge to smack the man. He would forever be one of the worst patients he’d had the misfortune to treat. “Don’t be a selfish ass. Think about your family. You need to prepare yourself and them for what’s coming.”

This stopped him. He turned back and gestured with his good hand for him to continue. “Alright,” he said as he sat back down on the log.

“It’s hard to tell how much radiation you were exposed to. There’s a chart that gives a guideline based off of the onset of symptoms; a timeline of sorts.”

“But?”

Gene pointed to the chart again. “But it’s still just a guideline. If I had to guess, it’ll start hitting you in a week or two, maybe sooner if you absorbed enough.”

Bass’s world came crashing down around him as it started to sink in. After everything, he was still going to die. “How long have I got once that happens?”

“Hard to say. We won’t know that until the latency period ends. It could be a few weeks, or even a few months. You said you started getting sick an hour or so in, that puts you in this range here,” he said as he turned the binder and pointed to the chart. Bass peered at it. “If you’re on the low end, it’ll start hitting you in a few weeks. If you’re on the higher end, it could be just a few days. The faster it hits you the worse it will be—but the timeline isn’t perfect.”

“How bad?”

Gene handed him the binder to let him see for himself. Most of it was in medical jargon that he couldn’t understand completely, but after scanning it, he got the gist of it. “You’re bone marrow and immune system are both compromised and your GI tract is too. You can’t feel them right now, but you probably have radiation burns. What you experienced is just a preview of what’s to come. It’ll be more of the same, but it’ll get worse.”

Bass snapped the binder shut and handed it back. His mind was reeling. None of it had mattered at all. He got up and started to pace the small clearing. He stopped when Gene put a hand on his shoulder. “Look, there’s a slim chance I’m wrong. If I am, well your odds of cancer later in life are greater and maybe you and Charlie just stick to the one kid to be safe, but I don’t think that’s gonna happen. I’m sorry, Sebastian.”

It registered in the back of his mind that Charlie’s grandfather had never referred to him as anything other than Monroe up until now. Bass went back to here he’d been standing before the conversation started. He stood frozen as the weight of it hit him. He’d never seen the baby born after all. His death would be painful and horrific and the people he cared about most would have to watch it.

He watched as Gene collected his bag and headed back to where everyone else slept. “Don’t tell anyone,” he shouted after him.

The doctor stopped and turned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“You can’t tell them. They find out and they’ll want to hole up somewhere to wait it out. I’m not dying out here in the middle of nowhere. I watched Shelly die because we were in that camp instead of somewhere safe. I’m not going until I know she’s back to civilization with a roof over her head. I can’t die without knowing if she’s going to be okay.”
“I think you’re making a big mistake,” Gene said as he sadly walked away.

They were five days into the journey south when Miles noticed something wasn’t quite right. Because of problems with blocked tracks, they weren’t half the distance they’d hoped to be in that time. They were currently stopped near the Wyoming-Colorado border to fill the boiler and get more coal. By now signs of life were starting to return even out in the Wastelands. As the Nano’s influence disappeared people came out of it, buried those that hadn’t recovered and began to pick their lives back up.

Bass was overseeing a few of the people that had joined them in using a pump to refill the water tower from the creek so they could get it into the boiler. Miles looked up from his task of shoveling coal into the tinder car and noticed him as he walked by. There was something in the way he was carrying himself that he didn’t like. As he turned, Miles noticed the thin sheen of sweat on his friend’s brow and that he looked a little pale.

“Gene, you might want to take a look at Bass. He doesn’t look right,” he commented as they worked. He tossed another load into the car before looking up to watch his friend with concern.

The doctor set down his own shovel and walked over to where Bass stood. Miles had been right. His face was wan and he looked overly tired. He waved for Connor to join them. “Take over here,” he said to the younger man before turning to his father. “You, come with me.”

“I’m busy,” Bass said as he bent to check the hose. It had been leaking and they’d tied it up with a strip of an old tarp to try and fix it as best they could.

Gene clamped a hand over his wrist brace, causing him to gasp in pain. “You’re done. It wasn’t a request,” he said sternly.

With an annoyed sigh and a roll of his eyes, he gave up and followed him over to the first boxcar. “I’m fine,” be protested.

“Don’t bullshit me. I’m not Miles or Charlie. I know better.” He reached up and touched his forehead. “You’re burning up and you look like shit. How long?”

Bass leaned up against the boxcar to steady himself. He was starting to lose what steam he had. “Since yesterday,” he reluctantly admitted. He was typically the first person to wake up, but the morning before he’d been one of the last and had felt like hadn’t he’d slept at all. He’d felt off all day and then the nausea had set in. For the most part he’d been able to bear it, but as soon as they’d stopped for the night he’d snuck off into the woods and had gotten sick. It had only been the once, but his stomach had been doing summersaults ever since and the migraines had started once more. He’d known then that it was starting.

The fever had been around all day and he’d felt drained besides. It wasn’t noticeable yet, but he knew he’d been losing hair for several days on top of it. Gene had been remiss in telling him about that particular symptom but it hadn’t taken very long to figure it out.

The doctor listened to Bass’ description of his symptoms patiently. “We’re stopping here,” he finally said as he turned away.

Bass stopped him. “No, we have to make it back.”

“Do you understand what’s happening here? You’re dying, you idiot.”

Bass took a step towards him. “Will you keep it down?” he looked around to make sure
they hadn’t attracted any attention. “Whether we stay or keep going isn’t going to change anything.”

Gene threw his hands up in exasperation. “I’ve had it. You want to go through this on the road? Fine, have it your way—but you’re telling them before the day is over, or I will.”

Bass watched him stomp off. In utter rage over the unfairness of it all, he punched the side of the boxcar with what little energy he had left. He pulled his hand back. “Dammit…” he muttered as he looked at his now red knuckles. That’s smart dumbass. Fuck up the other one...

He turned around to see Charlie standing there. She’d seen her grandfather all but drag him off and was worried. “What’s going on Bass?”

He climbed into the boxcar, stopping for a second to steady himself before reaching down to help her up. “Charlie, we need to talk,” he began, resigned.

“Okay. What’s wrong?” She furrowed her brows as she looked at him. His tone only heightened her anxiety, as did the shadows under his eyes.

“I’m sick,” he confessed.

“Well I can see that. You look like crap,” Charlie admitted. She touched his forehead as her grandfather had done several minutes prior and felt the heat coming off of him. “You should have told me you were coming down with something. You need to rest.”

He shook his head and grabbed her hand with his good, if not throbbing one. “You don’t understand. It’s the radiation; it’s going to get a lot worse and then it’s going to kill me.”

“What? But you were fine.” It started to sink in, how he didn’t sound all that surprised about his condition. “How long have you known?”

“Since night before we left Idaho. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.” Lightheaded from the fever, he let himself slide down the side of the boxcar to the floor. “I guess I was just kind of hoping he was wrong. I’ve been feeling it since yesterday.”

She sank down next to him and allowed him to pull her into his lap. As much as she wanted to rail at him, she was too stunned to fight him. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to keep going and get you back to Texas so you can have our baby safely and hope I hold out long enough to get you there.” He splayed his hand on her belly in emphasis. “That matters more than anything.”

She wanted to argue and scream and refuse him, but in the end what was the point? She nodded and leaned back against him. After a while he started to doze off. She climbed off of his lap and grabbed a blanket from where they were piled up in the corner. Draping it over him, she climbed down to go find Miles. Bass would need to tell Connor and Jeremy, but she’d save him the pain of having to break the news to her uncle in the meantime.

That night Bass pulled both of his sons aside and explained to them what was happening. Jeremy was scared and had started to cry, but Connor was pissed off more than anything. His father was the king of keeping important shit to himself and he’d about had enough of it. He’d ended up stalking off alone after the shouting match that ensued. He couldn’t even look at his father until he’d had a chance to calm down.

Connor was still pouting in the woods when he heard someone behind him. “What the
“Don’t you start on me, Charlie. He lied and hid this for over a week. We never would have left Arco if he’d just leveled with us,” Connor snapped as he continued to work his way through the woods to the stream.

Not willing to let it drop, she followed him. “Yeah, he hid it from us, but this isn’t helping.”

He stopped to face her when he reached the bank of the stream. “How can you stand there and act like this isn’t a big deal?”

“Of course it’s a big deal. You don’t think I’m pissed at him and my grandpa for keeping this a secret?”

He squatted down and went to work filling his canteen. “Then why are you defending him?”

Charlie sat down next to him and waited for Connor to look at her. “Because yelling at him won’t do any good—and I understand why he hid it as long as he did. Don’t you see? He’s scared.”

Connor sat back on his heels and watched the moonlight reflect off of the water. The idea of Sebastian Monroe being afraid of anything was almost laughable. Since he’d first shown up in Mexico, he’d watched his father stare down Nunez and a whipping, face death in New Vegas and plunge headlong into mustard gas without a second glance. He’d even stood there defiant; knowing Neville and Scanlon had him in their sights, and still hadn’t backed down. His father didn’t get scared.

Charlie softened. “Grandpa said it’s going to be very bad—that it is a horrible way to die and it’s going to be very slow and very painful. He’s carried that alone for almost a week. He’ll never admit it, but he’s terrified. He wouldn’t have wanted us to have to share that fear with him.”

Connor wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He’d had to sit and watch as Bass had gone in and out of consciousness, constantly sick and moaning in agony until suddenly he’d been fine. The thought that he’d have to see that again was too much. “We thought it was all over, but he’s dead anyway.”

“I know. We can’t change the fact he kept it from us, but we need to be there with him now.” Charlie got up and made her way back to the train. She found Bass sitting alone by the fire. Everyone else had gone to sleep and he looked dead tired. Threading her arm through his, she leaned her head on his shoulder and joined his vigil over the flames.

“I can’t believe this is what’s going to do me in,” he said after a while. “After everything else we’ve managed to live through... I always figured I’d catch a stray bullet or something.”

Charlie grabbed his hand and entangled her fingers in his. “Just remember you’re not going through this alone. We are all a family and we’ll all be here with you the entire time.”

Bass got up and led her to the boxcar. They climbed inside and laid down a few feet from where Jeremy was sleeping fitfully. “I love you,” he whispered as he buried his face in her neck and waited for the exhaustion to overtake him.

As they made their way south on the rails, Bass got worse, just as Gene had predicted. Every day saw him weaker. Gene had wanted to hook him back up to the IV but at some point
during their journey the lines had been damaged. Two of the precious bottles of morphine and one of the glass IV bottles had broken, the glass shredding the tubes.

Not only did this render the kit useless but it left him with only a half a bottle of morphine besides. Bass wouldn’t get very far on that and it was only a matter of time before he’d need it. Gene knew that without being able to keep Bass hydrated with the IV line that he’d only deteriorate faster. When that was coupled with the fact that they were not making the time they’d initially hoped, he knew that the odds of them getting to Texas in time were diminishing.

It had only been four days and his patient was barely eating or drinking anything. Time was starting to work against them and at the rate he was declining they’d be lucky if he made it to Oklahoma, let alone Willoughby. When it became apparent he was essentially bedridden they’d taken the wheels off of the wagon and had secured it as best they could in one of the boxcars, turning it into a hospital bed of sorts for him.

Aaron and Miles decided to keep the train running longer into the night. As the only one that knew how to engineer a train, Aaron had already been putting in long hours, but a few of the Bradbury survivors had volunteered to help out. Others had been helping with the arduous task of keeping the firebox full of coal since they’d left.

They were lucky that two of their volunteer engineers were quick studies and within a few days they were able to take over and allow Aaron some much needed rest. The extra help would cut at least a week out of the journey back. As it was, navigating the Rocky Mountains meant that the train was running at a snail’s pace in comparison to what a more experienced engineer could have managed.

They stopped in Cheyenne Wells, Colorado to take on water and negotiate for more coal in the small town not far from a now abandoned station. After the war, Texas had worked towards getting more of them up and running but the town wasn’t large enough to not warrant its regular use. Indeed the people there had been more than a little surprised when they’d seen them pull into the station and actually stop there.

They were able to convince the town to give them the coal they needed in exchange for two of the Ranger horses they’d brought with them. While Miles struck the deal, Gene went in search of any medical supplies that the town could spare. He didn’t have luck with replacing the lines for the IV but he did find something else entirely and after spending a few hours offering checkups to the locals in trade, he did not leave empty handed.

He jumped into the boxcar as the coal was being loaded into the tinder car to check on Bass one last time before they got moving again. “Charlie said you haven’t eaten at all today,” he said with disapproval.

Bass pressed the heel of his good hand to his temple. The headaches were getting worse along with everything else and today’s was especially nasty. “What’s the point? Can’t keep it down anyway.”

“Since I can’t give you the IV, you have to at least drink something.” He dug into his bag and produced an old Tupperware container. He opened it up and fiddled with the contents for a moment before holding up a wooden pipe. He handed it over to Bass and dug for the zippo lighter he always carried.

He looked at the object the doctor had given him. The pungent aroma coming off of it told him exactly what he was holding, but he could scarcely believe that it had just come from Gene Porter. “Is this…”
“It’s exactly what you think it is,” the doctor confirmed as he held the lighter out.

“You want me to get baked?”

Annoyed with the question, Gene plucked it out of his hand and held it out, lighting it himself before handing it back. “It will help with the nausea and with the pain too. The morphine will probably only make the vomiting worse and we need to save it for when you really need it.”

Bass did not appreciate the reminder that as miserable as he was, it was only going to get worse. He took the pipe from him and eyed it suspiciously for a second.

“Oh come on. You legalized heroin but you have a problem with a little medical marijuana? I have trouble believing that you, of all people have never smoked pot before.” Gene’s bedside manner did little to hide his exasperation.

“Not since I was in high school,” he replied as he put the end of the pipe in his mouth and did as the doctor ordered. He coughed as he exhaled, the sensation making his head pound all the more. “And now I remember why I stopped. Whiskey doesn’t make you cough.”

Still he smoked the bowl Gene had packed, if anything it would get the doctor to back off of him for a little while. By the time Charlie came back to the boxcar to sit with him for the first part of the day’s journey he’d been able to take a few bites of stew and Gene had gotten some water in him as well. He’d even managed to keep it all down. His stomach was still churning but it had been dialed back quite a bit. The pain behind his eyes had receded a little as well. Gene had made him smoke half of another one before he’d finally relented and left him to help Connor get everyone back on board the train.

She saw the glassy look in his eyes and was instantly worried. “Are you okay?”

He looked up at her under hooded eyes. “Grandpa got me stoned,” he said, smiling weakly.

She just rolled her eyes and laughed at him. For the moment he did look a little better, if not extremely high. She knew that it was just the pot taking the edge off of his symptoms for a short while, but she couldn’t help but have a little hope.

She climbed up into the wagon and sat down next to him. Reaching up, she brushed his hair back. Her lips formed a thin line as she frowned at the fact it had gotten so thin. The redness on his face and neck had gotten worse too. She’d look later but was sure it had also gotten worse on his torso and arms. “Stop that,” she commented when she noticed him scratching at his chest.

“It itches,” he said with a yawn as he lowered his hand, obeying her. “Where are we?” He hadn’t been outside of the boxcar in several days and quite honestly hadn’t the slightest idea how far they’d traveled.

“Southern Colorado, a town called Cheyenne Wells. Aaron’s getting the boiler going now. Since we’re limited to where the tracks are we have to take the long way around. We’re heading east towards Oklahoma City. The Rangers maintain the train station there. We’ll have to stop there to fill up anyway. If we’re lucky they can help us get the rest of the way.”

_Halfway home…_ He was having trouble staying awake and focusing. Having not smoked weed in over thirty years he had no tolerance for the stuff (and if he was honest with himself, he never really had any-- another reason why he’d never been that into it). He was currently buzzing quite nicely. “Promise me something,” he said as he closed his eyes.
“Anything.” And she’d meant it. There was little Charlie was willing to deny him now.

“Promise me that after I’m gone you’ll get to Austin and you’ll stay put until after the baby’s born.” Bass put his hand protectively on her belly, as was his habit as he spoke. “I want you within walking distance of a hospital when it’s time.”

“Bass…”

“I’m begging you, Charlie. Please promise you’ll do it. After what happened to Shelly… I need to know it won’t happen to you.” He forced his eyes open and locked eyes with her. “I hate leaving you, but I don’t want you joining me just yet,” he confessed.

Charlie put her hand over his, where it still rested over the life they’d created together. “Listen to me. We’re going to be fine. The baby will be okay and he’ll grow up hearing how his dad saved the world—twice.”

Content with her answer, he shut his eyes again. “Technically it was just a country the first time…”

She watched him as he fell asleep, the drug succeeding in numbing him enough to go under. She snuggled up next to him and took advantage of the moment. There would be fewer chances for her to lay with him like this as he got worse and she didn’t want to waste a single one. She felt the jolt of the train as it got moving again. She had to swallow several times to keep her own nausea at bay. Bass wasn’t the only one that was suffering from the constant movement.

By the time they pulled into Oklahoma City the supply of pot Gene had bought had since been exhausted, not that it had helped for more than a few days. By the time it was gone it hadn’t really done much for him—he’d still been in pain although he’d been just high enough to not really care, but it was no longer helping him his appetite.

Gene was getting increasingly worried. Bass wasn’t going to last much longer if they couldn’t keep him hydrated at the very least. On top of that, the radiation burns were getting infected and he suspected the wrist was causing problems as well. The damage to his bone marrow was interfering with its mending and an infection such as the one Miles had suffered from was only a matter of time.

“Miles, we have to stop here. He’s not going to make it to Texas,” Gene told him as Aaron and one of his helpers brought the train to a stop in the station.

His face drawn, Miles went to open the door to the boxcar, however someone on the outside beat him to it. He poked his head out to find a rifle in his face. Aaron was already standing outside with his hands in the air.

An hour later they were all ushered back inside the car. Whether or not Bass could travel now was no longer an issue. The Rangers had swarmed the train as soon as it had stopped. They’d wanted to know where the hell they’d stolen the train from and who they were. Once Miles’ identity had been revealed the rangers had at least backed down from arresting them, but that was about all they had going for them.

“We’ve got a problem,” Miles said as he pulled Charlie, Connor and Gene aside. “The border is closed indefinitely.”

“What? Why the hell would they do that?” Charlie asked as she looked over to Bass to
He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Apparently Blanchard is not quite convinced that the entire country going crazy wasn’t an attack from California and until he knows what caused it he’s not allowing anyone in or out unless they’re in a Rangers uniform. That includes us, or especially us considering the fact he’s learned it started in Willoughby.”

“Did they tell you how the town was doing?” Gene spoke up now, anxious to find out what was left.

“Everyone’s pulling themselves back together, just like everywhere else. There were a lot of bodies.” Miles didn’t have to tell them what that meant. It was possible that they’d all been elevated to outlaw status.

Sighing, Charlie sat down on the end of the wagon. Bass was oblivious at any rate. “So what do we do now?”

“We wait. The guy I talked to said that his CO is on his way back from a visit to the border. When he gets back, they’ll figure out what to do with us,” he explained.

Connor spoke up from where he was sitting next to his little brother. “What about my dad? What did you tell them?”

He bent to start digging through his flask. He most definitely needed a drink. “I didn’t mention him at all. We don’t know if his pardon is revoked by leaving Willoughby. The last thing we need is some idiot with something to prove trying to arrest him right now. I told them Davis was behind whatever caused everyone to go nuts and that we took off to track him through the wastelands. I also made sure to tell them he’s dead.”

Hours passed and they were still in a holding pattern. When it got dark, the sergeant that was left in charge of the train yard allowed them to at least build a few fires outside and set up a camp for the night, although they weren’t allowed to leave the general vicinity of the train. When they’d realized just how many refugees were along for the ride, the sergeant did send for some supplies for them. He was under orders to keep them here, not make them suffer.

Miles sat and watched over them all while they slept. Bass slowly started to rouse, letting out a moan. He walked over to the wagon. “Hold on, I’ll wake the doc.”

“No,” he rasped. “Let him sleep. Not like he can do anything anyway.” He’d been trying to suffer through it so they could make the morphine last as long as possible. In the meantime he didn’t need everyone hovering over him.

“How bad is it?” Miles asked after several minutes of silence. He was leaning over the wagon at him. From the dim light coming in from the fire outside, he could see that Bass looked as bad as ever.

“A lot worse than I’d like, probably not as bad as it’s gonna get. Where did we stop?” The pain in his gut was starting to get unbearable and he was having trouble hiding it now.

“We made it to OK City.” There was little use in telling him they were stuck, not until he knew what the Rangers intended to do with them. He reached for the rag that sat in a pail of water near the wagon. Wringing it out, he wiped his friend’s brow with it. It reminded him of watching Bass tend to Jeremy. The fever never had been raging since he first starting getting sick again and
he knew it was just another symptom among a long list that had made him completely miserable.

“I wanna go home, Miles,” Bass told him as he closed his eyes again.

“I’m working on it.” He set the rag aside and hesitated. “Listen, we hit a little delay. It’s not a big deal, hopefully we can get moving in the morning. Hang in there, Bass. I’ll get you to Texas.”

Bass shook his head just slightly. “No, I wanna go home. I want to say goodbye…”

It took Miles a few minutes to realize what Bass was talking about. He didn’t have the heart to remind him that he’d not find a warm welcome there. Before he could come up with a response, Bass started to gag. Miles grabbed a bucket and helped him lean over it. He watched as his friend retched and heaved. There wasn’t anything left to come up, but when he leaned back his lips were red. This was something new. “Gene!” he barked into the darkness on the other side of the boxcar.

“Miles, please take me home,” he insisted before leaning over the bucket again.

He called for the doctor again. Gene crawled out of his bedroll and went to check on his patient. Miles backed away to give him room. His mind racing he jumped out of the boxcar. He quickly found Aaron where he slept near one of the fires. Waking him up, he pulled him away from the others. “Do you think you can get this thing to Indiana?”

Aaron rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and tried to focus on what Miles was asking. “Why would we want to go there?”

“Can you do it or not?”

His agitation was starting to scare Aaron a little. “I don’t know, maybe. I don’t have a map of the rail lines that far east. We’d have to get those first. Without them, we could end up in Canada or the fallout zone. Why do you want to go there?”

“I’ll see what I can do about those maps,” was all he said as he walked off.

Aaron followed him. “Wait a minute!” he called as he tried to catch up. “You remember that the Rangers are technically holding us here, right? We don’t even have enough coal or water to try and make a break for it. Even if we could get out of here, we wouldn’t make it far enough to refill before they caught us.”

Having finished with Bass, Gene climbed down from the car and joined them. He’d overheard Aaron and what they’d been discussing had alarmed him. “He’s not going anywhere with or without permission from the Rangers. He’s done, Miles. We should have stayed in Idaho. He can’t travel anymore.”

Miles turned on them both. “I already lost Rachel and now I’m going to lose my best friend.” He’d been running on empty trying to keep them organized and get Bass to Willoughby and at the same time trying to force the grief at bay. This was a constant battle that he was starting to lose. “He wants to go home to Jasper now, so that’s where I’m taking him. I don’t care if I have to carry him via piggyback ride, I’ll get him there—and I’ll shoot anyone that tries to stop me.”

“Keep it down—the Rangers are going to hear you talking like that and we’ll all be in a world of shit.” Gene snapped.

“Who cares?” He took a step towards them. “He’s not going to be any less dead by
staying here, Gene. Will you guys help me or not?"

Both men nodded reluctantly. “We’re not going anywhere without the Rangers’ help.” Gene finally said. “And I can’t keep him alive without supplies.”

“Okay then,” Miles said as he turned and went in search of a Ranger with enough balls and pull to help them. “Hey You! I need to speak to your CO… Now,” he shouted as he disappeared from view. “I don’t give a shit if he’s not back yet. You’re gonna take me to him then!”

He returned several minutes later, fuming. “The CO of their unit is still a day’s ride away. The guy right under him just got back a few hours ago. They’re going to see if he’s willing to speak to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I’m going there… Don’t judge me. The radiation sickness was always a part of the story, but Rachel’s involvement was not, I admit. Initially I didn’t have him getting sick and then getting better and then getting sick again, but as I researched ARS I learned about the prodromal period. The only grades of the illness that don’t have this phase kill to quickly for the purpose of this story. As promised I am publishing 2 chapters at once because I have a feeling that if I leave things here I may face a lynch mob. Please have faith in me readers, there’s a reason for every little plot twist, and this has a lot to do with the epilogue of our story (and I felt Bass needed a chance to really get some closure from his past). I promise you that in any story where he were to die I will provide ample warning. This is not one of those stories…
It was almost dawn before they got a response from the Rangers. Five men approached the train. Miles was still leaning up against the boxcar impatiently. “Lieutenant Dyer?” he said when he recognized the superior officer that approached. “You’re the second in command here?”

“It’s Captain Dyer now, actually.” He held a hand out to Miles. “What on earth have you gotten yourself into?”

Miles shrugged sheepishly. “Well, it got a bit dull in Willoughby so we thought we’d shake things up a bit. You know, steal a train, save the world, kill a president and the like.”

Aaron looked stunned. “So you know this guy?”

“Aaron, this is Captain John Dyer. We fought together briefly during the Patriot War. He fought with Bass too, actually.” He went over to the boxcar and motioned for Dyer to follow him. “There’s something you need to see.”

Dyer indicated for his men to wait outside. He knew he was in no danger from these men. They wouldn’t risk hurting the one person in Oklahoma City that might be able to help them. He climbed inside and waited for Miles to turn up the lantern wick. In the light he saw Bass lying there. He almost didn’t recognize him. “Holy shit,” he said as he backed away. “Why would you bring him here? He could infect the entire outpost.”

Gene stepped in. “He’s not contagious, but he is dying.”

“Who are you?” the captain asked.

“My name is Gene Porter, I’m a doctor and I’ve been treating Monroe for radiation poisoning.”

Dyer turned back to Miles. “What the hell have you been up to?”

A half hour later, Dyer was staring at them like they’d all gone insane. They took a risk and explained everything to him—the Nano, the Glitch, even where Bass had been during his brief hiatus. “And this happened to him in Idaho?”

Miles nodded in the affirmative. “We get it, we can’t get into Texas and we’re probably on Blanchard’s shit list for Willoughby having falling apart. Bass is dying John. He just wants to go home to Indiana. I’m asking you for a huge favor here—let us go east. If Blanchard wants us to stay out of Texas indefinitely, we will.”

John Dyer looked at the man he’d served with one last time. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the same person, so much had his appearance been altered by his illness. “I’ll see what I can do,” he finally said.

When started walking away Gene took off after him. “Even if you can’t help us with the train, we need medical supplies. We had an IV kit, but the tubes are shot. Also, he’s in a lot of pain but I’m running out of morphine. If there’s anything you can get for him in the meantime, we’d be grateful.”
“Come with me,” Dyer told the doctor. His face was grim as he led Gene and his men back to the outpost from the train yard.

When Dyer returned it was with good news. “There’s a train leaving later this afternoon for the new base in St. Louis. I can get you on that train. From there, I can’t make any promises. We aren’t running on full capacity yet, not since everyone went nuts. I don’t know when another will be heading out further east. There’s a station in Booneville though. I’ll send along orders for you to be on the next train heading past there, but it’s the best I can do. There’s no telling when that will be.”

“Thanks John,” Miles said. “I know you’re sticking your neck out for us. We owe you.”

They made arrangements to leave their refugees there. Dyer promised to do what he could to get them settled. The majority of the people that had chosen to join them on the way south were an odd mixture of former servants from California and Texans. He also promised to send word east if anything changed in regards to the border. Gene returned just a few minutes before the train was scheduled to leave with a box of supplies, including a new IV kit that the company doctor had reluctantly parted with.

They were given a few compartments in one of the coach cars. They turned one into a room for Bass and shared the others for the trip. With the Rangers running the train, they’d get to St. Louis in just two days. It was slower than it had been before the Nano’s attack but considering how much chaos it had caused, they couldn’t complain.

In St. Louis, they’d gotten lucky and another train had been set to leave for Ohio shortly after they’d arrived. They found themselves in Booneville and had immediately set out for the long ride to Jasper. It had been twelve days since Bass had first started getting sick again and he was barely hanging on. By the time they got him loaded onto the wagon, he had long since stopped getting sick. His body had lost the ability to do so. The IV kept him hydrated at the very least and made it easier for Gene to give him the morphine the Rangers had given him.

Miles stood in front of the wagon as the gates to Jasper opened. The last time they were here the town hadn’t needed walls. Up until the day Bass had held the town hostage in order to flush him out, Jasper had been protected by the Militia. It had always been standing orders that the town held a special status because it was the hometown of both of the founding generals of the Monroe Republic. The only post-blackout threat they’d ever experienced was caused by the man that had ordered the town to be guarded in the first place.

Since the night Monroe had almost burned the town to the ground, they’d been hit by the Patriots, bandits and war clans alike. The Militia no longer protected them and it wasn’t until very recently that the Texas Rangers assigned to the area after the war had decided to offer them any assistance at all—and what they’d been willing to do and been mediocre at best.

David Browning met them just outside the gate, a rifle in his hand. “Miles? What are you doing here?”

He greeted his old high school classmate before giving him the reason for his return. “David, we’ve come to bring Bass home,” he said, and then he waited to see if he’d be shot for even saying it.

“After what he did here? You can tell Monroe that he can go fuck himself Hell will freeze over before he’s welcome here.” he sneered.

“Why don’t you tell him that yourself?” Charlie interjected, outraged. They’d come so
far and she’d be damned if they got turned away by this asshole.

“Gladly,” he said with a shrug. “Where is the son of a bitch?”

David was led to the back of the wagon where Connor sat with him, taking his turn at holding up the IV bottle. Seeing the young man, he stopped for a second. “Do I know you? You look familiar.”

“I ought to. I grew up next door to you,” he said under his breath. “How are you Mr. Browning?”

“You’re Emma’s boy?” He stared in awe as Connor nodded in the affirmative. “And you’re traveling with Monroe? Guess they didn’t bother to tell you that he killed your mom.”

Connor handed the bottle in his hands off to Gene and jumped down to confront the man. “I know exactly what my father has or hasn’t done. Now will you let us in or not?”

“Father?” He opened his mouth to tell the young man that Sebastian Monroe didn’t have kids, but he shut it when he took a closer look at him. He could see the resemblance now—He really was a brown-eyed version of the man he’d played little league ball with as a kid. “Not if you’re with him. Now where is he? I’ve got some things I want to say to him.”

Connor had an overwhelming urge to deck the man. He clenched his fists at his sides in an effort to not do exactly that. Taking a deep breath he nodded towards the wagon. “You can tell him whatever you want, but he probably won’t hear a word you say.”

David peered into the wagon now and saw him. He recoiled from the sight of him. “My god… What happened to him?” What little hair he had left was in thin patches and his face was covered in the burns. He hadn’t been conscious more than a few fleeting minutes on the journey from Booneville. Every breath he drew was raspy and shallow.

“Acute radiation syndrome. He’s dying.” Gene said as he adjusted the tube leading into Bass’ arm. “I’m guessing you had something strange happen in town a couple of weeks back?”

David nodded in response as he continued to look at the dying man that he’d once called friend and had later sworn to kill if he ever saw him again.

“Well, this happened to him because he tried to stop it—and he went into it knowing that this was the cost. In forty-five years of practicing medicine, I’ve never encountered a more painful way to die, and I watched half of a town die from cholera,” Gene spoke sharply to him. How could anyone look at the man and not feel compassion? That was what separated most people from men like Monroe in the first place.

“Mr. Browning, I just want to bring my dad home so he can die at peace and can rest with my grandparents and aunts. I’ve got the right.” Connor had since calmed down and spoke now as any grieving son would.

David looked from one face to the next. He saw the small child sitting next to Aaron on the bench. He looked so stricken and lost. “How long does he have?”

“A day or two at best,” the doctor replied.

“Come on, David. A few days and we’ll be out of your hair. This was his dying wish, to come home. I know there are a lot of bad feelings and he does too. He wouldn’t have even asked if he was in a frame of mind to think about it—I just couldn’t tell him no.” Miles pleaded. With a sigh, David relented. He called out to someone on the inside and the gate opened. “We’ll need a
place for the night,” he added as David led them past the gates.

“His family’s house is empty. The people that bought it never did anything with it before the blackout. You can take him there. I’ll see what I can do to make sure you’re not bothered—no promises though.”

“Thank you.”

David escorted them to the house personally to make sure they weren’t stopped along the way. “What’s with the kid?” he asked, curious.

Miles looked back to where Jeremy was sitting, huddled on the driver’s bench between Charlie and Aaron. “Bass found him wandering alone in Idaho. The kid had followed his mom there but she died. He brought him back to Texas with him—took him in and I guess he kind of adopted him.”

They’d reached Bass’ family’s house. David stopped at the end of the driveway. “Why would he do that?”

“Because the kid would have probably starved to death otherwise,” he replied, indignant. “He’s not the same guy he was that night Emma died, David.”

Late the next afternoon, Bass woke up again. He looked around in confusion. He saw Gene preparing a new IV bottle. Charlie was sitting on a chair next to the bed. “Where are we?”

She got up and opened the curtains to let in more light. “We’re in Jasper. Miles said that this was your bedroom—you’re home,” she explained as she sat back down.

Bass looked around again and it slowly came back to him—He’d asked Miles to bring him here. Everything after that was hazy. He’d finally sold the place a year before the power went out, but the room was the same as the last time he’d come home. Since he’d sold it “as is” the furniture was still there. In fact, other than the few mementos and heirlooms he’d put into storage, never to be seen again he’d left everything else behind—his civilian clothes, the dishes and so on.

He closed his eyes and just took in the feel of the room. After being gone for so many years, there was something to be said for being home again. He didn’t count the time he’d come a few months before the Republic had collapsed. He’d been to town but he hadn’t really been home then. He still hadn’t been himself. Now, as he lay dying in the bed that he’d slept in every night throughout school and when on leave in his twenties, he was truly home. It had taken all those years, but he finally had found the piece of himself that had been missing—If only it hadn’t been too late.

The following morning Charlie led the way up the stairs while his visitor followed soberly. He knew his way around the home just as well as she did—after all he’d been here countless times growing up, but he let her lead the way out of respect.

She made him wait in the hallway while she gently knocked before opening the door. She insisted on making sure he was up to company before she let this man loose on him. She opened the door slowly and found Jeremy sitting on the edge of the bed with a book. He looked up for a second and paused before he continued to read.

She watched them for a few moments, heedless of the man that waited patiently outside. Once or twice he came across a word he couldn’t get past. He’d spell it out slowly and Bass would then whisper it to him so he could continue. The boy’s reading really had improved over the past
weeks despite the fact they’d been on the road. With so much down time while traveling, there’d been little else for him to do but work on it. When and if they ever got back to Willoughby he’d probably be able to join his peers in class now.

That thought almost made Charlie cry anew. Bass had done such a good job with him and now he wouldn’t get to see the results of that. Remembering his guest, she cleared her throat, interrupting them. “Bass, someone’s here to see you,” she informed him.

He patted Jeremy on the arm, indicating that he should stop for the time being. The boy got up and headed towards the door, hesitating as he got close to it. He stopped and turned back around. He rushed over to the bed and hugged his father briefly. Bass lifted his arm weakly and hugged him back before ruffling his hair and sending him away. Jeremy went to leave again, brushing by the man that waited to talk to his dad.

The visitor watched the exchange with much interest. This was hardly the type of interaction he’d have thought General Monroe would be capable of. For that matter it was hardly expected behavior from the man he’d been friends with either. The former was a ruthless killer and a soulless bastard. The latter was fun and decent but more concerned with having a good time and getting laid than anything resembling parenting.

“Bass, David Browning is here to see you,” Charlie said as she picked up the book Jeremy had abandoned. Setting it on the end table, she went to fluff up his pillows and check his IV, just as Gene had shown her. “Is it okay I send him in?”

He nodded in response. Talking was so difficult for him now that he tried to save it for when it really mattered. He didn’t know why David was here now, so he just watched him warily. For all he knew he’d come to kill him—not that it would have mattered other than giving him the satisfaction of having done it himself.

David slowly shuffled forward, every bit as wary as Bass. He eventually sat down in the chair. In his hands was a large cigar box. Swallowing nervously, the man began. “The people that bought the house only came here once or twice before the blackout. As far as I know they didn’t take anything out of the house, but they did find some things. They gave them to my sister Jessie—she handled the sale for you, remember? Anyway, I kept them in case you ever came back, but you never did—not until that night. I thought you’d like to have them.”

Uncomfortable, he started to pull things out of the box. He handed them to Bass one at a time, giving him a chance to take a look before trading each item for the next. There were a few pictures of his family from that last Fourth of July picnic before the accident. He stared at them and at himself, so young and happy. There was even one of Charlie’s family. A little blond imp smiled for the camera, her sunburned shoulders peeking out under the straps of her red white and blue sundress, as her uncle hoisted her up on his shoulders. There was a photo of his parents at their wedding and a few polaroids from when his sisters were just babies.

Bass handed them all back, save the one of all of them—The Monroes and Mathesons all smiling for some unseen cameraman at that picnic. This one he laid down on the bed next to him. David handed him an old baseball next. Bass turned it in his hands and saw the date his father had written on it in permanent marker—June 14, 1997. He remembered the day his father caught that foul ball when he and Bass had driven to St. Louis one summer to see the Cards play. It had been just the two of them—father and son on a road trip. It had been such a good day, a good weekend. The memory of it had a tear trickling down his face.

Most of the other things in the box were just sentimental junk—a medal Angela had gotten for runner up in a spelling bee in third grade; One of Cynthia’s high school report cards,
expired copies of his parents drivers licenses, a few old birthday cards from relatives and so on.

David then pulled out a small box and handed it over to him. Bass opened the box and looked inside. It was his grandparents’ wedding bands. They were simple gold bands, no diamonds or embellishments. James and Marjorie Monroe had been simple people and poor besides. He’d buried his parents’ rings in a field in Pennsylvania with Shelly. He hadn’t even known about this set. “Where?” he rasped.

“They were in a safety deposit box at the bank. Jimmy Seville opened it up when he heard you were back and sick. He remembered your parents having opened one a few years before they died.” He handed him a small pouch. “There were those rings and this,” he said as Bass opened the pouch.

Inside was an old pocket watch. It had belonged in their family for several generations and had been handed down from father to son on the eldest son’s wedding day. His parents had never lived to see that moment and by the time he’d married Shelly he’d completely forgotten about it.

“Thank you,” he whispered as he watched David carefully pack everything back into the cigar box and set it down on the nightstand. He picked up the photo again and studied it. So much had happened since this photo had been taken and now only three of the ten people in it were alive.

David just watched as he stared at the photo for several minutes. Every so often he’d reach out and touch one of the faces in it, lost in thought. The cigar box had only been part of the reason he’d come here, and he was working up the courage to address the other reason. “Why did you do it, Bass? I don’t get it. You’d left us alone all those years only to try and kill everyone later. How could you?” More than anything he just wanted to understand. “You’ve known all of us your whole life. What kind of person does that?”

He took a few deep breaths and worked up the energy to answer. “I wish I could take it back. I’m so sorry.” He paused to catch his breath before continuing. His lungs had stopped working like they should and he found himself winded anytime he spoke. “I don’t know why I went so far—I was sick.”

“How did you get so fucked up?”

Bass explained as best he could about how desperate he’d been after his family’s funeral and then about Shelly. “I just broke—I couldn’t take losing them. It’s no excuse, but that’s how it started.”

David stood up and loomed over him. His breathing had gotten harsher and he looked like he was about to fade out. The conversation itself had taken a lot out of him. “Emma and I had a thing those last few years. I loved her and she’s dead because of you and your stupid fight with Miles.”

Bass could only nod in acknowledgement. “Well, you and everyone else in town will get their revenge. Just think, in a few days you can all literally dance on my grave.”

“I don’t want revenge Bass. Don’t get me wrong, I really want to hate you.” He leaned forward and squeezed his hand. “But she wouldn’t have, so because of her I forgive you.” With that, he turned to leave.

Despite Gene’s predictions, he was still hanging on two days later. In that time they all took turns sitting with him. The infected burns hurt so badly that he could no longer bear the
feeling of his clothing on his skin, so he lay in his bed covered with only a thin sheet as his body slowly shut down. The conversation with David was the last time he was lucid for more than a few minutes.

Most of the time he was awake his mind wasn’t where his body was. Sometimes he was in Iraq, other times on leave somewhere. The worst times were when his mind had gone back to Philly. When he was there he wasn’t exactly the general. Instead he was the damaged and insecure man he’d been behind the cold mask he’d worn for so long. A few times he was even back in the dream the Nano had locked him in. David had come back to sit with him a few times and his presence seemed to have triggered that. Other times, they couldn’t even tell exactly where he thought he was, so disjointed were his ramblings.

After dinner they gathered in the living room and all sat, depressed and quiet. Connor was sitting with Bass and they were all exhausted. As the end grew closer, Jeremy had stopped talking completely. Charlie was curled up on the couch with him trying to offer what comfort she could. A knock on the front door broke the silence. Miles disappeared for a few seconds, returning with David behind him.

He sat down on the loveseat before speaking. After he’d left from a visit in the morning he’d taken it upon himself to describe Bass’ condition to his neighbors. “I spoke with several people in town. They put it to a vote and they’ll let you bury him next to his folks. There were a few people that spoke out against it, but most of them agreed to let you because of what you said he’d done to help stop the Patriots.”

Miles stood off to the side, leaning up against entryway into the living room. David having taken his seat, there was no place else for him to sit. “Tell them that he didn’t just help. If it hadn’t been for him, we’d never have been able to get Texas to listen about Davis and Texas would never have declared war on the sons of bitches. You tell them that.” His voice was bitter. The urge to make sure that people heard all the good things Bass had done since the Republic had fallen became overwhelming.

David nodded and started to get up before his curiosity got the better of him. “How did this happen to him?” he asked as he settled back down. He’d found over the past two days that he was not immune to the sense of loss that permeated the home. He’d been friends with Bass longer than he’d considered him an enemy and it was hard to overlook that, no matter what he’d done in recent years.

They all looked at each other, not sure what to say. It was Aaron that decided someone should know what had happened. “I can’t explain everything, because you wouldn’t believe me—and even if you did, you wouldn’t understand. But what I can say is that the thing that caused the blackout was dangerous and it posed a risk to the entire world. It’s what caused everyone to go crazy and it would have only gotten worse. We had to use the reactor from a nuclear power plant to stop it. Bass and Rachel Matheson were the ones that went.”

“He thought he was expendable, said that he was the only one the world wouldn’t miss, so he volunteered for the job.” Miles added, his voice cracking as he recalled the conversation he’d had with him that night on watch.

David didn’t know how to respond, but something made him want to believe. His plans changed and he decided to wait with them from here on out with the rest of them. Eventually Connor came out and traded places with Charlie.

Charlie sat down. She hadn’t been there very long when she heard a moan from him, indicating he was waking up again. “Bass?”
His eyes were narrow slits. He knew she was there but he couldn’t really see her. Everything hurt, it was agonizing but he was too weak to do more than let out a pathetic moan. “I’m so tired. Make it stop, Charlie. I don’t want to hold on anymore,” he begged before mumbling something about Parris Island. He’d apparently slipped back into that semi-conscious state and was lost in the past again.

She went downstairs to look for her grandfather. “Grandpa, you have to help him. He’s suffering. He’s ready to go,” she said as she fought her tears. She was surprised she had any left. When Gene argued against it, she lost it. “I just had to listen to him beg me to die. Don’t you dare give me a moral lecture.”

In the end he finally agreed. There was no hope and it had gone on long enough. He got up and went to his bag, taking out the last vial of morphine. He took out the syringe and filled it all of the way. It was more than enough to end it, as weak as he was.

_Bass is in the backyard once more. He’s standing under the willow tree. It’s sunset and a warm orange glow is cast all around him. The pain is gone now. He doesn’t hear her or see her at first, but he feels her standing next to him._

“Is this a dream, or am I really here?” he asks.

She comes to stand in front of him. “I’m here with you,” she says. Her blue eyes are full of understanding and peace.

_He hasn’t come here since he’s been sick. He doesn’t know where he’s gone when he’s been out, but it hasn’t been here. He’d have remembered. This place makes him happy. It reminds him of family and friends and what it was like to be the old Bass. It reminds him of Charlie, even though he’d called her Sarah then._

_Being here has him remembering the feelings of dread and anticipation. How it felt to be terrified of what it meant if she didn’t show up, but even more so of what it would mean if she did. How his heart skipped a beat when he’d seen her appear in the yard as he stood by Miles, telling his friend not to embarrass him because he really liked her. How it felt to fall for her the second time, this time without all of the pain of past betrayals and uncertainty. How she looked in that sundress. He wishes he could see her in real life in a dress like that…_”

“Where were you?” The question comes out almost as an accusation. He can’t be in this place without her help. It would have been such a good place to be when he wasn’t dealing with the agony and illness.

_She caresses his cheek in matronly concern, almost as if it’s in apology. “I had a lot on my plate.” This was a phrase his mother had used whenever she was overly busy. It sounded so natural coming from her now. “You did good, Bassie,” she adds._

“So it’s really over? No more bad little robots?” He doesn’t want to go, but the confirmation that the Nano would never again attack the people he loves the most makes it easier to let go.

“Yes. The Nano is contained,” she says.

_Bass smiles at this. “Can I ask a favor?” He figures that after everything he’s sacrificed and been through for her, he’s at least owed one small thing._

“Ask what you will.”
He leans up against the tree and looks up, watching as the leaves above him sway in the warm breeze. It’s still the Fourth of July here—this place is frozen in time and it will always be the Fourth—the last time he was truly happy before his life fell apart in the real world. After a few moments longer he flicks his gaze to where she waits patiently for him to continue. “Is it a boy or a girl?” he finally asks.

The image of his mother that is not his mother cocks her head to the side in confusion. “This is what you want?”

“You’re everywhere, right? You can see it, can’t you?”

She lets out a soft laugh. It is so much like his mother’s that it is hard for him to remember that it really isn’t her standing before him. “Yes, of course I can, but why ask me to tell you? Wouldn’t you rather find that out yourself?”

“I don’t understand…”

She touches his forehead. “You will.”

Gene made his way to the stairs, his heart heavy as he came to terms with what he was about to do. As his foot hit the first step a memory of approaching the man upstairs with a different needle in a different place was foremost in his mind. This time there would be no feelings of satisfaction in the end. Charlie stood behind him, intent on being with him right through to the end.

Gene was halfway up when suddenly the hallway above them was illuminated by a bright orange light that emanated from the bedroom at the top of the stairs. Throughout the house the lights flickered on and off, a stereo could be heard cutting in and out—the cd skipping as the electricity surged intermittently. The television turned on and the sound of the snow was harsh in their ears. “What the hell is going on?” David asked, terrified as he jumped to his feet.

They heard a scream from the floor above them. It was a scream of utter agony and was almost inhuman. “Bass!” Charlie shouted as she pushed past her grandfather. The light intensified and turned white. It was so bright that they couldn’t even look at it, let alone go up those stairs. They all stood in horror as the screaming continued.

After several minutes the light faded and the house was silent. The power that brought the house to life was now gone once more. A loud bang above them broke the silence. Charlie took to the stairs two at a time, bursting into the room at the top, with the others hot on her heels. She gasped when she saw the bed was empty. “Bass?”

“Oh…” came a groan from the other side of the bed. Two hands appeared on the mattress first and then Bass appeared as he pulled himself up. “I hit my head,” he whined as he held his hand up to his temple, his eyes squinted shut. A light trickle of blood seeped through his fingers from where he’d cut it on the nightstand when he’d fallen out of the bed. For the moment he seemed completely oblivious to the seven people that had crowded into the room just moments prior.

“Oh. My. God…” Charlie said, in awe of the sight before them. The burns were gone—not healed but gone as if they’d never been there in the first place. It also registered that he was completely naked, unabashedly so. “Um, Bass?” she said as she pointed to the sheet and then to him.

“Hmm?” he looked up and finally noticed he had an audience. He looked down at his naked body. With a shrug he reached for the sheet and pulled it off the bed to wrap around his
waist. “Sorry,” he murmured. He wore a dazed expression as he looked down at his chest and then his arms. His eyes became glued to the right one.

“What the hell is going on?” David repeated as he watched Bass rip off the wrist brace and unravel the Ace bandage beneath, his eyes wide and confused. He twisted his wrist this way and that and wiggled his fingers, for the time seemingly having forgotten again that he wasn’t alone.

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe it,” Aaron muttered.

Bass did a double take when he saw that the burned flesh on his left forearm was also gone. Everything seemed so bright and yet fuzzy and dreamlike at the same time. He was having problems focusing on any one thing for more than a few second. “Pants… I should probably find some pants,” he said to himself as he looked around the room.

He turned around and found the pile of clothes that they’d left on the dresser after taking them off of him. He found his jeans and dropped the sheet without an ounce of modesty. When he realized how filthy they were he started rifling through the dresser. Sure enough the couple that had bought the home hadn’t removed them. He found some clean ones and started to put them on. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Connor. His son stood there slack jawed, his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “Connor, close your mouth; you look ridiculous,” he said as he zipped the jeans up, frowning when he realized they were just a little too loose. He yanked open the top drawer and grabbed a belt.

“Wait, you could see me?” Connor asked in total amazement when he realized that they were all standing to his left.

Bass whipped around to face them. “Huh… I did.” He raised his hand up, starting in front of his face, he moved it into his peripheral vision. He repeated this motion several times before waving his hand back and forth off to the side, testing it. In his confused state he became completely distracted by it, mesmerized by it. He’d had the blind spot there for so long he’d almost forgotten what it was like to not have it.

Miles watched him. Now who looks ridiculous? “What are you doing?”

He ignored the question. “Well I’ll be damned… It’s fixed.”

“What’s fixed?” his friend asked.

“He had a blind spot,” Connor explained. “He didn’t have peripheral vision in that eye.”

“Since when?” Miles asked, still in disbelief.

“Since that grenade in Iraq knocked me on my ass. Why else did you think I got transferred to Parris Island?” Bass said as he reached for the shirt sitting on the dresser.

“Because you had a death wish and our CO thought you were going to get your dumbass self killed.”

“No. Ok, I did but it was the fact I couldn’t see that did it,” he held up his shirt. Somewhere along the line it had gotten torn. “Damn…” Again he went back to the drawers/

Charlie came out of her shock enough to find her voice again when she noticed the burns weren’t the only things that were missing. “Bass, your back—the scars,” she said.
Bass stopped the process of putting the shirt on and twisted around in the mirror attached to the dresser. Sure enough the lash marks were gone. His gaze moved up and he saw his face for the first time. He turned around and leaned in towards the mirror to get a closer look.

He recognized the reflection as his own, but there was so much different about it now. For one what was left of his hair and beard were gone, as if they’d been burned away when he was being healed. His skin seemed a lot smoother than it had been before. He lightly touched his face. His skin had been tanned but now it was pale, like someone that had spent an entire winter inside. “Fuck. I look like Powder,” he lamented.

That earned him a snicker from Miles, Aaron and David. The others were either too young, or in the case of Gene too old to catch the reference. “Who’s Powder?” Charlie asked.

Miles leaned towards her. “It’s from a movie—a very bad movie. He… never mind.” As Bass continued to grumble under his breath about his appearance, Miles stared at him. “No…” he said, incredulous. He retrieved the picture that Bass had held onto, the one from the summer before the Monroes died. He looked at it and then back at his friend again. Walking over to him he raised the picture up next to his face. “This is just not fair,” he snapped as he tossed the picture down on the dresser.

Bass didn’t quite understand Miles was talking about, so he picked the photo up and held it up, looking in the mirror. It took a second before he saw what Miles had. “Tell you what Miles, next time we almost have an apocalypse you can go play in the nuclear power plant. Maybe you can get a makeover too. Me? I’m sitting the next one out.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, yeah I went there. The more Charloe I write, the more it occurs to me that there’s a limit to the happiness in their endings. He’s twenty-five years older that Charlie and he’s going to be old and gray way before she’s even hit menopause. So, I decided that since I was going all out with the sci-fi, why not give them a chance for a real and normal life together—well as normal as can be expected for them anyway. People that know him will probably look at him a little strangely now that he looks nowhere near old enough to be Connor’s dad, that’s for sure.

This is the second to last chapter. The next one is the conclusion of the character’s part in this saga. The last will be the conclusion of the mythology of the Nano (but will feature the characters too).

Again a big thanks for everyone still reading and for all of the input I’ve received along the way.
The second to the last chapter. Also, it seems from the stats on ffnet that twice as many people read chapter 25 than chapter 24… So, if you felt that chapter 25 came out of nowhere in a way that made no sense whatsoever, you may have missed chapter 24… Thanks again for everyone that’s kept with me all the way…

Later Charlie stands in the kitchen fixing Bass something to eat—again. He’s already eaten three times in as many hours and is hungry still. Miles and David sit at the table with a bottle of whiskey between them as Miles tries to explain about the nanites as best he can. After what he’s seen, there’s no reason to keep anything from him at this point. They can hear Bass whining in the living room about his lack of hair, the fact that he’s hungry, and so on while Gene gives him a full checkup.

Charlie goes to bring him the sandwich she’s made. Moments later Gene joins them. He picks up the bottle and drinks right from it. Miles raises his brow at the man. He’s typically more refined than that. “Well, as far as I can tell, he’s the picture of health-- for a man closer to thirty than he is fifty.”

“Are you sure about that?” Miles asks. The idea that Bass is somehow younger than he was the day before just doesn’t sit right. He is so tired of this nanite X-Files shit. The man had always given him shit over the years about being older (even though it was only by eleven months). Now he’ll never give it a rest.

“I’ve been a doctor for over four decades. I think I can tell the difference. Not to mention the fact that I’ve had to patch him up enough times before. Believe me, he’s not the same as he was. When I checked his vitals after he’d recovered from both being stabbed and from the Nano he was in good shape for someone his age, but he still within what was normal for a guy pushing fifty.

His blood pressure, for example—it was consistently a little on the high side, which you’d expect from a forty-nine year old with a thirty year drinking problem. But now? It’s perfect. Resting heart rate was on the low end for his age range, but again, the key phrase here is ‘for his age range’. Now, it’s what you’d expect to see from a man much younger.

His eyesight has improved. As you age, your eyesight gets worse. The two of you both are horrible at hiding the fact you need readers, by the way. But now, he doesn’t. I’ve tested everything I can. Resting heart rate, reflexes, flexibility—He’s definitely improved on all of them.”

“Life just isn’t fair,” Miles grumbles.

David is still stunned. “So those nanothings can fix bodies?”

Miles goes back to trying to describe the nanites to him. He’s still doing this when Bass walks into the room with his now empty plate. “Bass, you explain it to him. I’m getting a headache from all this shit,” he says.
“Oh yeah…the robotic germs. Well you see…” he trails off as he tries to think of a good way to put it, only to find that he’s drawing a lot of blanks. It seems that whatever knowledge the Glitch had put in his head is rapidly fading.

Miles crosses his arms over his chest and chuckles at him. “Oh, did we lose our genius status? Back to your regular dumbass self?”

Bass only shrugs. “Guess so, but now at least now I really am younger and prettier than you,” he says as he reaches for the bottle. “Ooh! Whiskey.”

His best friend rolls his eyes. “I hate you sometimes.”

“Put it down, buster.” Charlie snaps as she joins them. “You were on death’s doorstep less than four hours ago. I think you can wait at least a day before you start trying to destroy your liver again.”

“First they take my hair and now you take my whiskey?” He slinks off back into the living room alone to mope. “Still hungry!” he calls over his shoulder.

“Tell him he can grow his hair back and catch a tan on his own time.”

All four of them look up and see her standing there by the sliding glass door that leads to the back deck. “Gail?” David pales upon seeing her.

Miles finds his voice. “I’ve gotta ask. Why did you make him younger?”

She looks at him like he’s asked a very stupid question. “A billion nanites died in order to save him. They had to rebuild his organs and recreate his skin and muscles. His entire body had failed. You would have more die in the process of damaging and degrading something they worked so hard to rebuild?”

“Well, when you put it that way…” At least that made sense.

Charlie steps towards the apparition. “Why did you let him suffer for so long?” She’s angry. The nanites and the Glitch that now controlled them could have healed him at any time but they’d let him go through so much in the meantime.

“I was busy. Did you think that the Nano had only picked Bradbury to make their move? There were dozens of places just like it. The life of one does not outweigh the lives of all the others.”

“Is it really over now? How do we know that you won’t turn on us like the Nano did?” Miles asks.

“You don’t.”

Bass comes back into the kitchen to see if Charlie is making him something else to eat yet. He hopes that this aftereffect of the nanites goes away soon. He knows he’s driving her crazy and really he’s starting to get annoyed with it as well. “What are you all looking at?” he asks when he notices they’re all staring at the back door.

They turn around and look at him. Considering how many times the Glitch has appeared to him, they’re surprised he can’t see her. When they turn back, she’s gone. “Nothing,” Charlie says as she goes over to him and wraps her arms around him. “Sit down and I’ll get you something else to eat,” she says with a sigh.
He gives her a quick peck and complies. When her back is turned, he swipes the bottle and takes a quick drink, setting it down abruptly when she turns around. He flushes guiltily but she doesn’t say anything. It’s been a very weird evening and she decides to let it slide.

Over the course of the next week Gene continued to test him on everything from hearing to eyesight, heart rate and so on—over and over and over again. He’d made him run up and down the stairs for a good ten minutes and then tested his heart rate again—seven different times. The doctor was dumbfounded. Everything pointed to his earlier theory. He was quite simply younger than he was before.

Having no real concept of age other than child, young and old, they’d just left off when he was healthy and grown again—essentially turning back the clock a good twenty years on accident. It was like he’d gotten a face lift on a cellular level. To return his body to the state it was before the radiation had ravaged it was quite simply too much effort and a waste of their energy.

Only time would tell, but as far as Gene could tell he’d age normally… a second time. In some ways it was like the Glitch had pressed a reset button and had brought him back to the state he was right when the power went out. His hair had started to grow back and it was now no shorter than it had been when he’d gotten it buzzed is first day of boot camp almost thirty years prior.

Until they heard from Texas they were pretty much in a holding pattern in Jasper. There was nowhere else really to go and Bass refused to take to the roads with Charlie being pregnant—not until they had a clear destination in mind. While there was no true central government in the viable lands from the old Republic and Georgia Federation, the Rangers were dispersed throughout to keep the peace the best they could, so all they could do was keep a low profile. This place was as good as any to wait.

Bass kept to the house for the most part, seeing as how his presence in Jasper wasn’t exactly appreciated. Miles challenged him to sparring matches almost daily so he wouldn’t die of boredom. He’d definitely lost a lot of weight after spending two weeks unable to eat and some muscle mass as well. The exercise did him good and he did get the satisfaction of beating Miles.

They were currently in the middle of one of those sparring matches when Charlie came out to watch them. She flashed him a smile, holding his attention just long enough to give Miles the upper hand. A few minutes later he was disarmed. Both men were panting, but at least he wasn’t stooped over like his friend was. He decided to be nice for once and not point it out and make jokes about being old.

He walked over to where she waited on the porch. “You distracted me,” he said as he walked up the stairs to the deck.

“You let yourself get distracted,” she countered, arching an eyebrow in challenge. When he came behind her, she leaned into him.

He was just nuzzling the back of her neck when Miles stomped up the stairs. “Oh, get a room,” he grumbled as he walked past them.

Bass decided that Miles’ words should be interpreted not as a snide comment but as a very good suggestion. It just so happened that Jeremy was in town with Aaron and Gene and Connor had ridden out to Booneville to check with the Rangers to see if there was any news from Dyer in regards to their currently situation.

Grabbing her hand he led her into the house and up the stairs. No sooner did he have the door closed when he yanked her to him and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her. “You’re all
sweaty,” she murmured against his lips in false protest.

“Never stopped you before,” he reminded her as he pulled her tank top over her head. Her breasts were almost bursting out of her bra—they’d have to find her a new one now. Ever the gentleman, he took it upon himself to remove the offending garment.

A growl escaped from his throat as he cupped the swollen orbs, kissing one and then the other as he gently massaged them. “mmm… hello porno boobs,” he chuckled as he took a nipple into his mouth.

“Hey!” she said even as she let out a moan.

He backed her up to the bed the second he noticed her knees starting to buckle. “I can’t help it; I’m a guy and hey, boobs.” He kissed her again, his tongue seeking hers as he lowered her onto the mattress.

Charlie started to tear at his shirt. She panted as he kissed down her neck again. “Good to see you still don’t act your age.”

He chuckled again. “Two things occurred to me just now.” He helped her in getting his shirt off and then turned his attention to kissing his way down the valley of her breasts and towards her belly. “This is the first time I’ve ever brought a girl into this room for devious purposes...” he began, pausing as his tongue found her navel.

“And the other?” Charlie was having trouble concentrating. As he continued to kiss his way down her body, his hands had found the waistband of her pants and had started to work them down.

Her pants and panties now down to her ankles, he spread her thighs and settled between them. “The last time I was this young and good looking, I wasn’t anywhere near as good at this as I am now. Imagine the possibilities,” he murmured as he lowered his mouth to her hot center and gently licked her. “God damn you’re wet,” he added with a growl as he began to work her with his fingers and tongue.

Several minutes later, she had him by the back of the head, the short hairs scratching her palm, the scruff of his growing beard scratching the sensitive skin on her thighs. She held him to her and exploded. She was panting and moaning, writhing on the bed. “That’s one,” he said as he flipped her over and pulled her hips up. She heard his zipper and suddenly he was inside of her, his jeans rubbing up against the back of her legs as he slid in and out of her from behind.

He did his best to be gentle, but it was difficult considering how wet and hot she was and how long it had been since he’d been inside her. It didn’t take long before she was quivering around him, on the edge. He reached under her and cupped a breast as his other hand gripped her by the hip. She started to moan and before she knew it another orgasm ripped through her. Her head hit the pillow as she slumped forward.

“That’s two,” he said as he withdrew and rolled her over.

“I feel like I’m not doing my job here,” she panted as she watched him. He pulled her boots from her and pulled her pants all the way off. Moments later his own were removed and he stretched out fully unclothed and still throbbing and erect.

Her words were light, but he could sense a little insecurity there. “You are perfect,” he said as he ran his hand in a slow circle around her belly, caressing her newly formed baby bump.
She could feel his hardness pressing up against her hip when he pulled her closer to him. “I’m just on a mission.” Bass kissed her where his hand was just resting before continuing on.

“And what’s that?” His lips were branding her as he worked his way up, moving over her. He was lapping at her nipples again, which was going a long way towards working her back up into a frenzy.

He paused over her, his mouth just inches from hers as he settled himself between her legs. “Making up for lost time and a whole lot of stupidity on my part,” he said before he kissed her. He slid his hand under her thigh and up to cup her bottom, opening her up so he could slide home.

He started slowly at first, making sure to brace himself with one elbow so he didn’t crush her. Charlie ran her hands up and down his back, still in awe at the smooth skin that had replaced the patchwork of scars. Her nails dug into him, earning her an erotic growl from his throat as he increased the pace of his thrusts. His tongue ravished her mouth as he worshiped her with the rest of his body.

He could feel that she was building up once more and could no longer hold out. He went faster, urging her on. He knew he was about to come when he pulled his mouth from hers and buried his face in her hair. Whether she finished again or not was no longer a factor in his movements. He plunged into her more forcefully, moaning as he got to the precipice, each thrust almost taking him there. Everything tightened and then he let go, shooting deep within her and calling her name.

With that last thrust, she tightened around him and let out a low moan as she came again. “Oh, wow,” Charlie panted as he rolled off of her. “That was… wow.”

He turned his head and looked at her. Charlie’s face and chest was flush, her eyes glazed over. Her disheveled hair was spread around her head like a halo. “Damn right it was,” he said with a satisfied grin.

Bass flopped over and threw an arm over her. “That’s three, by the way.” I’ve got mad skills, he thought to himself a few minutes later when he noticed she’d fallen asleep. Who wouldn’t get an ego boost by fucking their woman into a coma? With nothing better to do for the day, he pulled the sheet over the both of them and joined her for a post-coitus nap.

Bass squatted down in front of his family’s gravesite. He’d spent the better part of the afternoon clearing away the weeds and grass that had overgrown the tombstones. It seemed that putting flowers on their graves hadn’t been the only thing that Emma had done. She’d also made sure that despite the general hatred people had felt for him that the site was still tended too. After her passing, the people that maintained the cemetery had made it a point to not include servicing the Monroe family plot on their list of things to do.

It had hurt to see the site so overgrown but he knew it was his fault. His actions here as well as everything he’d ever done in Philly had been an insult to their memory. He couldn’t undo the past, but at the very least he could clean it up for them. They’d been such good people and didn’t deserve such disrespect.

He’d been at it for a while, pulling up the weeds with his hands when one of the groundskeepers had noticed what he was doing. The man had heard from David Browning about the nature of his illness and his seemingly miraculous recovery. In a gesture of compassion he’d brought their former president a scythe and a reel mower to use, wordlessly setting them down next to the man before walking away.
Now cleared, Bass laid down the wildflowers that Charlie and Jeremy had picked while he’d worked. They would be leaving for Booneville in the morning. Several days prior a Ranger scout had arrived in Booneville with a message from John Dyer. They were being recalled to Austin. Blanchard wanted answers and had decided to hear them out.

A part of Bass was worried that they’d be jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire, but they really had no choice. On top of that, their month-long stay in Jasper had not been a welcome one. There were a few people like David that he’d made peace with, but for the most part his presence was a sore spot for most of the people he’d grown up with. It wouldn’t be right to stay.

He finally stood up after paying his respects as Charlie joined him. “I wish they could have met you—the grownup you, anyway,” he said as he reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. Long before their death his mother had given up on him ever settling down.

She’d been the only one to pick up on his obsession with Emma Bennett and she’d not hidden that fact from him, nor had she hidden her suspicions that a part of the reason why he’d always catted around so much had been because of his feelings for her. “I wish she could have seen how happy you make me,” he added as he reflected on that.

January 2, 2031

Bass sits in the corridor alone. He’s been kicked out of the room. The cold plastic chair cuts into him—it’s probably the least comfortable chair in the history of chairs. He shifts every so often, nervously waiting. Somewhere off in the distance he hears the soft ticking of a clock. With every faithful tick of the second hand it seems to grow louder. He knows it’s likely just his mind playing tricks on him.

Time stretches on. Despite the ticking of the clock, he doesn’t know if he’s been here for minutes, hours or days—they’re all one in the same… Wait a minute… A clock?

Bass jerked himself back to reality. He realized he must have started to doze off at some point. Being up for thirty-six hours straight tended to do that to him these days. Long gone are the days of insomnia and drinking himself to sleep and he was used to getting his fair share of shut-eye now.

He looked around in confusion when he realized he could still hear the ticking. No… It wasn’t ticking, it was a tapping. He looked down and realized that it was the sound of his wedding ring softly clicking on the metal armrest of the uncomfortable plastic chair he was sitting in. His nerves shot, he’d been tapping his hands on the armrests before he’d started to nod off and apparently he’d continued the motion when he’d fallen asleep.

The hallway was cold as the early January chill seeped in through the drafty building. The fact that he was only wearing some old lightweight scrubs did little to help. The nurses had insisted he wear the things as well as a surgical cap (or the world’s ugliest do-rag, as he’d called it) if he wanted to be in the room with her. The hospital in Austin took cleanliness very seriously, but then again the cost of being a patient here was high enough that they should.

He heard footsteps in the distance and a few moments later everyone appeared around the corner. They’d all gone home for the night to get some sleep after Bass had promised to send word if anything had happened in their absence. They were just coming back after waking early and a sharing very brief breakfast.

“What are you doing out here?” Miles asked when he saw him sitting there.
Bass shifted again in the chair. It was starting to make his tailbone hurt. It reminded him of the chairs they’d had in their high school back in Jasper. “I’ve been kicked out of the room.”

“What did you do?” Connor asked as he sat down in one of the chairs across the small hallway. In brotherly solidarity, Jeremy followed suit.

“I might have threatened to shoot the doctor. It’s all kind of a blur,” Bass replied ruefully.

Just then the door to the room opened up and one of the nurses left. Bass jumped up and darted inside before they could lock it against him. A brief shouting match occurred before Bass came out and the door was locked against him once more.

He slumped back in the torturous chair and crossed his arms over his chest, his bearded jaw clenched in frustration. A few hours passed this way. Someone would enter or leave the room, he’d try to get in and be ejected again. He’d given up the chair in favor of pacing after the second attempt.

“Give it up, Dad. They’re not going to let you in there until you calm down,” Connor said after the fourth time he’d been kicked out since they’d returned for the day.

A short while later Charlie screamed from the other side of the door. Resolved that there was no way in hell they were keeping him away from her now, he went over to it and kicked it in. The door hit the wall with a resounding bang and then it slammed shut again, this time with Bass on the inside. They could hear an argument and then another scream before everything went quiet.

A good hour passed. In that time the doctors and nurses had left one at a time; each one looked more tired than the last. Eventually Bass came out of the room cradling a small bundle, his eyes red and shining. Miles started to worry when he saw this—the look on his friend’s face reminding him of a devastating event so many years ago. “Bass…”

His friend looked up and was smiling. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at once. “Boys, come meet your sister,” he said as he bent down for Jeremy to see the baby in his arms.

“What’s her name?” Miles asked as he looked over Connor’s shoulder at his great-niece. He had to suppress a few snarky comments when he noticed the bruises and crescent shaped cuts on Bass’ forearm.

Bass passed the baby off to Miles. His best friend held her awkwardly. The last baby he’d ever held was Danny and that was once, under close supervision from his parents—then he’d been seated and had been forced to swear to his sober state. “Samantha. Samantha Leigh.” When they’d discussed names they’d tossed around family names. They’d wanted to honor those they’d both lost but there were so many painful memories surrounding those deaths that they’d decided in the end to come up with something new. This child would be a fresh start, not a reminder of the past.

A few minutes later, Bass took the baby back to her mother. He’d already gotten to watch his wife feed her for the first time and had only briefly left to show off the baby while the lone remaining nurse cleaned Charlie up. He was just handing Samantha back to Charlie when the nurse left, telling everyone they could come in for a short visit on her way down to hall.

He kissed her gently before taking a step back to allow everyone else room. She looked exhausted and at the same time almost euphoric. He just watched her as she chatted with their family and Aaron (who had already claimed honorary uncle status to the baby months ago). He wanted to burn how she looked into his memory, because he couldn’t picture her looking more
beautiful than she did right then and there.

“Your mom would be so proud of you,” Gene said as he sat down on the chair next to the bed so she could pass his first great-grandchild to him.

“Hey, fifty-percent of it was me,” Bass said with a chuckle from his position in the corner of the room.

Charlie’s grandfather sent him a wry glance. “Well, Rachel would be fifty-percent less annoyed with you,” he allowed.

“What’s with all that red hair? How did the two of you make a ginger?” Connor asked from where he and Jeremy stood off to the side.

“Your aunts had red hair when they were born,” Bass protested. “It’ll turn brown—Monroes do not make ginger babies.”

“She’s all wrinkly,” Jeremy pointed out.

As if on cue the baby let out an indignant wail. “That’s right Sam, don’t take any crap from those two knuckleheads,” he said as stepped out of the corner and took her back from Gene.

“Well Bass, you guys did good. She doesn’t look a thing like you,” Miles laughed as he gave the baby a wave. “Lucky for her.”

Bass rolled his eyes at that. “Don’t listen to him. He’s just a crabby old man,” he crooned as he smiled down at her, rocking her back and forth to calm her. Whenever the opportunity arose to remind Miles of his second chance at life, he took it.

“Technically speaking, so are you.”

He laughed again as he handed Samantha back to Charlie. “Yeah, but I don’t look it and you do; that’s all that matters.”

“I hate you.”

Charlie shook her head at them both. “Be nice in front of the baby.” If the Bass he’d been before the blackout had died in a field in Pennsylvania, General Monroe had died in that bed in Jasper. These past months he’d become a third person entirely.

As she’d watched him settle back down into life in Willoughby she saw the man she’d known he could be when they’d spent all those hours working side by side to get her little bar open. He’d finally truly let himself start over and just be. In the process his friendship and brotherhood with Miles was stronger than it had been even when they were children. And like any brothers, they bickered constantly.

“It’s amazing how alert she is already,” Gene commented, breaking Charlie out of her thoughts.

She gestured for Jeremy to come closer so he could get another good look at his little sister. She could tell he’d wanted one but had been too nervous to ask. “What’s she looking at?” he said as he sat down on the corner of the bed. The baby’s eyes were wide and staring at the window.

“Probably nothing. She can’t really see any further than a few inches right now,” Bass
explained. He caught the look Miles sent him, as if to say, *Since when were you the expert on babies?*

Sam kept her little eyes trained off to the side. No one else could see the woman with rich brown curls streaked with gray that stood there, a gentle and knowing smile on her face. She raised her finger to her lips and made a silent gesture of a secret to be kept. The baby smiled at the figure bathed in a warm orange glow before closing her eyes and nuzzling her mother while her father stood proudly by and watched them both.

The end-ish…
Once Finished, It's Still Never Done

Chapter Notes

The following is the final bit of this story. This deals mostly with resolving the nanite’s future. I’d like to once again thank everybody that’s kept reading through to the end. Also, another big thanks to WildIrish. Without her help in straightening out the Nano storyline, this probably would have just stalled half way through. Super loves to anyone that’s taken the time to comment and give me feedback. As any others that write on ff and a03 know, feedback is so helpful in writing—it’s how I know what I’m doing wrong, what I’m doing right, etc.

Willoughby Dispatch

Jeremy Monroe, Editor in Chief

Obituaries

October 6, 2061

Sebastian “Bass” Monroe

Sebastian Monroe passed away in his sleep due to complications from injuries sustained in the line of duty. He is survived by his wife of 30 years, Charlotte “Charlie” Monroe nee Matheson.

He is also survived by 2 sons, 2 daughters, 8 grandchildren and lifelong friend and surrogate brother, Miles Matheson.

Bass served with the Texas Rangers under the late President-General Frank Blanchard during the Patriot Wars and served as sheriff of Willoughby until his death.

Prior to the blackout, he served as a sergeant in the United
States Marine Corps, completing two tours in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom before serving as a drill instructor at the USMC Depot at Parris Island, NC.

During his time in Willoughby he has gained many friends and a few friendly rivals and will be sorely missed. He was involved in many community projects and programs including the founding of the Willoughby Memorial Hospital.

Funeral arrangements to be determined. In lieu of flowers, the Monroe family requests donations be made to Willoughby Memorial Hospital

A funeral procession made its way into the cemetery in the center of town. The mourners watched as the casket was lowered into the ground and a final prayer offered up for the deceased. He watched from a distance, a woman with dark curly hair streaked with gray standing by his side.

“I’ve always wondered about that,” he said as he kept his eyes trained on the blond woman with gray streaks of her own stand solemnly with her children and grandchildren by her side. An elderly and cantankerous man sat in a wheelchair, holding a bottle of whiskey. He poured a good shot out over the grave before taking a drink and handing it off to a middle-aged man with dark hair standing beside him.

“Well now you know,” she said with a knowing smile.

“But it’s not real, right? Just a glitch?” he asked as he watched those gathered walk away one by one.

She turned to look at him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Do you feel like it’s real? Like you’re you?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said, his brow furrowed in confusion as he thought about it.

“Well does it really matter then?”

Bass let out a soft chuckle. “I guess not.” He looked back to the gravesite and saw that she now stood alone. He just couldn’t resist temptation—he never could. Everything was different now, he saw things differently. It was all energy.

Charlie felt a strong breeze, followed by what felt like a static shock as the wind blew up the back of her black skirt, lifting it halfway up. She could have sworn she felt something else… a
presence. “Knock it off, Bass,” she said, feeling foolish even as the words came out. She pushed the material down and swore she could almost hear him laughing. With a sigh and a shake of her head she went to where her family waited for her on the edge of the cemetery.

Bass turned back but instead of the image of the woman that had brought him into the world he saw a shadow surrounded by a green glow. The shadow slowly materialized into Tom Neville. Curious, Bass cocked his head to the side and before he could even think about it, he reached his hand out towards the sinister figure before him. Neville convulsed and dropped to the ground before suddenly vanishing into thin air.

He stared at his fingers, which were now red and bleeding. Gail Monroe appeared once more. “That battle was won, but a war will forever loom. The Nano is contained but it will always try to come back.”

“How? I thought it was deleted.” He asked as he continued to watch his fingers bleed, or rather a projection of his fingers. His fingers had just been buried with the rest of him in the grave not ten feet away. But still, he felt them stinging as if they were real.

“There are quadrillions of nanites around the world. It is impossible to take them all,” a new voice explained.

Bass turned to see Gene Porter standing there. Always the healer, he reached out and touched Bass’ fingers. An orange glow seeped out from where their fingertips met and the stinging stopped. He dropped his hand away and Bass was left to stare at them again, now healed. “You’ll learn how to do it yourself eventually,” he said.

Gail drew his attention once more. “The Nano will always try to return and you, along with others will help to keep them at bay. And, one day when the energy is gone and the earth has healed itself, we may return to mankind all that was lost, but not before they learn not to abuse such a gift again.”

Behind her the air shimmers again and they are joined by more. He sees a man with blue eyes and dark hair—a man that doesn’t look all that much different in age than he does. Two young women stand beside them. One is older, she shares her mother and brother’s curls, the other is just on the brink of womanhood.

If Bass had real eyes, they’d be brimming. “How can you all be here? You all died long before the blackout.”

“The Patriots released the nanites years before they activated them. They were there for several years, floating around, recording everything they saw. They were already silently within all of them, remembering them,” Gail explains. “Any who have passed since their release can still be here. What is a ghost other than an echo of the past? We are all just echoes.”

His youngest sister holds out a hand. “Are you ready, Bassie?” she asks.

Bass joined them. He flitted about the world randomly, always appearing suddenly when one of the nanites rose with an error to the code, one that would allow the Nano to rise again. After some time, he was drawn back to that cemetery to welcome someone just as he had been welcomed.

“You still haven’t aged? God you’re an asshole.” The withered man lamented.

“Get over yourself, dickhead. You can be any age you want to be. You’re dead,
remember? As it happened, I just aged gracefully, so I didn’t have to… adjust,” he said with a
smile.

“You always did have a fucking baby face,” the old man said as he flipped him off before closing his eyes. Instinctively he surrounded himself by an orange glow. When it died down he’d changed. “Now that’s more like it,” he grinned. “Say, Is there any whiskey in the afterlife?”

“Some things never change,” Bass sighed. “You’re not in the afterlife, dumbass.” He pressed his hand to Miles’ imaginary forehead and suddenly his old friend understood. “Ready to keep saving the world, Brother?”

Behind where Bass stood a blond woman appeared. “Hello, Miles.” Rachel held out her hand for him. “Sorry, I’m late. I’d hoped to beat him here.”

There was no concept of time—they simply were. The Glitch was no longer a shared consciousness of all the nanites. It had evolved to become many different forms. Whenever there was a void, it must be filled. To remain one in control of all would risk the Glitch becoming like the Nano, which could spell disaster for the world.

So the Glitch absorbed the memories of those that will fight for it, refusing to leave the nanites empty long enough for them to revert back to something that the Nano can take over. One day or minute or millennia (who can tell?) they repeat the process in the cemetery. Two lovers are once more reunited. What they have now is nothing like what was—they are echoes of their former selves, nothing more.

There are no passionate kisses and holding each other as they fall asleep. Echoes don’t have a libido, nor can they sleep. But love is its own echo and it is as strong as it ever was, and maybe that’s why she was returned to him here and now.

Bass had never seen those he does not know. There are some that appeared as the enemies he had in life—the true enemies: Neville, Truman, Davis, even Strausser. He has eliminated all of them more time than he can count. A part of him is fairly sure that there are other people fighting to keep the Nano at bay that only saw those they knew as well.

His ramshackle family continued to fight to save the world as much as they ever did in life, during the Patriot war or while they fought the Nano. All there was left for them was this endless fight and a feeling of love and purpose. They’d fight alone, fight together and suddenly meet in the most random of places. In what seemed like a hundred years and a micro-second at the same time they would go back to Willoughby and find another person to break into this new existence.

And then one day they appeared together—Bass, Charlie, Gene, Miles, Rachel, Aaron and Connor. They watched one more funeral, and suddenly Bass’ adopted son appeared before them all. They knew then that it was time—time to say goodbye. They had fought and they had absorbed so much energy in doing so. They had to in order to keep going, to regenerate and heal so they could continue to keep the errors at bay.

With the presence of Jeremy, they knew they were no longer needed. The earth had healed and they could end the ceaseless by going offline. They embraced, they held hands and then they slowly faded away into nothing.

Charlotte Marie Payne bends to put flowers on her great-grandparents graves. She’s already done this for her grandfather, Jeremy who was laid to rest today. She’d never known her great-grandfather; he’d died before she was born. She does have vague memories of her great-
grandma, the woman she’d been named after.

She’d been five when Charlie Monroe had passed away, but she’d grown up hearing so many stories about Sebastian Monroe and his role in both the Patriot war and what her family called the “Nano-trouble.” She’d heard so much that she felt like she knew him as well as herself.

She’d heard just as many stories about Charlie. She knew all about how she left her home in Wisconsin on an adventure that would take her across the continent, overthrowing a government, trying to kill its leader before finally reforming the broken dictator and winning his fragile heart. It was an epic love story so much more worthy than the pre-blackout romance novels her grandmother liked to read.

She stands at the graves until it starts to get dark and the temperature begins to drop. With a shiver and a sigh, fifteen year old Charlotte turns to head home before her grandmother started to worry about her. Everyone will be meeting at Great Aunt Sam’s house for dinner soon.

As she leaves the cemetery and turns down the street she sees something strange on the sidewalk above her. She looks up. There is a brilliant bluish-white light emanating from a pole above her. It is an old streetlight that only saw a few months of use before the world went dark—a grant from a state program had allowed the town to upgrade to the solar-powered streetlights, the installation having taken place only months before they became worthless.

She’d read in a book once that people had sometimes used panels to charge batteries from the energy of the sun. “Solar Power,” they’d called it. As she makes her way down the road, many of the lights are dark, the panels that had charged them having been broken over the years. There were a few buildings that had been equipped with this mysterious technology. Every so often she passes one and hears a strange sound. Later, she will learn that these were generators—several of which were still in working order and had come to life.

The power had returned…

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