The Fates That Tore Us Apart

by Mnemoli

Summary

PART 3 OF "THE ROGUE VARIABLE"

As Sole Survivor Myra Larimer struggles with the knowledge that her greatest enemy is also the only family she has left, she finds herself forced to choose a side. But can she live with the consequences of her decision? When allies become enemies and friends find themselves betrayed, who will be left standing by her side?

*UPDATES TUESDAYS, AND USUALLY FRIDAYS, BUT SOMETIMES OTHER DAYS TOO*
Fog clung to the Castle’s battlements like tufted fleece, obscuring the world beyond the fort. The concrete walls were stark and bare against the white mist, figures moving like shadow puppets as they went about their morning work. It was the third day of heavy fog, and tensions were high in the fortress as minutemen jumped at shadows that might be hostiles moving beyond the walls, only to find that they were harmless tricks of the light.

Still, work had to continue, and so the Castle’s staff labored ever onward, turning the once-vacant ruin into a command center to be proud of. Even in these conditions, their responsibility to the Commonwealth would not allow them time to relax. As far as anyone was concerned, what precious time they had could run out at any moment, and they had to be ready.

“No move that turret over to the left a bit, Guerra!” called Preston from beneath the reconstructed Castle wall. The Minuteman’s newest officer stood on top of the forty-foot-high concrete structure, struggling with the heavy machine gun. She threw her whole body into it, finally scooting the turret half a foot closer to the corner of the battlements.

Preston couldn’t help but laugh as he watched her struggle. Over the last month, he’d gotten to know Talise fairly well, at least well enough to know that she rarely did anything the easy way. Still, she’d relaxed since she and Preston had returned from Jamaica Plain, and the Colonel was glad to see it. While they hadn’t managed to find any surviving members of her deceased boyfriend’s family, the town having become completely overrun with feral ghouls, Talise had at least gotten the opportunity to learn more about Henry’s early life from a half-burned journal they’d recovered at his family’s old homestead. Preston had been more than willing to help her continue the search, but Talise had come to the difficult conclusion that their odds of finding Henry’s next of kin were slim at best, and she had insisted on returning to the Castle and joining up with the Minutemen. He couldn’t say that he was entirely unhappy that she’d decided to stick around.

“Is that better?” Talise huffed, her face red from exertion.

“Looks good,” the Colonel replied, giving her a thumbs-up. “That wall should have enough defenses set up on it now. Come on down and get cleaned up before breakfast.”

“Yes sir!” the young woman replied, heading for the stairs.

Preston looked about the courtyard with a satisfied smile on his face. It had taken months, but the Castle’s walls were finally finished. The heavy armor plating on the outside of the concrete walls had been a good first step. Now, every wall was being armed against a siege that seemed inevitable. The Commonwealth had taught Preston many lessons in his time serving her, but perhaps the most critical was this: for every fortune, misfortune was sure to follow. No power or security came without a price, and the Minutemen had grown dramatically in power. Every settlement they protected was diligent about sending recruits to the Castle, to the point where Preston had a hard time training all the new members himself. That sort of population was bound to garner the unwanted attention of the
Institute. Preston knew they would come. It was just a matter of when.

Still, the Colonel wasn’t content to just seal the doors and wait. There was a whole world out there, full of people who needed a chance to determine their own future free from the fears that plagued their lives. And now that the Minutemen had the numbers, it was time to send dedicated squads to defend the settlements already allied with them. They needed to show those that remained neutral that today’s Minutemen, at least, kept their word.

A small stage had been constructed at the base of the northern wall the evening before, in preparation for the reassignment ceremony that would take place soon, if the damn fog would lift. Preston wasn’t a huge fan of pomp and circumstance himself, but he’d learned how valuable events like these could be for morale. The only thing that would make the ceremony better would be if the General herself bothered to show up to preside over the squad selection, but Preston wasn’t even sure where Myra was. He tried to pretend that he wasn’t bothered by her absence, that he didn’t blame himself for driving her away with his awkward declaration of love. He just hoped that she wouldn’t stay away forever. The Minutemen still needed her as a symbol of hope, a rallying point. Without Myra, Preston worried that the whole beautiful dream of a free Commonwealth would fall apart.

As Preston checked the stage’s structural integrity one more time, he heard a loud, grating voice from beyond the Castle wall.

“Hey!” cried the voice. “I heard this place belongs ta the Minutemen again! Yer General in there? I need ta speak with her!”

Preston dashed up the stairs to the top of the battlements. Below, he saw a lone figure in what appeared to be military fatigues, though the fog made it difficult to see many details. Whoever it was was standing with their hands on their hips. “Who are you, and what do you want with the General?” he asked cautiously.

“The name’s Ronnie Shaw, though ya young pups probably don’t remember me. I came ta see what all the fuss was about. Apparently, yah new General’s got quite the reputation. I thought maybe it was time I came back, offered what I know.”

“You’re a minuteman, then, aren’t you?” Preston asked.

“Was,” Ronnie replied coldly. “I was a minuteman, back when that meant something.”

“We’re hoping that it means something again,” the Colonel replied. “Hold on. I’ll let you in.” He activated his radio. “Davis, would you please open the door? We have a guest.”

“Oh it!” Kes replied from her station by the entrance, pressing the door release. The heavy wooden gate swung open, and the newcomer strode inside, glancing around the compound with disdain. “Can’t say I love what ya’ve done with the place,” she called, “but I guess it’s better than nothing. Where’s yah General?”

Preston’s hackles rose slightly. They’d worked tirelessly to restore the fort to its former glory, and here was this stranger out of nowhere, criticizing his men? Preston wasn’t having it. At the same time, however, he didn’t want to risk aggravating Ronnie. If the old-timer really did have important information, the Colonel realized that he was going to have to play her games. “She’s away, currently,” he replied. “But we’ll reach out and see if we can get her here. Just sit tight.” He turned to Forrester. “Jake, send a message to the General. She needs to get here. Now.”

“What do I tell her?” Forrester asked over the radio.
“Just tell her that there’s someone here who wants to meet her, and it’s urgent,” Preston replied. “Emphasize the urgent part. I don’t want her blowing me off again.”

Ronnie scoffed. “Sounds like yah General’s a real piece-a-work. Who leaves their troops ta fend for themselves? Disgraceful.”

Preston sighed. “General Larimer’s a busy woman, but even still, she’s done a lot for the Minutemen. When you meet her, maybe you’ll see that.”

“Attention!” blared Forrester’s voice over Radio Freedom as he enunciated clearly and slowly into the microphone. “This is an urgent message for the General. If you’re listening, we have a...situation at the Castle. There’s a --what the--Hey! You can’t do that!”

Preston watched in disbelief as the newcomer pulled the mic out of Jake’s hands, pushing the young Lieutenant aside. “All right, listen up, General,” the old woman snarled. “Get yah heinie back here pronto. This is Ronnie Shaw. Ya’ve never heard of me, but yah'll want ta talk ta me.”

“Ma’am!” Jake protested with a grimace. “That’s delicate equipment!”

“All right,” Ronnie grumbled. “Don't get yah panties in a bunch. Ya can have yah precious mic back.” She shoved the device back into the broadcaster’s hands, turning back to Preston. “That ought ta get her butt in gear. Now, are ya the one in charge here, in the meantime?”

Preston nodded, offering the ornery old woman a handshake. “Colonel Preston Garvey. I handle the day-to-day situations for the General while she’s away.”

“Huh,” Ronnie grumbled, accepting his hand. “Well, ya at least seem competent enough.” She pulled roughly on his arm, quickly turning it behind his back in a gooseneck. Preston yelped in pain as she forced his fist up his back just hard enough to incapacitate him. “Still, ya screwed up. Can ya tell me exactly what ya did wrong?”

Preston’s eyes watered as he glanced around the compound. At least a dozen guns were trained on them from around the keep, his Minutemen ready to destroy Ronnie at his command. “You’re outnumbered, Shaw,” he groaned. “If you’re here to hurt us, you’ll never leave the Castle alive.”

“I shouldn’t have even been able ta get through the damn door!” Ronnie said angrily. “What if I was a synth infiltrator, or a raider? Ya had no way of knowin’, but ya just let me waltz right in here. Idiots, the lot of ya. This isn’t playtime, kids. It’s war. And ya have to take it seriously, or the whole ‘Wealth’s boned. Understand?’”

Preston nodded. “It’s okay!” he called to the guards. “Stand down. We’re all friends here.” Ronnie released his arm from the lock. The Minutemen lowered their weapons, though many of them still watched Ronnie suspiciously. The Colonel rubbed his arm gingerly. “Well, thank you for the lesson,” he muttered. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Ronnie sighed. “Ya can make it up ta me by tightening security on the door. Back in my day, we had a squad posted there 24/7. Ya have the manpower, don’tcha?”

Preston shook his head. “We’re reassigning most of the Minutemen currently stationed here to our settlements. I’m only keeping a skeleton crew at the Castle until we’ve trained more to take their place. I can’t keep all our manpower locked behind these walls while people are dying out there.”

“People are always gonna be dying out there, Garvey,” Ronnie said coldly. “Yah first priority should be ensuring that the Minutemen don’t die out with them. Now, I’ve got some ideas that’ll help with that, but yer gonna have ta let me implement them. Startin’ with screening yah current militia.” She
produced a clipboard from her pack, a list of questions printed neatly on it in red ink. “I happened by a place called Covenant a couple years back. Crazy-ass folks there, but they’d been working on a way ta detect synths using simple logic questions. We should screen everyone here immediately.”

Preston frowned. “I’m not sure the General would approve of that,” he said. “She believes that free synths are welcome in our ranks, so long as they work hard and follow our rules like everyone else.”

Ronnie laughed in disbelief. “Next thing, yah’ll be telling me that she’s training up a squad a’ Deathclaws to fight for her. Because that, at least, is less dangerous than having synth spies in our ranks. Ya know a Deathclaw’s a Deathclaw, what they’ll do, what motivates them. A synth? Well, that’s just asking for trouble. No way to tell if they’re still workin’ for the Institute. Ya might as well just tear down these walls ya’self and wave a great white flag around.”

The Colonel sighed. “Still, it’s the General’s call. I trust her judgement. But you don’t know General Larimer like I do, so I can understand your hesitation.”

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “From what I’ve seen so far, Colonel, I’m not impressed. But who knows? Maybe this General Larimer will surprise me.”

It was nearly midnight when the alarm went up from the front gate, rousing Preston from his fitful slumber. “What is it?” he groaned into his radio.

“General’s back!” Zev shouted, “and she’s brought company! Got a whole bunch of Super Mutants on her tail. Turrets are doing what they can, but I’m not sure it’s enough.”

Preston leapt out of bed, putting his boots on quickly. He didn’t have time to bother with much else, so he threw his coat on over his boxers and grabbed his laser musket from its hook on the wall as he ran past it. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked. “Open the gate and let her in!”

“No, don’t listen ta him!” Preston heard Ronnie admonish Zev. “Ya open those doors, and we’ll be invitin’ all those muties in for a midnight snack. Yah General’s just gonna have ta fend for herself.”

“But, ma’am…” Zev protested, “that’s our General out there!”

“I don’t care if it’s the President of the former United States himself,” Ronnie snarled, “I’m not letting ya open that door!”

Preston, by that point, had cleared the hallway and was already on his way to the guard tower above the gate. The firing of the turrets was deafening, spouts of hellfire illuminating the starless night. He could hear the taunting cries of the mutants long before he saw them, and he shuddered as he thought about Myra being trapped beyond the walls. Hopefully, he wasn’t too late. “Damn it, Shaw, you’re not in charge here!” he screamed, firing a flare from his flare gun down towards the bellowing horde. He couldn’t risk hitting Myra. He had to get some light on the battle. “Open the gate, Zev! We’ll just have to risk it.”

“Ya make one move towards that button, boy, and yer dead,” Ronnie hissed. Preston heard the unmistakable sound of a pistol being cocked. It didn’t take a genius to visualize what was happening down below. The Colonel’s heart pounded in his ears as his mind raced. He could run down and
protect Zev, or he could help Myra by covering her from above. There was no time to do both.

Preston cried in frustration as he fired his laser musket at the nearest mutant. He grabbed at his radio angrily. “Zev, don’t be a hero, okay? I’ll do my best to cover the General from here. Ronnie, when this is over, we’re going to have words.”

“I expect that we will,” the old woman replied calmly.

With that, Preston returned his attention to the scene beneath him. Myra knelt on the very doorstep of the fort, her laser rifle held trembling in her hands as she fired round after burning round into the horde. From what Preston could see, he counted at least seven Super Mutants still standing, their wrath concentrated on the General’s failing form. Preston cranked his musket and fired, trying to take down the closest target, a large, ugly brute with a sledgehammer who was charging Myra’s position. He managed to catch it in the arm, sending the hammer spiraling off into the night, followed by a scream of rage from the green monstrosity. Still, the creature wasn’t downed, merely wounded, and it continued its ferocious charge. Myra screamed as the brute caught her around the waist, hurling her against the Castle walls like a rag-doll. She fell to the ground, unmoving.

“General!” screamed Preston, firing at the Super Mutant once more. This time, he caught the creature squarely between the eyes, and it keeled over, rage and confusion frozen on its dead face. “Damn it, you’d better live,” Preston muttered, his heart sinking. Zev was right. Even between Preston and the turrets, Myra’s chances were slim. If she was still alive, she wouldn’t be for long. “I need more men on the walls!” Preston cried into his radio. “Hurry!”

“Oh, fuck this!” screamed a gravely female voice from behind Preston, “Duck, Garvey!” Before he could react, he felt a blazing woosh as a missile careened past the side of his head. The shell exploded into the crowd, sending chunks of mutant flying in all directions as two of the beasts fell. The Colonel turned to see Kestrel Davis grinning at him as she reloaded her missile launcher. “Liberated this from the General’s quarters a few days ago,” the petite blonde explained. “And no, I’m not sorry.”

“Right now,” Preston replied as he took aim, “I’m not even mad. Just try not to kill the General. Or me, if you can help it.”

“You’re no fun,” Kes teased, firing off another missile. “This thing’s awesome. Can I keep it?”

“Absolutely not,” Preston said. “You’re a menace, Davis.”

“Says the guy parading around in his underwear,” she retorted.

Preston blushed. “There wasn’t time, so...oh, forget it! If the General lives, you can ask her.”

More bursts of laser fire joined the fray as the other minutemen found their positions along the wall. While not all made their marks, due to inexperience as well as the poor sight conditions, enough hit their targets to turn the tide. In a matter of minutes, the battle was over.

As soon as the last monster fell, Preston tore down the stairs to Zev’s position. He shoved Ronnie out of the way, slamming his fist down on the door release button. “Ignatius, I need you to prep the infirmary!” he bellowed into his radio, dragging Zev with him as he ran to the gate. “Let’s hope the General’s still got a need for it.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel,” Zev said, his eyes brimming with tears. “My life’s not worth all that much. I should have opened the door.”

“I’m not angry at you, Stern,” Preston replied, trying to sound calmer than he was. “It’s Shaw’s fault
if anything happens to the General, not yours. We just need to-- Damn it!” he exclaimed as he neared Myra’s still form.

She was lying on her side, curled into a loose ball. Her laser rifle lay discarded a few feet away, partially submerged in one of the rivulets of mutant blood that flowed along the gate towards the lake. Myra’s body was covered in scrapes and bruises, including a rather nasty gash just above her right temple that stained her snowy hair with sticky clumps of half-clotted blood. Preston noted with alarm that she wasn’t wearing her armor, her soft body barely concealed by scraps of green fabric that were once a dress, now torn to shreds. Without armor, it would be a miracle if the Super Mutant’s blow wasn’t fatal.

With the exception of her head wound and a few other concerning lacerations, Myra seemed to be mostly unscathed. Still, as Preston knelt beside her still body, he noticed that her breathing was ragged and shallow. He scooped her up carefully in his arms. “Zev, grab the General’s gun,” he ordered. “I’ll take her to the infirmary.”

Zev nodded, picking up the blood-soaked rifle with a look of disgust. “Is she going to be okay?” the young man asked as they raced back towards the keep.

Preston sighed. “I honestly don’t know. She looks fine, but for all we know, her insides could be all busted up. We have to just do what we can, and hope that’s enough.”

Ignatius was already preparing a large dose of his usual herbal remedy when they entered the clinic, boiling strange roots and powders to create a bitter broth. Preston had been skeptical when the doctor had first started using his plant-based treatments, but he had to admit that whatever was in them seemed to work well. The medic’s eyes widened as Preston gently laid Myra’s unconscious body on one of the hospital beds. “What the hell happened to her?” the gruff giant exclaimed.

“For starters, a Super Mutant tossed her against the fort,” Preston replied. “Some of her wounds look older, so I’m not sure what caused them.”

Ignatius frowned. “Has she been unconscious long?”

Preston nodded. “ Nearly six minutes, now. But she’s still breathing.”

“That won’t mean much if she never wakes up,” the medic replied, pawing through the ingredients on a tall set of metal shelves. “We have to assume there’s internal bleeding, probably at least some broken ribs. If we’re lucky, her major organs are okay, but we can’t bank on that either.” He grimaced, holding up a glass jar with some sort of dried purplish flower petals in it up to the light. “Super Mutants,” he grumbled, placing the jar back and selecting another. “I was really hoping there weren’t so many of them in the East. Well, at least you don’t have Nightkin.”

Preston wanted to ask what a Nightkin was, but he was frankly more worried than curious at this point. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

Ignatius nodded. “ We’ll need to get her to drink an infusion of fever blossom, bloodleaf, and a tiny hint of glowing fungus to boost her body’s recovery. But we can’t wait for her to wake up, so we’ll need to get a feeding tube set up.” He grabbed a coil of thin plastic tubing from the shelving unit, tossing it into a pot of boiling water. “I’ve never had to use one on an unconscious person before, so I’ll need you to hold her head steady while I place the tube down her nose.”

“That seems...risky,” Preston replied. “What if you send it down her windpipe by accident?”

“It’s that, or we have to wait for her to wake up,” Ignatius retorted as he prepared the infusion, “but
she might be dead by then. We have no way of knowing how bad the damage is. I’m sorry, but we have to risk it.”

“Damn it!” the Colonel cried. He turned to Zev, who was still clutching Myra’s gun, tears in the boy’s eyes. “Zev, you and Kes are to confine Ronnie in a cell until we know if the General’s safe. Don’t let her leave.”

“Yes, sir!” the young man barked, placing Myra’s gun on a table by the door as he left.

Preston sighed heavily, turning back to Ignatius. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Myra regained consciousness about halfway through the next day, though from the cries of agony, Preston was sure she wished that she hadn’t. He rushed to her bedside as soon as his duties allowed him to, cupping her hand in his as she whimpered in pain.

“Is there anything we can do to make her more comfortable?” Preston asked Ignatius.

The medic shook his head. “I’ve given her as much pain relief as I dared. From what I can tell, she’s got at least three broken ribs. Frankly, considering what you told me when you brought her in, she’s incredibly lucky to be alive.”

“Can we at least take the tube out?” the Colonel retorted. “She should be able to drink now, right?”

Ignatius sighed. “Just to be on the safe side, I’d like to leave it in. But you’re right. With the limited equipment we have to sanitize anything, we don’t want to risk infection. Hold her still, will you?”

Preston gripped Myra’s shoulders firmly, hoping that he wasn’t hurting her. “I’m sorry about this, General,” he said soothingly. “This is probably going to feel really strange, but I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The medic took hold of the end of the feeding tube, slowly and steadily pulling on it. Myra’s eyes widened in shock and horror as the plastic began exiting her nose, moaning desperately against the blockage in her throat. It hurt Preston to see her so afraid, but he knew that they couldn’t stop now. After a few agonizing moments, the tube popped free, and Ignatius quickly tossed it back in another pot of boiling water to be cleaned.

Myra gasped deeply, her mouth opening and closing like a fish’s as she struggled to overcome the unpleasant sensation. “That…” she whispered hoarsely, “ugh...water.”

“Here, General,” Preston said. He poured her a glass, carefully tilting it to her lips as the General struggled to sit up. She took a few small sips before lying back down with a cry of discomfort.

“I really...ugh...I need to stop coming here,” Myra moaned.

“Or you just need to stop being so reckless, ma’am,” Ignatius replied. “I’m beginning to think you’ve made a deal with the devil, considering how many times you’ve avoided death since we’ve met. You’ve got more lives than a damned cat.”

“That too,” she muttered. “How long...argh...am I supposed to be laid up this time?”

“Considering that we still don’t know the full extent of your injuries,” the medic continued, “you’ll
be lucky if you’re back on your feet by the end of the month.”

Myra shook her head slightly, grimacing in pain. “That’s not going to work for me,” she hissed.

“Well, like it or not, that’s the reality of it,” Ignatius said, holding out a shot glass full of pungent medicine. “It’ll go faster if you take your tincture regularly, though I can’t promise that it’ll taste good.”

She gagged as the liquid slid down her throat. “You weren’t kidding,” she replied. “What’s in this?”

“A few desert herbs I saved, plus some local plants that seem to work similarly,” the medic said cryptically. “So far, it’s the best cure for most things I’ve found out here. Should help the bruises heal quicker, at least.” He turned to Preston. “I have to go check in with Kes. Call for me if she gets worse, okay?”

Preston nodded, watching the large man as he ducked through the doorway and headed down the hall. The Colonel eased the door closed behind him before turning his attention back to Myra, glaring at her. “Why were you out there alone?” Preston growled. “Didn’t you bring anyone with you?”

Myra sighed. “I was with Deacon, but that didn’t exactly work out,” she muttered.

“Deacon?” he asked incredulously. “Where the hell is Paladin Danse? I can’t imagine he’d be stupid enough to let you come here by yourself.”

“Danse...ugh... he doesn’t know I’m here,” Myra replied. “I haven’t seen him in weeks. As far as I know, he’s still back at the Airport with the rest of the Brotherhood.”

Preston frowned. “Did something happen between the two of you?”

Myra shook her head slightly. “It’s not like that. I just...I learned something recently that might complicate things. A few weeks ago, I finally managed to get to the Institute.”

“What?” Preston exclaimed, his eyes wide. “How? You never told me that you’d found a way in!”

“I wanted to keep things as small as possible,” she replied, “so only the people directly involved in getting me there knew what I was up to.” She broke down in a fit of coughing, crying in torment as her body convulsed with the effort. “Fuck!” she cried once her fit subsided. “Where was I?”

“You were telling me about how you got into the Institute,” Preston replied.

“Yeah,” Myra said. “So, long story short, I learned how to hijack the Institute’s teleportation technology, and I used this crazy machine to launch myself into their facility. The how doesn’t really matter. But what I found there, that’s the problem.”

“Whatever it is,” Preston said, “I’m sure Danse can handle it. The guy almost died for you, General. I doubt he’ll leave your side unless you beg him to go. I know I wouldn’t, if I were him.”

“Are you sure about that?” Myra asked, her emerald eyes full of anxious energy. “Is this room secure?” she rasped.

Preston nodded, making sure to turn off his radio. “It is now. What’s the matter?”

“What if I told you that I found my son?” Myra asked bluntly.

“That’s great news!” Preston said, smiling. “I’m so happy for you!”
“Yeah, well, it’s not really,” she said, her face blank. “See, he’s the head of the Institute.”

“What?” the Colonel gasped.

“It’s the truth,” Myra continued. “The big bad monster everyone’s afraid of? That’s my child. Now do you understand why I’m here by myself?”

Preston nodded. He reached out to hold her, but before he made contact with her he thought better of it. It wasn’t his place, and even if it was, her body was battered and sensitive and he didn’t want to cause her any more pain. “Are you okay?” he asked softly.

Myra shook her head, exhaling a long, shaky breath. “No. I’m not even a little okay. Part of me wishes that I’d found him dead. Then, at least, I’d still have someone to bury. I could move forward. But this?” She looked up at him, her eyes welling with tears. “Preston, what do I do? If I go back to the Brotherhood, they’ll want me to kill him. And maybe that’s the right call, considering who he’s become. The Institute can’t be allowed to keep hurting people. But even knowing that...that’s my baby boy. That’s my Shaun. How could I ever hurt him?”

“You said you were with Deacon,” Preston replied. “That means the Railroad knows about this. What did they suggest?”

Myra frowned. “I don’t know. I didn’t tell them. Well, I told Deacon, but he promised to keep it between us for now.”

Preston scoffed. “And you believed him?”

She sighed. “I...I don’t know. Not any more. Look, it’s all gone to shit. Everything’s all fucked up. I can’t even think clearly. I was on my way home to hide away from everyone for a while when I got your message, so I came here instead. And, well, I wasn’t exactly watching where I was going. Hence the mutants.”

“Damn,” Preston swore under his breath. He smiled sympathetically at her. “I know things seem bad right now. And hell, you’re right. In a lot of ways, they really are bad right now. But if anyone can find a way through this, General, it’s you. Whatever you need, the Minutemen are behind you.”

“Thanks,” Myra said sincerely. “I know I can count on you, Preston. That’s why I came back as soon as I got your message.” She grimaced. “Speaking of, who is this Ronnie person, and why does she seem to think she’s in charge around here?”

Preston sighed. “She’s one of the old Minutemen, from before my time. Seems like she doesn’t love the way you’ve been running things. Or maybe she does? It’s kind of hard to tell with her. Apparently she wants to help, but so far, all she’s been doing is second-guessing my orders and nearly getting you killed.”

Myra groaned. “Sounds like a real peach. Well, I guess we should get this over with.”

The Colonel shook his head. “General, you’ve been through hell. We can deal with Ronnie in the morning. Right now, the best thing you can do is rest.”

“Is that an order, Preston?” Myra asked. “Because as far as I’m aware, I’m still the General here.”

He laughed. “No, it’s not an order. Consider it a request from someone who cares about you.”

“Well, in that case,” she replied with a weary smile, “I guess I’ll comply. I am pretty exhausted.”
“I’ll leave you be, then,” Preston said, heading for the door.

“Thank you, Preston,” she called after him. “For everything.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, closing the heavy wooden door behind him. His eyes misted as he thought about what Myra must be going through right now. After everything she’d lost, to find out that her son was...no wonder she didn’t seem to care if she lived or died. Carrying that kind of a burden was something that Preston couldn’t even imagine, and the Colonel had plenty of demons of his own. His survivor’s guilt had almost led him to his death. It came as no surprise to him that Myra had been taunting fate again. The drive to find her son had kept Myra alive. Now that she knew who he was, what that meant for the people who believed in her, it was a testament to her strength that she was still alive at all.

Preston wondered if Myra had picked a fight with the Super Mutants on purpose, knowing that she might die. It would probably be the easy way out of her situation. But it pained him to think that the people who cared about her mattered so little to her. Didn’t she know how desperately she would be missed?

He felt hot tears on his cheeks, and he wiped them away in frustration. So what if her son was the devil himself? It wasn’t Myra’s fault. She hadn’t gotten the chance to raise him. He was brought up as a creature of the Institute, molded by their ideology into the formidable head of their organization. As far as Preston was concerned, the only thing Myra and her son shared were their genes. Now, he only needed to help her see that.

Myra’s strength and determination had saved Preston’s life. She had given him something to believe in again, had shown him that his dreams of a free Commonwealth were still worth fighting for. If he had to, he would be that strength for her as well. One way or another, Preston vowed, he wasn’t going to let Myra fall. For the sake of the Commonwealth...for his own sake, he would help her as long as he was able to.

He continued down the hall to the Castle’s brig, a small room full of cages. Until Ronnie Shaw had shown up, the rusty iron bars had held no prisoners. Preston had even argued with Kes and her men when she’d told him that they needed a place to put prisoners. A shame that the fearsome Fox had been right, after all.

The Colonel smiled at Zev, who stood nervously outside Ronnie’s cage. The young minuteman returned his smile awkwardly. “Any news?” the boy asked.

“The General’s going to live,” Preston replied. “No thanks to you, Shaw,” he added with a glare towards the old woman. She sat on a simple stool in the middle of her cell, her battle-hardened eyes meeting his defiantly.

“I stand by what I did, Garvey,” Ronnie replied. “If you’d opened those doors, we’d mostly be dead right now. A good leader needs to be prepared to sacrifice the one for the many. I’m sure when she’s better, yah General will agree with me, if she’s got any sense in her head.”

“And fortunately for you,” Preston shot back, “we have a chance to find that out.” He crept closer to the cell, placing his hands on the bars. “I know things were different when you were a minuteman,” he growled, “but don’t expect General Larimer to have any patience for you if you yank her around like you’ve done with me. If you do anything to compromise her authority, you’ll be wishing I left you in this cage and tossed it into the ocean. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” the old woman said with a smirk. “Looks like ya have some balls after all, Garvey. I guess ya feel tougher when yah General’s behind ya, huh? What, ya sleeping with her or somethin’?”
Preston clenched his fists. “Don’t talk about her like that,” he said as calmly as he could muster.

Ronnie laughed. “So that’s a no, then. No wonder yah’ve got such a stick up yah butt. Look, I’m sorry that the General got hurt. I really am. Lord knows I’ve seen enough a’ them come and go over the years. But if the Minutemen are going ta survive what’s coming, yer gonna have ta learn that ya can’t make exceptions, not even for leaders. Everyone’s gotta be willing ta die, but smart enough ta live. Got that? It’s a hard lesson, but a true one.”

Preston sighed as he contemplated her words. What would he have done if the situation had been different, if it was someone else beyond the walls and not Myra? He wanted to believe that he would have made the same call, but he honestly wasn’t sure. Would he have risked his men for anyone else? Or would he have played it smart, the way Ronnie suggested? Perhaps, in her own callous way, Ronnie was right. The Minutemen couldn’t save everyone, no matter how hard they tried. And if they fell because of a single liability, they wouldn’t be able to help anyone at all.

But was that the type of organization Preston wanted to work for, one that turned its back on the suffering and desperate to save its own hide? No. That had been the way of the old Minutemen, the cowards who had abandoned the people of Quincy and their own brothers-in-arms to save themselves from the wrath of the Gunners. And even if it killed him, Preston would do anything to prevent something like the Quincy Massacre from happening again.

“You’re right that we need to be prudent,” he said firmly. “And I know that you think you’re helping. But I’ve seen what your methods can do in action, Shaw, and I can tell you that the path they lead down is not worthy of the Minutemen. We have to stand for all people, be willing to risk our lives for anyone who needs us, even if it’s not the smart play. We’re supposed to be the good guys, and that means that we don’t turn our backs on anyone, especially our own.”

“Then yah’ll all die,” Ronnie said, her eyes cold and determined. “But I’ll be damned if I let ya go down without a fightin’ chance. When yah General’s up for it, I’ve got somethin’ to show ya. Took a look around before ya locked me up, and I think the ol’ armory’s still intact. That means we can build artillery, really give it to those synth bastards and anyone else who tries to get in our way.”

Preston’s eyes widened. “No kidding! You know how to build artillery?”

Ronnie nodded, grinning. “I was in charge of the damned armory, back in the day. It’d be more right ta say that no one knows how to build artillery as well as I do. But I’ll need my workshop back, if ya want my help.”

“That’s General Larimer’s call,” Preston replied, “but as long as you stop trying to act like you’re in command, and you follow the General’s orders, I think we might be able to work something out.”

“Great!” Ronnie exclaimed. “So when are ya gonna let me out?”

Preston shook his head. “Oh, you’re not leaving the brig until the General’s better. I appreciate any help you can give us, but that doesn’t excuse what you did. Still, I’ll make sure someone brings you a sleeping bag and something to eat. Don’t want you to be too uncomfortable.”

“Yer too kind,” Ronnie mumbled sarcastically, “but fair’s fair, I suppose. I’d do the same ta ya if it was me makin’ the rules. Gotta keep the peace.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” Preston replied. He turned to Zev. “Sterne, I’ll send someone down with bedding and a meal. Just slip them through the bars, okay?”

Zev nodded. “You’ve got it, sir. I promise, I won’t open the door for any reason. Well, except if
there’s a fire. That’d be okay, right?”

Preston sighed. “If it’s a really big fire, I guess.” He shot Ronnie one more pointed look before leaving the room, still trying to figure out her play. Was she sincere in wanting to help? Or was this just a ruse, acting cooperative and...well, not really repentant, but at least placid enough until she got another chance to start a one-woman coup? It was hard for him to tell. Preston wasn’t a duplicitous soul. It was impossible for him to think that way. But Myra understood manipulation. If anyone could tame Ronnie Shaw once and for all, it’d be her.

The way things stood now, she’d certainly have time to do it. Poor Myra. Preston knew her well, and nothing would be harder for her than sitting still while she healed. He chuckled as he remembered the young woman he’d met in Concord, stubborn and insistent on doing everything herself. She’d changed a lot from the girl who’d gotten stuck in Mama Murphy’s ceiling. In a lot of ways, she’d grown into the kind of leader he could really respect. But some things would never really change, and her refusal to ask for help when she was in trouble was still as frustrating as ever.

Preston made his way back to his room. He extracted a device from his coat pocket, a small cylinder-shaped flare, and set it on his desk with a grin. It was one of Myra’s vertibird signal grenades, snagged from her pack after the Colonel had gotten her to safety. Preston wasn’t a thief, not exactly. He was doing this for her own good. With a sigh, he pulled a sheet of paper out of one of the drawers and began to write a letter.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Surprise! I'm posting this chapter early because I'll be out of town on Tuesday, and I wanted to get a head-start on the volume. We are now starting the 3rd volume in this 10-volume series, so that's pretty cool I guess!

I hope you guys are prepared for a LOT of mixed feelings heading into this one. It's a roller-coaster.

NEXT CHAPTER: Danse confronts Myra about her association with the Railroad.
Paladin Danse had hardly left his quarters since he’d learned about Myra’s association with the Railroad. There wasn’t much cause for him to do so, anyway. Until Myra returned with information about the Institute, the Paladin was effectively on standby. But it wasn’t boredom that confined Danse to his small room on the main deck of the *Prydwen*. It was a deep, twisting ache that seemed to grow with every waking hour, like an old wound that acted up when the weather changed for the worse. The thought that Myra had betrayed him, had betrayed everything he stood for, was unbearable. No amount of busy work could distract him from the gnawing, festering disquiet in his soul.

He barely ate, subsisting on the limited rations he’d squirreled away in his room in case of emergencies. He barely slept, his dreams haunted by visions of Myra, her mouth twisted into a cruel grimace as she pointed Righteous Authority at the Paladin’s head, Deacon urging her to pull the trigger. There was no escape from the torment.

Maxson had checked in on him regularly at first, trying to break the Paladin from his funk, but the Elder had eventually relented and gave him space. No one else bothered to try. Thus, when there was a gentle but persistent knocking on Danse’s door, he almost thought he was imagining it. “Come in,” he said gruffly, and the door swung open to reveal an unexpected visitor.

Paladin Brandis stepped lightly into the room, closing the door behind him. The old man had recovered quite well since his return to the *Prydwen*. His skeletal frame had fleshed out some, and a healthy pink glow had returned to his pallid cheeks. Even his green eyes, once haunted and half-crazed, had regained some of their kind, wise light that Danse remembered from long ago. “How are you holding up, kid?” Brandis asked, easing into Danse’s desk chair. He pulled a box of snack cakes from his satchel, tearing them open and tossing one to the younger Paladin. “Haven’t seen you around much. You been avoiding me?”

Danse shook his head, holding the packaged treat unopened in his large hands. “Not particularly,” he muttered. “I suppose it’d be more accurate to say that I’m just keeping to myself.”

Brandis nodded grimly. “It’s a terrible thing, Danse, losing your subordinates. Trust me, I know. But it’s too soon to give up hope on our Angel. Knight Larimer’s beaten the odds more than once. She’ll pull through. I really do believe that.”

“As do I,” Danse replied. “That isn’t what has me concerned.”

Brandis sighed as he unwrapped a cake of his own. “Well, what is it, then?” he asked between bites. “Because you look like I did when Larimer found me, and that’s not a good look on someone as young as you.”
Danse frowned. “I’m not certain you’d understand if I told you,” he said. “Or if you’d agree with my decision.”

“Well, hell, kid,” Brandis muttered. “You’re the Senior Paladin here. I’m not exactly at a position in the Chain to question your decisions. But sitting in here cooped up with your demons isn’t helping. You need to talk. Might as well talk to me. I’m old. I’ll probably forget whatever you tell me by the end of the day.”

The younger Paladin sighed heavily. “I suppose you have a point. It concerns Larimer. But I can’t risk anyone finding out about what I’ve learned, not before she has a chance to explain herself. You’re a good man, Brandis, but…”

The older man smiled gently at Danse. “But you’re worried that I’ll tell someone about whatever it is that’s bothering you. I can’t say that I blame you. The trouble with the Brotherhood being like a family is that it’s hard to keep secrets. It’s wise of you to keep whatever you’ve uncovered close to your chest.” Brandis leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on Danse’s desk with a small sigh. “But, that being said, I owe our Angel my life, Danse. You can trust that I take that sort of debt seriously. I’d follow that girl into the gates of Hell if she needed me to, sure as you would. So if you need me to keep my mouth shut, you’d best believe that it’s locked tighter than Ingram’s metal ass.”

Danse thought for a moment, his brow furrowed. He knew that Brandis adored Myra, the woman who had given him his life back. Still, it was risky bringing another person into the circle of people who knew her secret, even someone as sincere as Brandis. Was the weight of Danse’s concern heavy enough that he really needed another shoulder to bear it? Or was Myra’s potential treason too great of a transgression even for the old man?

In the end, Danse’s need for a sounding board won out, and he relented. “I believe you, Brandis. But what I’m about to tell you becomes public knowledge, you are the only one I’ll have to blame.”

“That’s fair,” Brandis replied. “So what is it that’s gotten the Brotherhood’s most unflappable Paladin worked up like a Squire on his first mission?”

“I’ve recently acquired some information about Larimer’s…activities that could be a major liability,” Danse explained. “If anyone finds out the specifics, she would be severely punished. As the Senior Paladin of this outfit as well as Larimer’s sponsor, I have an obligation to report my suspicions to Elder Maxson immediately.”

“But something’s stopping you, right?” Brandis asked.

“I… I don’t know,” Danse groaned. “I’ve never neglected my duties. I’ve always stood up for the Codex, for order. The fact that I’ve even waited this long… I don’t know what to do, Brandis. What if she’s betrayed us, and my inaction leads to disaster?”

“What if you’re wrong, and she’s still loyal?” Brandis asked with a soft sigh. “Damn, Danse, I don’t envy you. That’s a difficult judgement to make. But, if you don’t mind taking some advice from an old man’s intuition, perhaps you should trust Larimer.”

“How can you say that?” Danse retorted. “You don’t even know what she’s done!”

“And you do?” Brandis countered. “I know you, Danse. I’ve known you since you were an Initiate fresh from the Rivet City gutter, barely able to spell your own name, let alone recite the Codex. If you had conclusive evidence that our Angel was a devil in disguise, you wouldn’t hesitate to unmask her. We both know that Larimer’s prone to doing things in her own way, and sometimes that means that she walks a grayer path than we can follow. But that don’t make her a traitor any more than it
makes her a radroach in a human suit. You trust her. I can see it in your eyes. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re right to. Our Angel’s one of the good ones. Hell, maybe even the best.”

“Even if she’s working with the Railroad?” Danse asked, his voice trembling.

“The Railroad?” Brandis replied with a catch to his voice. “Are you certain?”

Danse nodded. “As certain as I can be without further proof. Now, do you understand the stakes? I read your report, Brandis. What happened to your squad, the ambush… Would you still stand by Larimer, if she was a Railroad agent?”

Brandis reflected for a moment, his green eyes misty, distant. “I lost three good men in that ambush,” he murmured. “We hadn’t done anything to provoke that sort of attack. Hell, we hadn’t even begun our survey yet. We weren’t threatening the Railroad or their interests. We were just too close for their comfort, I suppose.”

“And Larimer may be working for that same organization,” Danse pressed. “She may have even been sent by the Railroad to infiltrate our ranks. How can either of us stand by her when we can’t even trust her?”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Brandis retorted. “I trust her. Larimer saved my life, gave me my purpose back. Even if she was involved in the Railroad, I don’t think she’d agree to hurt us. That’s not the woman I know. If she’s involved with those nutcases, she has to have a good reason.”

“I hope your assessment is accurate,” the younger Paladin sighed. “Because I’ll be perfectly honest, the thought of Larimer being the enemy is one I’d rather live without.”

“Agreed,” Brandis said. “I certainly understand now why you’d keep that information to yourself, Danse. If word got out, I doubt our Angel would even get a trial.”

Danse nodded. “Banishment would be the humane option. More likely, she’d be thrown from the foredeck.” His voice trembled. “I’ll be honest with you, Brandis, I don’t know what I’d do if that were to occur. I…I care for her too much.”

Brandis smiled gently at the younger man. “I can’t recall seeing you this concerned for anyone since Knight Cutler,” he mused. “It’s good to see.”

Danse chuckled bitterly. “Not that it matters, if she really is a traitor. No matter how I feel about her, I have a duty to uphold. If I have to choose between her and the Brotherhood… how could I make such a choice?”

“Well, I guess the first step is finding out if your suspicions are true or not,” Brandis replied. “You need to have a talk with our Angel, find out her side of the story.”

“I don’t even know where she is,” Danse retorted. “Hell, I don’t even know if she’s alive.”

“I guess it’s your lucky day,” Brandis said with a faint smile. He pulled a sealed letter out from his satchel, tossing it down on the desk. “This came for you this morning. The Lancer who delivered it had quite the story to tell. Apparently, the Minutemen got their mitts on one of our signal grenades.” Danse’s eyes widened in shock, and Brandis laughed. “Now how do you think they got one of those?”

Danse grabbed for the envelope, turning it over in his hands. The writing didn’t match Myra’s delicate cursive. His name was emblazoned on the envelope in blocky print letters instead. If Myra hadn’t sent it, then who had? He tore the paper open, his eyes narrowing as he read the note.
Paladin Danse,

General Larimer made it to the Castle, no thanks to you. She’s hurt. Bad. We’ve got her as stabilized and as comfortable as we can, but there’s not much we can do but give it time. I thought you’d want to know. Please come if you can. It would put the General’s mind at ease, whether she admits it or not.

I’ll be expecting you by vertibird in the next few days. Don’t wait too long. I can’t guarantee that she’ll recover.

- Col. Preston Garvey,

Commonwealth Minutemen

“Damn it!” Danse growled, throwing supplies in his pack as quickly as possible. This couldn’t be happening. Myra wasn’t even back from the Institute yet. She couldn’t be. If she’d come back, she would have checked in with him right away, wouldn’t she have?

“What’s wrong?” Brandis asked.

“Larimer’s in trouble,” Danse replied. “I have to go.”

Brandis nodded. “Well, then, sounds like you’ve made up your mind after all, kid. Good luck. Just don’t forget to tell Elder Maxson where you’re going. The last thing you need right now is suspicion cast on you as well.”

Danse frowned. “Of course. Thank you, Brandis.”

“Any time, Danse,” the older man replied with a thin smile. He stood, walking deliberately for the door. “If you do get a chance to see her, tell our Angel hello for me.”

“I will,” the younger Paladin replied. “I sincerely hope you’re right about her.”

“So do I,” Brandis murmured, the metal door clanging shut behind him.

Danse continued packing as quickly as he could. He had no way of knowing how much trouble Myra was in, but for Preston to write him...her injuries must have been severe. In spite of how well he’d recovered in their care, the Paladin sincerely doubted that the Minutemen had the capability to tend to anything too serious. Their doctor didn’t even believe in stimpacks. He briefly contemplated requisitioning some supplies from Cade, but the Knight-Captain would ask questions, and questions had a way of getting back to members of staff that Danse would rather not deal with until he knew for certain how he was going to handle things with Myra. So instead, he grabbed a few stims from his personal supply, as well as clean bandages and water in case the Castle had run low.

He hesitated for a moment before packing his chessboard and pieces. How long had it been since he and Myra had last played? Would she even want to? Was she even physically strong enough to play? Danse sighed, putting the set in his bag anyway. Knowing Myra, she was probably bored out of her
mind at the Castle. If nothing else, she’d appreciate the gesture.

Once his pack was full, Danse climbed back into his power armor, then turned out the lights in his room and made for Maxson’s quarters. The Paladin knocked insistently on the door, his heart in his throat. What if Arthur refused to let him leave? Or what if Quinlan had already gotten to him, had already poisoned him against Myra before Danse had a chance to get her side of the story?

“Come in,” Arthur’s gruff voice resounded from beyond the door. When Danse opened it, he was greeted with the familiar sight of his friend and leader typing furiously on his terminal. Maxson raised a hand, waving it idly as he continued typing with the other. “Leave it on the counter,” he said. “I’ll eat when I’m finished.”

Danse cleared his throat. “Hard at work, Arthur?” he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice. Maxson’s shoulders tensed. The young Elder turned in his desk chair, his eyes widening slightly as he took in the sight of his oldest friend.

“I’ll admit,” Maxson said as he stood to greet the Paladin, “I wasn’t expecting to see you today, Danse. Are you feeling any better?”

Danse nodded. “I must apologize for being so negligent in my duties,” he said softly. “I had quite a lot on my mind.”

“So it would seem,” Arthur replied. He eyed the pack at Danse’s side. “Something tells me this isn’t a social call. Are you planning on going somewhere?”

“Larimer’s at the Minuteman headquarters. I haven’t gotten too many details, but it seems as though she’s sustained some significant injuries. Colonel Garvey urged me to come at once, as long as you find that acceptable.”

“She’s back?” Maxson asked, his piercing steely eyes trained on Danse. “You’re certain of this?”

The Paladin nodded. “I’ve never known Preston to lie, Arthur. He may not be a member of the Brotherhood, but he does live by a code. If he says that Larimer is gravely injured, she must be.”

The Elder frowned. “Why would she have gone to the Castle, instead of coming back to the Airport? I gave her explicit orders to report to me as soon as she returned from the Institute.”

“There are any number of reasons,” Danse replied. “Perhaps her return trip sent her to the wrong location. Maybe she was wounded on the way and stopped there for help. I don’t know for certain, and it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m going to go retrieve her. Assuming I have permission.”

“Of course, Danse,” Maxson replied. “Recovering Larimer is an extremely important mission. If she really is back, she’s the only person we know who’s managed to infiltrate the Institute. We have to debrief her as soon as possible. But before you go,” he continued, “I need to ask you a small favor.” The Elder stalked over to his footlocker, digging through the box with a troubled expression on his scarred face. “Where did I...ah! Here it is.” He pulled a small package wrapped in red cloth out of storage, handing it to Danse. “I wanted to give this to Larimer when she came back, but perhaps you wouldn’t mind taking it to her instead.”

“What is it?” Danse asked, weighing the package in his hands.

Maxson sighed. “If you must know, it’s a collection of short stories I’ve been working on when I have the time. Larimer asked if she could read them, and perhaps they’ll give her something to do while she recovers.”
Danse smiled slightly. Arthur had always had a love for writing, ever since he was young. There had been many times over the years when Danse had caught him with a pencap in his mouth when Maxson thought that no one was watching. Since his promotion to Elder, such sightings had grown increasingly rare, so it was good to know that Arthur still found time for his notebooks. The Paladin didn’t think that anyone else even knew about Maxson’s secret hobby, and even Danse had never read any of what his friend had written. The Elder guarded his notebooks carefully. Maxson must have trusted Myra a great deal to be willing to share his stories with her.

Danse’s heart ached once more as he thought about what he’d learned of Myra’s associations. What if she really had betrayed the Brotherhood? Maxson had very few people who he was close to, fewer still that he really trusted. Danse could count the members of Maxson’s inner circle on one hand. Given the number of people both outside of and within the Brotherhood who wanted him out of the picture, the young Elder had good reason to be suspicious.

Still, somehow Myra had joined the ranks of Arthur’s trusted few. But if she turned her back on the Brotherhood, how would Maxson handle the betrayal? Would he ever trust someone again? Somehow, Danse doubted it. It would be nearly as devastating as Danse himself betraying the Elder. At least that was an outcome that was unfathomable to contemplate, or had been until Myra had entered the picture. If Danse was forced to choose between his best friend and Myra, he still wasn’t certain what he would do. He was loyal to a fault, but if his loyalties were divided...it was better not to think on such things.

“I’ll make sure she gets it,” Danse said simply. “If there’s nothing else…”

“No,” Arthur replied. “By all means, go. Bring her home.”

The Elder didn’t have to tell Danse twice. In a flash, he was out the door, heading for the flight deck. He could only hope that Myra was still alive. After that, then he could worry about who she was really working for...and what the implications of her true allegiances would be.

It was a short but rough journey from the airport to the Castle, and Danse was extraordinarily grateful when he felt solid ground beneath his feet again. He loved flying, but given the circumstances, he couldn’t wait for the trip to end. He barely acknowledged the young raven-haired minuteman at the gates when she let him in. His mind was so preoccupied with thoughts of Myra that it was hard to focus on anything else...that was until he stepped inside the old fortress.

The Paladin glanced around the Castle courtyard, his eyes wide in astonishment. The fort was no longer the seaweed-encrusted ruin it had been when he’d last visited. In the months since, the Minutemen had made significant improvements, crafting fortifications and gun placements that the Brotherhood would be jealous of. He noted with some concern the long iron barrels of what looked like artillery being polished and prepped near the radio tower. What did the Minutemen need such heavy ordnance for?

Danse glanced up at the sky, the Prydwen anchored to the zeppelin tower of the old airport clearly within view, and his stomach twisted slightly. With that kind of firepower, the Minutemen could shoot the great airship down easily. No longer were they a group that could be ignored. If Myra really was an enemy of the Brotherhood, the strength of her militia could prove to be a far greater threat than anyone had believed.
Preston strode up to greet him, a grim smile on his face. “I’m glad to see that the gate guard didn’t give you any trouble,” he said cordially. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“Where’s Larimer?” Danse asked bluntly. “Your letter implied that she was in peril.”

“She’s through the worst of it, thank goodness,” Preston replied. “But as it is, she’s got a few broken ribs and a pretty nasty concussion. And that’s just what we were able to diagnose. She’s on bed rest until Ignatius is satisfied that there’s no worse damage.”

The Paladin frowned, his eyes heavy with concern. “Do you know what caused her injuries?”

Preston nodded solemnly. “She got in a fight with some Super Mutants, and one of them threw her against the Castle wall. If she’d been wearing armor, she might have been all right, but as it was…”

Danse’s eyes narrowed. “She wasn’t wearing any armor?” he cried in alarm.

Preston shook his head. “Apparently she and Deacon had been...um…” he paused, his eyes widening as if he just realized who he was talking to. “Anyway, she wasn’t wearing armor for whatever reason,” the Colonel hastily amended. “Just a nice dress.”

Danse scowled. So Deacon was involved in this situation, because of course he was. Instead of checking in with the Brotherhood, had Myra gone on a Railroad operation? The Paladin didn’t want to believe it, even though the evidence was staring him in the face. How long ago had Myra returned from the Institute? How much information had she given to the Railroad? He felt a cold anger surge through him, tempered only by a great deal of sorrow. Was Myra lost to him after all? Had she ever been loyal?

The Paladin cleared his throat, tamping down his emotions. He didn’t have time for speculation. Today, he only had time for the truth. “May I see her?” he asked gruffly.

“Oh course,” the Colonel replied, leading him into the keep. They stopped at the end of a long stony corridor before a set of heavy wooden doors. “This is the General’s Quarters,” Preston said. “Please be careful not to get her too worked up. We still haven’t ruled out internal bleeding.”

Danse nodded. “I’ll certainly make an attempt,” he replied, easing the door open.

The room was a little bit bigger than Danse’s own quarters on the *Prydwen*, all gray stone and concrete instead of cold steel. It was well-furnished and very Myra, he noted with a slight smile. A large Minuteman flag hung on one wall, its slate blue softening the stark stone. Several of the other walls had been adorned with tattered cloth tapestries decorated with what seemed to be the beginning of a couple different art projects. To the left of the door was a large desk, overflowing with maps and books and other documents. Next to this stood a large set of shelves, filled with strange trinkets and jars of what looked like various pigments, as well as a selection of knives and smaller sidearms placed haphazardly throughout. *Righteous Authority*, Danse’s treasured laser rifle that he’d gifted to her, leaned against the wall next to the shelf, faint bloodstains darkening the barrel. Beyond was a battered wooden table and a set of four mismatched chairs, a threadbare red tablecloth covering the flat surface. Finally, there was a large double bed, piled high with pillows. There, looking up at him with wide and conflicted eyes, was Myra.

She seemed paler even than she normally was, her skin almost like translucent wax against the soft blue sheets. As Danse approached her bedside, she lifted a hand shakily towards him. “You’re not a dream, right?” she asked hoarsely.

Danse shook his head. “No, Larimer. I’m here.”
She smiled gently at him. “It’s good to see you, Danse,” she murmured, “but what are you doing here?”

“Preston sent me a message,” he replied. “He told me you’d sustained serious injuries, and that I should come as soon as I could. So I did. Are you recovering well?”

She nodded. “Preston. That sly bastard. Who would have thought? Still, it’s…it’s really good to see you.”

He took her trembling hand in his armored one, squeezing it as gently as he could. In spite of his doubts, in spite of his worry, it was wonderful to just be near her again, to feel her hand cupped in his. It almost made him forget everything he had to ask, all the things he needed to know, all the horrible suspicions that had clouded his mind. Wasn’t it enough that she was here, by his side again?

For the first time since he’d joined the Brotherhood, Danse found himself wishing that he hadn’t become a Paladin. If only he and Myra had met some other way, in some other circumstances. Allegiances wouldn’t matter if they were both civilians. None of this would matter. They could just be like the thousands of others struggling to survive in this cruel world, working side by side to build a life for themselves. Things would be so much simpler, if only that were the case.

But unfortunately, such speculation was wasted. Their circumstances were what they were, and their lives were not their own to spend on each other. He belonged heart and soul to the Brotherhood of Steel, and Myra...well, she had always been a complication. Now more than ever.

“It’s good to see you too, Larimer,” he said softly before releasing her hand and reaching into his pack. “I have a gift from Elder Maxson,” he continued, handing her the package.

She unwrapped the parcel, her hands shaking with effort. As the cover of the worn composition notebook was revealed, she chuckled softly. “Of course. I’ll have to thank him personally when we get back to the Prydwen. Whenever that is,” she added with a groan of pain.

“Just be kind if it’s not well-written,” Danse replied. “As far as I know, he’s never let anyone read his notebooks before.” A cold shard of jealousy stabbed at him, but he wasn’t sure where it was directed. Was he jealous of Myra for getting a chance to see inside Arthur’s well-guarded inner sanctum, or was he jealous of Arthur for how close he’d gotten to Myra? Perhaps it was a bit of both, he thought. Either way, it was distracting and hardly worth worrying about. There were far worse things on his mind than Myra’s relationship with the Elder.

“I promise I’ll be tactful if it’s awful,” Myra said, setting the notebook on her end table. “So, did you bring me anything else fun, or just your handsome self?”

Danse blushed, furious with himself for reacting so strongly to her casual flirtation. “I…” he cleared his throat. This was hardly the time. He needed answers. “How long have you been back in the Commonwealth?” he asked.

Myra sighed, as if she too could feel the change in the wind. “I’ll take that as a no,” she replied. “It’s been a few weeks. I meant to come back right away, but…” She trailed off, eyeing the door.

Danse walked back to the entrance of the room. He pulled the door of the General’s quarters closed with a heavy thud before turning back to Myra. “Larimer, I think you owe me an explanation,” he growled. “And given the danger you’ve put both of us in, it had better be one hell of an explanation.”

“What are you talking about, Danse?” Myra asked, her eyes wide.
“I believe you’re already aware of what I’m talking about...Whisper,” Danse said, nearly spitting out the last word.

Myra’s face paled even further, and she struggled to sit up in her bed. “I...how long have you known?” she gasped in pain as she fought the sheets that confined her.

Danse felt the last delicate shard of hope shatter inside him. He knew it was a long shot, but he really wanted to believe that Quinlan’s information hadn’t really been implicating Myra, that it was all just a horrible misunderstanding. “So it’s true,” Danse snarled. “You are a member of the Railroad after all.” The Paladin glared at her. “After all we’ve done for you, everything I’ve...the Brotherhood has offered you, you joined the damned Railroad? You do understand who they are, don’t you? What they stand for?”

“They just want synths to be treated as persons,” Myra said defiantly. “I know the Brotherhood doesn’t believe that synths are human. But Danse, what if the Brotherhood’s wrong about gen-3 synths? What if they really are as human as you or me?”

“That’s ludicrous!” Danse retorted, pacing anxiously. “Synths are machines. They are manufactured. Their very existence is a testament to technology going too far yet again, to human hubris destroying itself. Do you really want to live through another disaster like the one that decimated your world? Because if you let those abominations live, Larimer, that could well be the result.”

“I understand the Brotherhood’s concerns,” Myra continued. “And I’m not asking you to agree with me, Danse. I’m just asking you to keep an open mind. If it is, in fact, possible that gen-3 synths are people, then we have an obligation to help them, just as much as we have an obligation to help other humans who need us.”

“Are you hearing yourself?” the Paladin asked. “Synths aren’t born. They don’t die. They are manufactured, and they shut down. That is a fairly clear distinction. They do not have souls. How can they? They are fabricated.”

“How would you know?” Myra exclaimed, her eyes pleading with him to hear her out. “Danse, how would you know if they have souls? Have you discovered some way to find the soul that I don’t know about?”

“No,” he replied cautiously, his clanking strides coming to a stop.

Myra nodded. “Exactly! There’s no way to be certain if they are ensouled or not. So isn’t it possible that an artificial being with intelligence and free will might possess a soul? I mean, how would you know, one way or the other?”

He thought for a moment. “I suppose it is possible,” Danse conceded. “But that’s hardly the point.”

Myra shook her head. “No, it’s exactly the point. If it’s possible that they have souls, that they are, in fact, alive, then I believe that gen-3 synths have a right to live, just as much as any natural-born person. Even if you disagree with me on that, Danse, you have to acknowledge that it is wiser to err on the side of caution. Do you really want to be responsible for genocide?”

“Larimer, listen to me!” Danse growled. “Of course I don’t want to commit genocide. But your Railroad friends are almost at that level already! Do you know how many people they’ve killed over the years in order to save an insignificant number of synths?”

Myra frowned. “The Railroad doesn’t kill people, Danse. Not unless they’re threatened.”

Danse shook his head, pulling a fat stack of files from his pack and handing them to her. “That’s
incorrect. I did some research in the Brotherhood’s archives. These files contain every known act of terrorism committed by your friends. They have murdered a significant number of people in the last few years, and many of the victims are our own brothers and sisters. Do you remember the old man you rescued, Paladin Brandis?"

She nodded slightly, her eyes welling with tears as she read through the reports. Danse knew the files forwards and backwards. The contents had occupied his every waking moment the entire time Myra was gone, so he knew full well the horror and dismay she must be experiencing. “Are you saying that the Railroad…” Myra murmured, her voice cracking with emotion.

Danse sighed. “We have reason to believe that the initial ambush on his squad was from the Railroad, yes. Brandis was on a recon mission, just like mine. His team hadn’t even encountered any synths. Still, the evidence we collected at the scene suggests that the Railroad attacked them anyway, just to keep them from getting too close.”

“Desdemona wouldn’t do this,” Myra protested. “She’s a ruthless bitch, but even she wouldn’t do something like this. Would she?”

“I believe that the evidence speaks for itself,” the Paladin continued. “I’m sorry, Larimer. I wish I didn’t have to show you these files. But I want you to understand who you’ve decided to join forces with. The Railroad is not on the side of justice. They are liars. They are killers. And if they even suspected that I had uncovered your secret, they would not hesitate to make you and I both disappear.”

Myra stared up at him, tears welling in her bloodshot eyes. “But, Danse, how many synths has the Brotherhood killed over the years? Surely, the Brotherhood has caused just as much suffering as the Railroad has. Hell, even the Minutemen had their dark chapter at Quincy. One thing I’ve learned since I emerged from the vault is that no group of people is blameless.”

Danse nodded. “That’s certainly true, as long we accept your premise that synths are human. But the people the Railroad has killed are undeniably human, and there is no way around that fact. The Railroad doesn’t value human life, Larimer. How can they claim to champion synthetic life when they have no regard for life itself?”

Myra thought for a moment, her brow furrowed. “You do have a point,” she said quietly. “But I refuse to believe that every member of the Railroad thinks that way. I’ve...I know them, Danse. Some of them are my friends.”

The Paladin sighed. “And I believed that we were also friends. I’ve come to trust and respect you. If this were just a matter of ideological debate, I might even be able to agree to disagree with you. But the fact remains that the Railroad is a corrupting influence. And if you continue playing both sides of the fence, sooner or later, you’re going to find yourself alone.”

“We...we are still friends,” Myra replied, her voice breaking. “I...I want us to still be friends. I need you, Danse. More than you know.”

“If you’re being sincere,” Danse muttered, “you need to start behaving like it. Do you realize the danger you’ve put us both in? If anyone in the Brotherhood finds out about your...associations, you’ll probably be executed. And as your sponsor, it is my duty to report you and accept my share of the blame.”

Myra frowned. “So why haven’t you turned me in?”

“I’m not entirely certain,” Danse admitted. “I’m not particularly sentimental, as a rule. Perhaps I
merely wanted to give you a chance to recant. I felt…” he sighed. “I feel like I owe you that much, after all we’ve experienced together. You matter a great deal to me, Larimer. But you have to stop lying to me. If we’re going to survive this, I need you to tell me the truth. How long have you been working for them?”

She sighed raggedly. “I never wanted to hide this from you, Danse. I was hoping that I could find a way to tell you that wouldn’t put anyone else I care about at risk.”

Danse frowned, jealousy tightening its coils around him again. She’d kept secrets from him, to protect whom? Deacon? The Paladin’s scowl deepened. He had disliked Myra’s association with the duplicitous civilian even before he’d learned that the man was the Railroad’s top intelligence agent. Now, the mere implication that Myra cared for the man filled him with ire. “I wish I could believe that,” the Paladin replied. “I want to trust you, Larimer. But I’m not sure how I can any more. Answer me. Have you been spying for the Railroad since before we met?”

Myra shook her head. “Of course not! I was recruited a few months ago, when MacCready and I went to Goodneighbor.”

Danse scowled. “Is MacCready also a Railroad agent? Hell, are all of your friends working for them?”

“No, although Mac and Preston do know about them,” she sighed. “Mac works for me, and that’s the truth.”

The Paladin felt a pang of guilt as he remembered the events that led Myra to Goodneighbor after they had cleared Fort Strong. If only he’d kept himself under control, had been able to face his fear of losing her after the Super Mutant attack…he should have stayed by her side. Damn it, why did everything go wrong every time he strayed from her side? Danse and Myra should have gone to Goodneighbor together. He should have been there for her. In a way, this was all his fault.

“Larimer,” Danse said softly, “what did the Railroad promise you? Why would you join them when you already had the Brotherhood of Steel and the Minutemen at your back? Weren’t we enough for you?”

“They want to take down the Institute, Danse,” she replied earnestly. “Even if their motives are different, they want the same thing the Brotherhood does. And they have some significant resources at their disposal, methods and techniques no one else has. That’s why I decided to ally with them. I figured that we could debate the synth question after we…” Myra’s voice trailed off, a far, haunted look in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I never meant for things to turn out like this.”

“I know you can’t trust that I’m telling you the truth, Danse,” she continued. “But believe me. The last thing I’d ever want to do is to hurt you. All I’ve ever wanted was to get my son back. Everything else was just a means to get there. But now…I wish I’d found another way.” Myra’s eyes welled with tears. “Very few things in my life have been as painful as seeing you look at me like this, Danse. I’d take it all back, if I could. I’m so, so sorry.”

Danse felt an overwhelming desire to scoop her into his arms and cradle her gently against his armored torso. He wanted to hold her close, to brush the lines of worry and regret from her lovely
face, to give her the comfort both of them desperately needed. But he held himself back. For all her perfect words, for how desperately he wanted to throw caution to the wind, there were some lines he couldn’t afford to cross. Not until he knew where they stood.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. No more apologies were exchanged. There was no need. Whether it was a foolish, treasonous decision or not, Danse believed her. He still trusted her. And, more than that, he couldn’t bear to lose her because of his own mistakes.

Eventually, Myra sighed, biting her lower lip the way she always did when she was distressed. “So what now?” she asked softly.

“We still have quite a dilemma on our hands,” Danse replied. “I’m reasonably certain that Proctor Quinlan suspects you, or will soon. As far as I can see, there are two options. You can leave the Brotherhood of Steel and go into hiding. You might be safe, but I...we would never be able to see each other again without risking us both being executed for treason.”

Myra laughed bitterly. “Well, that’s not really an option. After all of this, I won’t leave you behind to clean up after me. What’s the other choice?”

“I hate to ask this of you,” Danse said with a measured sigh. “I know how important the Minutemen are to you, and whether I approve or not, I realize that you consider many members of the Railroad to be your friends. If there was another way...but the safest option would be taking the Oath of Fidelity. Formally join the Brotherhood of Steel, and make it clear to everyone where you stand. Then no one in the Brotherhood would turn on you, not even Quinlan.”

Myra frowned. “Danse, I can’t do that. I have responsibilities to all my allies. If I prioritize one group above the others, it could start a war.”

“I understand that,” the Paladin replied. “That’s one of the reasons I was hoping to avoid you taking the Oath. But we don’t have the luxury of half-measures, Larimer. Not at this juncture. If you’re going to survive, Quinlan has to believe that you are sincere.”

“I...I need time, Danse,” Myra murmured, her emerald eyes searching his for answers he couldn’t even begin to know how to give her. “That’s not a decision I can just make on the spot.”

He nodded. “I understand. That’s why I’m prepared to take you away from here as soon as you’re well enough to move. I have a vertibird on standby, manned by a lancer who owes me a pretty substantial favor. We can be halfway across the Commonwealth before anyone knows we’re gone.”

Myra scoffed. “Running away? That’s unlike you, Danse.”

“It’s hardly running away,” he argued. “You need a chance to think things through, and the further you are from Proctor Quinlan right now, the better. As far as anyone will know, you and I have a very important, urgent mission that requires our immediate attention.”

The Paladin walked over to Myra’s desk, grabbing a pen before furiously scribbling a message to Arthur.

_Elder Maxson,_

_Knight Larimer is experiencing severe psychological stress as well as extensive physical injuries. I_
am retroactively requesting an undetermined amount of leave for her and myself so I can keep an eye on her. I believe I still have almost a year in unused leave, so I trust this will not be an issue.

I know our attack on the Institute must come first, but, frankly, if she doesn’t take some time off, I fear Knight Larimer will not last through the coming conflict. As you yourself said, she is too valuable an asset for us to mismanage her right when we need her the most.

I’ll keep you informed of any and all changes to her condition, and we will return as soon as she is well. Thank you in advance for agreeing to this. If you do not agree to this, feel free to punish me as you see fit. Remember, you’re the one who insisted on leaving her in my care.

Ad Victoriam,

Senior Paladin T. Danse

Good enough. He grabbed a signal grenade from his pack, setting it on top of the note. “When we’re ready to leave,” he said, “I’ll take this to Colonel Garvey. I trust that he’ll know what to do with it.”

Myra’s eyes widened. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

Danse frowned. “When have you ever known me to not be serious, especially when it concerns the safety of my men?”

She smiled softly. “That’s certainly true,” she replied. “Still, are you sure you want to take this sort of risk? What if I decide not to take the Oath?”

Danse returned to her side in a few long strides, taking her hand in his once more. “I trust you more than almost anyone. I know you’ll do what you perceive to be the right thing, even if I don’t always agree with your conclusions. Whatever you decide, I’ll do my best to protect you. If it costs me everything…” he sighed. “So be it. But if you’re still holding something back, I need you to be honest with me. I can’t protect you if I don’t know all the variables.”

Myra’s gaze faltered. “I already told you about the Railroad.”

Danse sighed. “I know. But there’s something more, isn’t there? What happened in the Institute, Larimer? Why didn’t you come home to the Prydwen? You never would have risked exposing your involvement with the Railroad if you’d just done what you promised and reported to Elder Maxson first.”

“Do...do we have to talk about this right now?” she whispered hoarsely. Her eyes looked past him at some unknown spot on the floor.

The Paladin nodded. “I need to know, Larimer. What aren’t you telling me?”

“Sit.” Myra patted the side of her bed gently, and Danse shook his head. She glared at him, patting the bed more emphatically. With a heavy sigh, he removed his power armor and sat awkwardly next to her, trying not to crush her battered body by accident.

“I’m not sure why this is necessary,” he mumbled.

“I…” Myra smiled up at him sadly, her eyes brimming with tears. “This is going to be difficult for
me, Danse. It’s easier if you’re close. Sorry,” she added, blushing slightly. “I know it’s awkward and weird, but I feel safer when you’re here like this, okay?”

Danse nodded, his ears burning. “Very well,” he conceded. He wasn’t sure he understood what she meant, and he felt nervous sitting this close to her. He could feel the heat of her body through the sheets, the hard curve of her leg pressing slightly against his lower back as her body shifted. Even though they operated in close quarters most of the time, it was rare for them to be this close, with no armor in between to keep them safe. This close, they could wound each other gravely if they wanted. This close, it was harder to deny the growing bond between them, even if Danse was still struggling to ignore it.

He didn’t want to admit that he loved her. The thought crept unbidden from the deep part of himself he’d caged it in when he’d found out about her Railroad involvement. He might in fact love her, but there were so many reasons why he shouldn’t let that be true. What if she was toying with him? What if she only saw him as a friend and colleague? He couldn’t risk their already frayed relationship by giving his feelings for her a name. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

But sitting beside her, watching her labor for words that would not willingly be born, he couldn’t deny the truth to himself. He would conceal it as long as he needed to, even forever if that was how things panned out, but he knew. Danse knew for certain that he loved her. He loved Myra so much that the thought of leaving her side again was almost unbearable. Even if she betrayed him in the end, even if she killed him, he couldn’t bring himself to ever part from her. He was hers, completely and entirely. May whatever god still ruled over this forsaken world have mercy on him.

He started as Myra laid her cold hand on his knee, and he turned to look at her awkwardly. She chuckled at him softly, her beautiful eyes flickering to life with her smile. “What’s wrong, Danse?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “We’ve just talked about so much already today. Perhaps you’re right, and we should continue this discussion another time.”

She shook her head. “No. You’re right. I need to be honest with you. After all you’ve done, you deserve to know the truth. I found him, Danse,” she continued, her face falling. “I found my son. But he’s not a child any more. He’s the leader of the Institute.”

Danse’s mind reeled. How could this be? “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Definitely,” Myra replied. “I’ve tried to come up with some way the Institute could have been tricking me, but the evidence speaks for itself.”

Danse took her hand in his, lending her what comfort he was able. “That certainly complicates things. I assume that’s the reason why you failed to report your findings to Elder Maxson?”

She nodded. “I’m not sure what to make of it all, Danse. Hell, I’m not sure what to do about it. Shaun’s an old man, now, almost three times my age, if you can believe it. I missed... I missed everything. I never got to teach him to read, or soothe his nightmares. Those bastards stole it all from me, and now he’s the worst one among them. They made him into a monster. My own son... my baby boy.” She broke down in deep, angry sobs.

Danse struggled to find any words that would fix this situation. He never quite knew what to do with crying women. It was one of his bigger weaknesses. Someone slicker than him would have had the right thing to say, some simple solution to make everything seem right again. All the Paladin had was his gruff sincerity, and he had to hope that it would be enough. “I...I’m sorry,” he managed. “I know this must be a terrible shock for you. I cannot even imagine what you must be feeling right now.”
Myra shuddered as he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “How do I carry out our mission now?” she asked. “Can I really kill my own child? No mother should have to make that choice, Danse!”

He nodded solemnly. “Agreed. You have been put in an unimaginable position. I’ll ask Maxson to take you off this assignment. We will find another way to reach the Institute.” Not that Arthur would agree, since he’d made his position on their mission abundantly clear while Myra was away. Still, Myra was being asked to kill her own son. Danse would risk Maxson’s wrath to save her from that.

“No!” cried Myra. “No, this is mine to finish. I can’t let anyone else take responsibility for my failure as a mother.”

Danse sighed heavily. “It is not your fault that you were robbed of the chance to raise your son, Larimer. Therefore, it is not your fault that he grew up to become the man that he is. You cannot blame yourself for that.”

“But I do!” she cried. “I do. It was my job to raise him, to protect him, and I failed. My son…”

He shook his head. “Thinking like that won’t do you any good,” he replied. “Believe me, I know somewhat how you feel. After Cutler, I felt like I’d failed as well. I realize that losing a friend is different from losing a child, but the fact remains that you did not make him who he became. It wasn’t your choice.”

Myra gripped his arm so tightly that he thought she might leave a bruise. “When I was pregnant,” she growled, “I made a promise that I would give Shaun the best chance in life that I could. Is this really the best I could do?”

The Paladin placed his hand over hers. “I don’t know,” he replied earnestly. “But none of this was your choice.”

“I could have refused to sign us up for the Vault,” Myra continued. “We could have died together that day, or become ghouls. Either way, those bastards wouldn’t have taken him, used him for their damned experiments. Did you know why they call him Father? It’s because his DNA...my DNA is the model for all the gen-3 synths. They stole my baby to make their slaves.”

Danse stared at her in shock. “I...I had no idea.”

“I doubt anyone outside the Institute does,” she murmured. “The synths basically worship him. Hell, a lot of the scientists do too. Everyone in the Institute was just so fucking nice to me because of it. These terrible, twisted people, and they treated me like I was the Madonna. It was an awful, heretical nightmare, Danse. I can’t even begin to deal with it.”

His heart ached for her. How could it not? After all she’d gone through to save her son, to be confronted with something like that...it was a miracle that she still seemed sane, if he was perfectly honest. “That’s all the more reason to move to a neutral location as soon as you’re able,” Danse said softly. “No matter what you decide to do, you deserve to come to that decision on your own, without anyone manipulating you.”

Myra nodded. “It would be best if I was on my own while I figure out what to do about all this” she replied. “But Danse?”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’d really like it if you stayed with me. I’ll understand if you’d rather leave, knowing what you know. But I...I want you to stay.”
Danse sighed heavily. Of course he wanted to remain by her side. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that there was nothing he’d rather do. But was it wise for him to put himself in this position? Was it right for him to remain, to influence her when he’d just told her to choose on her own?

Myra’s eyes darkened as he hesitated, and she released her grip on his arm. “I’m sorry,” she said blankly. “I’m acting like an idiot. You’ve indulged me enough.”

Danse eased down next to her with a heavy sigh, lying beside her on top of the sheets. Carefully, he pulled her into his arms, protecting her the only way he had left to do so. If she was in a firefight, he would have shielded her as he always did. If raiders were staging an assault on her home, he would risk everything to bring her to safely. But against the worries and decisions that hung over her head like a guillotine blade, all he had to offer was this awkward attempt at comfort.

Myra tensed with a hiss of pain, but soon settled into his unexpected embrace. The Paladin thought he might have imagined it, but it felt as though she’d placed a gentle kiss against the arm of his flight suit as she nestled against him. Tears still flowed heavily from her bloodshot eyes, and he lifted his arm to her face, wiping them dry with his sleeve. “Thanks,” she murmured softly.

“I’ll never leave you,” he said. “You’re my responsibility, after all.”

She chuckled weakly. “So what part of the manual is this tactic from?” she joked.

Danse smiled slightly. “Perhaps if it works, I’ll have to write an appendix,” he replied. “As it is, decorum prohibits actions like this, and with good reason. I trust you’ll keep this infraction just between us.”

Myra nodded. “You keep my secrets, Danse, and I’ll keep yours.”

In spite of himself, the Paladin liked the sound of that. He’d always been a paragon of decorum, never questioning the Codex that kept his adopted family alive. But ever since Myra had stumbled into the Cambridge Police Station, that weak black pistol blazing, Danse could sense a shift in his approach to his calling. Myra was changing him, and while that should have alarmed him, Danse found that realization surprisingly comforting to him. There was no way he could return to the man he was before. But with her beside him, he had no desire to do so.

Prudent or not, he loved her. And that, at least, was worth defending, even if she could never know the truth.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh, Danse...you poor, conflicted sweetheart.

I’ll be back to my normal updating schedule next week, plus a couple updates to our side-story! Thanks for your patience! I love you all!

NEXT CHAPTER: Deacon makes some mistakes. Hancock is a surprisingly good friend.
Chapter Summary

Deacon has a bad day. As if he hasn't had enough of those.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Deacon was exhausted, emotionally and physically. Ever since that night up in Salem, he’d been searching half-heartedley for Myra, hoping that she hadn’t been torn apart by the corvid Watchers that patrolled the skies of the Commonwealth at the Institute’s bidding. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if he found her dead. He really wasn’t sure what he’d do if he found her alive.

Although it had been a few days, the spy’s lips still seemed haunted by Myra’s ministrations. What had happened between them was an illusion, a facade. Deacon knew that in his mind. But his heart wasn’t entirely convinced. Whether it was simply the multi-year dry spell talking or something deeper, he wanted to believe that the passion behind Myra’s kisses had been real. Even so, he feared finding out the truth. At this point, he wasn’t sure what was worse, knowing that Myra didn’t care for him or knowing that she did.

Once the endorphins had worn off, the reality of the situation had fallen about his shoulders like a lead vest. Deacon had behaved horribly unprofessionally, even for him. The spy could and did make light of the rules all he wanted, but there were some lines even he didn’t dare cross. Work was work. Relationships were...messy. Most of all, they were for other people. Deacon neither wanted nor deserved intimacy with others. It was easier to be lonely than to put someone at risk. Even more so, loneliness was all a man like him could hope for. After the sins he committed, he didn’t deserve to be cared for.

He wished that Myra could understand that. The look of hurt on her face when he’d driven her away had wounded him deeper than she could know, but he’d done it for her sake. Couldn’t she see that? The last thing he wanted was for her to end up like Trailblazer, an exile trapped underground until the loneliness and grief drove her to desertion. Myra had already lost so much. Getting banished might be one loss too far. Besides, she deserved better than Deacon. Hell, she didn’t even know who he was, really, what he was capable of. He was poison, pure and simple. If he got any closer to her, he could very easily destroy her. Worse still, Deacon realized, Myra could just as easily destroy him. It was better that things ended now, before they could even begin.

All the same, he wanted to make certain that Myra was safe. The spy cared for her, whether he wanted to or not. Even if he had to keep her at a distance, he’d do anything he could to protect her, just as he always had. From the moment he’d intervened outside Vault 111, he’d never stopped fighting for her. Like hell he was going to stop now. But how could he protect her from himself, from the ramifications of what he worried they’d both felt that night in the bar?

Deacon sighed heavily, continuing his trek towards Goodneighbor. It was the next place to look for Myra on his list. The church in Nahant had been a bust, filled only with memories. Besides, he had it on good authority that Myra frequented the Old State House when she needed a place to lie low. Odds were good that even if she weren’t there, Hancock would have some idea of where she was. The ghoul mayor's drifter-based intelligence network was startling, actually. It put Deacon himself to
shame more than he’d like to admit.

The small plaza by the gates was filled with onlookers when Deacon arrived, and it didn’t take long for him to see the cause. Three bodies lay in the street outside Daisy’s place, skulls cracked open to reveal the synth components inside. Deacon recognized one of the corpses, a drifter he’d bunked next to more than once. The other two were strangers to him, though apparently not to the citizens of Goodneighbor. As Deacon’s eyes swept the crowd, he noticed that the gathered mob was not as unified as it normally was. Ghouls stood mostly on one side, pressing in on the other half of the crowd with fear and malice in their eyes. The other side was mostly other humans, with a few ghouls trying desperately to keep the peace between the factions. A few members of the Neighborhood Watch were holding people back from each other, trying to calm the rising tensions, but it was clear that a full-blown riot was only moments away.

“Any one of you smooth-skins could be one of them!” an ornery ghoul in a tattered suit yelled.

“What, so you want to just throw us all out, is that it?” shrieked an elderly woman. “You’ve known me since I was a girl, Greg! When McDonough kicked your family out, I stood up for you! Now, you want to kick me out of my home?”

“It’d be safer that way,” another ghoul cried out. “None of them synths ever posed as a ghoul. Bet they can’t figure out how. We’re the only ones we know we can trust!”

“Maybe old McDonough was right,” a man snarled back. “You freaks ain’t human.”

Shit. This was bad. Deacon had known for months that the Institute was trying to infiltrate and destabilize Goodneighbor. Honestly, he hadn’t expected the city of misfits to band together even this long. But now, it was obvious that they had been working on borrowed time. The Railroad’s efforts to secure the town were in vain. The population was all but prepared to consume itself, just like the people of University Point had. If someone didn’t intervene soon, more blood would be spilled, and it wouldn’t just be Institute-controlled synths that lost their lives.

Where the hell was Hancock? The mayor might be a mess in his personal life, but he always had a knack for keeping everyone united. Had he somehow not heard the yelling in the streets, or was this particular problem too big for even him?

A woman screamed as a radiation-weathered fist swung down, sending her reeling to the ground. The groups surged even more insistently towards each other, knives and bats materializing out of coats. There wasn’t time to wait. If no one intervened, there was going to be a bloodbath. "Hey!" Deacon shouted, drawing the attention of the crowd, “knock it off, people! Can’t you see that this is exactly what the Institute wants?”

“Who the hell is this guy?” The ghoul named Greg jeered. “Who do you think you are, asshole, coming into my town and telling me what to do?”

“You’re better than this!” Deacon replied nervously. What the hell had he been thinking, getting involved like this? It wasn’t his style. He was more of a pick up the pieces kind of guy. “Goodneighbor’s a place where everyone’s welcome!” he called. “That’s what makes it special. Don’t throw that away. You start kicking people out, and you’re no better than Diamond City!”

“You’re one of them!” roared one of the other ghouls. “Damned smooth-skin bastards! I’m tired of getting tossed aside by you bigots! We ghouls have a right to be here, way more than you do! You haven’t been through what we’ve been through! You should pay for what your kind did to us!”

The crowd surged forward with a cry of contempt, and Deacon searched around for a place to run.
This was why he usually just let these things run their course. He’d been spending too much time with Myra. Her stupid motivational speeches were rubbing off on him, and now he was going to die in a tremendously stupid way. Perfect. He closed his eyes, bracing himself against the town wall as the first blows descended.

The one good thing about getting beaten up as often as he did was that nothing hurt quite as badly as it used to. That was a small mercy, at least. After the first dozen or so blows, he almost couldn’t feel any new ones. As he sunk to the pavement, his own blood hot and wet against his skin, Deacon felt overwhelmed by a sense of grim clarity. Perhaps this was how he deserved to go out, being torn apart by people he wanted to help. Was this how it had been for the man the Deathclaws had lynched? Maybe, in a way, this was justice. He’d been waiting for the scales to right themselves for so long, he’d almost thought he’d been given clemency. Deacon should have known that he wouldn’t get off that easily.

Suddenly, he made out a voice crying over the crowd, barely audible to his failing ears “Hey! What the hell’s going on here? Fahrenheit, get him up, will you?” Deacon felt himself pulled free from the mob, and he opened his eyes painfully to survey the situation. He was alive. What’s more, he was tucked behind the broad back of a particularly angry amazon of a woman, her snarling face and readied minigun holding the mob at bay. Even without hearing her name, he would have recognized Hancock’s hulking bodyguard anywhere.

The mayor himself pushed through the crowd to their side, clutching the side of his head as he glared at the mob with deep black eyes. “God damn, some of you people do not know how to behave when your beloved mayor has a hangover,” he hissed. Now who wants to tell me why the hell you’ve been chasin’ down baldie here before I really get impatient?”

“It’s these smooth-skins, Hancock!” cried one of the ghouls defiantly. “They’re all trouble. Hell, for all we know, they’re all synth spies!”

“And all ghouls are a menace, bound to go feral and kill everyone at any time,” Hancock retorted. “Yeah, yeah. We’ve heard it before. We all have! So why the hell are you acting like those asshats back in Diamond City? This ain’t the Stands. We’re better than them. Goodneighbor’s not a members-only club. Anyone that wants in and keeps their nose clean can stay here. That’s what we agreed on, right?”

“That was before!” Greg yelled, pressing forward through the mob. “Before these synths started replacing people. We gotta keep our town safe, Hancock. You know we do.”

“And we will. But we’re not going to start hurting innocent people just because they might be spies. That is not how we do things. Get that through your thick skulls, or we will have a problem. Do you want a problem with me, Greg?”

“Of course not,” the ghoul replied nervously. “But these bastards gotta--”

Hancock sighed, pulling his knife from its holster. “We can do this the nasty way if you’d prefer. I really don’t want to make an example of you, brother, but you know I’m good for it.”

Greg scoffed. “This ain’t over, Hancock. Sooner or later, things are gonna change around here. You’d best be on the right side when it happens.”

“Funny,” the mayor replied. “Here I was going to tell you the same thing.” He turned back to the crowd. “Anyone who still believes in fuckin’ freedom, get down to the Third Rail. Drinks are on the house for everyone who agrees that no one’s gettin’ kicked out of our little community who don’t deserve it.” Noises of agreement echoed through the mob, and the crowd slowly dispersed, returning
to the gutters and tunnels from whence they came. Hancock walked over to Deacon, smiling grimly at him as he helped the spy up. “You all right, Deacon? Can you walk?”

Deacon nodded, spitting a mouthful of blood out of his mouth. “I’ve had worse,” he said. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“You ain’t exactly my first choice of damsel in distress,” Hancock teased with a jagged grin, “but I guess in lieu of a tall, leggy blonde, you’ll do.”

“Hey, I can be a tall, leggy blonde,” Deacon protested jokingly. “I was a girl for a couple months once, you know.”

“And I’m sure you were quite the looker, too,” the mayor replied, “so long as no one was lookin’ too close. Not like it’d be hard to look better than you do right now, my man. Those bruises all from my people, or you come into town lookin’ like you fell off the back end of a particularly angry brahmin? I’m not judging, I’m just curious.”

“You don’t need to fuss over me, Hancock,” Deacon said. “I promise, I won’t go looking for revenge. I’m just here on business.”

“Your business doesn’t usually involve you picking fights with the populace,” Hancock replied, his beady eyes narrowed. “That’s why I let your people operate freely in this town.”

“To be fair,” Deacon protested, “I didn’t start it. Things were bad when I got here.”

The mayor nodded. “Now that I believe. The Institute’s got folks all kinds of worked up, and I can’t say that I blame ‘em. It’s only gonna get worse from here, and I’m runnin’ out of pretty speeches. Something’s gotta give, and I just really hope it ain’t our town. Goodneighbor’s always had her problems, but we’ve made it work because none of us have anywhere else to go. We freaks and misfits stick together. At least we used to. Who knows, any more?” Hancock sighed, glancing at himself in a broken storefront window. “Maybe this beautiful trip’s just comin’ to an end. Always knew we had to come down sometime.” He sighed. “Fahrenheit, you mind grabbin’ some bandages and shit from Daisy’s?”

The muscular woman nodded. “I’ll get some Med-X too. You used the last of it, I think.”

Hancock laughed. “Sounds like me. I’ll see you at home.” The mayor walked back towards the Old State House. Deacon wasn’t sure if the ghoul wanted him to follow or not, but he tagged along anyway. The spy still needed to find out where Myra was, and the mayor was still his best lead. Without saying another word, Hancock held the door open for him, ushering Deacon inside. Once they reached his sitting room, the mayor seemed to relax somewhat. “Now that we’ve got you off the street, mind telling me what brought you here? Do you know something about what’s been going on?”

Deacon shook his head. “I’m not here for the Railroad,” he replied quietly. “Not exactly, anyway. I’m looking for Myra. Have you seen her?”

Hancock eyed him curiously. “What makes you think that I know where she is?”

“I know she drops in to see you once in a while,” Deacon continued, “especially when she’s in trouble. And the last time I saw her, she was in trouble.”

The mayor sighed. “That’s not exactly news. Trouble tends to follow her, far as I can tell. But somethin’ tells me you’re speaking of trouble in a more...hmm, concrete way, maybe? What’d you do?”
As Deacon struggled to come up with an answer, the door opened, revealing Fahrenheit. The young woman tossed a bundle of medical supplies on the couch next to him. “Patch yourself up,” she grumbled. “You’re bleeding on the furniture.”

“Thanks,” Deacon replied, sorting through the bundle.

Hancock sighed. “Fahrenheit, is that any way to treat a guest? Get some boiling water goin’, will ya?” He knelt next to Deacon, pulling a small sewing kit and a lighter from his pocket. “That cut above your eye’s gonna need stitches,” he muttered. “I think I’m sober enough to get the job done. Lucky thing you caught me early in the day.”

Deacon winced as he watched the ghoul sanitize the needle. He’d always hated needles. That was why when he’d hit his lowest, he’d always preferred pills and inhalers to injectables. “You sure that’s necessary?” he asked nervously.

“I mean, hell, brother, I’m not a doctor,” Hancock replied. “But I’ve cleaned up after enough bar fights and bad trips over the years. Tell you what? You take it like a man, and I’ll dose you up with somethin’ that’ll make you forget all about it. What do you say?”

“Normally, I’d tell you to leave me alone,” Deacon grumbled, “but honestly, right now that sounds pretty great.”

“Right on,” the ghoul said with a wide grin. “You just take it easy, and we’ll take care of the rest. When you’re up for it, then we can talk about our girl, okay?” Deacon nodded, and Hancock sighed, holding his head still. “Hang on. I don’t wanna stab you in the face. Well, outside the parts I need to stab. Take your sunglasses off so I can see the damage.”


“Well, if you’re going to be difficult…” Hancock dug around on his coffee table, searching for something in the massive pile of chems that littered it. With a triumphant smile, he pulled a few bottles of different pills from the heap. Deacon recognized one of the bottles as Day Tripper, but he wasn’t sure about the others. The spy watched in fascination and horror as Hancock crushed several of the pills into a water-stained glass before reaching for a syringe of Med-X from the couch. “Fahrenheit, we still got any of that Quantum?” he called.

“There’s a couple bottles in the kitchen,” she replied. “You making another batch of Sunshine?”

“Thought we could all use some calming down after what happened this morning,” Hancock said, emptying the syringe into the glass with the crushed pills. “You game?”

“You know I hate that shit,” Fahrenheit said as she returned to the room, a steaming bowl of water in her hands. She set the water on the table before pulling a bottle of the glowing blue soda from her pocket, setting it next to the bowl. “Besides, someone’s gotta stay sober if those idiots decide to try anything.”

“That’s...actually not a terrible idea,” the mayor replied, cracking open the bottle of Quantum and filling the rest of the glass with it. He swirled the mixture around until the pills dissolved before handing it to Deacon. “Here. A couple sips of this, and you’ll be calmer than a corpse in no time.”

Deacon sniffed at the unholy concoction, grimacing. “Is this safe?” he asked.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Hancock said with a laugh. “But it sure as hell works. I’ve been perfecting it for a few months now. I call it Sunshine because it makes you feel all warm and safe and shit. Tastes like the wrong end of a radroach, but other than that, it does the trick.”
Deacon wasn’t thrilled about the idea of taking experimental chems from a man who literally ghoulified himself to get high. The spy had vowed years ago that his chem-abusing days were behind him, getting his highs from danger and self-loathing instead. That was way healthier. But, honestly, the idea of not giving a shit about anything for a few hours sounded pretty good. Maybe if Deacon could clear his mind of all these conflicting emotions, he’d be able to see a way forward. Even if that didn’t work, at least he wouldn’t have to worry about Myra, the Railroad, or anything else for a while. Before his mind could talk him out of it, Deacon plugged his nose with one hand and knocked back the glass.

“Holy shit!” Hancock cried. “Easy, brother! I said a couple sips, not the whole damn thing! Oh, crap,” the mayor continued, his voice trailing off as the world suddenly got all...floaty. “Deacon, come on, you...easy...damn it…”

The spy couldn’t understand Hancock any more, but he didn’t exactly care. He smiled sleepily as he drifted off, his mind a beautiful kaleidoscope of colors as he lay back against the couch. A warm softness took hold of him, wrapping Deacon in a blanket of pure light. Within moments, he was past the point of caring about anything.

Deacon lay on his back in a field of surprisingly green grass, staring up at a clear, blue sky. He smiled sleepily as he felt the warm rays of the sun on his face, and stretched lazily. There was a clean, delicate smell in the air, like gentle florals mixed with hot summer grass. It was so soothing, so familiar, even though he was certain that he’d never experienced the scent before. He blinked a few times before realizing that his glasses were missing. Normally, he would have panicked at being so exposed, but honestly, he couldn’t really bring himself to care either way.

He heard a familiar laugh nearby, and the sound spurred him to sit up. Deacon glanced around, trying to make sense of where he was. The field he was in was vast, bordered in the distance by a lush forest. Somewhere out of the range of his sight, running water babbled and played. There were no structures of any kind save for a white wicker table resting at the crest of a rolling hill. There were several chairs around the table, two of which were occupied. At this distance, he couldn’t make out the features of the figures seated there, though they seemed familiar to him. One wore a long blue dress, loose, wavy blonde hair drifting about in the gentle breeze. The other wore a shorter green number, her chestnut brown hair pulled into a tight bun. Deacon wandered closer, his bare feet caressed by the soft grass as he climbed the hill. As he drew nearer, the two women turned to look at him, and he realized with a jolt who they were.

“Look who’s finally awake,” Barbara mused with a warm smile. “We thought you were going to sleep all day.”

Myra laughed warmly, gesturing to a basket on the table. “We thought we were going to have to eat without you. Come, sit.”

Deacon’s mind felt muddled. This couldn’t be real. Still, as if compelled, he sat between them, smiling in spite of his confusion. Barbara rached over, taking his hand in hers. “Myra and I have been having the most lovely conversation, haven’t we, dear?”

Myra nodded as she rummaged in the picnic basket, pulling all manner of delicious foods from its
depths. “Barb has such a great sense of humor,” she said. “No wonder you love her.”

Deacon frowned. “Myra, your hair…”

She laughed. “Like it? I know it’s a simple style, but it keeps it out of the way.”

“No,” he continued, “I meant that it’s not white.”

“Of course not, silly,” Myra said, handing him the heel of a warm loaf of bread. “I’m not that old.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling all right, Alex?” Barbara asked, her hazel eyes concerned.

Deacon’s heart raced. How long had it been since anyone had called him by his name? “I’m not sure,” he managed. “What are we doing here?”

Barbara squeezed his hand tighter, her nimble fingers soft against his skin. “We’re having a picnic, of course. This was your idea, remember?”

“I can’t say that I do,” he replied.

Myra sighed. “You’re always so preoccupied, it’s no wonder you forgot. What are we going to do with you?”

Barbara giggled. “I guess we just have to remind him,” she said, kissing Deacon’s cheek softly. “Come on, sweetheart. You promised that you’d forget about work today and just spend time with your family.”

“But I...Myra’s not...I mean, I remember this,” Deacon managed. “But it wasn’t like this. Myra wasn’t here. And it wasn’t nearly this beautiful out.”

“I think someone drank more wine than we thought, Barb,” Myra joked, though her smile didn’t make it to her eyes. “Of course I’m here. Look at me. I’m right next to you.” She placed a hand on his thigh, gently stroking it. “I know you’re stressed out, but now you’re just being hurtful.”

Deacon tried to protest, tried to tell them that there must be some mistake, but the words just wouldn’t come. Instead, he just sighed heavily, doing his best to relax. He had to be dreaming. At least he could try to enjoy it while it was happening. He could feel guilty when he woke up, if he had to. He tore into the bread, relaxing slightly as the familiar mineral taste of razorgrain flour filled his mouth.

Barbara shook her head at him. “You should wait, hun,” she said. “It’s rude to eat before everyone’s here.”

Deacon frowned, eyeing the remaining empty chair. “Who else are we expecting?”

A loud whistle pierced the air, and Myra looked towards the forest, smiling warmly. “It looks like Soph’s back,” she said, waving to someone in the distance. The figure waved back, dashing towards them.

“Who’s Soph?” Deacon asked as he watched the person draw closer.

Myra looked at him like he’d grown a second head. “Don’t tell me you forgot about your own kid,” she said. “Did you hit your head?”

“But I don’t...we never were able to have children,” he murmured, looking to Barbara for help.
She sighed. “You’re still having those awful nightmares, aren’t you?” she asked. “About me being a synth? I told you, they’re just dreams. They aren’t real.”

“They...aren’t?” Deacon asked, trying to sort out his conflicting thoughts. He wanted to believe what he was seeing, that Barbara was alive, that they were living happily, that they had a daughter of their own. But in his heart he knew that this was all an elaborate fantasy. This idyllic place, the two people he cared most about by his side...it was a beautiful dream. Nothing more. This wasn’t his reality. And it certainly wasn’t the life he deserved.

“Daddy, are you okay?” asked a soft voice. He turned, his eyes meeting a pair of startling emerald green ones. The girl who stood before him was about eight or nine, if he had to guess, with a mess of ginger curls framing her heart-shaped face. A smattering of freckles spilled across her round cheeks, giving her an impish look.

“Your father just had one of his nightmares, Sophie,” Barbara replied.

“Again?” the girl exclaimed, pulling her chair out and sitting at the table. “Poor daddy.”

Myra chuckled, making up a plate for the child. “It’s okay, Soph. We all have bad dreams sometimes. It doesn’t mean the nightmares are real.”

Sophie nodded, shooting Deacon a toothy grin. “He always makes things harder for himself, doesn’t he?”

Barbara laughed, making a sandwich for herself. “He always has.” She turned to Deacon. “Alex, dear, you should eat more. You’re so pale.”

Deacon nodded, trying to ignore how strange this entire situation was as he continued eating his bread. He wanted to accept the good that was in front of him, to enjoy these precious moments even if they weren’t real. He looked across the table at Sophie -- this adorable young girl who was supposedly his -- watching her every movement. Here and there, he caught sight of one of his mannerisms in her, and it startled and amazed him. He’d wanted children so badly back in those naive days when he and Barbara had vowed to spend their lives together. Things had seemed so simple, then, so full of hope. But who he was now, the man he’d become...how could such joy belong to him? His heart twinged every time Sophie looked at him, her smile exposing soft dimples on her cheeks. Perhaps Alex deserved to have a family of his own. But Deacon certainly didn’t. It was for the best that this was just a dream.

Myra kicked him lightly under the table. “She’s not gonna grow up if you take your eyes off of her for a single second, you know,” she teased. “Relax, Deeks. We have all the time in the world to be a family.”

He frowned at this. What did she mean? He cared for Myra, this much was undeniably true, but for her to call them family? Even his subconscious couldn’t believe that, could it? He looked to Barbara, who shot him that easy, comforting smile he missed so much. “You shouldn’t be so afraid, sweetheart,” she murmured. “Things change. That’s what they do. It’s okay for things to be lost. It makes finding them in the end even better, don’t you think?”

“She’s right, you know,” Myra replied. “We’re all together now, and that’s what matters.”

Sophie nodded, munching on a piece of tarberry crostata. The red juice from the berries ran down her chin, staining her pale skin. Without thinking, Deacon reached out with a cloth napkin, wiping her face. She grimaced at his ministrations, but allowed him to continue. “I can clean up after myself, daddy,” she muttered. “I’m not a baby.”
“I guess you’re not,” he replied, and she flashed an impish grin at him, stealing the last few bites of bread from his plate and shoving them into her mouth. “Hey!” Deacon cried. “I wasn’t finished with that!”

Myra sighed. “Soph, don’t tease your father. We want him to stay with us, don’t we?”

The girl rolled her mischievous green eyes. “Yeah, but he left himself wide open, momma! What was I supposed to do, pass up a chance like that?”

Deacon’s heart raced as he heard Sophie’s declaration. “Myra,” he murmured, his eyes wide, “she’s…no. That can’t be right. You’d never…we’d never…” He shook his head. "This isn’t real. None of this is real.”

“Shh!” Barbara chided, handing him a fresh piece of bread. “Relax. Eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” he retorted.

“Eat!” Myra chimed in, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Don’t be rude, Deacon. We spent so long preparing this for you.”

Deacon relented, taking another bite of bread. There was a bitter aftertaste to it this time, like the yeast had gone off. He tried to shake his growing dread, to bring his mind back to a calm place, but it was a losing battle. There were too many impossibilities. For how real everything seemed to his senses, he could feel a growing dread setting into his bones.

It wasn’t real. Deacon vaguely remembered being at Hancock’s, taking...something. This was just a drug trip. As he struggled to remember what had brought him to this place, the air seemed to grow bitter cold around him. The bite of bread turned to mold in his mouth, and he spat it out in horror. The food on the table had all decayed similarly, rotten meat and mold-covered fruit oozing strange juices as they leaked off the sides of the discolored wicker. He whimpered in alarm, his eyes fixed on a large, pus-yellow spider that crawled out from the pile, waving its spindly, needle-like legs slowly in the air. He didn’t dare look up, didn’t dare to make eye contact with the three figures sitting next to him.

“How sad,” a voice that was almost Myra’s rasped. “He’s gone and ruined this, too.”

“When will he learn?” a ghastly, child-like whisper asked, Sophie’s voice distorted and hollow.

“So many years on this earth, and still, he suffers,” Barbara replied, her voice choked back in her throat like it was being swallowed by the grave itself. “There’s nothing we can do, if he won’t do it himself.”

“We did our best,” not-Myra mused. “But for a liar, he doesn’t like lies much.”

“He’s a hypocrite,” the child whispered. “Maybe he does deserve this.”

Deacon shuddered, now trying to look up, needing to see the truth. But it was like he was paralyzed, unable to see anything beyond the horrible, pungent decay before him, beyond the massive spider-thing which he now realized had far too many legs. The terrible monstrosity skittered towards him, and he struggled in vain as it clambered onto his torso, heavy and cold as ice through his tattered shirt. He tried to scream, but he couldn’t muster a sound, couldn’t turn away, couldn’t do more than hyperventilate and watch as the horrible spider-thing climbed ever higher, its face shifting and contorting as it called to him with a thousand human-like screams.

Suddenly, its fangs sank into his neck, icy needles piercing straight through his jugular. Deacon
gurgled in inexpressible terror as the legs of his chair gave out from under him. He found himself plummeting into an endless abyss of putrid darkness, the laughter of the three creatures who had played with him echoing in his ears as he fell into nothingness.

Deacon’s own screams jolted him awake, and his eyes opened almost impossibly wide as he sat up, gasping frantically. Hancock loomed over him, shaking him gently. “Hey, brother,” the ghoul soothed, his pitch black eyes filled with concern. “Hey. It’s okay. You’re fine. Just a bad trip.”

“I…” Deacon gasped, struggling to slow his breathing. “What the hell is in that stuff?” he wheezed.

Hancock sighed, handing him a glass of water. “I told you, you weren’t supposed to take that much. I haven’t tested it out at larger doses yet, and even still, my metabolism’s way faster than yours. I’m thrilled you’re not dead. Last thing I need is you ODing on my couch. That would not win me any good ghoul points from your boss.”

Deacon swallowed the water greedily, his throat sore as hell. “Remind me not to take any more of your chem experiments,” he moaned. “Or any chems at all, really. That...sucked.”

“Outside of the obvious,” the mayor said, “how are you feeling?”

“Oh, me?” Deacon asked sarcastically. “I’m fine. Never been better. Heck, we should go bowling. I’ll be the pins.”

“That bad, huh?” Hancock asked. “Well, I can’t give you anything else for the pain, not until the Sunshine’s left your system. Like I said, I’m not keen on you ODing on my couch. But while you were flying high, I did make some soup. Chem-free, I promise,” he added. “It’s probably long cold by now, but I can reheat it if you’re hungry.”

“Food sounds...ugh,” Deacon muttered, his stomach heaving as the taste of mold and filth filled his mouth again. “Yeah, not like the best plan right now. I’ll stick with water.”

The mayor shook his head. “Man, that must have been a hell of a trip.”

“How long was I out?” Deacon asked.

“Hmm,” Hancock mused, looking out the window. “Maybe half a day or so? I donno, man, time’s pretty much optional as far as I’m concerned. Sun’s nearly down, though, if that means anything to you.”

Deacon struggled to stand, though a flood of wooziness quickly forced him back onto the couch. “Ugh. That long? It felt like a few minutes at most.”

“Like I said,” Hancock replied, “time’s a funny bitch who doesn’t play by anyone’s rules. Better not to let her run your life. Still, I’m sorry if that’s not the answer you wanted.”

The spy shook his head, wincing as pain flooded his head. “It’s not your fault. I guess it was just one of those days.”

“You have days like this often?” Hancock asked.
“It’s been known to happen,” Deacon joked. “One time, I woke up in a Deathclaw nest with three baby ‘Claws. Seems like the momma Deathclaw mistook me for one of her own. She kept fawning over me and everything. Now that was a rough day. At least I got free meat out of it. And some terrifying new siblings.”

The ghoul laughed. “That’s what I like about you Deacon. You’re a lying bastard, but somehow, I always want to believe you anyway.”

“That’s my charm,” the spy replied with a pained grin. “Hell, when Myra takes over the Commonwealth, maybe I can talk her into making me her jester. I’d look awesome in one of those outfits, right?”

Hancock struggled to breathe through his wheezing cackles. “Man, I’d hire you myself, if Fahrenheit ever retires. But speaking of Myra,” he continued, gasping, “you wanted to find her?”

Deacon nodded. “Have you heard from her?”

The ghoul sighed. “I’m not sure I should tell you this, but she did swing by a few days ago. Said she was on her way to the Castle, something about checking in with the Minutemen. I talked her into staying for a few nights, since she seemed pretty broken up about something. Wouldn’t tell me what, but that’s her business anyway. Something happen between you two?”

Deacon frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Well,” Hancock said with a sigh, “It could be the fact that you both had that same look about you, like someone punted your cat off a roof. Hell, maybe it’s because you were screaming her name when you were out. Maybe it’s just my intuition.” he laughed. “Hell, you don’t have to tell me. Not my business anyway.”

The spy sighed. “If you must know, we had a bit of a fight over the value of some of the junk in her collection. Sometimes, I swear, she’s a crow with how much shiny stuff she hoards. She didn’t appreciate that I told her to throw out all those dog bowls that were weighing her down.”

Hancock grinned. “I hear you. Who even needs eighty screwdrivers? And not even the fun kind, with vodka, but the metal kind.”

“Right?” Deacon snickered. “I probably could have been nicer about it, though. I sometimes forget there’s feelings under all that warrior woman stuff she’s got going on these days.” At least that part wasn’t a lie. God, he’d screwed up. How could he face her, after the way he’d treated her? Even if it was for the best, he could have been more tactful.

The ghoul nodded. “As the world’s expert on the fine and often forgotten art of seduction, I can freely tell you, yeah, you messed up.”

Deacon groaned. “First of all, gross. Second, I wasn’t…I mean, I’d never…”

Hancock eyed him incredulously. “Right. A woman like that, and you haven’t even thought about it? Yeah, and I’m a hot pink vertibird. You’re lying to the wrong ghoul, Deacon. I can smell heartache a mile away, and you, my man, are marinating in it. So what’s the deal, she turn you down too?”

“You mean you actually…” Deacon smirked. “So much for the master of seduction.”

“Hey, I do all right!” Hancock protested. “And it wasn’t like that. I mean, yeah, I maybe suggested…but only ‘cause she seemed so upset, you know? But she’s all hung up on that tin can of hers, unless you know something I don’t.”
Deacon tried not to think about the hot desperation in her kiss, the way she moaned against him as he explored her body. It was all an act, a game they were playing. It hadn’t been real, and it never could be. “Yeah,” he joked. “Not like Danse would know what to do with a woman if she came with an instruction manual. It’s pretty hopeless.”

“Poor Myra,” Hancock agreed with a laugh. “I guess there’s still hope for the rest of us, then.”

Deacon sighed. Maybe there was hope for someone like Hancock. He had a roguish charm that seemed to endear people to him, and what’s more, the ghoul had the sincerity to back it up. He might be a junkie, but he had a good heart. Deacon couldn’t say the same for himself. “Yeah,” he said, hoping his smile seemed more sincere than it felt. “Maybe.”

Hancock grinned, slapping the spy lightly on the shoulder. “Well, now you know where she went, so I’m sure you’ll want to go after her. But if you don’t mind taking my advice, maybe you should stay here until the Sunshine’s out of your system. Don’t want you gettin’ any strange side-effects out there on the road.”

“That’s fair,” Deacon replied. “Besides, I probably don’t need to go see her. I mostly wanted to make sure she was alive. Now that I know she’s okay, I should really get back to my mission.”

The ghoul frowned, his deep inky eyes narrowing. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Look, I donno what you did, and I really don’t wanna know. But if you made her upset, brother, you’ve gotta apologize. Things have a way of gettin’ worse if you let ‘em fester. Just ask my missing toe. You gotta make things right.”

“And how do I do that?” Deacon countered. “I can’t just run away and bury myself in work. That’s a great solution, too,” Deacon said. “Works like a charm, and it keeps me productive. It’s a win-win.”

Hancock sighed. “Whatever. I’m not your Miss Nanny. You wanna do that, go right ahead. But you gotta be willin’ to live with the consequences. This life we’ve got’s full of choices, my man, and not a lot of do-overs. Just think about that.” He grabbed a tin of Mentats off the table, popping a few in his mouth. “I’m too sober for this,” he muttered. “Do what you want.”

Deacon lay back down on the couch with a huff, trying to hold on to any train of thought he could...well, any train that didn’t involve Myra. He didn’t even want to think about the choice before him, especially not in light of his drug-fueled vision. The last thing he needed was to see her smiling face, or to hear the voice of a child that didn’t exist. His mind was a mysterious and often twisted web of lies and fantastical musings. This was just another of the cruel tricks he played on himself. Nothing more.

The spy liked to pretend that there wasn’t much that scared him in the world. And perhaps that was true, in a way. The things that really horrified him lurked in the dark recesses of his own being, not outside of himself. And if he had to single out the one thing that filled him with the most dread, it was the idea that his view of reality was wrong, that all the lies he’d told and internalized and believed at the time he needed to believe them had muddled his perception of the world as it was. If he couldn’t trust his own mind, his own senses, there was nothing in this world he could rely on. What if all the lies had finally snuffed out the truth like a cap over a candle, leaving behind nothing but smoke and the faint odor of a forgotten reality?

Deacon exhaled slowly, trying to calm the guilt and unease that filled him. He had to be rational about this. After all, he was still under the influence of the drug. The last thing he needed was a panic attack. The urge to run away from the situation was intense, as it always was. The spy was a coward. He had no illusions about that. But Hancock was right. For once in his miserable life, Deacon needed to consider the consequences of inaction just as much as he agonized over the consequences
of action.

Was it really better to leave things with Myra as they were, to drive her away when he’d spent so long trying to bring her into the fold? Regardless of his personal feelings for her, he still believed that she could be the force for change that the Railroad needed. Was he willing to throw away all their futures just because he might have let himself catch feelings?

“Damn it, I’m really going to have to go after her, aren’t I?” Deacon moaned.

Hancock wheezed contentedly beside him, his eyes glazed over. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. But it can wait. She’s not goin’ anywhere, right? Try an’ get some sleep.”

The spy nodded. “I’ll try.”

Just as he was about to drift off, however, loud and angry voices filled the night. Hancock groaned in frustration. “Damn it, what is it this time?”

The door to the living room flew open, and Irma rushed in, blood coating her corset. “Hancock! You’ve gotta do something!”

The men both sat up straight, staring at the madame of the Memory Den. “What is it, Irma?” Hancock asked, all peace drained from his face. “What’s goin’ on?”

“I tried to stop them,” Irma gasped. “I told them we weren’t helping the Institute, but they...there were so many of them! It must have been half the town.”


“It’s Doctor Amari,” she said breathily, her face clammy and pale with shock. “She’s been shot.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, that was...a thing that happened. I promise, Deacon won't always have such a bad time. He does have some moments of happiness. Really!

Can you tell that I write eldritch horror novels when I'm not working on fanfiction? I hope that wasn't too rough for you guys.

Yes, I did name the drug Sunshine after Hancock's pet name for the Sole Survivor, because I like to imagine that being around her gives him the same feeling as being on the drug. Remember, a small dose is pleasant. It's the larger quantities that lead to horrible nonsense. (To be fair, I guess that's Myra as well.)

NEXT CHAPTER: Danse and Myra go on a well-deserved vacation.
Today's chapter will be delayed as I just got laid off from my job and have to pack up my office. I'll post again as soon as I can, promise!

-Mnemoli

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